The Complex World of the Chung Hwa Hui

International Engagements of Chinese Indonesian Peranakan Students in the Netherlands, 1918–1931

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Abstract

This article describes the foreign political engagements of the Chung Hwa Hui (CHH), the Chinese Indonesian students' association in the Netherlands, in the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s. By exploring these activities beyond the borders of the Dutch empire, and thus widening the traditional nation- and empire-centred research focus, it becomes clear how the students in the CHH cautiously determined their position in the complex world around them. Despised by other organizations as passive and apolitical, it appears that the Chinese Indonesians were actually well aware of events in China, the Netherlands East Indies, and the international diplomatic world, and actively engaged with various groups and networks in Europe and beyond. Although the article exemplifies the merits of a transnational approach, it also undergirds the theoretical reflections of Frederick Cooper regarding globalization. As Cooper rightly argues, globalization is neither a modern phenomenon nor an irreversible trend: 'spatial affinities could narrow, expand, and narrow again' (2005:94–5, 109). As the case of the CHH shows, their increased awareness of the world around them sometimes allowed for surprising adventures in Paris and Brussels, but on other occasions led to periods of contraction and introversion.

Keywords

Chung Hwa Hui – peranakan Chinese – anti-colonialism – transnationalism – internationalism – interwar period

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On 10 December 1931, the secretary of Perhimpoenan Indonesia (PI), the Indonesian nationalist students’ association in the Netherlands, invited the Chinese Indonesian student organization Chung Hwa Hui (CHH) to a protest meeting against the Japanese invasion of the Chinese province of Manchuria, better known as the Mukden Incident. The Indonesian students in the Netherlands considered the military intervention in China as part of a wider imperialist offensive in Asia, aimed against the suppressed races and classes. ‘This imperialist warmongering in China forms a great and pending danger for us [in Indonesia]’, they warned. The Indonesian nationalist PI called upon the Chinese nationalist CHH to univocally condemn this ‘imperialist robbery in China’; an event, they assumed, that most certainly disturbed the Chinese Indonesian population as well. The latter were indeed greatly disturbed, but they left the call unanswered.

This article describes the troubled relationship between these two interwar migrant organizations in the Netherlands, and the political attitude of the CHH in general. The latter organization is mistakenly perceived as an obedient and introvert group. However, to get a full grip of the political complexities and dynamics involved, this article transcends the traditional national or imperial focus, and applies a transnational and multi-staged approach instead. As will become clear, student elites, such as the members of the CHH and the PI, were well aware of the world surrounding them, and related their own position and ambition to those of political movements abroad. As such, they provide good examples to scholars, emphasizing that the history of colonial migration and anti-colonial agitation can only be studied if one acknowledges the permeability of national and imperial borders (Manela 2007:xi; Anderson 2007:2–4) and the global force of imaginations, inspirations, and solidarities (Karl 2002; Featherstone 2012:16–9). This applied to an even greater extent to the Chinese Indonesian students in the Netherlands, and to other migrant communities with a ‘cumulative’ migration history, such as Hindustani migrants from Suriname in the Netherlands, Indians from Kenya in the United Kingdom, or Jewish Algerians in France. Their political horizon comprised no less than four

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1 Throughout this article I use the common Dutch romanized Hokkien system for *peranakan* Chinese names as they are still in use in Indonesia today. For Chinese (topographical) names, I use the modern Pinyin transliteration system, or the Wade-Gilles system in those instances where this form is most familiar to international readers, such as Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek, Manchuria, and Mukden.

2 Sent letter 25-12-1931, inv. nr. 27, Chung Hwa Hui archives (hereafter CHH), International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam, the Netherlands (hereafter IISH).
different landscapes: a perceived country of origin, a country of birth, a country of arrival, and an international stage on which all these identities merged, collided, and transformed.

However, although a transnational dimension will be added to the political work of the Chinese Indonesian in the Netherlands, this article will also try to avoid the pitfall of the transnational history writing that frames every foreign encounter as an early example of globalization-before-the-age-of-globalization. As Frederick Cooper rightly argues, ‘spatial affinities could narrow, expand, and narrow again’ (Cooper 2005:94–95, 109). Arguments against globalization as a recent phenomenon should also challenge the conception of globalization as an ever-increasing and irreversible trend. A study of transnationalism should therefore specify how interconnections were established, while indicating the limits, barriers, and blockades to cross-border interactions.

**Peranakan Chinese Politics**

The reserved attitude of the Chung Hwa Hui towards the Indonesian students in the PI in the Netherlands was certainly not incidental. More often in the 1930s, the *peranakan* Chinese association rejected cooperation with Indonesian and leftist political organizations in relation to events concerning China or the Chinese community in Indonesia. As a reaction, the inviting organizations denounced the CHH as being an irrelevant, elitist, and obedient club, afraid to speak out in political issues. Also in the Netherlands East Indies, branches of the CHH established by former members were mocked for being a ‘Packard club’, referring to the assumedly large number of expensive Packard automobile owners in the group (Govaars 2005:186). This derogation by contemporary organizations has shaped the image of the CHH as being moderate, satisfied, and

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3 The term *peranakan*, or ‘descendants’, was used in the Indonesian context to differentiate between ‘peranakan Chinese’, who were born in the Netherlands East Indies, and ‘totok Chinese’, who were born in China and migrated to Indonesia in the course of their lives. The first group usually spoke Dutch or a Malay language and were culturally oriented towards colonial society. In the Dutch context, however, the term ‘peranakan’ referred to all the ethnic Chinese from the Netherlands East Indies residing in the Netherlands. In the remainder of the article I will use the term ‘peranakan’ instead of ‘Indo-Chinese’, to avoid confusion with migrants in France coming from French ‘Indo-Chine’, that is, modern-day Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (Govaars 2005:19–20).

4 Received letter 6-11-1933, received letter 7-12-1934, inv. nr. 26–7, CHH, IISH.
elitist, and it led to reduced attention among scholars for the political dynamics within the *peranakan* group (cf. Bachtiar 1967:5–6; Poeze 1988:lxvii, 1989:259).

