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**Imperial Crossings:  
Chinese Indentured Migration to Sumatra's East Coast, 1865-1911**

Gregory Jany

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April 29, 2021

## Abstract

Tracing the lives of Chinese migrants through multi-lingual archives in Taiwan, Singapore, Netherlands, and Indonesia, *Imperial Crossings* is a trans-imperial history of Chinese indentured migration to Sumatra in the Netherlands Indies. Between 1881 to 1900, more than 121,000 Chinese migrants left southern China, stopping in the port-cities of Singapore and Penang in the British Straits Settlements before leaving again to labor in the tobacco plantations of Dutch Sumatra. The journey of these labor migrants across multiple imperial jurisdictions tied their itineraries with those of a disparate set of characters: Leiden-trained sinologists, young German and Dutch merchants chasing profits, Qing officials thinking about China's position in the world, British legislators debating about freedom, and Chinese brotherhoods making money in Malaya.

*Imperial Crossings* weaves these intertwined histories of migration through Philip Kuhn's framework of a "migration corridor," a living space that connects migrants to their native place. The efforts of Straits Settlements and Netherlands Indies officials in the 1870s to regulate the movement of Chinese labor migrants between the two colonies emerged out of a paradoxical need to secure the "freedom" of migrants through bureaucratic controls, which strengthened the Anglo-Dutch border in the Straits of Melaka and obstructed the corridor. In the 1880s, Dutch planters attempted to redirect this corridor to contest the power of Chinese players in the migration industry by recruiting laborers directly from southern China, bypassing the Straits Settlements. These efforts revealed the outsized role minor bureaucrats played in the exercise of imperial sovereignty, as well as the agency Chinese laborers displayed through spectacular forms of mutiny and everyday forms of resistance. Concurrently, the migrants and the Qing state each engaged in a dialectical process of defining the relationship between China and its emigrants through the corridor. This process configured a globalizing China, which manifested in the migrants' cultural networks and the Qing's assertions of its diplomatic rights as a sovereign state. Redrawing historiographical boundaries, this essay illuminates how historical transformations in the age of empire were constituted through the bodies, movement, and imagination of migrants.

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Lastly, I dedicate this thesis to my parents. Their unfailing love and support make all of this possible.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1894, a curious pair of authors, the British Presbyterian missionary Archibald Lamont and the Xiamen-educated Straits Chinese newspaper editor Tan Teck Soon, sat together in Singapore to write a novel that sought to capture the experience of a Chinese coolie migrant to Deli, a region in the East Coast of Sumatra in the Netherlands Indies.<sup>1</sup> The finished work, *Bright Celestials*, tells the story of Tek Chiu, an orphan who lost his parents to the global cholera pandemic of 1881.<sup>2</sup> After he is caught in a gambling crackdown, the eighteen-year-old Tek Chiu flees his hometown in Fujian, China to one of the province's port-cities. There, he meets a broker who promises him a rich life as a scribe in Singapore. However, upon arrival in Singapore, Tek Chiu encounters Chinese brokers and depot-keepers who pressure him to sign a contract as an indentured laborer.<sup>3</sup> Soon he finds himself on board a ship to the plantations of Deli. For all Tek Chiu knows, Deli is a place that "killed men and grew tobacco."<sup>4</sup>

The curious authorship of the novel suggests how the histories of laborers migrating from Southern China to Eastern Sumatra were intertwined with the itineraries of a wide-ranging, seemingly disparate set of actors that spanned imperial borders in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Asia. During the peak of the migration between 1881 to 1900, over 121,000 Chinese men traveled across the South China Sea to labor on the plantations in Deli.<sup>5</sup> From their villages in the coastal provinces

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<sup>1</sup> The term "coolie" is a sensitive and racialized term used to describe Chinese and Indian laborers employed under indenture contracts. One possible etymological origin of the term is the Chinese *kuli* (苦力), which means "bitter strength." In this essay, I will use this term in a conscious and non-derogatory manner in reference to the existing scholarship on the "coolie trade" from China, as well as the categories colonial registers of the Netherlands Indies and the British Straits Settlements assigned these labor migrants to.

<sup>2</sup> John Coming Chinaman, *Bright Celestials: The Chinaman at Home and Abroad* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1894). Christine Doran attributes this work to Archibald Lamont and Tan Teck Soon in Christine Doran, "Bright Celestial: Progress in the political thought of Tan Teck Soon." *Sojourn*: 21, no. 1 (2006): 46-67.

