CHAPTER FOUR

REDEFINING DUTCH-CHINESE COMMERCIAL RELATIONS (1890S–1910)

In 1892 an official inquiry was ordered into the economic position of ‘Foreign Orientals’ in Java and Madura. The final report conceded their economic indispensability, but also demonstrated their ‘harmful’ presence. Increasingly, all kinds of economic and social wrongdoings were attributed to the Chinese presence in Java’s interior. To diminish Chinese economic dominance the revenue farm system was gradually abolished. In its wake the enforcement of the so-called passen- en wijkenstelsel – designed to control the whereabouts of the Chinese population – became vigorously debated.

The Chinese response to these deteriorating circumstances was influenced by renewed contact with China towards the end of the century. The overseas Chinese adopted a more assertive attitude when dealing with the colonial government and/or its commercial establishment. Deprived of any political power, but aware of their leverage within the colony’s economic structure, the Chinese used boycotts as a means to defend their (commercial) position. This development of their organizational skills ridiculed the cherished conviction of a natural order of things within colonial society.

An Awkward Alliance: The Interdependence of Dutch and Chinese Business

“No two peoples have ever been more loyal to one another than the Dutch and the Chinese, but now [...] this friendship has been severed [...].” Such were the words of the Syahbandar of Juana a year after the massacre of the Chinese in Batavia in 1740.1 The revolt of the Chinese in the vicinity of

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1 The Syahbandar or harbourmaster was a key official within the trading ports of the Malay world, who had purchased the right to collect import and export duties. This position implied profitable business opportunities and formalized recognition of an individual’s status, wealth and power within society. (Liem 1933: 17–19; Nagtegaal 1996: 223; Remmelink 1994: 129). The Dutch adapted the institution of Syahbandar into their kapitan appointments from which ultimately the elaborate officer system in the Netherlands Indies would stem (Knaap and Sutherland 2004: 22–25; Lohanda 1996: 33–34, 39–50; Reid 1993: 70–71). See also Chapter 2, Paragraph ‘The Colonial State and the Economy’.

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Batavia, which led to the death of thousands of Chinese within the city itself, had everyone stunned. The Javanese reacted with disbelief since the Chinese and the Dutch were like two sides of the same coin. Their alliance was regarded so strong that the Javanese had come to consider the Chinese trading network an extension of VOC activity. According to Susuhunan Pakubuwana II, the Chinese were like women without any power, fit only for trading and managing tollgates, because “[...] wherever the Chinese live [...] they are supported by the Honourable Company and are permitted to trade [...] and grow rich, all of which is made possible by the Honourable Company” (Nagtegaal 1996: 221–222; Remmelink 1994: 129).

The Chinese were well aware of the precariousness of their position as shown by the distressed reaction of the Chinese captain and lieutenant of Semarang, Que Anko and Que Jonko. Upon hearing of the revolt and killings in and around Batavia, they tried to convince the VOC headman in Semarang B. Visscher of their loyalty and good intentions. However, the Company tended to lump all Chinese together. Any distinction between ‘good’ or ‘bad’ Chinese evaporated when put to the test. As Chinese started to lay siege to Semarang in June 1741, Que Anko and Que Yonko were put into chains with Visscher fulminating: *Potong kepala, semua!* (cut their heads off, all of them!). Que Anko did not survive the ensuing madness.

In the end the full-scale revolt of the Chinese destabilized politics in Java with Javanese rebelling against the VOC and the Chinese urban elite as well. In 1743 the rebellion collapsed, but internal strife among the Javanese elite continued unabated, leading to the destruction of the Mataram empire and its division into the Yogya and Solo courts in 1755 (Ricklefs 2001: Chapters 9 and 10, especially 119–130; Bongenaar 2005: 51–53).

It would take more than 150 years before the well-nurtured (economic) alliance between the Dutch and the Chinese was seriously questioned again. The severed friendship between the Dutch and Chinese elite was

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2 The ascendancy of the Que family started with the appointment of Que Kiau-ko as the first Chinese captain of Semarang in 1672. He originated from Haiting in Fujien (the current district of Fujian in South China), but migrated to Batavia where two brothers served as captain and lieutenant. After moving to Semarang he managed to build a successful career, no doubt benefiting from his family connections. Around 1684 Que Kiau-ko returned to Batavia where he administered the Chinese graveyard and the Boedelkamer in its dealings with Chinese business. After a few years he returned home to his place of birth in China. In 1685 the Que family also obtained the position of Syahbandar in Semarang, which accentuated their social and economic prominence. Que Anko, who made his fortune in the sugar trade, succeeded as kapitan and Syahbandar of Semarang in 1706 (Liem 1933: 9–10, 27–28; Nagtegaal 1996: 99–101; Ong Tae Hae 1849: 25–26; Willmott 1960: 5, 212).