

# Ethnic Chinese in Colonial Bureaucracy: An Overview of the History of the Institutionalization of *Vreemde Oosterlingen Palembang* 1906-1942

Huddy Husin<sup>1</sup> M.I. Djoko Marihandono<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> History Department, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia

\*Corresponding author. Email: [djoko\\_marihandono@yahoo.com](mailto:djoko_marihandono@yahoo.com)

## ABSTRACT

The establishment of the colonial government impacted on the political and economic life of the Palembang people. In this situation, all Palembang society groups, including the ethnic Chinese, had to adapt to the colonial Dutch East Indies' policies. This historical study aims to understand the dynamics of the Palembang Chinese ethnic group within the *Vreemde Oosterlingen Palembang* institution in colonial society's structure in Palembang. This historical study of the colonial period uses primary sources obtained from the National Archives collection (ANRI), including the *Memorie van Overgave Resident Palembang*, and the *Staatsblad van Nederlansch Indie* archive collection. The writing of this article also uses secondary sources local Palembang newspaper *Han Po*, obtained from the National Library. Other secondary sources in writing this article are in book form as supporting works, including Mona Lohanda's *The Kapitan Cina Of Batavia 1837-1942*, and Mestika Zed's work *Kepialangan Politik dan Revolusi Palembang 1900-1950*. This article's writing also uses Christopher Lloyd's structuration approach; and the Agency concept described by Anthony Giddens. This article departs from the opinion that historical facts and the value system possessed by the Palembang Chinese ethnic group, greatly influenced the behavior of the Chinese ethnic in the institutionalization of *Vreemde Oosterlingen Palembang*.

**Keywords:** *Ethnic Chinese, Vreemde Oosterlingen, Palembang Colonial Period*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

After the Muntok agreement between England and the Netherlands in December 1816, this marked the second time for the Dutch colonial rule over the Palembang area. The Dutch colonial government began to carry out a strategy to re-establish its power in the Palembang region, by carrying out military expeditions to bring security into order and secondly establish a colonial government in the Palembang region. The first step in carrying out a military expedition was carried out since Commissioner Muntinghe, namely crushing the loyal power of Sultan Muhammad Badaruddin II in the interior. To complete the steps of the military expedition, Commissioner Muntinghe took the road to exile them from the Palembang area [1].

The next step after bringing security into order in the Palembang area, the Dutch colonial government in Palembang established a colonial bureaucratic structure in Palembang. In 1824 his successor, Resident J.C. Rinjst abolished the Palembang Sultanate's existence, and appointed Prince Kramajaya the son-in-law Sultan Muhammad Badaruddin II, as prime minister. This government model was introduced by his predecessor, J.J van Sevenhoven, as a form of direct, pragmatic government. The abolition of the Palembang Sultanate and the colonial government's formation using a direct

government system, marked the colonial era under the colonial bureaucracy.

The establishment of the colonial government in the coastal and inland areas of Palembang for the first time made it easier for the Palembang city government to build the city of Palembang. According to *Staatsblad van Nederlansch Indie* (1905) government in Batavia passed regulations regarding the Decentralization Law, and on April 1, 1906 the Palembang Residency government was officially formed. The ratification of Palembang as a residency provides an opportunity for the leaders of the Palembang region to build and make physical changes to the city. A fairly basic change in the early days of the Palembang Residency formation was the construction of land transportation routes. The construction of this road made it easier for the Palembang area to be organized according to the Palembang government's interests.

Changes in the city's physical context impact progress in the economic field, and make Palembang a magnet for immigrants, especially for ethnic Chinese people. The Palembang area's Chinese ethnic groups are generally groups of traders and laborers in the Palembang mining area. The Chinese ethnic group's existence which increased in number in the early 20th century and the Chinese ethnic group's economic position, which was getting better, made the Dutch colonial government enter

its representatives (ethnic Chinese groups) *Gemeenteraad* of Palembang city.

The entry of Palembang Chinese ethnic representatives into the *Gemeenteraad* catapulted the position of ethnic groups within the social strata of colonial society in Palembang. The effect on increasing the Palembang Chinese ethnic group's position can be seen through the Dutch colonial government's special treatment of Chinese ethnic groups in the economic field. Special treatment was also given to grant permission to establish educational institutions (schools) for the Palembang Chinese ethnic group. The Dutch colonial government gave the granting permits and facilities was a sign that the Chinese ethnic group could play a good role in their political activities in Palembang.