However, the image of the CCH—conveyed by contemporary organizations and sometimes by the CCH itself—as an apolitical organization is dissatisfactory, and contrasts sharply with recent studies that have pointed to the highly politicized character of the global Chinese diaspora, and publications on the lively political culture of the Chinese community in the Netherlands East Indies. In the first half of the twentieth century the Chinese world was shaken to its foundations. After the definitive demise of the Qing dynasty in 1911, China was immersed in the chaos of a civil war in which numerous factions—warlords, various social classes, and both an emerging communist and Guomindang nationalist party and several foreign colonial armies—were fighting over the remains of the former Chinese Empire (Roberts 1999:203–7). Political turmoil in China easily spilled over to Chinese migrants elsewhere, as political and kinship ties within the Chinese diaspora remained strong. Europe, for example, was described by historians as a revolutionary hotbed in the 1920s (Benton 2003:347–75; Karl 2002; Levine and Chen 2000). In a recent work, the American historian Erez Manela described the massive and worldwide reaction of Chinese migrants to the proceedings of the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919, and the refusal of the allied powers to force Japan out of the Chinese province of Shandong (Manela 2007:109–10; cf. Xu 2005:258–62; MacMillan 2002:338–41). Other events on the Chinese mainland ignited similar powerful solidarity campaigns among Chinese migrants overseas, such as the abovementioned Mukden Incident in 1931 and the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937.

Also in the Netherlands East Indies, Chinese political life was evolving fast. The Chinese Indonesian sinologist Leo Suryadinata described how three political streams within this community competed for the sympathy of the Chinese Indonesian population, each with a different vision on the future of the Chinese community in Indonesia (Suryadinata 1976:85–105; see also Govaars 2005:81–3). George McTurnan Kahin even traced the roots of the first modern, non-Dutch political organizations in the Netherlands East Indies to Indonesia’s Chinese community (McTurnan Kahin 1970:28; and, more recently, Vickers 2010:73).

In short, although the CCH may have seemed to be reserved towards the Indonesian nationalists in the Netherlands on specific occasions, political turbulence in China, in the Netherlands East Indies, and within the Chinese diaspora suggests that there was more at stake than just an elitist lack of interest. This article aims to reinterpret the attitude of the CCH with regard to other Dutch organizations as politically cautious, corresponding with its precarious
political position in the Netherlands. In order to fully grasp the social and political dynamics of the peranakan society in the Netherlands, we will have to look beyond the Dutch stage and the immediate confrontation between the Indonesian and peranakan group, and apply a more transnational approach instead.

Peranakan Students in the Netherlands

Who were these students? Peranakan students began to arrive in the Netherlands from around 1900 onwards, concurrently with the arrival of other students from the Netherlands East Indies. Although they were persistently categorized as ‘foreign Orientals’ by the Dutch colonial administration, ethnically Chinese communities had existed in the Indonesian archipelago long before the first Dutch ships arrived. In the twentieth century, a majority of them had lived in the region for generations, had exchanged Chinese languages and customs for local ones, and were to a large extent ‘Indonesianized’ (Suryadinata 1976:xiv). Nevertheless, culturally, socially, and organizationally these peranakan Chinese remained distinguishable as a group. After being banned from international trade by the Dutch authorities in the nineteenth century, they functioned as middlemen between the Dutch authorities and the local communities. As small traders, pawnshop owners, and tax collectors, the peranakan Chinese were the first to extract money from the indigenous population, and consequently they were the main target of popular anger in times of economic hardship (McTurnan Kahin 1970:41). In an often hostile Indonesian society peranakan Chinese parents were intent on giving their children economic independence. For the richest among them higher education in the Netherlands ensured their children a career as a doctor, lawyer, engineer, or business man (Benton and Pieke 1995:2–3; Van Galen 1989:29). It is important to note that the peranakan students in the Netherlands typically belonged to wealthy business families with an orientation on the colonial economy. For them, a Dutch education was a good investment in knowledge, contacts, and status within the colonial society.

Although the peranakan Chinese population was a small minority in the Netherlands East Indies, the number of peranakan students was slightly higher than that of the ‘native’ Indonesian students who arrived in the Netherlands in the same period (Stutje 2013; Van Galen 1989:30–1). Moreover, they were closely knit and better organized, and the population was big enough to build its own infrastructures parallel to the structures of the Indonesian students in the Netherlands. In 1911, peranakan students established the Chung Hwa Hui, three years after the inauguration of an association for Indonesian students:
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the Indische Vereeniging, which would later be renamed as the Perhimpoenan Indonesia. The CHH was designed to bring peranakan students in the Nether-
lands closer together, and to facilitate them intellectually, socially, and financially. In each of the major university cities a local branch was established, and several committees organized the social life of the association. In the first years of the twentieth century just over fifty peranakan students studied in the Netherlands, but after the First World War their numbers grew to an annual figure of approximately 150 persons, most of whom became members of the CHH. Many of them enrolled in the law faculty of Leiden University, but later medical studies in Amsterdam, technical studies in Delft, and economics in Rotterdam gained in popularity.5

Socially, the peranakan students were well acquainted with the Dutch academic elite and many of them were members of Dutch elite student societies; the so-called corpora or fraternities. Often, they had followed European education in the colony, and were more fluent in Dutch than in any other language. More complex than their social status, however, was the political balance of power among the peranakan in the Netherlands, which reflected the intense discussions among peranakan in the Netherlands East Indies.

