Coolie Legend on the Deli Plantation

Tale, Text, and Temple of the Five Ancestors

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Abstract

This article traces one narrative of anti-colonial violence on the Sumatra plantation through various Sinophone iterations and establishes the historical events on which it was based. The European anxiety about the defiance of the condemned Chinese men shows how this particular event turned into oral legend, religious observance, touring socialist theatre, leftist fiction, and a PRC Third World internationalist travelogue. In one moment of bravura, Chinese plantation workers rejected their status as colonial subjects. That gesture made them an emblem of the proletarian bona fides of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, and of the traumatic origins of Medan and other North Sumatra Chinese communities in plantation labour. By connecting the foreboding in the colonial archive with the eulogy in the Sinophone literary record, we can triangulate a fuller vision of resistance on the Deli plantations than is available from either one.

Keywords

Deli plantations – coolie labour – Chinese Indonesians – Sumatra history – anti-colonialism – Sinophone literature
... in what year this occurred, what process exactly occurred, where the rubber plantation was,\footnote{Zhou forgets or errs here: the event transpired not at a rubber plantation, but at a tobacco plantation. In his printed account, of which more below, this error does not occur.} which Dutchman handled the case, who was the ultimate Dutch authority—none of this information is known. If you have any materials there about this, I hope you can show me a little of them, or other related materials would also be fine.

Zhou Erfu to Wang Renshu (Ba Ren), the 12th and 14th (of December?) 1955

WANG 2005:145–146

Visitors to Medan today can still find the Five Ancestors Temple 五祖廟 (Wu Zu Miao), known in Indonesian as Vihara Pekong Lima, about 25 km east of the city, though it is no longer a popular place of worship.\footnote{The coordinates are 3° 32' 31.35" N, 98° 48' 37.52" E, located near the town of Lubuk Pakam, on the main road from Medan to Tanjong Morawa. Pekong is Sino-Southeast Asian usage for bogong 伯公, a name for a Taoist tutelary deity, and for that reason often used in temple names.} The temple, built around a tomb, is the most tangible reminder of a historical event in the Deli tobacco plantations of Sumatra that became a local legend. That legend in turn inspired numerous adaptations in Sinophone fiction and on stage, sometimes conflating more than one historical event. These adaptations have, in turn, filtered back into historical writing.

As recorded much later, the local legend concerns five young Teochew men sold from China to work as coolies in Deli.\footnote{Zhou E. 1956; Yege 1959; Liu Y. et al. 1979:139; Franke 1988. The Swatow (Shantou)/Teochew (Chaozhou) cultural region in eastern Guangdong was the principal source of coolie labour on the Deli plantation, with most departing from the port of Swatow before being 'resold' in Penang or Singapore. The Teochew language is closely related to Hokkien, which became the dominant Chinese language of Medan, as in Penang.} These five young men, meeting on the tobacco plantation, swear an oath of brotherhood. Cruelly abused by a Dutch plantation assistant, the five brothers swear to take their revenge upon him and never to betray one another; in some versions a rooster’s blood is used to seal the pact. Soon thereafter, they hack the Dutch assistant to death. The five
brothers offer no resistance to arrest. In court, they each admit to the killing and are all executed, even though each man could have saved his life by accusing one of the others.

According to the legend, on the day of their hanging, a thunderstorm blows up as the heavens shed tears for these five blood brothers who died far from home soil. A version of this part of the story, collected by a Chinese journalist in 1959, reads

‘When I was little, my grandfather would often say’, the temple keeper told us with peerless faith, ‘that when the Five Ancestors were sent to the gallows, there was a great and sudden change in the weather. Black storm clouds gathered from all directions, an ill wind blew up, and the air was filled with blowing sand. No one could see the execution take place, but shouts were heard of “Kill us, kill us, Dutch pigs! You can kill only us five brothers today, but when we come for our revenge it will be in our millions!”’

YEGE 1959:94

The tomb gives 1898 as the date of its rebuilding (Franke 1988:274), and a couplet at the temple gate reads, ‘Muster the courage to be righteous for a thousand years, and make your heart loyal for ten thousand’ 立膽為義照千古，存心從忠著萬年, identifying the temple as a place of homage to courage and loyalty. The temple, initially on the side of the road, acquired a reputation for furnishing very accurate fortunes (Jansen 1934:75), and the graves came to represent not only the victims of a particular injustice but generally martyrs of the violent regime of the tobacco plantations. In the 1960s, the city of Medan expanded, and the Teochew cemetery where the tomb had originally been located was demolished. Local Chinese collected money to move the temple to its current place, and the present site was opened on 9 August 1972.

The legend long remained popular,5 but the historical events that lie behind it have remained shadowy. Although always associated with the resistance
of Chinese coolies to abuses on the tobacco plantations, the legend's historical basis has been unspecific. Accounts given as formal or community history have been unclear, sometimes contradicting one another, and sometimes obscured by the supernatural elements of the legend. Literary treatments of the events have overwritten the historical record, with such versions—mediated again by PRC visitors in the 1950s—entering into broader transnational Sinophone knowledge with greater authority than the orally circulating legendary accounts.

The plantation system treated Chinese labourers ‘as a mass, not as a collection of individuals’, and the historical record is fatally skewed towards the planter perspective. Historians have had to ‘read carefully between the lines’ so that ‘the history of the plantation workers [...] [can] be laboriously reconstructed’ (Breman 1989:11). This article examines records of local history, the built environment, and the Sinophone literary echo in order to make more just sense of the colonial record. By drawing on newly available documents and evidence from the late-nineteenth-century colonial press, this article sharpens the historical contours around these events and permits a more precise line to be drawn from the historical record to the literary and devotional iterations of this story, which came to be known as the ‘Five Ancestors’. Tracing this single narrative of anti-colonial violence on the Sumatra plantation, as it transforms from colonial history to an enduring and multifaceted Sinophone legend, improves the understanding of Sinophone culture's enduring and transnational response to the horrors of coolie labour. Seeing the narrative's metamorphosis from the late colonial period to the Cold War also helps us understand the power of this ‘ancestral’ account.

1 The Deli Plantations

The period of commercial tobacco plantations and coolie labour indelibly marked Sumatra's east coast, not least in terms of ethnic composition. Between 1870 and 1931, it is estimated that 300,000 Chinese reached the Medan area on the north-eastern coast of Sumatra (Buiskool 2009:114). Today, the Medan Chinese remain both a large and culturally distinct group. Unlike on Java, many Medan Chinese retain high levels of fluency in Hokkien even today, despite

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6 PRC interest has of course been partly determined by relations with Indonesia. Indonesia's history was of much greater interest to PRC intellectuals, and cultural diplomacy most active, during the heyday of the Jakarta–Beijing axis in the 1950s.
the authoritarian and explicitly anti-Sinitic restrictions of the New Order era. Indentured coolie labour, one of the principal origins of the community, is naturally part of local oral traditions, with the real trauma of exploitation and resistance coalescing around stories such as that of the Five Ancestors.

The first successful harvest of tobacco was made on the east coast of Sumatra in 1864 (Volker 1928:15), and commercial interests in tobacco rapidly became multinational and expansion-driven by global markets (Stoler 1995:17–22). By the 1870s, Deli tobacco was established as a high-quality cigar wrapper, in demand for European and American smokers, and in 1871 the Deli Planters' Association was founded (Volker 1928:23). With local populations proving unwilling to work on the plantations, from the very beginning the planters started recruiting Chinese coolies.

Securing this supply of indentured labour was a major concern for the planters. Although the planters also recruited Javanese workers, they clearly preferred Chinese labour (Reid 1970:289). On behalf of the association, Dutch planters travelled to China (1874) in order to secure a steady supply of labour, but the authorities of Canton (Guangzhou), Amoy (Xiamen), and Swatow demurred (Schadee 1919:35), with pressure from the Cantonese provincial governor Jui-lin 瑞麟 (Ruilin) having only recently put an end to the use of the ports of Hong Kong and Macau for the global coolie trade (Yen 1985:121–122). Consequently, in the early years of the Deli plantation system, Chinese labour embarked in ports along the south-east coast of China for Penang and Singapore. There, they were contracted for Deli.

