Review Essays

Chinese Entrepreneurship in Colonial Java and Malaya

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Colonial archives often beguile researchers with their wealth of historical holdings, a diversity of assets attracting statisticians and storytellers alike. Archival riches reward conscientious scholars for their excavations but the dangers of this treasure hunt lie not in the finding of sources but in the utilization of them. Serious questions must be asked of any sources retrieved from such collections, questions complicated by the fact that the answers are likely to change depending upon the places and times of study. Do the data collected reflect the actual experiences of the subjects of the study or do they provide a colonial recollection of those experiences? How might European biases impact archival interpretations of events on the one hand, and, on the other hand, how might supplicants to colonial authority color their own narrations to suit their personal needs? Publication requirements also restrain modern historians: even if
a scholar has mined sufficient sources to support a 2000-page book, publishing practicalities require authors to make difficult choices. Two recently published books, Alexander Claver’s *Dutch Commerce and Chinese Merchants in Java* and William Tai Yuen’s *Chinese Capitalism in Colonial Malaya, 1900–1941*, exemplify these very complexities.

Alexander Claver’s monograph provides an excellent overview of Dutch financial involvement with the island of Java. Beginning with the evolution of the Dutch colonial state and the introduction of the Cultivation System into the region, Claver divides the early period of Dutch financial involvement in Java into three stages: the period of trial and error lasting until 1830; 1830 to 1870, which encompassed the government-led exploitation of Javanese agricultural and financial resources by the Dutch; and finally the post-1870 era of laissez-faire liberalism, which heralded active Dutch colonial control over the island’s economic affairs. Claver argues that the profitability of Java was aided by the rigidity of the Cultivation System, the rising global popularity of coffee, and massive improvements made by the Dutch in terms of colonial industry and technology. These improvements, including the introduction of telegraphs, steamships, post offices, and roads, fueled a meteoric growth not only in Javanese infrastructure, but also in Javanese exports, resulting in economic expansion unmatched by any other island of the Netherlands East Indies until the 1890s.

The chaotic years after 1884 reflect not only the devastation caused by the 1884 Sugar Crisis but also the significance of sugar as a primary player on the global and Javanese markets; they also illustrate the means by which Java came to be privileged economically beyond the other islands of the Dutch archipelago. Chinese traders first appear as major characters in this chapter, with a detailed examination of the reliance of Chinese traders upon *beleenings-crediet* (loans on security) and the extra collateral required of Chinese clients by large securities firms such as De Javasche Bank (*djb*). Although this chapter introduces Chinese merchants as an important subset of the Javanese financial world, its strength lies in its detailing of the connections maintained by Dutch financial institutions to Javanese agriculture and in its tracing of the various paths taken by large Dutch economic institutions in Java. Claver indicates that the Chinese represented a significant impact to Dutch firms only because of their importance as middlemen in the Java trade.

This book provides a fascinating narrative of the evolving relationship between the Chinese and the Dutch: in particular, it details the rising tide of anti-Chinese racism in Java as it was expressed in colonial economic reports. Claver’s research is peppered with statements of colonial outrage: ‘The Chinese gained a reputation of behaving like leeches, sponging on the poor indige-