Political Positioning

Although internal differences were often disguised by the cloak of charity, the boards of the CHH throughout its existence vacillated between loyalty towards the energetic nationalist movement in China, the Dutch colonial administration, and the emerging Indonesian movement for national independence. Although in all three loyalties the protection of the interests of the peranakan Chinese was paramount, the relative prioritization of these different loyalties mattered greatly in regarding the colonial system and in the forging of alliances with other organizations within the Dutch Empire and beyond.6

The China-oriented tendency within the CHH was inspired by turbulent developments in China, where in 1912 the Republic of China was established with the nationalist Sun Yat-sen as provisional president. Although most of the Dutch peranakan students did not speak, read, or write any of the Chinese languages and had never set foot on Chinese soil, they nonetheless embraced

5 Membership lists, inv. nr. 97, CHH, IISH; Van Galen 1989:28–9, 37; Minghuan 1999:29.
6 Unless stated otherwise, the information in this paragraph is based upon Suryadinata (1976:85–105), Van Galen (1989:6–21), and Govaars (2005:80–3).
Chinese culture and folklore, such as Confucian learnings and Chinese New Year. These China-oriented students did not consider themselves as subjects of the Netherlands East Indies, but rather as permanent foreign residents. To their own idea they fell under the diplomatic authority of the newly established Chinese consular services and had to be treated as equal in civilian status to the Dutch and other foreign groups, such as the Japanese. It is important to consider that this equation was not to be gained by direct negotiations with the colonial administration, but via transnational Chinese cooperation and diplomatic pressure by the Chinese government.7

In the course of the 1910s some peranakan in the CHH shifted their orientation and recognized that their future would be in the Indonesian Archipelago, far away from Chinese political turmoil and support, and amidst the other populations of the Indies. Within this group the idea gained ground that all ethnic communities in the Netherlands East Indies (Indonesians, Europeans, Indo-Europeans, Arabs, and Chinese) should be on an equal footing, and that the Indies as a political entity should be equal with the motherland under the Dutch crown. Although the implementation of these ideas would imply a radical transformation of colonial relations, they did not attack the colonial system as such, and retained confidence in the ability of the Dutch authorities to shift power. What is more, some peranakan Chinese saw the Dutch colonial authorities as the best guarantors of their political rights, commercial interests, and safety as a minority. Although this tendency was in principle benevolent to social and economic emancipation of the ethnic Indonesian majority as such, it withheld support for Indonesian nationalist organizations that were organized along ethnic or religious lines, or campaigned for complete abolition of Dutch authority (Gedenkboek 1926:10). In the increasingly antagonistic landscape of Indonesian politics, especially in the aftermath of the communist rebellions on Sumatra and Java in 1926–1927, this political position was increasingly considered conservative and pro-Dutch by Indonesian nationalists and impoverished peranakan, despite the fact that some adherents of this trend argued for democratic reforms.

As a consequence, a third tendency within the CHH evolved in the 1930s, which campaigned for complete independence of Indonesia rather than for political reformation of the Netherlands East Indies. While the commercial and

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political elites of *peranakan* in the Netherlands increasingly advocated the line of moderate reforms, leftist intellectuals within the *peranakan* community in the Netherlands broke away from the mainstream *CHH*, and started to engage with Indonesian nationalists. In 1932, a short-lived organization, called *Sarekat Peranakan Thionghoa Indonesia* (Association for Chinese Descendants in Indonesia, *SPTI*), propagated legal equality for, and integration between, all groups in an independent Indonesia, albeit with room for the cultivation of a distinct *peranakan* identity.\(^8\)

It may be clear that the different political strands within *peranakan* politics were most polarized in the Netherlands East Indies themselves. The *CHH* branches that were established in the colony from 1928 onwards were generally of the second, loyalist conviction (Van Galen 1989:239; Govaars 2005:21, 194). In the Netherlands, however, the large majority of the students found a home within the *CHH*. Therefore, the organization often cultivated a generally ‘Chinese’ character in a cultural sense, and refrained from further political action, as it had to reckon with all three strands. As such, the refusal of the *CHH* to join the Indonesian nationalists in protesting against Japanese imperialist aggression in 1931 can be explained as a practical, or in the words of the *PI*, ‘cowardly’, attempt to remain neutral and keep peace within the organization. However, as we will see, the reaction of the *CHH* was actually informed by conscious political considerations, which only come to light when we either examine the internal debates from up close, or zoom out to the international level and see in which political environment the *CHH* interacted.

Judging from the register books of external correspondence, the Chung Hwa Hui was far from introvert and isolated from the international stage.\(^9\) In the period from 1917 to 1939 the *CHH* was in contact with approximately 25 organizations from ten countries, and representatives attended eight international congresses. There are two periods in which these international engagements intensified: a first period around the Chinese May Fourth Movement of 1919 over the Japanese occupation of Shandong, and a second period with political campaigns in Paris and Brussels in 1926–1927. If we would include social events, a final period between 1932 and 1937 can be distinguished with the establishment of a European federation of Chinese students.

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\(^8\) Principles *SPTI* 12-2-1932, inv. nr. 288, *CHH*, IISH.

\(^9\) Register books of external correspondence, inv. nr. 11–16, *CHH*, IISH.
First Period: From Zürich to Versailles (1918–1919)

Peranakan adventures abroad began relatively low-profile when the CHH joined a pan-Asian organization in Zürich. On the initiative of the Indonesian student Samuel Ratu Langie the CHH joined the Société des Etudiants Asiaticques (SEA) in October 1918, which aimed to unite the Asian students in Zürich. As a longer-term objective the association intended to establish branches in every European country with a significant Asian student population, ‘to promote mutual understanding between Asian nationalities, and to stimulate feelings of friendship among them’. The association believed that self-conscious Asian students had an important role to play in modernizing their colonized homelands towards independence, without neglecting their respective cultures. Politically, this first event was rather insignificant, but it is remarkable to see the caution with which the CHH engaged with the Zürich association. Before it aligned to the initiative, a report had to examine the moral standing (deugdelijkheid) of the SEA as an organization. According to the report there were no objections against the principles of the SEA, as long as the organization observed strict neutrality towards any of the belligerents of the First World War, and as long as it refrained from ‘concrete’ struggle against ‘all forms of imperialism’. The cautious stance on anti-colonial politics in the Netherlands and abroad symptomized the complex relationship of the peranakan Chinese with the colonial status quo in the Netherlands East Indies, which after all provided protection and opportunities for the Chinese as a vulnerable trading minority in the archipelago.