The rapid development of plantations increased the need for workers. The Deli plantation system reached its peak in 1891, at which point there were 169 plantations. In the 1870s, from the labour of one coolie for a month, who was paid on average 3.5 dollars, the planters could count on 60–70 dollars pure profit (Schadee 1919:35–36). Working conditions were very poor, and diseases spread easily. Coolie mortality was very high, especially among the Chinese and especially in the early years (Van Klaveren 1997), and planters hired extra ‘help coolies’ to ‘fill the gaps (due to death, escape, sickness, etc.)’ (Weigand 1911:49).

7 The sovereignty of the Dutch colonial government in the East Indies over the entirety of north Sumatra was not fully established until the end of the Aceh War in the early twentieth century. When Dutch colonial merchants started the tobacco plantation industry in Deli, on the east coast of Sumatra, in the 1860s, rule was indirect: a number of small dynasties were ‘rewarded by the Dutch’ for their cooperation with ‘the title of Sultan, enormous wealth, complete security, and enhanced control over both their Malay vassals and the neighbouring Bataks’ (Reid 2014:4).
Meanwhile, European colonial authors hailed the exploitation of the area as progress: industrial profit where previously there had been virgin forest (Volker 1928).

The treatment of coolies was infamously ruthless, and colonial authorities did little or nothing to curb planter violence. In the 1880–1890s, *klapzaken* (cases in which supervisors hit coolies) were regularly reported in local newspapers. According to European planter narrative, the task of keeping order and finishing heavy work with a group of lazy coolies required a strict punitive regimen, since in the early years there were many ‘unemployed Chinese hired from Penang and Singapore, among whom were scum and criminals’ (Baumann 1936:13). Complaining that coolies often absconded after money and advances had been paid, the tobacco industry lobbied the Dutch East Indies government, which passed the Coolie Ordinance in 1880. The regulation allowed companies to engage coolies in a contract that obligated them to work for three years. It included *poenale sanctie*, or the penal sanction, which meant that this civil contract was under criminal law and runaway coolies could be caught by the police. The argument for this stringent rule was that many coolies ran away before the contract ended. The ordinance gave planters the power to punish coolies who were thought to be disobedient or lazy, or who were trying to run away (Breman 1989:40).

In the 1870s and 1880s, the ‘miseries [of working on the Deli plantations] were widely known in the overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia’ and the coolies ‘were ranked as the worst treated group among the Chinese in the Dutch East Indies’ (Yen 1985:161). British colonial officials set up an (ultimately ineffective) Chinese Protectorate in 1877 in the Straits Settlement, partly due to abuses of coolies leaving there for Sumatra (Reid 1970:296–297). The treatment of the coolies also attracted the attention of Chinese authorities. In 1886, Qing envoys arriving in Penang changed their itinerary to visit Deli upon hearing of the atrocities occurring there. In Sumatra, they were able to confirm many details and heard from ‘local Chinese leaders, merchants and coolies’ who ‘all agreed that many coolies were ill-treated’ (Yen 1985:161), including the firing of sick coolies, floggings resulting in deaths, and imprisonment of other local Chinese for seeking to help coolies. The dire situation contributed to the envoys recommending the expansion of diplomatic representation in Southeast Asia, since the colonial *kapitan* system was evidently unable to protect

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8 See, for instance, *Deli Courant*, ‘Men wachte zich voor “klapzaken”’, 22-5-1895.
10 It took three decades (1882–1911) before the Dutch, more obstreperous on this matter than
the Deli Chinese (Yen 1985:162–164). Nevertheless, in 1888, the direct transport of coolies began, after years of lobbying from Deli planters. The removal of obstacles to it ultimately came not through Dutch but through German diplomatic representation in China (Van der Putten 1996: 117–123; see also Deli Planters Vereeniging 1933:i–v; Broersma 1919:243–246). The importance of Penang and Singapore as entrepôts ceased by the end of the century.

By that time, there were voices in Europe protesting the way coolies were treated. The English consular interpreter Edward Harper Parker on his 1888 visit became ‘convinced that the majority of them were in a position little removed from virtual slavery’ (Parker 1909:43) due to the unfair contracts and brutal punishments, but the treatment of coolies was only brought to the forefront of public attention in the Netherlands by Van den Brand’s *De miljoenen uit Deli* (The millions from Deli; 1902 and 1903). There followed an investigation commissioned by the colonial government called the Rhemrev Report (Rhemrev 1904), which found that Van den Brand’s accusations were largely justified and that widespread abuses against coolies were taking place. As a result, a labour inspectorate was set up, and a revision of the coolie ordinance was published in 1915 (Lindblad 1999:45). However, it was not until the threat of a boycott of Sumatran tobacco arose from the USA in 1932 that the Deli tobacco companies gradually began to remove the penal sanction from new contracts. The outright abolition of the sanction only took place ten years later, in 1942 (Gould 1961:30).

In the context of this systematic brutality, resistance or violence from the coolies was common, often sparked by payment disputes. In 1885 alone, the *Deli Courant* recorded several such incidents. In July, a coolie named Tjoa A Paij was found guilty of murdering an assistant named Danckaerts. In August, two coolies were found guilty of murdering Giovani Bonicioli, an 18-year-old assistant at Lingga estate who was ‘literally cut to pieces’ suffering

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11 Chinese officers were a long-standing feature of the Dutch colonial administration, with *luitenant* (lieutenant) being a middle rank. By the twentieth century, however, their position in the community was increasingly awkward, since the Dutch relied on them to inform on, and quieten, the Chinese population (Williams 1960:124–6).

12 After the publication of *De miljoenen uit Deli* in 1902, a Dutch conservative group called De Vereeniging ‘Moederland en Koloniën’ (Association of the ‘Motherland and Colonies’) wrote a refutation entitled *De Koelie-ordonnantie tot regeling van de rechtsverhouding tusschen werkgevers en werklieden in de Residentie Oostkust van Sumatra*. Van den Brand wrote *Nog eens: De miljoenen uit Deli* in 1903 counterattacking the report, which the same association responded to with *Nog eens: De Koelie-ordonnantie ...* (1903).

25 lethal wounds. Four other coolies were involved in a murder in the Maryland estate. In September, the *Deli Courant* recorded six executions of Chinese coolies within a month for attacking planters. The *Straits Times* in January 1890 reported coolie riots due to payment disputes in Simpang Tiga, Sungai Silam, Hessa estates in Asahan, Tandem Hilir in Langkat, and Amplas. European assistants, who were often near at hand and personally known to coolies, were frequently attacked. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, over 10,000 coolies on the East Coast were convicted annually for misdemeanours, and about 200 for more serious crimes, including attacks on plantation administrators, assistants, and overseers on Sumatra’s east coast (Breman 1989:161–162). Many coolies died in prison awaiting trial (Breman 1989:163–164).

2 Literary Descendants of the Ancestors

Having constructed the temple and venerated notional ancestors in it, generations of Medan Chinese conceptualized themselves as descendants of these ancestors, who epitomize martyrdom, faithfulness, and heroic defiance. As Marxist thought became more available to Sinophone intellectuals in the region, the history of Chinese labour and resistance to oppression in this part of Sumatra was an understandably inviting subject for Chinese leftist intellectuals trying to engage Southeast Asian Chinese readers about their position in a global history of Western imperialist oppression of Asia. Thus, on stage as well as in journals and books, the sworn brothers were ancestors not only of the local community but also of a considerable literary progeny.

