Chinese correspondence in Dutch East Indies, 1865-1949

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to describe some aspects of the social history of the Chinese minority in the Dutch East Indies using items of postal history as a guide. It is a very personal view, seen through the eyes of a philatelist. Using a postal history collection, aspects of political history can be illustrated and/or documented. This article is certainly not to be read as a solid, documented scientific exercise. It should be read in the spirit of educational entertainment.

KEYWORDS

Social history; Peranakan; Dutch East Indies; philately; postal history; Tio Tek Hong; Chinese Red Cross; Yang Seng Ie Red Cross; Palang Merah Tiong Hoa.

This article deals with the social history of the Chinese minority in the Dutch East Indies during the last 84 years of colonial rule. It is very personal view, seen through the eyes of a philatelist.¹ Stamp-collecting is a popular hobby worldwide. This hobby is also known as philately, which certainly sounds more important and more scientific. Various specialties have developed within philately over the years. Some philatelists consider stamps less interesting than the way stamps were used and handled. Considered against its historical background, a letter or cover can become a historical document, far more interesting than the stamp on it. Covers sometimes tell fascinating stories of

¹ All rights of the pictures and illustrations used in this article are the responsibility of the author. In the online publication of this article (through the websites *Wacana* and Brill) all pictures are in colour [editor].

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their own. Therefore postal history has emerged as one of the most popular specialities in modern philately.

A postal history collection can also be used to illustrate and/or document aspects of political history. This article is based on a small side-collection I owned in the past. When reading it, consider it as a small personal hobby which got out of hand. Most collectors cherish their hobby as a means of relaxation and personal entertainment. This article should be read in the same spirit of educational entertainment. It is an attempt to recount some aspects of the social history of the Chinese minority in the Dutch East Indies using postal history items from my former collection as a guide. This article is certainly not to be read as a solidly documented scientific exercise. The story in this article is also by no means complete. Please note that the deathblow to a collection is the moment it is complete!

A PHILATELIC BEGINNING

We begin our tour through history at the moment the first stamp in the Dutch East Indies was issued: 1 April 1864. Philatelists often have a weak spot for the first emission of their favourite country. To own a cover with the first emission is special and I was very happy finally to be able to buy a nice example (Picture 1). The cover shows a correspondence between two Chinese merchants. Covers, franked with the first emission, often concern a similar correspondence between Chinese businessmen. Why do we not see more first emission covers from the Dutch? Before the first stamp was issued, letters were sent unfranked and the costs had to be paid by the recipient. The introduction of stamps made prepayment of the costs possible, but many Dutch were slow to change to this "new system". Our cover shows the first stamp in the upper left-hand corner. These stamps were still issued unperforated. The clear cancellation in the upper right-hand corner shows that the cover was mailed in Tegal on 7 November. Some postal historians specifically collect postal cancellations in all their varieties in text, size, and forms.

Picture 1. Chinese commercial cover (1865), franked with the first emission in the Dutch East Indies.

Picture 2. Postal entire (1888), sent from Pajakombo (Payakumbuh) to Padang Pandjang at Sumatra's West Coast. Nice strike of the unusual octagonal name cancellation of Pajakombo.

A beautiful cancellation from Pajakombo is shown on the red band cover of 1888 (Picture 2). The cancellation is a name cancellation showing a very unusual octagonal form. The cover bears another two other cancellations: A dot cancellation (also known as numeral cancellation) and a small round cancellation, both from the post office of Fort de Cock. As said, some postal historians happily collect all those different types of cancellation. They are lucky to have a solid handbook available for study, reference, and guidance.²

If the cover is inspected closely, you will see that the stamp image is printed *into* the envelope. The “stamp” and the envelope together form one complete unit, representing a monetary value. They should never be separated. Such a unit is called “postal entire” in English, *Ganzsache* in German, and *postwaardestuk* in Dutch. In the period 1870-1920, these postal entires were extremely popular, principally for financial reasons. Sending mail was considered expensive in those days. The stamp had to be paid for, and then the costs for the envelope came on top of it. Buying a postal entire meant both could be bought together for the cost of the stamp only!

Picture 3. Postal entire (1887), sent from Poerbolingo to Tegal.

Picture 4. Reunion of the Siem family in Poerbolingo, Banjoemas, celebrating the 80th birthday of their *materfamilias*, the paternal grandmother of the author.

² P. Storm van Leeuwen 1995.

The cover as in Picture 3 already looks familiar. Again a postal entire was used as a red band cover with two discernible cancels. Here the name cancellation is a straight line cancellation of the sub-post office in Poerbolingo (Purbolinggo) and the small round cancellation is from the main post office in Banjoemas (Banyumas). On a personal basis, Poerbolingo is very familiar to me because it is the home-town of the Siem family. In 1954, Siems from all corners of the world gathered in the village to celebrate the 80th birthday of the *materfamilias*, my grandmother, Mrs Siem Thian Ie (Picture 4). In 1887, the year the red band cover was sent, my grandmother was fourteen years old.

COLONIAL RULE

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Chinese community consisted of totoks (speaking Chinese and very much China-oriented) and the Peranakans (speaking Malay and very much adapted to Indonesian life). The Dutch colonial government restricted Chinese residence to special quarters or wards (*wijken*).³ The system of travel passes restricted their free movement. Although the official regulations referred to “Chinese quarters”, a producer of picture postcards was more straightforward and captioned one of his postcards *Chineesche kamp, Chinese camp* (Picture 5).

Picture 5. The picture is framed by decorations in the Jugendstil style, popular around 1900.

To manage the Chinese in the major cities, the Dutch appointed “Chinese officers” as agents. These Chinese officers (Opsir Tionghoa) assisted in translating and explaining the Dutch Rules and Regulations to the Chinese community. Their privileged position gave them the wealth needed to buy and control the profitable opium monopoly. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Chinese officer system had led to the emergence of a Chinese business elite.

³ Mary F. Somers 2009.