After the Indonesian chair, Ratu Langie, ensured in an official letter that the SEA would not make propaganda for any of the belligerent parties the CHH joined the SEA. Originally, the SEA had planned to organize a general, European-Asiatic congress within a couple of months, to discuss the establishment of a transnational confederation. However, the congress never took place and for reasons unclear the contact with the SEA was ended.

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10 Internal correspondence between Li Tjwan Tien and the General Meeting 11-5-1919, inv. nr. 12, CHH, IISH; ‘Société asiatique’, Algemeen Handelsblad, p. 7, 30-6-1918; Poeze 1986:122; Ratu Langie 1919:44–51.
11 Sent letter to the Société des Etudiants Asiatiques 7-10-1918, inv. nr. 11, CHH, IISH.
12 Received letter 13-5-1919, inv. nr. 20, CHH, IISH.
Lobbying in Paris

There was another channel through which the Chung Hwa Hui was involved in world affairs around the year 1919. In January of that year, the CHH was called upon by the Chinese Legation in The Hague to actively protest against the Japanese occupation of Shandong on the occasion of the Paris Peace Conference. Shandong is a large peninsula between Shanghai and Beijing, and the native region of the Chinese national philosopher Confucius. Until the First World War the region was controlled by Germany, but when Allied Japan conquered the area in 1914 it attempted to confiscate the peninsula, against the will of the Shandong population and Chinese nationalists. Despite the rhetoric of self-determination for all peoples by the American president, Woodrow Wilson, at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, and despite the fact that China had joined the Allied side during the War, the Western powers were unwilling to refute the Japanese claims over Shandong. In the eyes of Chinese in China and overseas, their fatherland was sacrificed on the altar of geopolitics and was de facto colonized by imperialist powers (Xu 2005:258–62; MacMillan 2002:338–41; Manela 2007:178).

Following Chinese communities worldwide, the China oriented Sin Po newspaper in the Netherlands East Indies started a boycott campaign against Japanese products and shops, and in some cities on Java violent incidents against shopkeepers occurred. In the Netherlands, the CHH did not boycott Japanese products but, on the instigation of the Chinese Legation, joined the choir of Chinese student organizations in Britain, France, and the United States by sending cables of support to the head of the Chinese delegation at the Paris Peace Conference, Lu Zhengxiang. His delegation had defended the Chinese political claim over Shandong as a Chinese province before the Council of Ten, in which the most important countries were represented. In the months during and after the actual negotiations, which took place from January to June 1919, the Chung Hwa Hui received news updates, memoranda, and publications from the Chinese delegation about the proceedings in Paris on a regular basis. Two prominent members of the Chinese delegation, Beijing’s foreign minister Lu Zhengxiang and famous public intellectual Liang Qichao, even paid a visit to the association in The Hague upon returning to China. In October 1919 they sponsored its language training programme in Leiden with a total sum of

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The 1919 board of the Chung Hwa Hui that was in contact with the Chinese delegation from Paris. From left to right: Tan Ping Ie, Sim Ki Ay, Oei Kiauw Pik (chair), Goey Ing Bok, and S.E. Ongkiehong.

Source: BG call number B22/890, Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis (Amsterdam)

1,500 guilders, to make the study of Mandarin freely available for the peranakan students.¹⁴

The CHH’s political engagements with the Paris Peace Conference was also motivated by the peranakan position in the Netherlands East Indies. In the colony, the peace negotiations coincided with an older political debate over the civil status of the Chinese group. In the turbulent years of the First World War, the Dutch colonial administration had publicly considered the establishment of a civil militia, in which Indonesian and Chinese young men would also be conscripted. For some moderate Indonesian nationalists this was an opportunity to demand political rights in exchange. However, the most prominent peranakan organizations saw the militia as an obvious attempt to absorption in the colonial pyramid—in a civilian status below the status of the Europeans in the colony (Tjiook Liem 2011:53; Suryadinata 1976:29–31).

On 28 January 1919, on the same day that the Chinese delegation in Paris presented its claims over Shandong before the Versailles congress, the activist newspaper *Sin Po* started gathering the signatures of Chinese Indonesians who asserted that they wanted to be considered as full, Chinese citizens and refused conscription into the Indies militia. The signatures and massive demonstrations in the main towns of Java aimed to draw the attention of the Chinese government and the Parisian delegation to the precarious position of its extra-territorial co-patriots. According to Suryadinata, a coalition of Chinese organizations even considered sending a representative to Paris, a plan that was quickly suspended, as the representative would not be allowed to return to the colony.15

The Chinese Indonesian attempts to influence the negotiations in Paris were not merely opportunistic. Behind the struggle over the fate of Shandong, the main stake for China at the Versailles conference was its recognition as an independent, civilized nation on the same footing as Western states and Japan. If the Chinese government was able to achieve its full appointment as a non-colonial state to the Paris conference table, this would imply that its extra-territorial subjects would be promoted from colonized, second-class to civilized, first-class citizens (Manela 2007:153). In the Netherlands East Indies, the Japanese were already accepted as full citizens under protection of the Japanese state, and this status was pursued by the Chinese in Indonesia as well. As such, Versailles was doubly significant to the Chinese in the Netherlands East Indies: both as a protest against the Japanese occupation of Shandong in China, and in terms of their recognition as full citizens, just like the Japanese in the Netherlands East Indies.

Therefore, apart from a first cable, expressing support for the Chinese cause in the Shandong debate, a second cable was sent by the CHH board in which the Chinese delegation was reminded of the position of the Chinese living in the diaspora and the impending abolition of their special rights. The head of the Chinese delegation, Lu Zhengxiang, replied that the delegation would put all efforts into protecting the interests of extra-territorial Chinese.16

However, the Chinese delegation was left no room for negotiations. In preliminary sessions Wilson and the other great powers had decided that only nationality problems directly emanating from the war would be discussed on

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16 ‘Chung Hwa Hui’, *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 16-4-1919, p. 2; *Gedenkboek* 1926:10; Suryadinata 1976:31.
the conference table. Moreover, the US, France, and Great-Britain did not want to provoke the Japanese delegation, and left the latter’s claims over Korea and Shandong unchallenged (Manela 2007:178).