2.1 Zeng Huading (1929)

The first and arguably most powerful literary treatment of the local legend was published in February 1929 by Singapore author Zeng Huading 曾華丁 in *Literary Arts Weekly* 文藝週刊 (Wenyi zhoukan), the fledgling literary sup-

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16 ‘Deli news’, *Straits Times Weekly*, 7-1-1890.
17 Historian Wong Yee Tuan’s account of certain riots in Deli in 1884 considers them principally as a ‘form of economic leverage’ between rival groups of economic interests in Penang (Y.T. Wong 2015:78–9). This element cannot be discounted, and no doubt acts of violence involved complex motivations. Nevertheless, animus against European overseers who meted out the regime of punitive indenture must always have been present and would most often have been the underlying if not always immediate reason.
plement of Nanyang Siang Pau 南洋商報 (Nanyang shangbao). Zeng’s story, entitled ‘Tomb of the Five Brothers’ 五兄弟墓 (Wu xiongdi mu), is a powerful ‘mythical expression of capitalist exploitation’ in which the sometimes grotesque images function as an accusation against ‘colonial-capitalist oppression’ (N. Wong 2022). This relatively early date suggests that this legend was circulating not only on Sumatra’s east coast in the early half of the twentieth century, but that it was also known in the closely connected Chinese communities of Penang and Singapore, which many of the coolies had passed through. Later writers, however, appear utterly unaware of this version.

The literary turn to Nanyang themes, then very new, was part of a wider emphasis from leftist Singapore authors on making the literature more ‘local’, with an emphasis on labour. As Wenyi Zhoukan editor—the brother of Zeng Huading, Zeng Shengti 曾聖提—explained:

The sole aim of this supplement is to collect food and materials produced and made in the tropical region. We have no intention to look for precious stones to decorate the palace which is built with marble. We are sincerely trying to gather Nanyang’s writers and readers who are supporters of our Nanyangnization program to build an iron tower of Nanyang literature with blood and [sweat] in the huge coconut and rubber plantation.

Y.W. Wong 2002:12; translation by Y.W. Wong

Zeng’s treatment strips the events of any specific geographical or historical context, and indeed literary researchers have tended to assume that the story is meant to reflect ‘real society in Malaya and Singapore in the 1920s’ rather than on the Sumatran plantations (Yang 1988:111). Zeng, if aware of the origin of the story, may have wished for it to apply more broadly, in a way that might now be called inter-imperial. At the same time, the almost sensual engagement with the lush jungle setting anticipates some of the stylistic features of post-war Mahua modernist texts (N. Wong 2022).

Unlike in the Ba Ren 巴人 or Shalihong versions discussed below, the reader is not given the names of the coolies (which are referred to instead as ‘pigs’ 猪

18 The text was then included by Fang Xiu 方修 in his seminal 1967 anthology of Sinophone Malaysian fiction, Anthology of new Sinophone Malaysian literature (Mahua xinwenxue xuanji 馬華新文學選集), which was the version consulted for this research.

19 Thus, the Five Ancestors are also honoured in a temple in Kampung Gurun, Kedah, Malaysia, built in 1954. See AngKongKeng (n.y.). ‘Kedah Gurun Goh Chou temple’. http://www.angkongkeng.com/malaysia/80-kedah/539-goh-chou-temple (accessed 21-3-2021). They are explicitly identified as being from Medan.
and referred to using the animal pronoun ‘ta’ 牠). Nor are we told that the coolies hail from any particular place, while historical and other literary expressions always mention that the coolies are Teochew. The anonymity of the actual place—legible as any site with indentured Chinese labour in Southeast Asia—suggests that the author intended the story to speak to the phenomenon universally. Nor is there a specific occasion or offense or indeed a very clear object of the killing. Indeed, it is not obvious whether the killed oppressor is even European—instead, vengeance is taken by the ‘pigs’ on the whole murderous coolie system. Only the combination of the tomb (including in the title), tobacco plantation, and the five labourers who insist on all being identified as the killers—and therefore all being executed—makes it a certainty that this story belongs to this same Five Ancestors narrative. Instead of names of people or plantations, the reader receives the account of oppressive tropical heat that is often a focus of contemporary Chinese writing on Nanyang. All versions of the story are necessarily angry, but Zeng’s text is bitter and visceral to a greater degree, and the principal effect is of rage against immediate exploitation, with imperialism and colonialism clear but distant and a little implicit. None of the events that soften the brutality of other versions—the heavenly ascension of the legend, or the promise of a brighter (Communist) dawn—is anywhere in sight. If there is hope, it is in the vigour of defiant rage, on the very insistence on the system’s obscenity, leading to the text’s caustic adoption of racist vocabulary in its continued reference to the Chinese labourers as ‘pigs’.

In the broader Chinese world, the Five Ancestors Temple narrative is now likely best-known as part of the work of Ba Ren, the pen name of Wang Renshu, although the Chinese-reading public could only access his work almost forty years after he wrote it. In his oeuvre, this is the work that ‘most powerfully embodied Ba Ren’s vision of a class struggle transcending ethnic divisions’ (T. Zhou 2019:47), and specialists also often consider it the ‘most important of his Nanyang works, as well as the one of greatest artistic merit, and occupying the most important position in Chinese-Indonesian theatre history’ (Zhang T. 2008:102). The projection of ‘a Marxist analysis of historical development onto the original legend’ (T. Zhou 2019:47) was certainly due to his consciousness

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20 This term, historically ubiquitous in Chinese, is just one sign of the brutal way that coolies were treated, both in transit and once on the plantation.

21 This is despite the fact that, unlike Ba Ren or Shalihong, Zeng was Teochew himself (Yang 1988:103).
of international politics and the prospects of Third World solidarity, but it also made a historically valid and recent claim about the exploitation of Chinese and *pribumi* side-by-side.

According to Ba Ren, he derived his account from ‘a history book by an Indonesian, *Deli then and now* 日里今昔’ (Ba Ren 1996:457). Previously unidentified, we believe that this source text is the Malay-language book, *Deli dahoeloe dan sekarang*, published by local historian and journalist Mohammad Said in conjunction with Sinar Deli in Medan in 1937. Working with explicitly propagandistic aims and under time pressure (since the play was for immediate performance), Ba Ren was not at liberty to conduct any further historical research when he first wrote his work, but would then spend time revising it for the rest of his life. The plot, closely resembling the legend, but without its supernatural elements, is as follows:

Five young men arrive from Chaozhou under unfair contracts and are exploited by the tobacco farming system. Animated by fervid revolutionary sentiments, they swear brotherhood and kill the Dutch assistant after he has cruelly and unjustly punished an elderly fellow worker. Under examination, all of the young men claim to be the ringleader of the crime, and thus the sultanate’s court grants clemency to none. They die as heroic martyrs.

Ba Ren wrote four versions of the play, using three different titles, from the initial composition in 1946 to one he was still working on at the time of his death in 1972. The first, used for theatrical performance, and the last, discovered after his death by his son, have not been published (except for an epilogue). The unpublished first and last versions are in Wang Keping’s possession; the first one is almost illegible (Wang 2005:145).