The following two postcards relate to Chinese officers. The postcard (1887), shown in Picture 6, was written by the Kapitein der Chinezen van Krawang (Captain of the Chinese in Krawang). For a cancellation specialist the card is of little interest since the small circle cancellation of Weltevreden is fairly common and the straight line cancellation of Krawang is barely legible. However, with its clear cachet of the Captain of the Chinese, the card is quite attractive to a collection. It illustrates that a postal item can be of barely any interest to one collection but can fit perfectly in another.

Picture 6. Postcard (1887) from the Kapitein der Chinezen in Krawang, one of the privileged Opsir Tionghoa in colonial Java.

After 1920 the Chinese Officer system declined, although the function still accrued its holder plenty of prestige. Khouw Kim An (1875-1945) served as the last Majoor der Chinezen of Batavia.⁴ He was born into one of the largest landowning families of Batavia. As he had enjoyed a sound traditional Chinese education, he had a good grasp of both Mandarin and Hokkien in addition to his native Batavian Malay. He also spoke Dutch fluently. Khouw was raised to the post of luitenant der Chinezen in 1905, kapitein in 1908 and finally majoor in 1910. By that time the duties of the last majoor and head of the Chinese community were mainly ceremonial. However, he was also the first Chinese elected to the Volksraad (the parliament in the Indies). The postcard from Canton (1915) is addressed with all the formality expected to be used for a man of his prestige (Picture 7). Although often a collector might wish that he could possess an item of better quality, one consolation might be that mediocre quality often signals greater authenticity.

⁴ "Khouw Kim An", *Wikipedia* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khouw_Kim_An].

Picture 7. Postcard (1914) from Canton to Khouw Kim An, Majoor der Chinezen, head of the Chinese community and member of the Volksraad.

CHANGE

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the Peranakans became more aware they were being treated as second-class citizens. The Dutch authorities gradually lent an ear to the Chinese grievances. The restrictions and the pass system were mitigated and ultimately completely abolished. Peranakan Chinese children began to be given access to Western education.⁵ These changes in the society resonate in the Chinese correspondence.

Picture 8. Early Chinese commercial cover (1896), using stationery with preprinted text in and a layout in western style.

Picture 9. Preprinted commercial postcard of a Chinese company (1907) with text in Dutch as well as decorative Chinese characters.

For the first time we find a Chinese commercial cover, provided with a preprinted text, in the collection (Picture 8). The layout of this commercial

⁵ Leo Suryadinata 1997.

stationery is quite similar to those used by western commercial firms. When the covers in Pictures 1 and 8 are compared, the configuration of the name and the general lay-out show barely any difference. What difference there is in the preprinted text and the western-style decoration. For the first time the postcard of 1907 (Picture 9) is multilingual. Apart from the Chinese characters, the card easily could represent a western Firm.

The cover (1905) shown in Picture 10a signals another step. It is one of the earliest commercial Chinese letters in the collection, addressed to a place in western Europe other than the Netherlands. On the back, the envelope is closed with the firm's seal (Picture 10b): In 1905 a Chinese merchant showed no hesitation in using some publicity for his *toko* in a suburb of Menado!

Pictures 10a and 10b. Early cover (1905) sent to a Western European country other than the Netherlands. On the back the envelope is closed by a seal with the name of a *toko* in a suburb of Menado.

The registered letter from Fort de Cock is surprising (Picture 11). It is not just another letter from a Chinese person to Western Europe, the cover

is addressed to a well-known stamp dealer in Germany. Was Tjoa Eng Wie one of the first Chinese stamp-collectors in the Dutch East Indies? The cover from this pioneer did not even originate from Java, but from Fort de Cock (nowadays Bukittinggi) on Sumatra's West Coast, not the most sophisticated area of the archipelago.

Picture 11. Registered envelope (1909) sent to a German stamp-dealer.

KEEPING TRADITIONS

Of course change does not always come easily. There will always be traditionalists who refuse to go along with all that “modern stuff” and cling to familiar customs and traditions. Consequently, we can admire the beautiful Chinese characters they calligraphed in their meticulous, graceful script and study their attractive personal seals (Pictures 12 and 13). These two covers present another type of postal cancellation: The beloved squared circle cancellations, used between 1892 and 1913.

Pictures 12 and 13. Commercial covers to Ampenan (1902) and Menado (1904). Plain envelopes, addressed in Chinese and then provided with personal seals in traditional vermilion red. Squared circle cancellations of Ampenan and Makassar.

While the world around them changed, the Chinese remained attached to some centuries-old traditions of their people. The small “lady’s envelope” (Picture 14a) from Wonosobo to Toeban (Tuban) is addressed in the traditional Chinese way. The envelope was cancelled on 5 February 1894. At the turn of the century, these ceremonial envelopes of tinted paper were *très en vogue* among the upper echelons of western societies all over the world. The reverse of the envelope is richly decorated with bamboos and red Chinese calligraphy (Picture 14b). Fortunately, we are allowed to have a look at the contents of the envelope (Picture 14c). The illustrated note is likewise richly decorated and provided with a vermilion seal. It seems to be connected to the celebration of the Lunar New Year. In our own time, the Internet makes it possible to know the dates of Lunar New Year of whatever year in the past. In 1894 Lunar New Year fell on 6 February.⁶ So, the small cover with New Year wishes was mailed on Chinese New Year’s Eve and undoubtedly reached its destination the next day.

Picture 14a. Ladies' cover (February 1894), addressed the traditional Chinese way.

Picture 14b. Back of the cover, showing bamboo decoration and calligraphed Chinese characters.

Picture 14c. The contents are effusive wishes for the Lunar New Year.

⁶ “Dates of Chinese New Year, 1645-1899, along with the year’s animal” [www.pinyin.info].