Four Stages

The political activities of the CHH in Zürich and Paris in 1918–1919 illustrate that the peranakan in the Netherlands were primarily orientated on China and the legal position of the Chinese in the Netherlands East Indies. However, regarding this orientation they were subject to influence from four stages: dramatic events in China, political campaigns in the Netherlands East Indies, negotiations in Paris, and student politics in Europe. A setback on one of these stages could lead to the tempering of activities on the other stages as well. The Versailles Peace Conference proved to be a great disappointment for Chinese nationalists, and after the demise of the powerful May Fourth Movement, it led to disillusionment among activists in China, peranakan Chinese in the Netherlands East Indies, and diplomats in Paris and The Hague (Manela 2007:193–5).

In the absence of new inspiration from abroad, the turbulent year of 1919 was followed by relatively quiet years within the CHH, in which the association was disorganized and further foreign activities were halted (cf. Cooper 2005:109). The character of the boards changed as well. The leading figure Han Tiauw Tjong, who had represented the China-orientated tendency and between 1916 and 1922 occupied several board positions, left the Netherlands in 1921, and in 1922 the new chairman Be Tiat Tjong plotted a new course. The latter abandoned the pro-China campaigns and gave new priority to the social function of the CHH and its role in preparing the young students for a career in the colony. Re-elected in 1923, Be Tiat Tjong stressed the progress that had been made by the Chinese community in the Netherlands East Indies and argued for ‘systematic organizing’ as opposed to ‘noisy demonstrating’ against the colonial system.17

Second Period: Paris and Brussels (1926–1927)

A new period of foreign engagements dawned in 1926. In a commemorative book published that year, the CHH board argued for the resuscitation of the Asiatic Students Society and new efforts to establish international cooperation (Gedenkboek 1926:7). New political currents with momentum in Europe could set the CHH afloat. While the activities in the first period echoed developments in higher diplomacy on the world stage, the actions in 1926 and 1927 primarily emanated from the grass-roots level of student organizations in Europe, and were communicated through networks in which the CHH became involved. In this period there were three concurrent movements that were largely independent of each other in the matters of issues and orientations, but showed interconnection on a personal level.

A first movement was based in the Quartier Latin in Paris, which in the interwar period harboured thousands of migrants from colonial and non-colonial countries. In November 1925 an initiative from a visiting professor from the University of Beijing, Tjeng Yin Chang, and a Chinese grant-student in Paris, Ting Tchao-Tsing, resulted in the establishment of the Association pour l’Étude des Civilisations Orientales (AECO), in which fourteen nationalities were represented. The AECO was primarily a cultural platform for exhibitions and performances of Eastern cultures, but it also provided a platform to establish political relations between the representatives of Asian peoples in Europe. Although its members had different political backgrounds, they shared a primordial notion of the value of Asian culture, worthy of protection and emancipation. Some nationalities, such as the Indonesians in the Netherlands, actively used the activities of the AECO to present their political claims for independence abroad (Stutje 2013:159–62). British, French, and Dutch secret services even suspected the organization of being infiltrated by bolshevists. However,
the significance for the CHH must mainly be sought in the contacts with other nationalities they established within the AECO.

In June 1926, six months after its establishment, the Chung Hwa Hui got acquainted with the Parisian AECO, again via an Indonesian student, Arnold Mononutu, who was active in the Perhimpoenan Indonesia. The CHH joined because, as the chairman stated, ‘one should not underestimate the importance of foreign contact, and propaganda for the name of Chung Hwa Hui’ (Han 1926:53–4, translation KS; cf. Van Galen 1989:163). In its publications, the CHH was far from explicitly anti-colonial, but it found a common agenda with the other AECO organizations in cherishing the Asian cultures and in establishing a network in Europe.

Together, the CHH and the PI invited functionaries of the AECO for lectures to The Hague, such as the Chinese student Tung Meau and the liberal nationalist Vietnamese lawyer and language professor Duong Van Giao. The latter announced the organization of an Asian congress in Brussels or Genève, later that year, to promote the organizational unification of Asia. But despite enthusiast reactions subsequent meetings—again—did not take place. This time, however, the absence of a continuation of the AECO did not lead to a new period of isolation, because new European movements gained momentum.

The Sino-Belgian-Treaty Riot

This time, the place of action was Belgium. In the summer of 1926, the Chinese government, under pressure of the nationalist parties, announced to the Belgian government that it desired to cancel a sixty-year-old treaty on customs tariffs, free trade, and juridical privileges between Belgium and the old Qing administration. This ‘Traité Sino-Belge’ from 1865 was one of the many so-called ‘unequal treaties’ that had been forced upon the Chinese emperor by Western powers after various wars in the nineteenth century, and in principle it was not limited to a finite period unless the Belgian king desired so (Woolsey 1927:289–94). To Chinese nationalists the unlimited and imposed character of the treaty were an affront and an example of the semi-colonial status of their fatherland. When the Chinese government asked the Belgian government to renegotiate

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20 Received statutes from Moh. Joesoef 15-6-1926, inv. nr. 12, CHH, iish.
21 Received letters 16-7-1926 and 31-7-1926, inv. nr. 12, CHH, iish.
the Sino-Belgian Treaty and the latter refused, the Chinese envoy called upon
the expatriate Chinese community in Belgium to start a campaign.