When performed in Sumatra for two years beginning in 1946 in numerous cities and towns, the show had to be linguistically adaptable, mixing Malay and Chinese topolects as appropriate, depending on the ethnic makeup of the audience (Guo 2015:418). Nevertheless, the troupe organizers decided

to delete all the plot elements about Indonesians struggling against the Dutch and supporting the Chinese labourers against the Dutch, leaving

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22 Mohammad Said (1905–1995) was the founder of the *Waspada* newspaper in Medan and wrote several history books about Deli and Sumatra. Unfortunately, no copy of *Deli dahoeloe dan sekarang* was accessible to us, and it may be held only privately, for it does not appear in Worldcat. Anthony Milner’s 1982 monograph *Kerajaan* cites it, but in his kind responses to our query he indicated that he did not presently have a copy, having likely read it in Medan, perhaps from the collection of T. Loekman Sinar.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period of composition</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Length (Wang 2005:145)</th>
<th>Publication</th>
<th>Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td><em>Temple of the Five Ancestors</em> 五祖廟 (Wuzu miao)</td>
<td>Foreword only published in Wang 2005</td>
<td>Local touring performance in Medan and other parts of what is now North Sumatra province; 1947 performance in Singapore.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td><em>Five hanged coolies</em> 五個被弔死的苦力 (Wuge bei diaosi de kuli)</td>
<td>4 acts, c. 60,000 words Published in PRC area studies journal (Ba Ren 1985); inclusion as appendix in selected works and included in complete works (Ba Ren 1996:381–455; Ba Ren 2017).</td>
<td>None known</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td><em>Temple of the Five Ancestors</em> 五祖廟 (Wuzu miao)</td>
<td>4 acts, c. 110,000 words Ba Ren 1986; Included as appendix in selected works and included in complete works (Ba Ren 1996:381–458; Ba Ren 2017).</td>
<td>None known</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated 1966–1967; discovered in 1979</td>
<td><em>The people who first lifted the torch of the proletariat</em> 第一次點起無產者火炬的人們 (Diyi ci dianqi wuchan- zhe huoju de renmen)</td>
<td>9 acts, ca. 60,000 words Closing curtain speech 凍幕詞 excerpted in Wang 2005.</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
only an Indonesian girl who sells coffee and is very sympathetic to the Chinese labourers and sings songs in order to encourage them to take their revenge.

XU 2001:153; see also FAN 2001:300

In the uncertain and rapidly evolving political circumstances, organizers feared that highlighting Chinese sympathy for Indonesian revolutionaries might provoke a violent reaction from the Dutch against the local Chinese. Although the interethnic themes of the script were toned down in performance, PRC-based participants in later years would remember the activities of the troupe as fulfilling the purpose Ba Ren intended: commemorating the ‘joint resistance of overseas Chinese and Indonesians against external aggression’ (Guo 2015:416). To this end, performance of the play was set into a programme of non-Chinese material as well, including dances and patriotic songs of both China and Indonesia (Stenberg 2019:83–90).

It seems to have been staged only one further time: a 1947 performance in Singapore by the Voice of the People Musical Theatre Company (Minsheng gejutuan 民聲歌劇團), founded in the same year (Zhao 1971:321, 337). Little is known of this performance or of the troupe, although an account of its formation notes that it was dedicated to using theatre to ‘express the darkness and bitterness of society’ and its stated goals include not only support for the Council for Joint Action’s stance on the new Malayan constitution but also ‘democracy in Vietnam, Indonesia, etc’;23 suggesting an internationalist and leftist stance. Another source notes that the troupe consists of ‘workers’ associations’ that did street performances for the May First celebrations.24 Whether members of Medan’s New China Dramatic Society (Xin Zhongguo juyishe 新中國劇藝社) brought the script to Singapore or were involved in the production is unknown; it could easily also be that the script was posted to Singapore, for instance by Ba Ren to associates of his from his Singapore sojourn (July 1941–February 1942).25 The troupe and script profile both fit comfortably into the early post-war scene of emerging local and visiting leftist theatre in Chinese in Malaya and show that the story retained relevance post war (B. Zhang 2021:84–103).

24 ‘Minsheng gejutuan biaoyan jietouxi’, Nanyang Siang Pau, 28-4-1947. Another source (Zhan 2001:171–73) makes it clear that the performances for May First celebrations were not of Temple of the Five Ancestors, for which the date and venue of performance remain unknown.
25 Special thanks to David Xu Borgonjon for alerting us to this performance, and to Beiyu Zhang for providing us with further sources about the troupe.
Ba Ren felt that he hadn’t done the story justice and continued to work on the play (Fan 2001:300). The second version, retitled *Five hanged coolies*, was written over a month’s time in 1947 and seems to have been intended also for performance and perhaps publication. That project was made impossible by Ba Ren’s imprisonment in a camp (August) and deportation (September) of that year by the Dutch (T. Zhou 2019:49). Indonesia remained a focus of Ba Ren’s activity—he became the first PRC ambassador to Indonesia in 1951—and he worked on his histories of Indonesia until his death. In the following years, Ba Ren continued to expand the text, creating a third version in 1955. In at least one fashion, the longer time allowed Ba Ren to bring the story closer to historical information since his friend Zhou Erfu visited the tomb during a trip to Medan in June 1955. Upon return to China, Zhou Erfu furnished by letter (from Shanghai to Beijing, reproduced in Wang 2005:145–146) the names on the tomb so that Ba Ren could use them for his characters, but was unable to give any further information.\(^{26}\) In Ba Ren’s new text, the European antagonist was given an appropriate name—Luhmann—the name of a planter family killed in 1876 (Stoler 1992).

In other ways, the effect of Ba Ren’s third (and probably unperformed) version was to make the script more appropriate for both the political atmosphere of 1950s China and the likely knowledge of PRC readers. Ba Ren more explicitly sets the Sumatran struggle in a global context, outlining the history of the plantations and connecting Sumatra to a global history of exploitation of Chinese labour in a project to ‘[redefine] diasporic collectivity’ in terms of ‘inter-imperial history’ (N. Wong 2022). The Nanyang term for China (唐山 Tangshan), which predominates in the second version, is not familiar in the PRC and was liable to be misinterpreted; it is most often replaced by the standard modern term (中國 Zhongguo). Matters unfamiliar to mainland Chinese readers, such as to Malay deities, are introduced more extensively (see, for instance, Ba Ren 1996:266, 394).\(^{27}\) Dialogues are extended and rendered in a more literary style, which privileges declamation over realism. Terms that might be felt to be injurious to Southeast Asians such as 番邦 (‘barbarian lands’, fanbang) for Southeast Asia or 番婆 (‘barbarian woman’, fanpo) are replaced by neutral (東南亞 ‘Southeast Asia’, Dongnanya) and positive (好姐姐 ‘good elder sister’, hao jiejie) terms. Most notably, Ba Ren made his Marxist analysis

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26 The tombstone records the names of the Five Ancestors: Chen Bingyi 陳炳益, Wu Tusheng 吳士昇, Li Sandi 李三弟, Yang Guilin 楊桂林, and Huang Wuqi 黃蜈蜞.

27 In both cases, the heroes decide that since the tutelary deity has come to the South Seas, he has taken on the habits of the local datuk deities (and, in the latter, has ‘sworn brotherhood’) and so must be ritually sacrificed a white rooster.
more explicit, adding self-consciously political speeches that are historically implausible but suit the socialist cosmopolitan political rhetoric of the early PRC. The terminology of the Dutch oppressors was reworked for the global Cold War context, with ‘low class people’ 下等人 (xiadengren) replaced by ‘Orientals’ 東方人 (Dongfangren), highlighting the racial aspect of imperialism (Ba Ren 1996:276–277). And while the sympathy of Indonesian characters for the Chinese coolies increased (Ba Ren 1996:342), a Malay song that had originally been included was removed, being of interest perhaps to Sumatran audiences but not to PRC ones (Ba Ren 1996:294, 416).

These transformations show how Ba Ren was at pains to bring his drama both into line with the PRC cultural policies and to make it legible and perhaps performable in the PRC. One can surmise that it was a disappointment to him, since this play—which he worked on for a quarter of a century, from 1946 until his death in 1972—would never be published or performed in the PRC during his lifetime.