Up to the present day, Lunar New Year still is the most beloved festival among overseas Chinese; celebrating it almost like a reaffirmation of their identity. Even where I live, a middle-size town in Florida, far from the Chinatowns in the big cities, every Lunar New Year the small Chinese community creates itself the possibility to be able to watch traditional lion dances in their favourite restaurants.

SUCCESS

In their homeland most Chinese who came to the Indies had been farmers. However, because of restrictive regulations it was very difficult for Chinese immigrants to own farming land. In the nineteenth century, most of them were involved in the middlemen distributive trade, the Dutch selling imported goods to the native population through Chinese retailers, even through the *kelontong* (grocery) trade. Some of these Chinese entrepreneurs became quite successful.

Against this background, the cover to Semarang (Picture 15)⁷ deserves special attention. The cover seems just another first emission cover as was discussed earlier (compare with Picture 1). However, the stamp in the left-hand corner is perforated. It is the second stamp issued in the Dutch East Indies. Readers familiar with the history of the Peranakans around 1900 will probably recognize the name of the addressee. Oei Tjie Sin (1835-1900)⁸ was a native of Fujian province who ran into trouble with the Manchu Government. In 1858 he landed in Semarang, at that time the biggest harbour and trading centre in Java. His start with a simple *toko kelontong* was modest but he quickly moved up from rags to riches. In 1863 he founded Kian Gwan as a *kongsi*. The second emission cover was sent from Cheribon (nowadays Cirebon) to Semarang in 1870, seven years after the foundation of Kian Gwan. In 1890 he chose one of his sons, Oei Tiong Ham (1866-1924), to be his successor. Oei Tiong Ham's rise in the business world was fast and surpassed his father's achievements. In 1893 he incorporated the Kian Gwan kongsi, which was renamed the Handel Maatschappij (Trading Company) Kian Gwan. He was appointed *luitenant* in 1886 and was promoted to *majoor* ten years later. In 1889 he was permitted to dress in western style. Kian Gwan developed into one of the largest, if not the greatest, of all trading companies in Southeast Asia. The firm had branches in various cities and the branches used postal stationery with privately added text (Picture 16) for their internal correspondence. In contrast to other Chinese, in his businesses Oei relied extensively on non-family members. He also hired Dutch managers and experts.⁹ Although he lived in a Dutch colony, he became an Anglophile, moving to Singapore in 1921.

⁷ Auction Catalogue 633. 2016 lot no. 945. Roermond: Van Dieten Postzegelverilingen.

⁸ Onghokham 1989.

⁹ Onghokham (1989: 179).

Picture 15. Chinese commercial cover (1870), franked with the second emission, from Cheribon, addressed to Oei Tjie Sin in Semarang (private collection).

Picture 16. Preprinted postal stationery, sent between two branches of the Kian Gwan concern (1902).

The rise of Chinese nationalism around 1900 was supported by the Chinese press. Among the best known was the Sie Dhian Ho Press in Soerakarta (Surakarta/Solo) (Picture 17). From 1902 it published various periodicals, promoting emerging Chinese nationalism.¹⁰ Among these periodicals was a tri-weekly paper for the Tiong Hwa Hwee Koan, the main association representing Chinese nationalism. The name Sie Dhian Ho became so respected that descendants used “Siedhianho” as their family name.

Picture 17. Early illustrated postcard of the Solosche Sneldrukkerij (Solo Fast Press), owned by the influential Sie Dhian Ho.

¹⁰ Ahmat B. Adam 1995.

Picture 18. Buitenzorg picture postcard, issued by Tio Tek Hong, Weltevreden.

Around the turn of the century (1890-1915), picture postcards were quite popular (see Picture 18). Travel had already made the world smaller but telecommunication as we know still was in its embryonic phase. The possibility to see pictures of faraway countries and continents was limited. Picture postcards were available and affordable, well suited to fulfilling that demand. They were eagerly collected and exchanged. 1892 the *prentbriefkaart* was introduced to the Dutch East Indies.¹¹ By around 1899 the market of picture postcards had grown tremendously. Several publishers issued picture postcards in quantities. Of course, most of them were Dutch: Mesman & Stroink in Semarang, Kolff & Co., and G.C.T. van Dorp in Batavia. The few Chinese publishers were small and only one could really compete. His name is in the fine print at the bottom of the card.

Picture 19. Tio Tek Hong was one of the first publishers to sell booklets containing twelve different postcards.

Picture 20a. From his shop at Pasar Baroe Tio Tek Hong sold a great variety of goods.

¹¹ Leo Haks and Steven Wachlin 2004.

Tio Tek Hong was born in Batavia in 1877. In 1902 he opened up a shop at Pasar Baroe in Weltevreden. His firm became a leading publisher of postcards. The tinted cards were sold for 7.5 cents apiece or 75 cents a dozen (cheaper by the dozen!). The price of untinted cards was 5 cents or 50 cents a dozen. In 1905 Tio Tek Hong was one of the first to sell booklets of postcards, detachable and often numbered, containing twelve different cards (Picture 19). In his department store he sold a great variety of goods (Picture 20a). Toko Tio Tek Hong is still a well-known colonial building in Jakarta.

Around 1904 gramophone records were introduced to the Dutch East Indies.¹² Tio Tek Hong was at the forefront of the development. In 1907 he became the agent for the German company Odeon. The title was spoken in on the records, followed by *Terbikin oleh Tio Tek Hong, Batavia*.¹³ Later Tio Tek Hong even produced records under his own label (Picture 20b).¹⁴

Picture 20b. Vinyl record produced by Tio Tek Hong with a label showing his name and the building of his *toko*. Early twentieth century (source: Dennysakrie63's blog).

Tio Tek Hong had a younger sister, Tio Goan Nio, my maternal grandmother. Picture 21 shows her on one of her birthdays. By taking the opportunity to honour both of my grandmothers in this article, I have tried to be a respectful grandson. My grandmothers had different characters, but both were beloved and respected by their families.

¹² Tim de Wolf 2010.