The Chinese ethnic groups played their roles and positions with the colonial rulers is an interesting enough discussion to be understood next. Given its position (socially and economically) which was getting better in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century until the end of colonial rule, the Palembang Chinese ethnic group through their leader's ingenuity, maintained their existence in the stratification of colonial society in the Palembang region.

## 2. METHOD

This article uses the historical method which contains the following procedures or stages: Heuristics, Criticism, Interpretation, and Historiography. Heuristics is the first step to search, identify and find historical sources. The author carries out this search to obtain information, data and insights related to writing articles. The author took this step to find sources from institutions related to writing this article [2]. The author carries out a heuristic process in several places, the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia (ANRI), the National Library (Perpusnas), and the University of Indonesia Library.

The colonial period's historical study uses primary sources obtained from the National Archives collection (ANRI), including the *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch Indie* bundle, and the *Colonial Verslag* archive collection (1905-1930). This article also uses secondary sources obtained through the National Library in Palembang local newspapers. Another secondary sources in writing this article were obtained through the University of Indonesia library in the form of a book supporting work. The main books include Mona Lohanda's work entitled *The Kapitan Cina of Batavia 1837-1942*, Mestika Zed's work entitled *Kepialangan Politik and the Palembang Revolution of 1900-1950* and Heather Sutherland's work entitled *The Formation of an Elite Brocration*. The writing of institutional-local histories in Palembang uses the structuration approach described by Christopher Lloyd, and the Agency's theory described by Anthony Giddens.

## 3. ANALYSIS

### 3.1. Chinese Population in Palembang Early 20th Century

At the beginning of the permit to build houses for the Palembang Chinese ethnic group in the mainland area (around) the Musi river, the house building model was in the form of a stilt house made of wood, bamboo and boards. The house with a stilt model was built to avoid overflowing water from the Musi River, when the rainy season comes and the Musi river volume increases. Changes to the Palembang Chinese ethnic group's residential building occurred after road transportation construction in the early 1900s. The construction of ethnic Chinese settlements began to follow land transportation routes. The house building is comprised two levels, where the lower building becomes a shop and the upper building becomes a residence. The house building began to use the basic materials of sand, stone and cement.

The main settlement center for the Palembang Chinese ethnic group is in the Ulu-7 area, an area that is also home to the ethnic Chinese leaders, namely the Tjoa family home which uses European and Chinese architecture. The Tjoa family is a family that inherited the position of Kapiten China Palembang since colonial times, and the Tjoa family's house is opposite the Ulu-7 pier. Ulu-7 Village is equipped with a temple as a means of worship, a center for the Palembang Chinese ethnic group's socio-cultural activities and a market as a center for local economic activities for the Palembang Chinese ethnic group [3].

The Chinese ethnic group in Palembang is a heterogeneous ethnic group, although in its development the Chinese ethnic group is often considered homogeneous by the native population and local rulers. During the colonial period the Chinese ethnic group's assessment tended to be homogeneous, this could be proven by the formation of Hoofd de Chinezen's institutionalization which was only based on establishment in economic status [4] and not ethnic and linguistic background.

Chinese ethnic groups live in the Palembang area and are divided into several areas of origin. They entered and were polarized into clan associations, socio-cultural associations and associations regarding death in their development.

The first Palembang Chinese ethnic association built-in Palembang was the *Balas Budi* and *Setia Mupakat Youth Association*. This association was built in the residential area of the Chinese Captain in Ulu-7. Chinese ethnic associations in Palembang are increasingly emerging due to an increase in the economy in Palembang, one of the associations that emerged due to the surplus in rubber production is the Tjahaya Boediman association which was founded in 1912 [5]

Chinese ethnic associations' activities are generally still based on the same ancestry or ancestry; this type of association with the same lineage is usually called a clan association (*kongsi*) which cannot be entered by ethnic Chinese in general [6]. An association based on one origin is an inward nature and organizes worship activities for ancestors, maintains family traditions, and family wedding parties [7]. Apart from having religious values, this clan association has a social function to protect each member, and to provide a place of refuge to families who have just arrived in Palembang [8].