2.3 Zhou Erfu 周而復 (1956), Shibin 使賓 (1957) and Yege 耶戈 (1959)
Zhou Erfu, besides providing the names from the temple to Ba Ren for the play’s characters as given in his third version, also devoted a few pages of his 1956 travel account Dongnanya sanji to a visit to the temple. Zhou Erfu, who visited the temple at Ba Ren’s ‘special request’ in 1955 to ‘collect materials’ (Wang 2005:144), adopted the same date (Zhou E. 1956:123). In his 1956 account, he tells how the local Chinese caretaker of the temple ‘excitedly told us the story of the five heroes’ whose ‘combined age was only 85’ (Zhou E. 1956:123). Zhou’s account of events resembles a synopsis of Ba Ren’s drama (Zhou E. 1956:122–125), with an emphasis on the five heroes surrendering themselves and each demanding that responsibility for the killing rest with them, even when separately examined. The memory of their sacrifice makes the temple ‘an immortal monument, a place of veneration for tens of thousands’ (Zhou E. 1956:125). Upon return to China, Zhou furnished by letter (from Shanghai to Beijing) the tomb’s names for the characters (reproduced in Wang 2005:145–146):

A year later, Nanyang Siang Pau published another travel account, signed by Shibin, likely S P Lim 林使賓, who would later become a leading member of Barisan Sosialis and in 1963 was targeted by the Singaporean government as part of Operation Coldstore.29 His travel account, entitled ‘No ordinary temple’

28 Zhou was in Indonesia only a few months after the Bandung Conference, accompanying Zheng Zhenduo as part of an official PRC cultural delegation (H. Liu 2010:164).
29 As the Barisan Sosialis delegate to the 3rd Afro–Asian People’s Solidarity Conference in Tanganyika in February 1963, Lim was detained by the British at the behest of Singapore
一個不平凡的廟 begins with the account of a sick child having been cured by visiting the temple (although it appears that the child's illness may in the first instance have been caused by showing disrespect to the temple). It then goes on to contrast the temple's smallness and modesty with how it appears in the legend of the Five Ancestors, which he retells based on identified sources, and again dates to 1871 (but which records the court as Dutch rather than belonging to the sultanate). Shibin's recounting, which like that of other left-leaning figures foregrounds the story's potential for anti-imperialism and proletarian heroism, is noteworthy for the gruesome passage in which the five labourers, having killed the Dutch foreman,

[d]ismember the body, and each one taking a piece, walk towards the home of the Dutch plantation owner, shouting 'Swine flesh for sale! Buy the swine flesh.' The Dutch plantation owner heard the clamour and ran out of his home—as soon as he saw it (it would have been better for him if he hadn't) he keeled over in a faint.

SHIBIN 1957:15

Other elements of the legend occur in slightly different forms (a rainstorm in Batavia at the moment of execution; fearful Dutch people stopping their carriages to pay their respects to the temple, so as not to anger the heroes, et cetera), but the text ultimately rejects the supernatural aspect as superstition while elegizing the revolutionary side of it.

In 1959, the PRC's cultural attaché in Indonesia (1955–1962), Sima Wensen 司馬文森, writing under the pen name Yege (Chen N. 1985:122), did the same in a piece entitled 'The story of the Five Ancestors' and published in Renmin wenxue 人民文學 (The people's literature).30 Their accounts are similar and also resemble Ba Ren's version (Zhou, for one, had likely read one or more of Ba Ren's versions). Yege's piece was also serialized in the Jakarta-based Shenghuo bao in 1960, whose readership was probably no more familiar than that of the PRC with the Sumatran legend.

and deported to Malaya (Boyce 1965:98; 'Lin Shibin yi bei qianfan Lianhebang', Nanyang Siang Pau, 6-2-1963).

30 Our thanks go to David Xu Borgonjon for identifying the pen name.
2.4 Shalihong 沙里洪 (1959)
Shalihong, pen name of Li Jing 李靖, was born to Meixian Hakka parents who arrived in Sumatra in the 1920s. After leaving high school early, he became a school teacher in Medan and Bagiansiapiai, before being invited to join the staff of Minzhu ribao 民主日報 (Democracy Daily) at the age of 21, where he worked for fifteen years until it was closed in 1966. While still in Sumatra, he studied traditional Chinese medicine and worked as a vendor in the market. His family owned a clothing store before being forced to sell it in 1973, at which point Shalihong moved to Jakarta, where he lived until his death in February 2020. He then embarked on a career in traditional Chinese medicine. Post-Reformasi, he contributed regularly to the literary column of Medan’s Shangbao 商報 (Business News) and Jakarta’s Guoji ribao 國際日報 (International Daily) (Stenberg 2019:192).

Shalihong’s version of Five Ancestors Temple was written in 1959 (Shalihong 2007). Though he was aware that Ba Ren had produced a play on the subject, he had not seen any production or script, and no copy of it is known to have been preserved in Indonesia. In the process of writing his play, which shares the title of Ba Ren’s drama, Shalihong interviewed surviving coolies who were still living in poverty in Labuhan Deli. The performers, part of a troupe called Haifeng 海風 (Sea Breeze), were principally fishmongers and other ordinary labourers of a pro-Beijing political bent, and Shalihong’s script includes words borrowed from Indonesian and other signs of local production (Stenberg 2019:91–93).

As in Ba Ren’s play, the specific catalyst for the disaster is the beating of a character whose work is not satisfactory to the foreman. The violence is more direct, with the beating of the elderly coolie enacted on stage, whereas in Ba Ren’s version it is reported. In this version, the judge is a Dutch planter, so the element of racial persecution in colonialism and the demand for justice are more direct, with the intermediary of the colonially controlled sultan’s court eliminated.31 In general, the proximate grounds for revenge in Shalihong’s version are more personal, while the larger injustices can be inferred from the story but are not highlighted. And while Ba Ren’s version has no time for laughter, there are moments of levity in Shalihong’s text, including a series of farting jokes in the court scene. Finally, the residual presence of religion—the oaths

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31 As Nicholas Y.H. Wong points out, the sultan performs an important function in Ba Ren’s narrative, allowing him to stage ‘a dual critique of feudal and imperial powers’ by setting out ‘the legal and extralegal means by which Sultanate elites and planters in East Sumatra alike grabbed land among the Sumatran coast and expelled indigenous communities, while local rulers fend them off’ (N. Wong 2022). As will become apparent below, Shalihong’s narrative is historically more accurate.
are taken at the altar of a god—shows the influence of Chinese religion without any of the ambivalence that attaches to it for Ba Ren as a loyal party member.

2.5 Hei Ying 黒嬰 (1983)

*Piaoliu yiguo de nüxing* 漂流異國的女性 (The Women who Drifted Abroad) is the major post-Cultural Revolution work of Hei Ying, a Medan author who made his name in Shanghai in the 1930s (Y. Zhang 1995). The plot, drawing no doubt on Hei Ying's own experience during and after World War II, follows Chinese educators and intellectuals in the archipelago during the turbulent late 1930s until the defeat of the Japanese at the end of the war (Hei Ying 1983; Tan 2018). Resistance to colonialism and imperialism is a constant subject, and Hei Ying depicts a visit to the Five Ancestors Temple by recently arrived Chinese characters unfamiliar with the story, resulting in an encounter not dissimilar to that reported by Zhou Erfu and Yege. What is notable in Hei Ying's brief account is the development in vocabulary, with the planter being referred to as 'a capitalist'. The narrator, watching devotees burning incense to the ancestors, makes the connection between the ancestors and nationalism explicit:

> Having heard the story, I returned to look at the temple. There were a lot of people offering incense to the Five Ancestors, entreatying for the blessing of the Five Ancestors. I couldn’t help thinking as I stood nearby: of course lighting incense and kneeling in prayer are superstition, but the people are no doubt showing their reverence for the righteous men who resisted oppression! Chinese people must not be insulted. The Five Ancestor’s spirit of resistance is admirable.

The story of the Five Ancestors naturally caught the imagination of Chinese-language authors of prose fiction, drama, and reportage in a period when all of these genres were widely considered important political tools. Prose fiction and drama have almost completely eliminated the supernatural element that is integral to the resolution of the legend, making the story one of Marxist class sacrifice and anti-imperialist resistance. Considering the accounts as a small corpus, it is notable that the fictional versions (Zeng, Ba Ren, Shalihong) elide the supernatural interventions that clearly formed much of the power of the original version, while the ethnographic accounts (Yege, Zhou) give them as a

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32 Indeed, since Hei Ying was an editor of *Shenghuo bao* at the time that they reprinted Yege’s account in 1960, he may have been drawing on it directly, as well as on childhood memories and other *prc* print accounts such as Zhou’s.
point of interest but give the same type of interpretation the modern reader will likely adopt: that the legendary aspect of the story is an expression of the trauma inflicted on the community.