¹³ Siem, Tjong Haw. The assistance of my brother in obtaining data about our great-uncle, Tio Tek Hong, is gratefully acknowledged.

¹⁴ Denny Sakrie 2013.

Picture 21. Tio Goan Nio, the younger sister of Tio Tek Hong and the maternal grandmother of the author.

ENTREPRENEURS

In 1943 Ong Eng Die¹⁵ wrote a dissertation on the *Chineezzen in Nederlandsch Indië*.¹⁶ In this sociographic study he describes the role of the Chinese in small- and middle-size companies. From the great variety of activities on offer, he selected two areas. The first one was the batik industry. Batik was originally produced by the female population as home craft for their own use. Later, batik was made for the market too, thereby attracting Chinese interest. Either as principals or sub-contractors they began to outsource the batik production, often also providing the raw materials (Picture 22).

Picture 22. Chinese merchants became involved with the batik industry as outsourcers, also providing raw materials.

Using this system, batik production was spread out to even the smallest *desas* (villages). The bulk of the batik was produced in Central and West Java with concentrations in Batavia, Pekalongan, and Lasem. Lasem, Tionggok Kecil, was known as a town with a strong Chinese influence (Picture 23). In Lasem

¹⁵ In Indonesia Ong Eng Die in 1955 would serve as Minister of Finance ("Ong Eng Die", Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ong_Eng_Die).

¹⁶ Ong Eng Die 1943.

batik, Chinese colours, earth red and dark red, tend to dominate,¹⁷ and there is also a preponderance of Chinese motives like dragons and bamboo.

Picture 23. Lasem was well known for its batik, showing patterns with strong Chinese influence. Around 1920 money between Chinese merchants still was sent by mail because money orders were not widely used.

Another area Ong discusses is the *kretek* industry. Lighting up a *kretek* is a characteristic, very Indonesian way of enjoying a smoke.¹⁸ The *kretek*, a pointed cigarette (called *strootje* by the Dutch) had its origin around 1880. It was hand-rolled and -filled with a blend of tobacco, cloves (*cengkeh*), and herbs. The *kretek* was named after the crackling sound the oil in the cloves make when the cigarette is lighted. Originally, its production was completely in the hands of the native population. Around 1913 Liem Seeng Tee founded his own company to produce *kretek*-cigarettes. Having begun as a blender himself, blending and rolling cigarettes, he conceived the idea of incorporating special flavours into his tobacco mix. As he developed sensitive antennae for the preferences of his customers, his company became very successful. In the 1930s he transformed the Handelmaatschappij (Trading Company) Seng Tee into the Handelmaatschappij Sampoerna. The company produced several brands aimed at different segments of the market, but its mainstay was the Djie Sam Soe (2,3,4 in Chinese), for the premium market segment. Since no philatelic item was available to illustrate this story, a collectible present-day Djie Sam Soe cigarettes packet (Picture 24) is shown.

Picture 24. Liem Seng Tee in Soerabaja founded the first successful *kretek* Chinese-owned cigarette factory. The key brand, Djie Sam Soe (2,3,4), was aimed at the upper market segment and is still the premium cigarette in Indonesia (contemporary cigarette wrapper).

¹⁷ Suherdjoko 2007.

¹⁸ Mark Hanusz and Julian Davison 2003.

The collection also has an advertising postcard sent by one of his Chinese competitors (Picture 25). The best cigar tobacco was not the best tobacco for the *kretek*-cigarettes. For the latter, the best tobacco came from the Temanggoeng area and several factories were located in that vicinity (Pictures 26 and 27).

Picture 25. Advertising postcard of one of the numerous producers of *kretek*-cigarettes.

Pictures 26 and 27. The best tobacco for the production of *kretek*-cigarettes was grown in the surroundings of Temanggoeng.

With its acquired freedom of movement, commerce, and education the Chinese community was able to develop and broaden its activities. The correspondence of its members shows a growing diversity in three distinct directions.

(1) THE WEST

Around 1900 western influences were creeping into the way the Chinese conducted their business. The success of an early pioneer like Oey Tiong Ham in applying western expertise was an important factor in breaking with familiar traditions. Within Chinese society, some companies began to display a certain hunger to absorb the latest western trends. The coffee-roasting company, Margo-Redjo, used an attractive illustrated postcard to promote its firm (Picture 28). If I had to comment on this postcard, I would mention some striking points. First it is striking the card is “multi-coloured”. We were living in 1926 here. This is the first advertising multi-coloured postcard in the collection. The pictures on the postcard are arranged in typical Art Deco style. Art Deco was an influential contemporary visual arts design style. It earned its name because it was showcased at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, held in Paris in 1925. The fact this postcard was used in 1926 certainly gives the impression the firm which issued it was eager to be thought ahead of its time. Alexander Claver (2011) describes how the small company survived the crisis of the 1930s by adopting a clever marketing policy. It is remarkable that this advertising postcard is a prediction that the small company would resort to modern western methods when confronted with the serious adverse economic headwind to come.

Picture 28. Multi-coloured printed advertising postcard (1926) for a western-oriented coffee roasting company.

Another 1926 item shows a Chinese illustrated envelope, advertising photo cameras, -components and chemicals (Picture 29). In 1920 Eastman Kodak had just founded a subsidiary whose primary purpose was to manufacture the chemicals needed for Kodak film photography products. By then, photography was within reach of the middle class.

Picture 29. Publicity envelope, promoting the upcoming trend of photography for the middle class.

Of course, the Chinese were also involved in that symbol of progress and modern life: the car (Picture 30). Keegan, Aprahamian & Co in New York were exporters' and manufacturers' agents for auto supplies. As the rate for a foreign letter was just raised on 1 February 1921 to 20 cents, the postage applied was insufficient and consequently the envelope was duly charged in the US.

Picture 30. As the car became the symbol for progress and modern life, Chinese companies became importers of car parts.