<sup>3</sup> Labor migrants who first arrived in Singapore were housed in a labor depot, where they were confined until they find employment. Chinese brotherhoods (*kongsis*), compatriot organizations that functioned both as ritual communities and joint-stock enterprises, often ran these labor depots. For a detailed explanation of the *kongsis*, see Carl A. Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910* (Cornell University Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Bright Celestials*, 145.

<sup>5</sup> These numbers are reconciled from Pieter Willem Modderman, T Volker, and G Veen, *Gedenksboek Uitgegeven Ter Gelegenheid van Het Vijftig Jarig Bestaan van de Deli Planters Vereeniging*, (Weltevreden: Kolff, 1929); Jan Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and the Colonial Order in Southeast Asia* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 60; and Hendrik Johannes Bool, *De Chineesche Immigratie Naar Deli* (Utrecht, 1904), Appendix. Adam McKeown notes that between 1879 and 1933, over 300,000 indentured Chinese laborers migrated to Deli and Bangka in the East Coast of

of Fujian and Guangdong in southern China, the men left for the port-cities of Shantou and Xiamen where they would embark on ships, often not knowing that they were headed towards the Netherlands Indies. Particularly before 1889, many would stop first in Singapore and Penang in the British Straits Settlements, before leaving again for the tobacco plantations in Deli across the Straits of Melaka. The circuitous journey of these migrants, on ships, steamers, *sampans*, *tongkangs*, and trains, formed corridors that traversed multiple jurisdictions, in particular, that of Qing China, as well as the British and Dutch empires of Southeast Asia.



Figure 1: Map of Southeast Asia and China. By author.

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Sumatra. See Adam McKeown, “Chinese Emigration in Global Context, 1850–1940\*,” *Journal of Global History* 5, no. 1 (March 2010), 102.

Scholars have written about the movement of these laborers, but they have focused on the points of departure, transit, and arrival, rather than the points of intersection and engagement. Histories of Deli in Sumatra employ Dutch and Indonesian sources to provide in-depth analyses of the violent capital-labor relations of the plantation and offer powerful critiques of the repressive policies of the Dutch plantocracy.<sup>6</sup> Works that study the Chinese diaspora in the Straits Settlements provide social histories of migrants as rickshaw pullers and opium farmers, detailed expositions of Chinese immigration to the British colony, and analyses of networks of rich Chinese merchants across Southeast Asia.<sup>7</sup> Yet, labor migrant connections between the two colonies, and to China, are rarely explored.<sup>8</sup> Anthony Reid's investigation of the mechanics of Chinese indentured labor migration to Eastern Sumatra is the sole exception, considering both British and Dutch perspectives.<sup>9</sup> Still, the Chinese laborers' own projects of maintaining their ties to China are missing, alongside the role of an increasingly active Qing state that desired to protect the rights of its population overseas.

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<sup>6</sup> Jan Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and the Colonial Order in Southeast Asia* (Oxford University Press, 1989), Karl Josef Pelzer, *Planter and Peasant: Colonial Policy and the Agrarian Struggle in East Sumatra, 1863-1947* (Springer Netherlands, 1981), and Ann Laura Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870-1979* (University of Michigan Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> On the social history of poor Chinese laborers in Singapore, see James Francis Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore, 1880-1940* (Oxford University Press, 1986), Carl A. Trocki, "Singapore As A Nineteenth Century Migration Node," in *Connecting Seas and Connected Ocean Rims*, ed. Donna R. Gabaccia and Dirk Hoerder (Brill, 2011), 198–224; Yen Ching-Hwang, "Class Structure and Social Mobility in the Chinese Community in Singapore and Malaya 1800–1911," *Modern Asian Studies* 21, no. 3 (July 1987): 417–45. On the formation of bureaucratic structures that managed the Chinese population in the Straits Settlements, see Ng Siew Yoong, "The Chinese Protectorate in Singapore, 1877-1900," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 1 (March 1961): 76–99. On elite Chinese merchant, intellectual, and commercial networks expanding across the Straits of Melaka see Wu Xiao An, *Chinese Business in the Making of a Malay State, 1882-1941: Kedah and Penang* (Abingdon, Oxon, United States: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), Yee Tuan Wong, *Penang Chinese Commerce in the 19th Century: The Rise and Fall of the Big Five*, Local History and Memoirs 24 (Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2015), and Mark Ravinder Frost, "Emporium in Imperio: Nanyang Networks and the Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819–1914," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 1 (February 2005): 29–66. On brotherhoods and Chinese *kongsi* organizations in the Straits Settlements, see Carl A. Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910* (Cornell University Press, 1990), Maurice Freedman, "Immigrants and Associations: Chinese in Nineteenth-Century Singapore," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3, no. 1 (October 1960): 25–48, and Lau-Fong Mak, *The Sociology of Secret Societies: A Study of Chinese Secret Societies in Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia* (Oxford University Press, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915* (Yale University Press, 2005) provides a rich study of many of these non-elite interactions in the Straits of Melaka, but Tagliacozzo focuses on the broad category of smugglers, rather than the coolie population in Deli.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Reid, "Early Chinese Migration into North Sumatra," *Studies in the Social History of China and Southeast Asia*, 1970, 289–320.