3 Finding the Ancestors

One of the difficulties with establishing the historicity of these events is the existence of conflicting dates in various sources. Other brutalities seem to have become associated to the Five Ancestors’ executions. For instance, one 1919 Dutch history of the area notes that a murder in 1871 of two [plantation] entrepreneurs by Chinese coolies, committed out of greed, was heavily punished by the sultan. Seven of the guilty were put to death, and fifteen others were sentenced to hard labour.

Schadee 1919:11; see also Broersma 1919:73; Said 1977:48

Ba Ren’s introduction to the third version incorporates both mention of the tomb and the events of 1871, quoting Deli then and now (Ba Ren 1996:243), that is, Mohammad Said’s Malay-language work Deli dahoeloe dan sekarang. Ba Ren’s quotation follows the above Schadee passage almost word for word – although notably the fifteen recorded by Schadee are replaced by five in Ba Ren’s account. The attachment of the 1871 killings to the temple created a conflation that would, for many writers, generate an erroneous connection between the 1871 deaths and the famous legend surrounding the tomb. In point of fact, Ba Ren is conscious of the discrepancy, noting that there were ‘more than five deaths’ but moving swiftly on to make his point about the Dutch colonial government manipulating the incident in order to strip the sultan of his judicial powers (Ba Ren 1996:243). He may even have been conscious of the fact that the incidents were separate but chose to combine them anyway for dramatic purposes.

Derived from Ba Ren, 1871 became the standard date for the Five Ancestors in PRC writings, and this date found its way into later histories of Indonesia and of Southeast Asia (see, for example, Chen H. 1984 v. 5, 239–240; Hong 1995:353–

33 Reid notes this year as being the earliest confirmed date of Deli’s bad reputation among Straits Chinese (Reid 2005:204–5), most likely due to these events.

34 Deli dahoeloe dan sekarang was not accessible to us, but Said’s description in Koeli kontrak tempo doeloe (1977) also corresponds closely to the Schadee passage cited here.
or into historical fiction set in Medan. Even those working more recently in Medan probably derive the 1871 date from PRC intermediaries or from Said (Huaiying 2015). Newspapers have also adopted the date, and later readers might receive garbled versions of the story by crediting an unspecified number of coolies with five killings. Historians have also, by and large, accepted this date without further investigation.

Associating the 1871 date with the temple was a result of conflation, but it is worth recording some details of the 1871 events that Schadee, Broersma, and Said refer to, as reported in Singapore and Sumatra newspapers. These state that Hermann Küng and Theodor Meyer, both Swiss and previously residents of Singapore, were attacked with axes by coolies at their plantation ‘fifteen or sixteen miles further inland than the previous European settlers’, the coolies having found out that they had recently received cash. The circumstance that establishes beyond reasonable doubt that the Küng-Meyer killings are the same as those mentioned by the historians forty-five years later is the fact that seven coolies were hanged, though a larger number were sentenced. But these were not the events that inspired the building of the temple. In some ways, the 1871 events seem a poor match, as the murdered Europeans were newly arrived, were working without a Chinese foreman (tandil), and were living in the same house as the coolies—showing an unjustified self-confidence that led to their vulnerability and violent death (Zangger 2001:247–248; Zangger et al. 2020:47–53). Since everything suggests that the motive was robbery rather than revenge, let alone class struggle, Ba Ren’s conflation of the two events was likely error or convenience, rather than the suitability of the murders themselves.

37 Numbers and punishment differ, with Broersma (1919:73) and Schadee (1919:11) saying fifteen for hard labour the Straits Time Overland Journal reporting eighteen for transportation (6-12-1871). Recent research has provided more detail. Küng came to Deli in 1870; he leased about 7,500 hectares of land in Pertjoet from the sultan and hired 25 Chinese coolies from Penang to work there (Zangger et al. 2020:31–2). The Dutch decided it was wisest for the sultan’s court to judge the coolies, and it is probably Said’s recording of this circumstance that creates the colonially controlled court of Ba Ren’s script, thus grafting a circumstance of 1871 onto the Five Ancestor events (which occurred, as will become clear below, over two decades later).
38 Xu Anru, a key member of the New China Dramatic Society that performed the play in 1946, noted the discrepancy between the number noted in Said and the five of temple and drama but did not conclude that they were separate events (Xu 2001:156).
39 The plantation, called Saentis, was taken over by Küng’s younger brother and cousin. An exhibit was held in 2020–22 in their small hometown of Heiden, Appenzell.
A more historically informed date had been provided in 1928 in the Deli Courant, which contained a summary of a report by a municipal official of the city’s burial grounds.\(^4\) The report mentions as a site of interest that

[t]he Go Ja Kong grave along the Bindjai Road (in the Teochew cemetery) is the temple of ‘The five estimable men’. Five coolies from Soengei Bamban are supposed to lie buried here, one of whom took honour so far as to murder an assistant. The other four refused to betray him, and all five were hanged on 30 June 1892.\(^4\)

That municipal official, Gerard Jansen (1894–1978), occupied various positions of responsibility for land matters in late colonial Medan’s municipal government. Jansen published two books about the different ethnic communities in Medan, De andere helft (The other half) in 1934, and Vreemde Oosterlingen (Foreign Orientals) in 1941, containing elaborate descriptions of ethnic culture, religion, and history in Medan.

As regards the temple, Jansen furnished further detail in his 1934 book De andere helft (The other half). Here, too, he calls the temple Go Ja Kong.\(^4\)

The five sworn brothers were swiftly idealized. Not for their crime, but for their loyalty. Their shared grave became a place of worship, even to the point that a shelter had to be built for the offerings […] The semi-circular space which is to be found in front of any Chinese grave was here almost full of little tables and a little cupboard, where offerings were placed […] There were also the usual candle holders, an ashtray for the incense sticks, cups of tea, and flowers, and in between were gifts, including an alarm clock and little vases of pressed glass, which had such a strange effect on our Western eyes in this environment.

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\(^4\) It seems that the report is only held in Leiden, but it was not accessible during the writing of this article because it was in the queue for digitization (Jansen 1928).


\(^4\) Jansen 1934 also gives the Chinese characters, 五爺墓 (pinyin: Wuye mu). Although Go Ja is a reasonable representation of the Hokkien pronunciation of the first two of these characters, meaning ‘Five Lords’ in Dutch orthography, ‘Kong’ does not resemble 墓 (pinyin: mu; ‘tomb’) at all. Instead, ‘kong’ is likely the pronunciation of 宮 (pinyin: gong), a common character for ‘temple’. It would not be uncommon for the temple complex to be referred to synecdochally as a ‘tomb’. Possibly the name changed (from ‘Five Lords Tomb’ to ‘Five Ancestors Temple’) when the temple was rebuilt in the 1960s, or it was confused with another local temple called Go Ya Kong (吳爺宮 pinyin: Wu Yegong) after Wu Zhen-
Jansen describes the location of the temple on the Binjai road and notes it as a major sight of worship before remarking:

The origin of this temple is quite lugubrious. About forty years ago, an assistant at the tobacco plantation at Soengei Bamban was murdered in a cowardly sneak attack. The story goes that the attacker struck down the wrong person, for it was actually the plantation administrator who had awakened the thirst for revenge which was expressed so brutally. The search for the perpetrator ran into an insurmountable difficulty: though it was possible to tell that one of five coolies had committed the crime, none of the five would say who the actual perpetrator was. They had sworn an oath to be loyal and would rather all pay the price together than betray the perpetrator. And they did indeed pay the price together, since all five were sentenced to death, hanged together, and buried together.