The next picture (Picture 31) shows an advertising envelope from a bi-monthly magazine. The text is quite interesting considering the time period. This magazine tries to draw attention to its advertisements by sport and films. It was issued by Toko Auw Pit Seng in Medan, in 1931! Quite ambitious for that time. This type of advertising would have even blended in nicely in the twenty-first century.

Picture 31. “Publicity through Sport and Films”, applied as early as 1931 by a toko in Medan.

(2) THE EAST

Given its different background and dissimilar history, the Chinese population of West Borneo shows some characteristics which diverge from other areas like Java.¹⁹

Picture 32. West Borneo, East Sumatra, Bangka, Biliton and Riau, all had major concentrations of Chinese outside of Java. For them Singapore was closer than Batavia.

¹⁹ Mary Somers Heidhues 2003.

Pictures 33 and 34. When the gold veins in West Borneo petered out, some Hakka Chinese became farmers, orientated towards Singapore.

In the eighteenth century, the sultans of West Borneo imported Chinese labourers to work in their gold-mines. This led to mining settlements, which were organized in *kongsis* and enjoyed a certain degree of political autonomy. In the wake of the Dutch expansion in the archipelago, the Lanfang Republic was established in West Borneo in 1777. It was a vassal state of the Chinese Qing empire. Only after three military campaigns and the fall of the Qing dynasty were the Dutch able to establish control over it. Many of Lanfang's citizen and descendants found their way to Singapore. When the gold veins in West Borneo petered out, several Chinese miners managed to diversify into agriculture. In contrast to the Peranakans in Java, those in West Borneo continued to speak Chinese and remained orientated towards Singapore, most notably because Singapore is rather closer to West Borneo than Batavia (Picture 32). Several items of the Chinese correspondence between West Borneo and Singapore have been preserved, including the contents (Pictures 33 and 34).

Pictures 35 and 36. Singkawang, derived from Hakka *San khew jong*, was probably and is the most Chinese town in West Borneo. The stationery of this letter of June 1931 symbolizes the flag of Nationalist China.

Very interesting is the cover from Singkawang (Picture 35). The town always had a special significance for the Chinese. The name Singkawang is derived from the Hakka Chinese designation *San khew jong* (a town in the hills nearby a sea). It was founded in the eighteenth century when waves of Chinese immigrants came down to work in the gold-mining area. Even today 42 per cent of the population is Hakka and travel agencies are selling Singkawang as the "Chinatown of Indonesia" and the "City of a Thousand Temples". Against this background the stationery used for the contents of the cover to Singapore (1931) is politically interesting. It shows two men, bearing flags similar to the

flag of the Kuo Min Tang (Picture 36), the ruling political party in the Republic of China founded by Sun Yat Sen. Imperial China was never really interested in the overseas Chinese. Sun Yat Sen, however, was very active in seeking support from the overseas Chinese in his efforts to establish the Republic of China (for his ideas). The final uprising against imperial China was made possible by important financial support from merchants in Singapore.

In 1931 the Sino-Japanese dispute over Manchuria would lead to a build up of tension and, ultimately, to the Mukden Incident. The pro-Chinese content of the cover can unquestionably be considered an early sign of the gulf of nationalistic and patriotic feelings gathering strength among the Chinese minority in the Dutch East Indies. This sentiment is reflected in their correspondence from Java (Picture 37). The cover from Wlingi (1936) is addressed to the largest bookshop in Shanghai. Conversely, a year later a letter from Shanghai was addressed to Soerabaja (Picture 38).

Pictures 37 and 38. The tensions between China and Japan led to an upsurge in Chinese nationalism and a growing correspondence between the Dutch East Indies and China.

(3) THE HOMELAND

A (small) third part of the Chinese did not choose between the West and the East, but remained rooted in their homeland and developed strong connections with the local population.

Ever since the nineteenth century, the Chinese had dominated the small retail trade. The local *tokos* providing almost “everything” still there even exist today. In the USA, such shops are known as “general stores” (convenience stores). In the Dutch East Indies such Chinese-owned *tokos* for *provisin* [sic!], *dranken*, *kramerijen* etcetera. were scattered into the farthest corners of the archipelago (Picture 39). Boeton (Buton) is an island off the “right leg” (south-east peninsula) of Celebes (Sulawesi). The population was considered too insignificant to have a post office on the island. Mail had to be handed over to a KPM (Koninklijke Paketvaart-Maatschappij) ship like the SS Baud. The KPM was the dominant shipping line in the Netherlands Indies and was so ubiquitous that it is possible to specialize in its ship cancellations. The bulk of their covers were sent by Chinese merchants from hamlets, “in the middle of nowhere”. The island of Boeton might not have had a post-office but it certainly had a Chinese *toko*!

Picture 39. Letter sent by a Chinese *toko* carrying the ship cancellation of the SS Baud, as no post-office was available on the island of Boeton.

By 1930, the KPM faced Chinese competition, orientated towards Singapore (Picture 40). The cover from Djambi (Jambi) shows a cancellation in red from a Chinese-owned ship. Some Chinese did not orientate themselves towards China or the West but fostered contacts with the neighbouring countries. At the time at which Chinese began to emigrate to Southeast Asia, the colonial boundaries had not yet been set. Correspondence across these boundaries was often of Chinese origin.

MEMBERS OF A PROSPEROUS COMMUNITY

At the end of the 1930s, various Chinese were clearly embedded into the western-oriented society of the Dutch colony. They displayed all the signs of a prosperous middle-class community. Sports like badminton were promoted as leisure activities (Picture 42). Originating in India, badminton became popular in England. The International Badminton Federation was founded in 1935. Toko Kwee Yauw Tjong was quick to participate in this latest novelty. Decades later, Indonesia would produce several World and Olympic badminton champions.

Picture 42. Advertising envelope for a *toko* selling articles to a prosperous community.