The formation of associations for the Palembang Chinese ethnic group was granted permission to be formed by the colonial government; this permit was granted because Chinese associations did not have political affiliations and interests [8]. The colonial government even formed a translation agency for Chinese language and literature, this agency's formation was assigned to help Dutch officials understand Chinese in 1860 and was led by B. Hoetink [9].

The socio-cultural life of other Palembang Chinese ethnic groups is found in death associations, these associations are heterogeneous; there are 7 death associations in Palembang region. This death association is responsible for burials, and helping struggling families buy coffins and organize funerals [10]. The famous death associations in the Palembang area are the *Young Balas Budi Darat* association and the *Setia Mupakat* association; these associations are located near the Chinese Captain's residen in Ulu-7. The association's existence cannot be separated from buildings that are considered sacred to the Chinese ethnicity, namely temples and cemeteries. The death association is located in the Ulu-7 area, adjacent to the Soei Goeat Kiong Temple and the Mahameru hill cemetery [11].

The death association is an association that has requirements to become members, some of which are the age and volunteerism of members in the context of religious rituals. The death association grants permission for both men and women to become members, provided they have reached 17. Regarding the main condition, namely the consequence of the ritual rules of worshiping ancestors and gods, each member must be consistent with a ritual that is different from the member's background. If a person is already a member of one death society, then he is not allowed to become a member of another death society [13].

### **3.2. Palembang Chinese Ethnicity and Colonial Bureaucracy**

In 1854 there was a fundamental change in the government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands where the Staten General was institutionalized. The governance and implementation of government in the Dutch East Indies were under the Staten General's supervision. Changes in governance, giving effect Governor General's work and responsibilities in the Dutch East Indies, were also directed to the Staten General. The Governor General's

accountability report to the Staten General complements the previous main task of being responsible to the Netherlands' King, through the Colonies' Minister. The formation of the Staten General in the Kingdom of the Netherlands' governance, in its development was also formed in the Dutch East Indies' governance. The Governor-General in carrying out his duties in the Dutch East Indies was assisted by the *Volksraad* (People's Council). In his duties, the *Volksraad* helped formulate laws and discuss the Dutch East Indies government revenue and expenditure budget.

The relationship between the Governor-General in Batavia and the Dutch East Indies government was linked to resident's existence as a local leader. The colonial bureaucracy model in the Palembang region, in general, is almost like the colonial bureaucracy model in Java. The resident is an extension of the Governor-General for the Palembang region. In carrying out his daily duties the Resident of Palembang is assisted by government officials from the Bumiputera group and community leaders from other East Asian groups (*Vreemde Oosterlingen*). The government bureaucratic structure in Palembang was then equipped with a city council apparatus (*Stadsgemeenteraad*), as a companion to the executive ranks of officials in the Palembang region. The city council is a legislative institution formed based on the global decentralization law. The membership is elected every 4 years with the composition coming from Europeans, Bumiputera and the people of East Asia (*Vreemde Oosterlingen*) [12].

In maintaining social stability in the Palembang region, the colonial government in Palembang made a policy regarding control over social groups in the Palembang region. Especially for the Chinese population, the colonial government appointed several representatives of ethnic Chinese to become leaders for Chinese citizens (*Hoofd de Chinezen*). The Chinese citizens in Palembang were given titles such as *Majoor de Chinezen*, *Kapiten de Chinezen* and *Luihtman de Chinezen* [13]. The Palembang Chinese citizens' leader were given the main task of taking care of administrative duties for their citizens. Along with the increasing confidence of the colonial government these leaders got the task of collecting taxes [14].

The election of Palembang Chinese leaders by the colonial government generally followed the pattern of electing Chinese leaders in Java, namely by considering the level of one's prosperity as a measure [15]. In 1825 the Dutch colonial government in Palembang appointed Tjoa Kie Tjuan, as the leader of the Chinese citizens of Palembang with the title of Major. Tjoa Kie Tjuan served until 1855, and the position of Kapiten China Palembang was then given by the colonial government to the son of Tjoa Kie Tjuan [16].

In daily life the Palembang Chinese leaders are tasked with organizing the ethnic Chinese community in the Palembang region's economic activities. The Chinese ethnic group, which generally acted as middleman traders

[17], was a vital element in connecting the native peoples with colonial government's economic activities [11]. When problems arise in the Palembang area's economic activities and are related to Chinese ethnicity, the Chinese Lieutenant will first tackle the problem.