This study seeks to address this lacuna by applying a trans-imperial lens to the migration of Chinese laborers to Deli.<sup>10</sup> It draws from a wide-ranging set of British, Dutch, and Chinese primary sources, including the colonial reports and legislative council proceedings of the Straits Settlements, documents written by Deli planters and Netherlands Indies officials, Qing correspondence, as well as court cases, newspapers, photographs, novels, and Chinese epigraphic materials. Doing so allows for a more complex history, one that sees the migrant imbricated in multiple imperial projects that manifested transregionally in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Asia, including projects of border production, economic contest, and political diplomacy.

To bring these interdependent processes together, this study builds upon Philip Kuhn's analytical framework of a "migration corridor." Kuhn sees corridors as both "connective links and living cultural spaces" that characterized Chinese migration.<sup>11</sup> They are "busy channels of money, social transactions, and culture" between the migrants' homes and their new environments; they are made alive through institutions, the flows of people, goods, and income through time, and ties of belonging and kinship.<sup>12</sup> However, in what ways, could such corridors be obstructed, redirected, or reimagined? And in the period of high colonialism, what role do imperial actors play in the formation, maintenance, and regulation of such corridors?

First, I examine how efforts to regulate the movement of Chinese coolies to Sumatra contributed to the production of an imagined and physical Anglo/Dutch border in the Straits of Melaka. These efforts obstructed the China-to-Deli corridor. In my analysis, I integrate perspectives introduced in Eric Tagliacozzo's study of border production in the Straits of Melaka

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<sup>10</sup> On studying migration from trans-imperial and global perspectives, see Sunil S. Amrith, "Empires, Diasporas and Cultural Circulation," in *Writing Imperial Histories*, ed. Andrew S. Thompson (Manchester University Press, 2016); Engseng Ho, "Inter-Asian concepts for mobile societies," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 4 (2017): 907-928; Adam McKeown, "Conceptualizing Chinese diasporas, 1842 to 1949." *Journal of Asian Studies* (1999): 306-337. On the study of inter-imperial networks in microregions similar to the Straits of Melaka, see Jeppe Mulich, *In a Sea of Empires: Networks and Crossings in the Revolutionary Caribbean*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2020); Lauren Benton and Jeppe Mulich, "The space between empires: Coastal and insular microregions in the early nineteenth-century world," in *The Uses of Space in Early Modern History*, pp. 151-171, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 46.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

and Adam McKeown's research on technologies of border control in the United States.<sup>13</sup> The border hardened as colonial officials in the Straits Settlements and the Netherlands Indies constructed new barriers that limited the mobility of Chinese laborers and brokers.

Then, I study the Deli planters' efforts to redirect the China-to-Deli migration corridor by forming a direct channel of recruitment from southern China, rather than through the Straits Settlements. In contrast to current scholarship from the Dutch academy, which examines these events through the lens of Sino-Dutch foreign relations rather than migration, I reinterpret the Deli planters' pursuit as an inter-imperial attempt to maintain European control over the corridor in an economic and political struggle with Chinese players in the migration industry: recruiters, brokers, merchants, and officials.<sup>14</sup>

Last, I investigate how Deli coolies and the Qing state redefined the China-to-Deli corridor as a space to imagine the relationship between China and its emigrants, and hence, the world. The laborers maintained ties that connected them to their native-place (*qiaoxiang*), understanding "China" to be grounded in their home communities.<sup>15</sup> The Qing government saw "China" as the imperial Chinese state, which needed to fulfill its Confucian paternal obligation and assert the rights of its overseas subjects as a sovereign state. In doing so, this chapter departs