Of course, such a prosperous environment produced all kind of delightful social activities. What about a sweepstake? Picture 43a shows the winning prize (No. 32 of the 80) in a sweepstake, organized by the Hua Chiao Tsing Nien Hua (HCTNH, Overseas Chinese Youth Association). The prize could be spent in any of the four participating shops (Picture 43b). The HCTNH had branches in various cities. They were involved in *voetbal* (soccer) and tennis tournaments. The HCTNH Malang *voetbalclub* won a certain fame because its goalie was the keeper of the Dutch East Indies soccer team during the 1938 FIFA World Cup in France. There were also competitions other than sporting ones. The florist “Magnolia” in Semarang (Pictures 44a and 44b) was proud to show how many awards it had achieved *bloemenconcoure* (floral contests).

Pictures 43a and 43b. A prize of f2.50 won in a sweepstake organized by the Overseas Chinese Youth Association.

Pictures 44a and 44b. Florist “Magnolia” proudly presents the awards it had won.

And then there were parties, not just parties but Black Tie Parties! The Chinese tailor Ang Sik Khing in Malang proudly announced to the public (Picture 45) he was fully capable supplying the latest style in festive, formal clothing.

Picture 45. A Chinese tailor in Malang promotes his black-tie clothing.

Now it is time to pay another visit to my great-uncle Tio Tek Hong. His business was hit hard by the Great Depression but he managed to survive (Picture 46).

Picture 46. The *perfin* of Tio Tek Hong, used on a postcard to the USA.

The illustrated card to the United States shows the well-known building of his *toko* and an interesting philatelic specialty: The stamps seem to have been damaged by small holes or perforations. On closer inspection, these deliberately applied holes form the letters TTH (Tio Tek Hong). Philatelists call such stamps *perfins*. They were meant to prevent theft, because these stamps could only be used by the issuing firm. Private use would have been easily detected. Another advertising card (Pictures 47a and 47b) was sent in 1941. A subtle change can be noted, because the card was censored, a sign that the Second World War had broken out in Europe. On the back of the card my great-uncle lamented the situation in which his business found itself. With his firearms sales, he would still do really well in the US today (Americans are still crazy about guns!).

Pictures 47a and 47b. Tio Tek Hong informing his provider in the USA that firearms are still doing well.

WAR AND HOSTILITIES

The following postcard (Picture 48) shows some significant changes had taken place. Japan and the Second World War had reached the Dutch East Indies. The “stamp” design looks familiar but the name of the nation has been replaced by “Dai Nippon”. The censor mark too is in Japanese script. Meanwhile, the postage rate for a postcard remained “unchanged” from 3½ cents to 3½ sen.

Picture 48. Domestically used postcard, showing signs of Japanese occupation: Dai Nippon and the Japanese censor.

For philatelists the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies is a real jungle of overprints, emergency issues, and local stamps. It is a beloved specialized field pursued by passionate collectors in the Netherlands, Indonesia, Britain,

and Japan. With such international interest rare items can become really expensive. In a side collection like this, only simple items will be shown.

The Chinese correspondence adapted to war-time conditions and limited itself to the essentials: business and settling payments. A Chinese wholesale agent send a postcard (2603 Japanese year = 1943) to a Chinese *toko* about an order (Picture 49).

Picture 49a. A close up of the postage stamp with the postmark.

Picture 49b. Business as usual between Chinese during the Japanese occupation.

Another item shows a payment and the use of a Japanese revenue stamp (Picture 50). The Japanese did not use the same administrative system as the Dutch. This is why a cover from Medan to Padang (Picture 51) was franked by a stamp of occupied Malaya. Yet, amidst the chaos and the angst of war, surprisingly we find a clear indication of philately: an envelope, sent from Tandjong Balei (Tanjung Balai) to Amoy in China (Picture 52). The envelope shows the special cancellation of the Japanese post, celebrating the first anniversary of the occupation of Sumatra. This cover was sent by a man in Tandjong Balei to his brother (or cousin) in China to obtain that special cancellation. How lucky the philatelist who, even under harsh circumstances, could relax in his hobby and bother about a cancellation.

Picture 50. Payment in wartime with Japanese Revenue stamp.

Picture 51. Japanese overprint of a Perak stamp, used in Medan.

Picture 52. Philately in wartime. Envelope sent to obtain the special cancellation to commemorate the first anniversary of the occupation of Sumatra.

So far, the majority of the items shown in this article highlight the commercial side of the Chinese minority in the Dutch East Indies. One important aspect of this population has been rather neglected: Its contribution to the health of the community. Peranakan readers are very much aware of how many doctors, dentists, pharmacists, and nurses there were among them. Why were they not represented? Maybe because in a philatelist's eyes their mail was rather boring. Maybe it needed a war to produce the first medically related item.

The envelope, sent from Bandoeng to Tjirebon (Cirebon) (Picture 53a), is remarkable because the postage is missing. The two red Japanese characters on the left, above the censor cancel, are *Go Yoo* (Official). This is clarified by the cachet in the upper left-hand corner. The violet ink is faded but the text *Pasteur Instituut* is still legible (Picture 53b). The Pasteur Institute in Bandoeng enjoyed such enormous international prestige as an institute specialized in vaccination against smallpox, the plague, and rabies that even the Japanese occupier granted the Institute freedom of postage. The envelope is addressed to a family doctor, probably about something to do with vaccination. It is a reminder that during the Japanese occupation all Dutch doctors were interned in camps and that, at that time only a few Indonesian doctors were available. Therefore, during the Japanese occupation the health care of the whole archipelago was managed by Chinese doctors.

Pictures 53a and 53b. "Official mail" (no postage needed) sent from the Instituut Pasteur located in Lembangweg in Bandoeng to a family doctor in Tjirebon, probably dealing with vaccination (the sharpness of Pictures 53a and 53b is consistent with the originals [editor]).