The Chinese captain and major did not do many activities in the field, because as positions with the middle and highest levels, because in maintaining the disabilities of the Chinese community, the Chinese Lieutenant had been assisted by the village head known as Incek Wijk. If there is a problem that occurs, and requires the Major's presence, his presence can be replaced by the Chinese Captain who will act to represent the Major's decisions and attitudes [7]. Seeing the important role of ethnic Chinese officials in Hoofd de Chinezen, the colonial government provided a salary of f. 100 / month to the Major and Captain of China [18].

The involvement of Chinese ethnic groups in the colonial bureaucratic structure was not only at the executive level, and legislative institutionalization. The existence of the Chinese ethnic group in the Palembang region's legislative body can be traced to its existence through the *Stadsgemeenteraad* institution, which was formed in Palembang in 1905 [12]. The Chinese ethnic group's existence in the *Stadsgemeenteraad* institution was also maintained during the colonial administration in Palembang implemented a reorganization policy in 1919 [19]. The colonial government carried out the reorganization policy in Palembang, namely the appointment of a *Burgemeester* (mayor). Based on this regulation (reorganization), the Palembang Chinese ethnic group had two legislative bodies (*Stadsgemeenteraad*). The policy to include Chinese ethnic groups's element into *Stadsgemeenteraad* continued until entering the end of colonial rule in Palembang [20].

Coming of the Chinese ethnic group into the orbit of Palembang region's colonial bureaucracy was actually very beneficial for the Palembang Chinese ethnic group. Efforts to maintain the stability of their social and economic life have become easier to do. Although the space for movement in the colonial bureaucratic structure was minimal, the recognition was given by the colonial government (at the executive and legislative levels) differentiated between Chinese ethnic groups and other groups of people from Asia (such as the Middle East, Japan, India. and others). A very favorable situation in the socio-economic field to the political area, we can see later in the sub-discussion of the political-economic activities of the Palembang Chinese ethnic group until the end of colonial rule.

### **3.3. Chinese Ethnic Socio-Political Activities Until the 1940s**

This sub-discussion will explain Palembang Chinese ethnic group's maneuvers, until entering the end of colonial rule in Palembang. The examination will focus on how the development of social and political structures

and economic progress in Palembang, since 1920 has influenced agents of the Chinese ethnic group in Palembang to maintain their existence. Entering the early 1920s, traders and business from the Palembang Chinese ethnic group got an economic position that tended to increase. The increase in the Chinese ethnic group's economic life was caused by the implementation of a policy prohibiting Middle Eastern (Arab) community groups from carrying out commercial activities in the interior of Palembang [11]. This situation was exploited by the traders and businessmen of the Chinese ethnic group to expand the area of expansion of their economic activities to the interior.

Implementing the colonial government's discrimination policy against Arab traders in Palembang, strengthened its position to monopolize the trade in rubber, coffee, transportation business and daily necessities. The improvement of the Chinese ethnic group's businessmen and traders' economics life is actually a reflection of the development of economic life in the Palembang region in general. The opening of the Palembangische Bank in 1913, paved the way for increased production from the agricultural and plantation sectors in Palembang. The rubber trade in Palembang is entering a significant increase, because it is also supported by land routes and an increase in the marine transportation fleet [21].

Palembang's economic development has become a magnet for newcomers who are increasingly busy entering the Palembang area. Professional groups such as teachers, doctors, technicians and others are groups of migrants outside Palembang. Their existence also influenced the Palembang people to enter the political field, because most of them had political positions opposite to the colonial government. Most of the Palembang people were then polarized in political activities in Palembang, Sarekat Islam, PSII, PNI and Gerindo were political parties that can attract the Palembang people to politics [11].

The Palembang Chinese ethnic group is an ethnic group that tends to be anti-patience towards political activities [22]. However, the increasing socio-political changes have made the Chinese ethnic group also integrated with political life in Palembang. The Palembang Chinese ethnic group began to follow the political dynamics in Palembang, in the form of becoming members of political parties (PNI and Gerindo) to becoming members of *Gemeenteraad* through the *Vreemdeoosterlingen* representative route [23]. Awareness to integrate with political dynamics in the Palembang region is a rational choice given the political changes in Palembang in the mid-1920s.