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<sup>13</sup> Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders* and Adam M. McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (Columbia University Press, 2008). While Tagliacozzo does not emphasize immigration bureaucracies as part of the process of border production he outlines, McKeown's research illustrates how global regimes of border control and identification emerged out of efforts to exclude Chinese migrants from the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the emergence of colonial bureaucracies as it relates to Indian migration, see Radhika Mongia, *Indian Migration and Empire: A Colonial Genealogy of the Modern State* (Duke University Press, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> On the recruiting efforts and Sino-Dutch foreign relations, see Frans van Dongen, *Tussen neutraliteit en imperialisme* (Groningen: Wolters, 1966), Frans-Paul van der Putten, "Small Powers and Imperialism The Netherlands in China, 1886–1905\*," *Itinerario* 20, no. 1 (March 1996): 115–31, and Ferry de Goey, *Consuls and the Institutions of Global Capitalism, 1783-1914* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014). For biographies on the Netherlands Indies sinologists, many of whom represented the Deli Planters Association in these negotiations, see R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Hartmut Walravens, *The Beaten Track of Science: The Life and Work of J.J.M. de Groot*, *Asien-Und-Afrika-Studien-Der Humboldt-Universität Zu Berlin*, Bd. 10 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002) and Koos Kuiper, *The Early Dutch Sinologists (1854-1900): Training in Holland and China, Functions in the Netherlands Indies*, (Brill, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Here, I respond to Shelly Chan's call to deconstruct conceptions of a fixed, immutable China, and instead, to recognize the fluidity of "China" as constructed through discursive and material interactions between China and its emigrants; most significantly, the co-constitution of China as the homeland and Chinese emigrants as its diaspora. See Shelly Chan, *Diaspora's Homeland: Modern China in the Age of Global Migration* (Duke University Press, 2018), 7-9. This chapter also builds upon Yen Ching-Hwang's classic survey describing Qing efforts to protect indentured migrants both in the Americas and Southeast Asia. Yen Ching-Hwang, *Coolies and mandarins: China's protection of overseas Chinese during the late Ch'ing period (1851-1911)*, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1985).

from existing scholarship that has either focused on the cultural life of elite Chinese merchants in Deli, or has examined the coolies' lives with minimal consideration of their "Chineseness."<sup>16</sup>

Taken together, I argue that the China-to-Deli migration corridor was ever-shifting in shape, direction, and form, as it was entangled in multiple projects of border-making, labor recruitment, and diplomacy. The corridor could be obstructed. It could be redirected. It could also be defined in a web of meanings that could not be reduced to physical mobility alone. Throughout, imperial bureaucracies reached beyond borders to manage the movement of Chinese migrants, as these migrants slipped through administrative cleavages, resisted in mutinies, and asserted their own agency within the limits of the corridor. Taking a trans-imperial approach to studying the mobility of Chinese labor thus opens new pathways of understanding the migration corridor as a liminal zone, where multiple itineraries, including the migrant's own, manifest through space and time.

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<sup>16</sup> For works on Chinese life in Medan during the Dutch colonial period, taking an elite perspective, see Dirk A. Buischool, "Prominent Chinese during the Rise of a Colonial City: Medan 1890-1942" (2020). On Deli labor history, see the previously mentioned works of Jan Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast* (1989), Karl Josef Pelzer, *Planter and Peasant* (1981), and Ann Laura Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870-1979* (1995).

## CHAPTER ONE

### KIDNAPPING AND BORDER-MAKING, 1865-1885

One hot morning in 1877, the Straits Settlements' interpreter for the Chinese, William Pickering, received news of a riot on the embankments of the Singapore River.<sup>17</sup> A group of eighteen newly arrived labor migrants from southern China had refused to board a ship. Chew Ah-Nyee, one of the migrants, was a school principal from Guangdong. A broker had promised him that he could find work as a clerk in Singapore.<sup>18</sup> Chew Ah-Nyee was enticed by the opportunity and boarded a junk together with ninety other men from his district. He spent his first day in Singapore locked inside a house in the landing ground of Telok Ayer. The next morning, he was unexpectedly taken to a boat to work in the tin mines of Sumatra in the Netherlands Indies, which required a journey by sail across the Straits of Melaka. Surprised, Chew Ah-Nyee and the other migrants tried to revolt. One of them rejected: "We won't go... you will sell us as little pigs to another country."<sup>19</sup>

Reporting this incident later to the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, Pickering declared that "the great evil is that our Colony is made a pretext to entrap coolies for slavery in the neighboring Dutch Settlements."<sup>20</sup> Pickering claimed that it was no place for the British colonial administration, which advocated for principles of justice and freedom, to allow for such "extortion and oppression" to happen under its jurisdiction.<sup>21</sup> He urged the Straits government to monitor and regulate the Chinese migrants moving in and out of the Straits Settlements' borders.