In Belgium, there was a considerable Chinese-workers community in the
mines around Charleroi and Marcinelle, and in the harbour of Antwerp. They
had stayed in Europe after they had been recruited as workers for the French
and British armies during the First World War. Moreover, a number of Chris-
tian Chinese students had profited from Catholic study loans and enrolled in
the universities of Leuven and Brussels. When the Association Générale des
Étudiants Chinois en Belgique learned of the treaty, they mobilized Chinese
students from France, Germany, and other European colonies in support of
their fatherland.22 In August, the former CHH thesaurus and son of a wealthy
business family Tjoa Soe Tjong learned via Chinese students in Paris from the
anti-Belgian campaign and forwarded its manifestos to the CHH. During a spe-
cial meeting in The Hague, which all members were urged to attend ‘because
of the importance of the proposal’, the CHH decided to express solidarity with
the Chinese minister for foreign affairs, and the Chinese envoy in Brussels, and
to contact the Association Générale des Étudiants Chinois. The latter had just
set up a Comité d’Etude pour les Traités Sino-Belges, and the CHH was invited
to attend a general assembly on the unequal treaties in October 1926.23

On behalf of the CHH the prominent members Han Tiauw Kie and Khouw
Bian Tie were present, to express moral support. They were only a minor del-
egation, as there were around eighty Chinese students from Belgium, France,
Germany, and Austria, as well as two hundred Chinese workers, traders, and
sailors from Antwerp, Amsterdam, and Rotterdam.24 Moreover, the peranakan
from the Netherlands could only understand parts of the conference as they did
not speak Mandarin. Nevertheless, they were impressed by the spirit of patrio-
tism among the other Chinese in Europe.25

After the plenary a public demonstration on floats took to the streets of
Brussels. Leaflets were distributed among the Belgian public in which the Chi-

nese colonies in Europe demanded the immediate abolition of the Sino-Belgian
Treaty and the unequal trade agreements in China. The next evening, again

22 Received letter of Fan Toen Yuen 23-2-1927, inv. nr. 23 A/J, CHH, IISH; Xu 2005:141–3; Levine
and Chen 2000:141, 147.
23 Received letters 30-8-1926 and 30-9-1926, inv. nr. 12, CHH, IISH.
24 Henk Wubben mentions a delegation of Chinese sailors headed by a certain Lou Ki, who
got to Brussels on behalf of the ‘Chinese Vereniging Holland’, which was the Dutch
branch of the Guomindang Party. This person was even detained during the riot that broke
out on the second evening but managed to escape deportation (Wubben 1986:140).
25 Internal report 20-10-1926, inv. nr. 13, CHH, IISH.
some fifty Chinese workers and students marched through the city to the Neutral Zone, in which demonstrations were officially prohibited. They were halted by the Brussels police after which a ‘heavy riot’ broke out. Seventeen Chinese demonstrators were hurt and arrested, but Han Tiauw Kie and Khouw Bian Tie seemed to have returned to Holland in time.26

Despite the many detained and wounded the anti-treaty campaign was a success, as the Belgians agreed on renegotiating the treaty. Further action in Belgium was not deemed necessary and the Comité d’Etude des Traités Sino-Européens was shifted to Paris. From this moment onwards, the CHH stayed in contact with Belgian Chinese, most notably with the secretary of the Belgian Comité, Fan Toen Yuen in Liège, and with its main organizer in Brussels, Ou Pao-Y. Three weeks after the congress the CHH board asked Ou Pao-Y to translate the congress papers and decision in French, so that the CHH members could understand the proceedings. The CHH was requested to contribute financially to the juridical defence of the detained Chinese, which it did with a donation of 200 Belgian francs.27

The League against Imperialism

Four months had passed when the Chung Hwa Hui received a telegraphic invitation by Ou Pao-Y to be present at the Kongress gegen Imperialismus und Koloniale Unterdrückung. The invitation came at short notice, as the cable arrived on 11 February 1927 while the congress took place from 10 to 15 February.28 It would be the most eye-catching event in which the peranakan were to become involved, as well as the reason for a shift away from politics.

The Kongress was organized at the instigation of the communist International Red Aid and the German section of the Comintern and bore a strong communist imprint. Nonetheless, the main initiator, Willy Münzenberg, consciously tried to avoid the impression that the Kongress was a communist tool.29 In accordance with the Comintern tactic after the Fourth World Con-

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26 Received report 23-2-1927, inv. nr. 23 A/J, CHH, iish; Levine and Chen 2000:141.
27 Sent letter 6-4-1927, inv. nr. 23 A/J, CHH, iish.
28 Received cable 11-2-1927, inv. nr. 13, CHH, iish.
29 As opposed to a so-called ‘front organization’, which would function under the directives of communist parties and organizations, the Swedish historian Fredrik Petersson in a recent publication characterizes the Kongress as a ‘sympathising structure’, indicating that communist factions kept a low profile as long as general support for the Soviet Union was secured (Petersson 2013:49, 109).
gress of 1922, various leftist tendencies in the industrial and colonial world—such as leftist social democrats, antimilitarists, and nationalists from (semi-)colonized countries—were invited to join their international front against imperialism.

An important partner was found in the European branch of the Chinese nationalist Guomindang Party (GMD), which was strongly organized in Germany and France. This organization already cooperated with communists in China, and had started a successful anti-Japanese boycott-campaign with communist organizations in Germany several months earlier.30 At the Kongress, the Guomindang block would form the second-largest faction after the German group, with 25 delegates, and it comprised all major Chinese organizations in Europe.

The Kongress was considered a great success, as unions, political parties, and government representatives from 34 countries were present, coming from all five continents. People of great renown, such as Jawaharlal Nehru of the Indian National Congress, Messali Hadj of the Algerian Étoile Nord-Africaine, and the Senegalese-French communist Lamine Senghor of the Comité de Défense de la Race Nègre, contributed to the prestige of the Kongress. Song Qingling, the widow of Sun Yat-sen, and Nobel Prize winner Albert Einstein were guests of honour, while the leftist French authors Henri Barbusse and Romain Rolland

added artistic cachet to the event (Gibarti, Fimmen and Hatta 1927:229–54). Names within the CHH network were Ou Pao-Y, the Brussels anti-treaty organizer who now represented the Chinese students from Charleroi University, and Duong Van Giao, the leader of the Vietnamese Parti Constitutionnaliste, whom we recognize as one of the central figures within the AECO. Also present were the Indonesian students of the PI. With five participants the latter were a medium-sized delegation, but its president Mohammad Hatta claimed to speak on behalf of a large coalition of Indonesian nationalist organizations (Stutje 2013:164–71).

