PART IV

SURVIVAL AND CREATIVITY: CHINESE BUSINESS RESPONSES TO REGIME CHANGE
CHAPTER SEVEN

CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND CREATIVE ADJUSTMENT:
MARGO-REDJO IN THE 1930s

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Introduction

In 1931 the International Colonial Exhibition was held in Bois de Vincennes near Paris. The Netherlands spent nearly 2.5 million guilders on a magnificent pavilion, which shows how much the Dutch government valued its colonial image even at a time of severe economic distress. In portraying the Netherlands Indies special emphasis was placed on the colony’s economic achievements. Visitors were informed about the different means of transportation, the road and railway network, the density of telephone, telegraph, and postal services, as well as the electricity grid. Attention was also paid to such topics as export agriculture, money and finance, engineering, the trade balance, etc.

The Dutch made creative use of sophisticated means of representation, such as illuminated maps with motion indicators, stuffed animals and colorful dioramas. The so-called “stairs of abundance” (trap des overloeds) was one successful example as the worldwide distribution of the colony’s export produce was symbolized by little figurines each carrying a product down the stairs. With a map of the Indonesian archipelago as the diorama’s point of departure, the figures multiplied before reaching a map of the world, their symbolic destination. This forceful—though rather misleading—impression of affluence illustrated the many economic accomplishments of the Netherlands Indies (Bloembergen 2002, 271–316; Taselaar 1998, 348–358).¹

However, it was neither an accurate nor truthful depiction of the actual state of affairs, because at the beginning of the 1930s world

¹ It therefore seems rather symbolic, that on June 28, 1931 the Dutch colonial pavilion burned to the ground. The decision to rebuild was quickly made and in a tour de force a new, though far less conspicuous, pavilion was constructed and officially opened on August 17.