Pickering's appeal illustrates the centrality of mobile Chinese laborers to the emergence of an intricate state bureaucracy that controlled Chinese migration between the Straits

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<sup>17</sup> Report by Mr. Pickering on Kidnapping Sinkehs, 23 February 1877, C.O. 275/21, ii.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, iv.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, iv. The term pig likely referred to the Chinese *zhuozai* (猪仔), a term describing unfree Chinese labor with roots from the Chinese coolie trade to the Americas and the Caribbean.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, iii.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

Settlements and the Netherlands Indies, forming new barriers in the China-to-Deli migration corridor. The creation of an administrative machinery to regulate emigration from the Malay Peninsula on one side of the Straits, along with the mutual constitution of a similar bureaucracy managing the inflow of Chinese labor on the other side in Dutch Sumatra, was part of an ongoing process of border production in the Anglo/Dutch frontier. It was a boundary that had only been demarcated in the Treaty of 1871 earlier in the decade.<sup>22</sup> The formation of bureaucratic apparatuses to manage Chinese migration further affirmed this boundary, limiting the movement of migrants in the liminal space of the Straits of Melaka, and strengthened the divide between the two spheres both in imagination and in practice.

### **The Paradox of “Freedom”**

Cases of newly arrived Chinese migrants being “kidnapped” in Singapore were not shocking news for the port-city’s readers in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, as these stories made their way into the press. In 1872, the *Straits Times Overland Journal* reported that the coast guard had arrested a group of thugs that secretly took four Chinese laborers on small, wooden sampans to board the steamer *Far East*.<sup>23</sup> The *Far East* would have brought them to the tobacco plantations of Deli in Eastern Sumatra. Such stories had even emerged in southern China. In Shantou and Fuzhou, printed placards warned potential sojourners that those who traveled to Singapore would be “puckerowed” on arrival to labor in Deli.<sup>24</sup>

The route for Chinese labor migrants to stop in Singapore before leaving again for Eastern Sumatra had only existed for eight years. In 1865, the Dutch pioneer of the tobacco plantations of Deli, J. Nienhuys, brought 88 Chinese and 23 Malay men from Penang to work on the plantations he had started.<sup>25</sup> In 1864, the Dutch recorded only twenty Chinese in the region, working as goldsmiths and small shopkeepers.<sup>26</sup> With the expansion of the tobacco industry, the

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<sup>22</sup> Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders*, 29.

<sup>23</sup> *Straits Times Overland Journal*, March 28, 1872, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Legislative Council, 9 September 1878, C.O. 275/16, 141.

<sup>25</sup> Schadee, W H M. *Geschiedenis van Sumatra's Oostkust*. Amsterdam: Oostkust van Sumatra-Instituut, 1918, 175-177.

<sup>26</sup> Reid, “Early Chinese Migration into North Sumatra,” 292.

Chinese population in Deli increased to 4,000 in 1872.<sup>27</sup> Backed with capital from the Netherlands Trading Society, Nienhuys' company, the Deli Maatschappij, alone imported 800 Chinese laborers from Penang in 1869.

In 1873, a petition from the elite Straits Chinese community to Straits Settlements Governor Harry Ord prompted him to devise laws to manage the flow of Chinese labor in and out of Singapore. Five Chinese merchants along with 42 other Chinese firms, signed a petition calling for an ordinance to “prevent bad characters from kidnapping the newly arrived migrants.”<sup>28</sup> In historian Eunice Thio's view, “self-interest and perhaps philanthropy” motivated these merchants to submit these petitions.<sup>29</sup> The merchants had suffered from a labor shortage in 1876 and faced serious competition for labor from the Deli plantations.

Regardless of their motivations, the Chinese elite succeeded in pushing Governor Ord to propose an unprecedented administrative machinery in the British colony, which would expand the state's capacity to record and track Chinese laborers who were entering its borders. Borrowing James Scott's term, such a system of registration represented the colonial government's attempts to make migrants “legible,” reflecting the practice of modern states to “see” and grasp the complexities of human realities through schematic categories, documents, and statistics.<sup>30</sup> Ord's bill required every unskilled Chinese coming to the Straits Settlements to be registered as an immigrant. A Registration Officer would board every ship carrying more than

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<sup>27</sup> Reid, “Early Chinese Migration into North Sumatra,” 293.

<sup>28</sup> Petition from Chinese Merchants relative to the treatment of Chinese Immigrants, June 22, 1873, C.O. 275/16, 149. The five merchant petitioners were Tan Kim Ching, Whampoa, Seah Eu Chin, Tan Seng Poh, and Cheang Hong Lim. They maintained a close relationship with the British colonial government, which had relied on them to govern the Chinese population in Singapore. Tan Seng Poh was a powerful revenue farmer who amalgamated the major opium farming syndicates of Singapore, Johor, Riau, and Melaka under a single “Great Syndicate” together with Cheang Hong Lim. Seah Eu Chin was Tan Seng Poh's brother-in-law, whose pepper and gambier plantation holdings formed the dominant bloc of the Gambier and Pepper Society. Whampoa was a merchant in the shipping business and the only Chinese member of the Legislative Council. See Trocki, *Opium and Empire*, 152-153.