When the war ended in August 1945, Indonesia immediately declared its independence. This step ushered in a violent, chaotic period and hostilities, lasting four years. The young Republic soon managed to issue primitive stamps, commemorating one of its first big battles, the Battle of Soerabaja in November 1945 (Picture 54). Postally the marked the beginning of an even more complicated period in which at least three parties: The defeated Japanese; the barely returned Dutch; and the young Republic, strove against each other. For philatelists such a situation can lead to what is known as “mixed franking” when letters are franked with issues from different parties (Picture 55). Even under these harsh, violent conditions, the Chinese continued some of their activities like making financial settlements for high sums as usual (Picture 56).

Picture 54. Stamp issued by the young Republic of Indonesia, showing the Battle of Surabaya in November 1945, used on an envelope to Solo.

Picture 55. Japanese postcard with additional postage issued by the Republic of Indonesia for express delivery.

通 知 票 (名宛人氏の切手) Segi boeat sialamat (Boleh potong)		郵便 爲替 證書 計算書番號 Nr. W 4.		料 金 用 欄 Peranko	
日 附 Tanggal 26		金 額 5000		5000 5000 5000	
差 出 人 Sipengirim:		金 額 f 5000		5000 5000 5000	
振 出 局 印 Kantor penjetoran		爲替番號 Nomor wesel		爲替當務者署名 Tanda tangan pegawai pos.	
爲替番號 Nomor wesel		拂渡監査番號 Nr. W 15.		6.-	
振 出 局 印 Kantor penjetoran		爲替番號 Nomor wesel		爲替當務者署名 Tanda tangan pegawai pos.	
振 出 局 印 Kantor penjetoran		爲替番號 Nomor wesel		爲替當務者署名 Tanda tangan pegawai pos.	

Tjioe Pan Lok
 Keplekan 52
 Pekalongan
 P. 2605-135-A6-175.

POSWESEL
 DJAWA

17 AGOSTOES 1945

17 AGOSTOES 1945

17 AGOSTOES 1945

Picture 56. *Postwissel* (*pos wesel*, money order) to make a payment of five thousand rupiah using stamps issued by the Republic of Indonesia.

RED CROSS SOCIETIES

When an international conflict breaks out, Red Cross Organizations begin providing humanitarian assistance. The central organization is the Comité Internationale de la Croix Rouge (CICR) in Geneva, often called the International Red Cross. It is Swiss in character, is strictly neutral, and provides help to both belligerents. Most nations have a National Red Cross. These national RC societies are not neutral and restrict their help to their own military and civilians. When Indonesia declared its independence and hostilities broke out, the Dutch had Het Nederlandsch-Indische Roode Kruis. The Indonesians had their Palang Merah Indonesia (PMI), founded one month after their independence. The CICR had its international headquarters in Geneva and a delegation in Batavia. In the chaotic post-war situation, the Chinese population set up Chinese Red Cross (CRC) organizations to take care of the people of Chinese descent. How these CRC branches were founded and worked is still unclear. However, since I owned a Red Cross collection in the past,²⁰ some items from that collection can be shown. Other Red Cross correspondence from this fascinating but disturbing period is shown elsewhere.²¹

Kwa Tjoan Sioe (1893-1948) was born in Salatiga. He attended the HBS in Semarang and in 1913 he was one of the first Chinese to enroll in the university in Amsterdam to study medicine. After finishing his medical studies, Kwa attended the Colonial Institute (Koloniaal Instituut voor de Tropen) to specialize in tropical diseases. He returned to the Dutch East Indies in 1921

²⁰ Hillesum Special 2002.

²¹ P.R. Bulterman (2009: 279-327).

and opened a private practice in Batavia in 1922. The poverty of the majority of his patients struck him forcibly. He then decided to raise funds to open a clinic at which poor people could obtain free treatment. This clinic would become the Yang Seng Ie hospital. Kwa insisted the clinic should care only for the poor. Patients who could afford to pay were sent to private practitioners. In 1928 he went to Europe. On his return, he was disappointed to find that only 50,000 guilders had been raised instead of the 500,000 guilders needed.

His luck turned in 1931 when Aw Boon Haw of Tiger Balm fame visited Batavia and consulted him about a minor complaint. When Aw heard of Kwa's plan he promised to donate a building for the hospital. The building was completed in 1933. The first patient admitted was Aw Boon Par, the brother of Aw Boon Haw. Nowadays, the Yang Seng Ie hospital is the Rumah Sakit Husada in Jakarta.

In April 1942, two months after the Japanese invasion, Kwa was taken prisoner and was only released on 22 August 1945. He returned to the hospital, providing help to refugees and wounded guerilla fighters as well as the common people. To finance the hospital, he launched a Red Cross Fund which proved a big success (Sidharta 2012).

The cover from Jakarta to Palembang in Sumatra (Picture 57) has a violet cachet "Jang Seng Ie Red Cross". It must have been a terrible time, probably late 1945 or early 1946, because the cover was not carried by the post. There is no postal cancellation. The envelope from Bandjarmasin in Borneo to Batavia (April 1946) was carried by the regular Dutch East Indies mail but was given a smaller violet "Jang Seng Ie Red Cross" cachet on arrival (Picture 58). Several CRC sections were active on Java, mainly in Dutch-held territory. The cover to Soerabaja (Picture 59) carried a red oval cachet with a Red Cross and the text Palang Merah Tiong Hoa Malang. The cover from Buitenzorg addressed to the same person in Soerabaja (Picture 60) has a large Red Cross cachet Palang Merah Tiong Hoa Bogor.

Picture 57. Undated envelope (probably late 1945/early 1946) transmitted from Djakarta to Palembang through the Jang Seng Ie Red Cross hospital.

Picture 58. Incoming mail from Bandjarmasin (April 1946) through the Jang Seng Ie Red Cross hospital in Batavia.

Picture 59. Envelope to Soerabaja (probably 1946) through the Palang Merah Tiong Hoa Malang.

Picture 60. Envelope to Soerabaja (1946) through the Palang Merah Tionghoa Bogor.