Jansen 1934:74

Jansen provided the exact date of 30 June 1892, but he remarked that he had not seen the procedural documents. Indeed, as he notes, it may not have generated much paperwork, or indeed been lost ‘in that grey past of Deli’ (Jansen 1934:74). Although local records dealing with the case have not turned up, the digitization of Dutch colonial newspapers has allowed us to identify several reports of the killings that Jansen refers to and which, if his information is correct, relate to the original event.

Based on those reports, it seems fairly certain that the events memorialized in the temple occurred not in 1892 but in late 1893. The Deli Courant, having noted with concern a rumour to the same effect in the issue of 13 December 1893, reported on 16 December that

[t]he rumour about the murder committed at the Soengei Bamban company has unfortunately been confirmed. Born in Stieblau near Dantzig, Mr Ernst Ziehm was murdered with axe blows and knife stabs by five laukehs [veteran labourers] recently arrived from Penang on 11th December, at six o’clock in the morning, when the work in the fields was being allotted at the edge of the jungle. The culprits have been arrested and confessed to their crime.43

ren 吳真人 (Franke 1988:103–5), an alternate name for Baosheng Dadi 保生大帝 and a popular figure of veneration in Hokkien culture. It is also possible that Jansen simply recorded the name plausibly but incorrectly.

43 ‘Moord op Soengei Bamban’, Deli Courant, 16-12-1893.
Papers in Batavia, Semarang, and even in the Netherlands ran briefer notices. Although attacks by coolies on Dutch assistants were not uncommon, the case must have attracted substantial local attention, for details on the case continued to run in the Deli Courant throughout the first half of 1894. For instance, on 14 March 1894, the Courant reported:

Landraad Medan, 13 March 1894. The Chinese Tan Peng Yak, Go To Se, Lie Sa Ti, Tjoa A Ai, and Tan A Lim, all by profession coolies at the tobacco company Paja Mabar, registered in the regions [onderafdeeling] of Padang and Bedagei, were declared guilty of: ‘Murder’ and were therefore sentenced to the penalty of death [italics in the original].

And in the same newspaper, on 28 July 1894, it was reported that Ziehm’s creditors should appear in Batavia to submit claims to the authorities appointed by the state, adding that

[O]n Tuesday, 31 July, at seven o’clock in the morning, the death sentence will be executed in the village of Petissa upon the five Chinese: Tan Peng Yak, Go Te Se, Li Sa Ti, Tjoa A Ai, and Tan A Lim, who had previously murdered Mr Ziehm.

Although there are other sources, these two articles naming the killers allow us to establish a chain of evidence linking the Ba Ren play and the temple with the

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44 See, for example, ‘Nederlandsche Koloniën’, Bataviaasch nieuwsblad, 28-12-1893; Java-bode: Nieuws, Handels- en Advertentieblad voor Nederlandsch-Indië, 28-12-1893.
47 The Landraad was the lower level of district court in the colonial system established for indigenous and Chinese inhabitants, which in Deli had the effect of removing the sultanate’s judicial powers. Judging by the almanacs, the court in Medan was established in July 1887, and a Chinese interpreter had worked there since September 1887 (Kuiper 2017:711; Regerings-almanak voor Nederlandsch-Indië 1893, 1194). At the time of the trial, the position was filled by Hie Foeng Tjong (Regerings-almanak voor Nederlandsch-Indië 1894, 1196), so it seems very likely that it was through his interpretation that the case was heard. From 1887, when it was founded, the court included prominent Chinese members, in Medan including the brothers Tjong A Fie and Tjong Yong Hian (‘Onze nieuwtjes’, Deli Courant, 6-6-1888; Regerings-almanak voor Nederlandsch-Indië 1887, 11:039; Regerings-almanak voor Nederlandsch-Indië 1888, 2103), but there seems to have been no Chinese members in 1894, when the case was heard.
Ziehm murder, because they give three names which correspond in Hokkien with three names on the tomb: Tan Peng Yak 陳炳益, Go Te Se 吳土昇, and Li Sa Ti 李三弟.\textsuperscript{49} The number of the coolies also corresponds. On 21 July, the \textit{Deli Courant} again makes a brief mention of a petition for pardon being rejected.\textsuperscript{50} Then, on 1 August:

On Tuesday morning, about half an hour later than the appointed time, the death sentence was carried out on the five Chinese, the murderers of Mr Ziehm, after one of them had unsuccessfully attempted suicide by hanging on Sunday night.\textsuperscript{51}

The execution, which ‘was attended by a large number of Europeans and natives’, attracted more than the usual attention as the behaviour of the condemned was remarked on at length.

The conduct of the five murderers had been marked by unheard-of brutality, so it is much to be hoped that on the next such occasion such subjects not be given the choice of whether they would rather walk to the scaffold or ride, as seems to have been the case with these people, since the whole way there from the prison to kampong Petissa, they continuously expressed themselves regarding the Europeans in an extremely noisome way.

It is moreover by no means clear to us why the hanging had to take place so far from the prison, given that the mocking and spitting of one of the offenders during the reading of the sentence justifiably caused everyone’s annoyance. The hanging itself was very humane, and the hanged very soon arrived in the empire of darkness.

Notably, a couple of weeks later, the \textit{Deli Courant} was still irritated by the circumstances of the execution, writing on 8 August:

Little by little, reports are also coming to our ears of the manner in which these criminals have been coddled in prison in recent days, which does not help to enhance the layers of opinion that the natives already

\textsuperscript{49} The names on the tomb (with pinyin transliteration) are Chen Bingyi 陳炳益, Wu Tusheng 吳土昇, Li Sandi 李三弟, Yang Guilin 楊桂林, and Huang Wuqi 黃蜈蜞.

\textsuperscript{50} ‘Onze nieuwtjes’, \textit{Deli Courant}, 21-7-1894.

\textsuperscript{51} ‘Onze nieuwtjes’, \textit{Deli Courant}, 1-8-1894.
have of our slow and cumbersome administration of justice. For several days before their execution, they received extra food, and they were not or insufficiently punished for insulting their guards, and finally, the day before the execution of the sentence, women were admitted to them (to sing for them!).

Their bodies were initially buried in the Teochew cemetery on the road to Binjai. Sima Wensen was told in the 1950s that ‘because the people who came to worship at the grave kept increasing, the farmers and workers pooled their money to build a temple’, although it is possible that Sima was embellishing the story to show proletarian solidarity (Yege 1959:94). On the other hand, a family tradition holds that Tjong A Fie, later the most famous Chinese person in Medan and at that time lieutenant of the community, visited the coolies before their execution and was engaged to build the tomb, later donating the marble for the tombs. It seems possible that the community delayed the building of the tomb until 1898, when the Dutch authorities had forgotten the matter and erecting a monument to the martyrs had become a less sensitive matter.

There can be little doubt, then, that the tomb is dedicated to the five Chinese who killed Ernst Ziehm, an assistant at Soengei Bamban, on 11 December 1893, and were hanged at Petisah on 31 July 1894 at 7.30 am.

What does tugging at the other threads of this story do? Most stories described the resistance against the evil Dutch assistant, but in fact Ernst Ziehm

52 ‘Onze nieuwtjes’, Deli Courant, 8-8-1894.
53 As mentioned above, lieutenant was a middle rank in the kapitan system. By the twentieth century, however, the position of lieutenants in the community had become increasingly awkward, since the Dutch relied on them to inform on, and quieten, the Chinese population (Williams 1960:124–6). Tjong is principally famous as one of the great merchants and builders of late colonial Medan, and his opulent home is now a museum. The authors thank Dirk A. Buiskool, who kindly allowed access to an interview with Mrs Seah Peng Ee, Tjong A Fie’s granddaughter, conducted on 19 October 1993 in Singapore. In that interview, she remarks: ‘There were five of them, five people […] the leaders, and they were fighting. So the Dutch government arrested them. […] So the penalty was death. […] So my grandfather went to see them. And he told them. I cannot help you. […] I will that you people are united with God. And my grandfather made a very big grave, the (blood)brothers were all buried in that big one grave. That’s what they call the five brothers.’ Buiskool (2019:311) also notes this family legend in a 1995 interview with Mrs Dusson, another granddaughter, but he uses the (probably erroneous) date drawn from Jansen. Ba Ren also gives an account of a prison visit to the ancestors, but in his case, it is a Malay chief, probably tweaking the story to emphasize inter-ethnic class solidarity as he does elsewhere in the text.
was a Danziger, and the company belonged to a Swiss man—part of the multinational picture of Deli’s corporate existence. Articles in Singapore newspapers from 1891 reporting the arrival of a Mr Ziehm from Deli suggest that he had been in the region for a few years.\textsuperscript{54} One death listing gives his age as 39,\textsuperscript{55} but otherwise we know little.