The presence of migrants, an increase in economic expansion to the hinterlands of Palembang, and the level of political participation of the native people in political life are some signs that Chinese ethnic groups must enter the political dynamics in Palembang. The level of competition will increase in size in the economic field,

and the resistance of the native peoples about their living conditions in the colonial society will have an impact on the existence of the Palembang Chinese ethnicity. Based on changes in the socio-political context in Palembang in the period from 1920 to early 1930, the Chinese ethnic group had an interest in local political life in Palembang.

The existence of representatives of Chinese ethnic groups in the colonial bureaucratic structure at the executive level (*Kapitan China*) was more complete with the existence of Chinese ethnic groups at the legislative level (*Gemeenteraad*) [20]. The existence of agents of the Chinese ethnic group in the colonial government's bureaucratic structure had an impact on the bargaining position of the Chinese ethnic group in colonial society in Palembang. Sufficient results can be seen from the existence of social agents in the bureaucratic structure of the colonial government in Palembang, with the emergence of schools for Chinese ethnic groups in Palembang [24].

The granting of permission to establish schools for ethnic Chinese, with Chinese as the language of instruction, resulted form of struggles carried out by Chinese leaders at the executive and legislative levels. The Palembang Chinese ethnic group's need to get an education had actually been met by granting permission for Palembang Chinese ethnic children to attend schools built by the Palembang colonial government. The existence of the schools established by the colonial government was deemed inadequate to answer the needs of ethnic Chinese to maintain their existence in the dynamics of colonial society in Palembang. Considering that the schools established by the colonial government used the Dutch language of instruction in the learning process.

Awareness to maintain the existence colonial society dynamics in Palembang, given the growing awareness of political identity in the Palembang community. In Palembang, socio-political movements that began to be polarized into identity politics in Palembang, can be seen in the increasing number of political parties and social associations that highlight their respective identities [25]. The existence of Chinese ethnic leaders in the colonial bureaucratic structure also made Chinese ethnic groups to align themselves with European society in law.

The colonial government allowed the Palembang Chinese ethnic group to undergo the legal process at the same court level as the European community. This can be seen in a legal case involving Palembang businessmen and the Palembang colonial government. A businessman named Tjia Tjik Seng has a dispute with the Palembang city government, where the case was tried in *Raad van Justitie* [26]. The Chinese businessman won the case and was later published in the newspaper. The victory of Palembang Chinese businessmen in a legal dispute with the Palembang city government, has further increased the interest of Palembang Chinese ethnic groups to get involved with political life in Palembang [23].

## 4. CONCLUSION

Changes in the colonial government's political policies in managing the Palembang area in the early 20th century, especially in city governance impacted on the Chinese ethnic group. This change was evident in improving the social and economic position of the Chinese ethnic group, when the policy of prohibiting Arab traders from entering the interior of Palembang was implemented. The expansion of the Chinese ethnic group's social and economic networks to the interior of Palembang, complementing the trade network of the Palembang Chinese ethnic group to the Singapore trading port that was already owned. The Palembang Chinese ethnic group's strategic position as intermediary traders made the colonial government implement a different policy from the *Vreemdeoosterlingen* community in Palembang.

The Palembang Chinese ethnic group had the opportunity to enter the colonial bureaucratic structure at the legislative level (*Gemeenteraad*). This opportunity was used by the Palembang Chinese ethnic leaders (Agency) maintain the stability and existence of the Chinese ethnic group in Palembang. The struggle carried out by the Palembang Chinese ethnic group through the existence of a leader in the city council, was manifested through the opening of a school for Palembang Chinese ethnic children. The establishment of an ethnic Chinese school in Palembang became the beginning for Chinese ethnic groups to face contestations in the Chinese community's socio-political dynamics in Palembang.

The existence of Palembang Chinese ethnic leaders in the colonial bureaucratic structure (executive and legislative), also illustrates how the colonial government handled different actions between Asian community groups (*Vreemdeoosterlingen*) in the Palembang region. The colonial government in Palembang provided many different facilities and facilities to the Chinese ethnic group, compared to the Arab, Indian, Japanese and other community groups. The handling and different approaches to the Chinese ethnic group by the Palembang colonial government were the article's findings. The Chinese ethnic group's ability to build economic networks from the interior to the trading port in Singapore made them quite central in colonial economic activities in Palembang. This situation made the colonial government in Palembang increasingly dependent on the Chinese ethnic group in Palembang in order to drive the colonial economy in Palembang.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Huddy Husin and Djoko Marihandono. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Huddy Husin and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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