Very remarkable is the provisory postcard with four Red Cross cancellations (Picture 61) showing the route of the card: PMI (Palang Merah Indonesia) Madioen – PMI Poesat (Djakarta) – PMI Priangan (probably Bandoeng) and handed over to the Chunghua Chunghui in Bandoeng. After receiving an impressive Chinese-style chop, the postcard reached its destination in Bandoeng. All this in March 1946 without using the regular (non-functioning?) post.

Picture 61. Provisory postcard with three PMI cachets and one CRC chop.

Even more interesting and rare is a card offered on Ebay in 2015 (Picture 62). The card was issued by a Chinese association the Chung Hua Chung Hui in Semarang, which functioned as the Information Bureau of the Chinese Red Cross. On the left-hand side of the card is the address of the Overseas Chinese Youth Association in Djakarta. A cachet of the PMI Poesat and an Indonesian censor mark (*telah ditilik*) were applied before the card finally arrived in Republic-controlled Poerwokerto. Semarang and Poerwokerto are both located in Central Java, but to ensure the card was delivered through the lines, it had to make the detour via Djakarta.

Picture 62. Rare postcard issued by the Chung Hua Chung Hui branch in Semarang (private collection).

To make it possible for civilians to exchange messages, the ICRC devised a system that first went into operation in the First World war (Picture 63). Civilians could use a special form, Form 61, to fill in a message. It could contain no more than 25 words and should be strictly familial. The Forms 61 would be collected and bundled by the National Red Cross Organization. It would send them to the ICRC in Geneva, where the contents of the forms were checked. The ICRC then sent the checked forms to the “other” NRC. The “other” NRC then would mail the forms to the addressees.

Picture 63. Red Cross postal message flowed for civilians during wartime.

The next picture (Picture 64) shows a “Form 61” issued by the CICR delegation in Java. It carries an impressive chop of the Chung Hua Chung Hui in Soerakarta. The form was duly filled in with a 25-word message on 21 February 1948 and then sent to the Jang Seng Ie Red Cross in Djakarta where it was stamped one month later on 24 March. From there it was sent to Soerabaja in Republican territory. On the back of the form is a cachet of the Chinese Relief Committee in Soerabaja, on the front a cancellation of 30 March 1948.

61 *

COMITE INTERNATIONAL DE LA CROIX-ROUGE
GENEVE (SUISSE)
DÉLÉGATION JAVA

JANG MEMINTA — ENQUIRER — AANVRAGER

Nama - Name - Naam **Siauw Kee Tat.**
 Nama panggilan - Christian name - Voornaam
 Alamat - Street - Adres **Djalan Mesen 100.**
 Kota - Locality - Plaats **Soerakarta.**
 Keresidenan - County - Residentie
 Negeri - Country - Land **Djawa Indonesia.**

Pemberitahoean — Message — Mededeeling
 (Paling banjak 25 perkataan, hanja berita keloearga) — (not over 25 words,
 family news of strictly personal character) — (niet meer dan 25 woorden
 slechts familie-berichten van strikt persoonlijke aard).
Moes kapingin sekali dengar kabar dari semoea
dan anak2.Tien Hok toeloeng tante sekolahkan
Besook ongkos2 moes ganti semoea,Mak tante Lien
pindah Koedoes.

Tanggal - Date - Datum **21 Februari 1948.**

JANG MENERIMA — ADDRESSEE — ONTVANGER.

Nama - Name - Naam **Ong Sien Nio.**
 Alamat - Street - Adres **Biliton straat no.53.**
 Keresidenan - Locality - Residentie
 Daerah - County - Streek **Soerabaja.**
 Negeri - Country - Land **Djawa Indonesia.**

24 MAR 1948

Picture 64. Message on a "Form 61" issued by the ICRC delegate carries from a CRC branch in Soerakarta to a CRC branch in Soerabaja.

The last item shows a postal identity card issued in 1948. It was valid until November 1950. By that time the Netherlands Indies would no longer exist. Uncertain of what to come, the Chinese merchant seems to have been concerned about the future.

GELDIG TOT EN MET DE MAAND November 1950
BERLAKOE SAMPAI DENGAN BOELAN

No. 1954/8 **HULP. BIJ. POSTKANTOOR**
 Kantorpos-Pembantoe-Tjabang (Naamstempel)

DIENSTAANWIJZINGEN
 Petoendjoek Djaba

De identiteit is vastgesteld aan de hand van:
 Tentang sahnja ditetapkan atas:
 pasif 10519 dda 1-46
 De (Rang) (Pangkat) (Handtekening) (Tanda tangan)

NAAM *Sie Pek Liang*
 NAMA
 BEROEP *Handelaar*
 PEKERDJAAN
 ADRES *Vliegveldlaan 68*
 ALAMAT *Batavia - C*

of vingerafdrukken
 vingers rechterhand)
 an atau tera djari
 tengah tangan kanan)
Stilleman

Legalisatie van nevenstaande handtekening
 of vingerafdrukken.
 H Pengesahan tanda tangan atau tera djari
 yang berada disebelah

5 c. NEDERL. INDIE
 10 c. NEDERL. INDIE

Picture 65. Postal identity card issued for a Chinese merchant.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

Among other matters it wanted to raise, this article was meant to show why many philatelists find covers more interesting than stamps. Postal history can be a valuable addition to conventional history. It can make history more concrete, tangible, and visual. With the collection I once owned, I have tried to tell stories about the Chinese minority in the Dutch East Indies over a period of 85 years. In this article some obvious gaps in the story have been provisionally filled by some non-philatelic “flat collectibles”. It proved to be possible to tell the story of the Chinese minority from a time of segregation and subordination to its integration into a prosperous western-style middle class. The story shows the multifaceted aspects of this population: Its hunger to adopt the latest developments in modern society, the clinging to old traditions and keeping touch with the fatherland but also its adjustment to the customs and needs of the host country. It shows the prosperity in good times but also the solidarity and care in bad times. For me, bringing all these items together has been a wonderful experience.

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