**Chung Hwa Hui Divided**

Upon returning from their journey to Brussels, the Indonesians were very positive about their appearance at the conference. They had obtained a seat in the Executive Committee and the congress had recognized Indonesia's claim for self-determination. However, the peranakan Chinese of Chung Hwa Hui were more ambivalent in their evaluation of the Brussels Kongress. Board members Han Tiauw Kie and Lie Soen Keng had attended the congress on behalf of the CHH, although they were mistakenly registered as representatives of the Dutch section of the Guomindang. Upon returning, Han Tiauw Kie, who was a student in electrical engineering from Delft, and who had also been present at the anti-Sino-Belgian-Treaty campaign as secretary of the CHH, described the Kongress as ‘magnificent and informative’. But in a special reporting meeting of the CHH on 15 April 1927, a month after the Kongress, it became clear that not all members were happy to cooperate with those who were generally regarded as the most radical elements of the European and anti-colonial political landscape.

Two factors made the CHH reluctant to join the league whole-heartedly. The first factor was fear for criminalization. The Brussels congress in February 1927 was held only two months after the repression of a major communist uprising in Java and Sumatra in late 1926. The Dutch authorities were not happy with the ‘communist’ activities and soon after they came home, the most prominent PI activists were detained, under the pretext of sedition. Secretary Han Tiauw Kie of the CHH was also interrogated by the examining magistrate. He had to justify


32 Internal correspondence 17-2-1927, internal correspondence 15-4-1927, sent letter to Fimmen 21-7-1927, inv. nr. 13, 23 G/L, CHH, IISH.
his presence at the conference and had to explain why the CHH library had subscribed to the PI newspaper *Indonesia Merdeka*. Although the CHH escaped further persecutions, many CHH members were not happy to be affiliated with radicals and overtly anti-colonial politics.33

Secondly, in the immediate aftermath of the Kongress the relation between the Guomindang Party and the Comintern became troubled over events in China. From 1923 onwards, the Guomindang Party and the Communist Party in China (CCP) had formed a military alliance to fight the many warlords and to bring China under a central government. However, along with the military successes opposition to this alliance grew, both within the ranks of the CCP, and within the conservative tendency and military leadership of the GMD. The exact course of events in China is highly complicated and historically politicized, but it is clear that from April 1927 onwards, starting with the anti-communist Shanghai Massacre under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, the uneasy alliance between Chinese communists and nationalists came to an end. It even escalated into the Chinese Civil War (1927–1937), in which the communist factions suffered a devastating defeat (Isaacs 1966:175–85; Poeze 1982:1xxxix–xc).

These developments in China compelled the *peranakan* in the CHH to adopt a more nuanced attitude in the choice of allies abroad. Which China did they support? In the Netherlands East Indies the local branches of the Guomindang were purged of communists, and in Europe an indiscriminate, all-Chinese attitude also became untenable. This was already clear upon arrival in Brussels. According to a report from 1929, drafted by nationalist Chinese supporters of Chiang Kai-shek in France, the GMD representatives at the Kongress gegen Imperialismus were communists in disguise. They had sent their own delegation of ‘true representatives of the GMD’, but they had been squeezed out by the Chinese chair Liao Huanxing, who allegedly was a CCP member as well. The French group could do no more than distribute pamphlets in the corridors of the Kongress and approach groups without a clear position, such as the CHH (Levine and Chen 2000:142).

It is no surprise that the Chinese representatives would soon disappear from the League against Imperialism and its meetings. The ‘rightist’ GMD groups turned away from the ‘communist disciples’ in the league, while the communist factions both lost their official mandate and their party structure after the anti-communist purges in China. The Chinese representatives had been the

33 Internal correspondence 5-4-1927, sent letter to Fimmen 21-7-1927, inv. nr. 13, 23 M/8, CHH, iish.
second-largest delegation in Brussels in 1927, but the second league conference in Frankfurt in 1929 was not attended by any significant Chinese organization at all. In a manifesto regarding China, the League against Imperialism in 1929 rejected in plain terms Chiang Kai-shek’s nationalist government in Nanjing, leaving no space for nationalist Chinese involvement.34

Seeing the Chinese leave the League against Imperialism, and confronted with intimidating police surveillance, the majority of the members of the CHH were undecided as to whether or not to continue the political adventures abroad, and if so, as to which side to choose. A minority remained in favour of joining the league, among whom aforementioned Han Tiauw Kie. He even attended the Second Frankfurt Congress in 1929 in private capacity. Other members advocated a return to a non-political, cultural line, but, as Han Tiauw Kie objected, politics would continue to divide the peranakan community anyway. Elsewhere it was aptly described that an isolationist position was already superseded because ‘despite the wish of a majority within the CHH not to engage in politics anymore, politics engaged with the CHH’.35

Finally, the issue came to a head in the board election of November 1930, when two candidate boards campaigned for the leadership of the organization. A ‘moderate’ faction, led by Lie Giok Tjoa, advocated a patriotic, non-political line, but paradoxically wanted to maintain the ties with the European nationalist Guomindang Party. It thereby implicitly recognized the authority of Chiang Kai-shek. On the other hand, a ‘leftist’ faction, under leadership of Tan Ling Djie, disapproved of the uncritical backing of Chiang Kai-shek and the lack of support for the Indonesian movement for independence. After a sharp debate, the pro-Guomindang faction won the majority support and steered the CHH towards a reserved stance with regard to the PI, leading to it turning down the PI’s call for action in December 1931 with which this article began (Van Galen 1989:49).

Political, Cultural, or Patriotic?