<sup>29</sup> Reid, “Early Chinese Migration into North Sumatra,” 297.

<sup>30</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 76-83.

twenty migrants from China to record the names and details of every person on board.<sup>31</sup> The Officer would then issue a pass for migrants without contracts.

For Governor Ord, the allegations of “kidnapping” floating around were unacceptable, as it suggested that slavery was occurring under British rule even after abolition. He advocated for expansive state regulation of the migration process. While the distinctions between indenture and slavery remain a matter of ongoing academic debate, Ord was resolute in his insistence that “it is our proud boast that the sun never sets on the British dominions, and that in those dominions no slave can live.”<sup>32</sup> The discovery of such a system of kidnapping and “slavery” would stain not only the Straits Settlements’ reputation, but also the British Empire’s.

Supporters of Ord’s bill were invested in ensuring that the borders of the British Empire preserved the notional “freedom” of the laborer. The Attorney General agreed that these kidnapped laborers were “in the position of slaves,” working without willful consent.<sup>33</sup> It was imperative for the Straits government to ensure that the migrants who had journeyed across the South China Sea to labor in Singapore did not work in Deli against their will. As the Attorney General proclaimed, “if this matter was not dealt with Queen Victoria would have slavery in her dominion.”<sup>34</sup> The shadow of abolition continued to hang over these colonial officials who asserted that any laborer within the British Empire, even indentured, was “free.”

Straits officials invoked caricatures of an “ignorant migrant,” as well as the moral responsibility of the British state, to counter critiques appealing to unfettered immigration. Ord described how newly-arrived laborers were “rude, uninstructed, and uncultivated, ... knew nothing of [British] laws and rules, and when they came here ... fell into the hands of their

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<sup>31</sup> Nagendiram Rajendra, “The Straits Settlements 1867-1874” (Canberra, Australian National University, 1976), 91. A similar system also operated in Hong Kong through the 1855 Chinese Passengers Act, but the Act mainly regulated conditions on board ships and the process of emigration, rather than immigration. See Elizabeth Sinn, *Pacific Crossing: California Gold, Chinese Migration, and the Making of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 76-90.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 73.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

designing countrymen who made a trade of them.”<sup>35</sup> The trope of the ignorant migrant was found across the British Empire. Colonial officials in British Guiana, India, and Mauritius too justified ever-expanding regulations on the migration of Indian indentured laborers by claiming the “necessary ignorance” of the colonized subject.<sup>36</sup> Like Straits officials who sought to intervene in “free” migration to ensure the “freedom” of the Chinese migrant from unjust contracts, administrators of Indian indenture justified state oversight on private contracts based on narratives of the paternalist state and the easily misled, simple migrant.<sup>37</sup> Ord had no doubt encountered these principles in his career as a colonial administrator in the British West Indies, Dominica, and Bermuda.<sup>38</sup>

Calls for the Straits government to pay closer attention to the flow of laborers to the Netherlands Indies grew stronger in the following years, even as Ord’s proposals were delayed. In December 1874, a group of twenty-six British and European trading firms asked Ord’s successor Andrew Clarke to delay bills that would regulate Chinese labor immigration.<sup>39</sup> But even as these merchants clamored for unrestricted immigration, their petition emphasized that laborers were being “hurried and cajoled” to work outside British jurisdiction.<sup>40</sup> They pitied the migrants that “in ignorance had been shipped away beyond the influence and protection of [British] laws.”<sup>41</sup> The petitioners demarcated the space of the British territories as one that protected the welfare of the laborer, imagining the space outside, like the Netherlands Indies, as one rife with oppression and violence.<sup>42</sup> In arguing for the protection of Chinese laborers to be

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<sup>35</sup> Legislative Council, 9 September 1878, C.O. 275/16, 73.

<sup>36</sup> Mongia, *Indian Migration and Empire*, 26.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Boyce, “Ord, Sir Harry St George (1819–1885),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, (Australian National University, 1974), accessed April 10, 2021, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/ord-sir-harry-st-george-4336/text7039>.

<sup>39</sup> Papers Laid Before the Legislative Council, 11 December 1874, C.O. 275/71, 91.