A bit more detail can be established about the owner of the Soengai Bamban plantation, Hans Caspar Bluntschli, who was, like Küng and Meyer, Swiss. Born in Zurich in 1865, he first worked as an assistant in Sumatra (arriving 1885) and then became co-owner of the Deutsch-Schweizerische Plantagen-Gesellschaft, which owned first Paja-Mabar and then Bamban. Travelling to New Guinea in 1888 (where he seems to have decided tobacco plantation would not be profitable), by 1890 he owned 3 tobacco plantations in Bedagai. He moved to Siak in the mid 1890s, where for many years he was the only European (Weidmann 1936:39). In 1917, he got into the coal-mining business in the Riau area, and in 1936 he was still active in Siak (‘the oldest Swiss [person] in Sumatra’, as the honorary consul praised him—Weidmann 1936:39). He died of malaria in a hospital in Pekan Baru in 1942 (Hovinga 2010:330).

A 1914 map indicates that the Soengai Bamban (Sei Bamban A en B; De Bussy 1914:209) plantations were still in use at that time for tobacco and rubber, being owned by the Holland Sumatra Tabak Maatschappij. In 1936, the plantation was mainly planted with rubber and it became the property of the Holland Sumatra Rubber Maatschappij (AVROS 1937:33). At present Sungai Bamban is a district (kecamatan) of North Sumatra and is mostly comprised of oil palm plantations, with the majority owned by PT London Sumatra (Rampah estate) and some smaller areas in the hands of the Indonesian state-owned plantation company PT PN III (Rambutan estate). The present Five Ancestors Temple is located about 50 km west of the Soengei Bamban estate, where the incident occurred.

Perhaps the most chilling aspect of the story is how common such occurrences evidently were. The modus operandi of the attack was also similar to that described by C.J. Dixon, formerly an assistant in Deli, when writing a vade mecum for other aspiring plantation workers (Dixon 1913:49):

\begin{quote}
A Chinese man is at heart a coward. He will rarely commit an attack openly or single-handedly. If he has such an intention, he will first secure
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{54} ‘Shipping intelligence’, \textit{Daily Advertiser}, 11-6-1891.
\textsuperscript{55} Trouw-, geboorte-, en doodsbereichten uit de Indische bladen tot 19 December, \textit{Haagsehe Courant}, 18-1-1894.
the support of a few of his comrades. As soon as these have been found, a secret covenant will be made, sealed with the slaughter of a chicken, on whose blood they will swear a solemn oath to loyally help one another in this matter, suffer together the punishment that may arise, and never ever to betray each other.

The passage is, of course, couched in broader racist rhetoric about the putative cowardice of the Chinese national character. Nevertheless, the fact that Dixon can describe this type of attack in detail is a reminder that the Five Ancestors’ incident was only one of many such conflicts in the coolie fields. The conflation of various attacks and murders shows that the legend and its fictional offspring were both ways of dealing with the trauma of the coolie labour system and putting it to use.

4 Conclusion

The treatment of the Chinese coolies in Deli was cruel, brutal, and dehumanizing. Violence was a fundamental element of Euro-American tobacco farming in Sumatra, and the killing of Ziehm and the execution of the coolies one of countless such events. The plantation system was grounded in an explicit racial hierarchy, administered by the employees of private capitalist interests and tolerated when not condoned by colonial officials. It is little wonder that the story of the five sworn brothers caught the imagination of the local Chinese community and that the legend it produced inspired writers of fiction and drama. Evidently, for subsequent generations of people of Chinese descent in the locality and region, it symbolized the trauma of the plantations, and of racial oppression, as well as the resistance to it. Chinese intellectuals from Zeng to Ba Ren to Shalihong were right to see in it a potent illustration of the exploitation of Asians by Western imperialism, with the motif of cross-ethnic solidarity—a ‘vision of a class struggle transcending ethnic division’ (T. Zhou 2019:47) a later and logical expansion as the global context of that violence grew clear to more people.

What also remains is the sense of the story as emblematic of late imperialism, for it is clear that colonial efforts to ‘maintain controlled mobility and sharp ethnic divides between captive workers and other subjects only had marginal success’ (Stoler 2009:232), much as the grip of Western powers on wide swathes of territory in Asia moved inexorably towards an end. Thus, in one Singapore newspaper account of the execution, the five prisoners ‘all strong, vigorous men’ are recorded as ‘behaving in an insulting way towards Europeans.
in general and to one of the Chinese officials’. This recalls the Deli Courant’s anger that one of the offenders ‘[mocked and spat] during the reading of the sentence’ and outrage at their alleged ‘coddling’.

The history of the Five Ancestors is probably only recoverable because, through regional exchanges and the arrival of Chinese intellectuals on Sumatra, what had been local oral history was translated into the intellectual sphere of literature and history. Once fixed in print (had it only been performed from an unwritten or an unpreserved libretto, it would have been much more difficult to reconstruct), it could be reproduced—not principally in Indonesia, where Chinese writing was about to go into abeyance—but in the PRC. There, it received some attention before the post-Mao era made a fuller range of treatments possible again, including both posthumous publication of two of Ba Ren’s versions as well as the short treatment in a novel by survivor Hei Ying.

The narrative’s noteworthiness for both PRC (Ba Ren, Zhou Erfu, Yege) and Nanyang authors (Zeng, Shalihong) for over half a century was due to its political aptness. For Nanyang authors, it illustrated Chinese struggle against imperialism (without much reference to non-Chinese groups), while for PRC authors, it not only eulogized the struggle but also illustrated intra-Asian solidarity vis-à-vis European colonial oppression. Today, in an era when Chinese Indonesians are once again at risk of being coded in general society as wealthy and aloof, it is important to remember how much of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia originated in forced or indentured labour, and that the Chinese leftists of the mid century could draw on a brutal recent history when they sought to establish solidarity between ethnic Chinese and indigenous Indonesians (in later parlance, pribumi).

The defiance (the mocking and spitting) and humanity (the singing) of the condemned men became a source of considerable anxiety to Europeans, the archival footprints of what Stoler calls ‘forebodings of future failures’ (Stoler 2019:2). In such accounts, we can dimly perceive why it was this particular event that would turn into oral legend and religious observance, touring social-

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56 Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly), 14-8-1894. The account is drawn from The Pinang Gazette, which, to the best of our knowledge, has not been digitized and was not available to us.

57 Indeed, all of the literary texts present the ‘coolie’ as the archetypal and ancestral version of Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, implicitly in tension with the merchant (taoke) ancestor/archetype and the alternate genealogy that this represents (Salmon 1983). Frustratingly, Salmon’s criticism that the cultural products of this community—that is, its customary self-representation—are seldom consulted, remains true almost four decades later.
ist theatre, leftist fiction, and PRC Third World internationalist travelogue. In one moment of bravura, Chinese plantation workers rejected their status as colonial subjects. That gesture made them an emblem of the proletarian bona fides of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, and of the traumatic origins of Medan and other North Sumatra Chinese communities in plantation labour. By connecting the foreboding in the colonial archive with the eulogy in the Sinophone literary record, we can triangulate a fuller vision of resistance on the Deli plantations than is available from either one alone.

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