This new political line is not to be confused with an elitist disinterest in the outside world, nor should we accept the CHH’s excuse that they wanted to remain neutral. This can be judged from the immediate aftermath of the shift. When, at

34 Manifesto 21-7-1929, inv. nr. 82, Archive League against Imperialism, IISH.
a PI meeting on China and Japan, losing candidate Tan Ling Djie criticized the CHH for being too obedient to Chiang Kai-shek and rejected the idea that China was the one and only fatherland of the peranakan Chinese, he was expelled from the association. Concurrently, the relationship with the PI was severed, because the latter had not respected ‘the personality’ of the CHH. With Tan Ling Djie, most leftist members of the CHH left the association and established the Sarekat Peranakan Tionghoa Indonesia (Union of Peranakan Chinese of Indonesia, SPTI). This association stated that the political future of the peranakan would be in an independent Indonesia, and that the Chinese Indonesians had to cooperate with the Indonesian movement for national independence, and its Dutch representatives in the Perhimpoenan Indonesia. As a reaction, the CHH forbade dual membership with the SPTI, and turned down all approaches by this new organization, which by 1935 seemed to have disappeared.

Concurrently, however, between 1930 and 1933, the contacts between the CHH and the still existing Guomindang branch in Paris intensified. In March 1930, the CHH assisted in accommodating a GMD representative, the Parisian language professor Wang Leng Tsoa, who was sent to organize Chinese workers in the harbours of Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Furthermore, the CHH received many letters and news bulletins from the GMD in Paris, as well as requests for financial aid for the organization and for the Chinese government in Nanjing. Judging from the addresses of correspondence, 81 Rue Monge and 3 Rue Thouin in the Parisian Quartier Latin, it indeed concerned the faction that was loyal to Chiang Kai-shek. In other words, the refusal of the CHH to reply to the PI invitation of 10 December 1931 to attend a protest meeting against the Japanese invasion of the Chinese province of Manchuria—and, for that matter, every invitation sent by the PI, the SPTI, the Anti-Fascist Students Comittee, and the Action Comittee of Defense against Anti-Chinese Agitation—must be interpreted as a loyalist, Chinese nationalist political move.

37 Press release to Aneta 15-3-1932, sent letter to Aziatische Studieclub 18-2-1933, sent letter to SPTI 8-12-1933, internal correspondence 6-12-1935, inv. nr. 14, 26, 159, CHH, IISH.
38 Received letter from the GMD Paris 28-2-1930, inv. nr. 25 H/Q, CHH, IISH.
Years of Introversion

Between 1930 and the end of 1937, the CHH in the Netherlands cautiously defended this nationalist political line. In this, they differed from the CHH branches that were established in the Netherlands East Indies by former students, who in this period expressed strong loyalty to the Dutch colonial system. The only foreign political organization with which the Dutch CHH maintained relations was the European Guomindang in Paris, although correspondence seems to diminish after 1933. In fact, foreign activities between 1932 and 1939 were mainly confined to attempts to unite Chinese student organizations in Europe on the basis of their common ancestry, which resulted in the establishment of the General Federation of Chinese Students Union in Europe in 1935. Co-founding organizations were the Central Union of Chinese Students in Great-Britain and the Verein Chinesischer Studenten in Germany, as well as organizations from Austria, France, and Italy. Five international gatherings took place, but in contrast to the events in the 1920s, these had a strictly social and cultural character. Sports activities, debating competitions, and discussions about common student problems consumed most of the time.40

Relations with the Indonesian students in the Perhimpoenan Indonesia in this period remained hostile, especially after the PI plotted a communist course in 1931. Only five years later, once the Comintern, in 1935, had formulated a Popular Front-strategy against the rise of fascism and the PI adopted a more conciliatory attitude towards non-communist organizations, were relations with the CHH normalized. Moreover, in 1936 a new and apolitical Indonesian students association, Roekoen Peladjar Indonesia (ROEPI), was established, making it possible for peranakan and Indonesian students to seek rapprochement and to organize social, cultural, and sports events together. Politically, however, the CHH and the PI joined forces only after November 1938, on the occasion of the Second Sino-Japanese War, leading to a joint manifesto against Japanese aggression in May 1939.41 This political initiative did not seem to have had an international equivalent.

40 Report conference in Welwyn 10-8-1933, Report conference High Leigh 20-10-1934, inv. nr. 29 Q/S, 142, CHH, IISH.
41 Manifesto CHH and PI, 18-5-1939, inv. nr. 16, CHH, IISH.
Four Stages

Focusing on the CHH, this article undergirds the observation of Frederick Cooper that ‘spatial affinities could narrow, expand, and narrow again’ (Cooper 2005:109). The troubled relationship between peranakan and Indonesian students in the Netherlands is in itself already an illustration of the complexities involved in political and cross-cultural cooperation. But an exploration of the foreign interactions of the CHH with other organizations abroad also reveals that the students functioned in a highly complicated political world, which sometimes allowed for surprising adventures in Paris and Brussels, but on other occasions led to periods of contraction and introversion. As Cooper also mentions with regards to the often-used term ‘globalization’, increased physical mobility—as embodied in a study trip to Europe—did not necessarily lead to openness to other groups and visions. In all these events developments on several stages interacted, and ‘globalizations’ collided. The activities of the CHH in Zürich and Paris in 1918–1919—as well as their abrupt termination—were a response to dramatic and interconnected events in China, the Netherlands East Indies, and Versailles. Likewise, the alienation of the CHH students from the League against Imperialism in Europe, was not only informed by events in Brussels, but was also a consequence of the revolt in the Netherlands East Indies, and the estrangement between the GMD and CCP in China. In order to fully grasp the political positioning of peranakan in the Netherlands, we should not only take into account their cultural background in the Netherlands East Indies and the Dutch student environment in which they were living, but also recognize that events in China and in the anti-colonial networks of Europe to a great extent shaped relations between student organizations in the Netherlands.

Conversely, the engagements of the CHH with the world beyond imperial confines can serve as a temperature check for the internal political dynamics within the association. Often, internal tensions within CHH were covered under the cloak of neutralism, but became more relaxed and visible in connections and collaborations abroad. In any case, the foreign engagements show that the uncooperative attitude towards the Indonesian nationalists of the Perhimpoenan Indonesia in the 1930s should not be dismissed as mere introvert, elitist behaviour, but was in fact a cautious political reaction to developments in Europe as well as in Asia.
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