<sup>40</sup> It is interesting to contrast the use of euphemistic language to describe laborers being “hurried and cajoled” in the firms’ petition with the more explicit allegations of kidnapping and slavery in the Legislative Council, showing how these allegations of kidnapping possessed a fluid valence that did not necessarily map on to reality.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> In practice, Reid suggests that labor conditions in Deli were in fact similar to comparable frontier communities in British possessions like Perak and Selangor on the Malay peninsula. See Reid, “Early Chinese Migration into North Sumatra,” 300-301.

regarded as an emigration—rather than immigration—issue, these merchants made a striking claim that the British colonial state possessed responsibility for the welfare of Chinese migrants who had entered its borders, even though they were only there temporarily, and not as British subjects.

### **An Imperial Inquiry and the Production of a Border**

In 1876, the Straits government appointed a commission to enquire into labor conditions in the British settlements, which produced evidence justifying tighter state control over labor migration. In her work, sociologist Radhika Mongia describes committees of inquiry on Indian indenture as “a general mechanism for the production of regimes of truth,” which functioned as a “constitutive and constituting element of a discursive field.”<sup>43</sup> The “kidnapping” of migrants framed much of the 1876 Inquiry Commission’s discursive field.<sup>44</sup>

Testimonies from colonial officials in the Commission provided evidence that the “kidnapping” of migrants to Deli was rampant, especially in Penang. The Penang police superintendent Henry Plunket described how there were constant convictions for kidnapping,<sup>45</sup> and an entire industry of *kongsi* members searching for migrants who would go to Sumatra.<sup>46</sup> The assistant interpreter Robert Karl mentioned that laborers had been sent off to Sumatra “many times—sometimes seventy [laborers], sometimes two or three.”<sup>47</sup> A former harbormaster concurred, claiming that he heard “about half a dozen times” that coolies en route to the British province of Wellesley were taken to Deli. Testimonies from Chinese brokers and merchants

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<sup>43</sup> Radhika Mongia, “Impartial Regimes of Truth: Indentured. Indian Labor and the Status of the Inquiry,” *Cultural Studies* 18, no. 5 (September 2004), 752.

<sup>44</sup> Report, C.O. 275/19, 133-158. The Commission assembled a motley of actors in the system of Chinese migration to testify: brokers, opium farmers, interpreters, policemen, steamship owners, harbor dock workers, and merchants. Three bureaucrats stood as the arbiter of truth: John Douglas, the colonial secretary; W.W Willans, the colonial treasurer; and S. Dunlop, the inspector general of Singapore. The labor migrant himself was noticeably missing.

<sup>45</sup> Report, C.O. 275/19, 153.

<sup>46</sup> *Kongsi* are institutions derived from the brotherhood organizations of southern China. They functioned as ritual communities and joint-stock enterprises. They are commonly found across Chinese migrant populations in Southeast Asia and crossed class lines, encompassing plantation owners, merchants, and laborers, albeit with unequal power relations. For a detailed examination of the *kongsi*, see Carl A. Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910* (Cornell University Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>47</sup> Report, C.O. 275/19, 152.

provide a more nuanced view of what “kidnapping” may have entailed. The broker Chio Kiam Siang described how crimps would tell newly-arrived laborers that they had to “go across the water” because there were no jobs available in Penang.<sup>48</sup> The brokers had a financial incentive to lie—they made a higher advance of \$30-\$40 when they got a laborer to work in Deli.<sup>49</sup>

Reid suggests that these laborers could perhaps be better understood as indebted migrants who lost their freedom of movement, waiting for an employment agent to pay for their fares, rather than as victims of an organized system of kidnapping.<sup>50</sup> Often, the employment agent willing to pay for their passage came from places like Deli that the migrants had never heard of, especially when demand was low within British territory. When prosecuting a “kidnapping” case by the captain of the ship *Sunda* in 1875, the Solicitor General of Penang was surprised to find that the allegedly “kidnapped” laborers refused to be extradited from Dutch Sumatra to serve as witnesses, thinking that they would gladly return to British territory with their passage paid if they had been mistreated.<sup>51</sup> Throughout the inquiry, “kidnapping” floated in an ambiguous space triangulated from the colonial suspicion of Chinese depot-keepers and brokers, the attempts of these Chinese actors to avert the colonial gaze, and the “kidnapped” migrant’s own lived experience.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Report, C.O. 275/19, 146.

<sup>49</sup> Plunket and Karl employed terms like “crimping,” “kidnapping,” “misleading,” interchangeably, without clear distinction on the level of encroachment on free will they entailed. Sometimes, they referred to brokers and thugs taking men by force and shipping them off in junks. In other instances, they described laborers escaping from a locked recruiter’s house. Contradictory testimonies also unfolded in the pages of the report. Plunket and Karl claimed that brokers often took laborers from the lodging-house owned by the powerful chief of the Tua Pek Kong Brotherhood, Tan Tek, who received payments from parties in Shantou to keep a house that would receive laborers in Penang. Right below their testimony, the opium farmer Koh Seng Tay denied that laborers bolted from Tan Tek’s house: “no one is allowed to go in without a ticket, and [each laborer] has to give up his ticket to the door keeper on leaving.” If kidnapping meant that a laborer was forced to work at a place he did not want to, Koh explained how each laborer would have to confirm to a policeman that he was leaving on his own free will on a Sumatra-bound steamer. The European owner of the firm Lind and Asmus, who employed a Chinese broker to hire laborers for Deli, further asserted that the broker would take the laborers he hired before a Justice of the Peace, who would ask each laborer to confirm that they agreed to the contract. See Report, C.O. 275/19, 146-153.

<sup>50</sup> Reid, *Early Chinese Migration into North Sumatra*, 297-298.

<sup>51</sup> “Kidnapping Coolies at Penang,” *Straits Observer*, March 11, 1875.

<sup>52</sup> On the difficulties of assessing the figure of the broker, see Adam McKeown, “How the Box Became Black: Brokers and the Creation of the Free Migrant,” *Pacific Affairs* 85, no. 1 (March 1, 2012): 21-45.

If bureaucratic rules had been put in place to prevent such “kidnapping,” Chinese brokers were adept at bending them. The Commission discovered that brokers would pretend to be emigrants and board a steamer headed to Deli, receive their advance payment from the employment agent, and escape.<sup>53</sup> They had no intention to leave Penang. The Commission reported that a group of “bad characters” had waited until their steamer made its way into the liminal waters between the British and Dutch littorals before attacking the crew; they escaped to a nearby island with their payment.<sup>54</sup> The Commission guessed that recruiting agents had to “kidnap and sell any unwary ones among their fellow countrymen” because of the tremendous financial losses incurred from paying advances to these escaped “emigrants.”<sup>55</sup> Recruiting agents also evaded police inspections on board ships by intimidating the laborers into claiming that they left on their own free will. Sometimes, the agents also found men to impersonate the laborer being questioned.<sup>56</sup> Such narratives further reinforced the image of the naïve, ignorant migrant.

The Commission concluded that the emigration of laborers out of Singapore and Penang to the neighboring Dutch settlements was rife with malpractice, justifying surveillance on Chinese migrants exiting British borders. Interestingly, the Commission reported that the Dutch colonial government implemented better protections on labor welfare compared to the British.<sup>57</sup> The malpractice occurred in the process of emigration and in the in-between spaces where Chinese migrants stood on the edges of British authority: the ports, Chinese-owned labor depots, and ships.

By 1877, the Straits Settlements had put in place a new bureaucratic administration to manage Chinese migration, forming a nascent regime of border control that solidified the imperial divide in the Straits of Melaka. The Commission recommended the appointment of a “Protector of Chinese” in Singapore and Penang to surveil new migrants and license all coolie-

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<sup>53</sup> Report, C.O. 275/19, 136.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Report, C.O. 275/19, 135.

brokers.<sup>58</sup> They also recommended the establishment of official depots under British control as spaces where colonial officials would protect migrants from unscrupulous brotherhood members. A broker working for a Sumatran planter would have to visit the depots with a doctor, select the laborer they deem suitable, and take two photographs—one to be kept by the Protectorate as a form of identification.<sup>59</sup> The broker would then take the laborer to the Protectorate, where he would put his signature on an English contract, receiving a Chinese copy. On the ship, the agent's representative would come on board to scrutinize each laborer according to their photograph. With each procedure, screening, and document required, once mobile Chinese migrants and brokers discovered new barriers in the corridor across the Straits of Melaka.

### **The Dutch Border**

The 1870s likewise saw Batavia increasingly exercising its power over the Anglo/Dutch frontier as it incorporated Deli into the institutional fabric of Dutch rule. Batavia's control over Eastern Sumatra had consisted of indirect rule over the Siak Sultanate, which counted several indigenous states including Deli among its dependencies.<sup>60</sup> In 1864, a year before Nienhuys first brought Chinese workers from Penang, the Dutch sent *controleurs*, or district officers, for the first time to Deli and Batubara as a show of administrative authority.<sup>61</sup> Yet military and colonial police presence continued to be thin even by the early 1870s. The police force in Deli consisted of only one manager and twelve armed policemen, and none of them were stationed in the other plantation districts of Langkat and Serdang. The historian Jan Breman noted that Deli had a reputation as “the Wild West” of the Netherlands Indies.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Report, C.O. 275/19, 136. The role was later instituted in 1880, and the interpreter William Pickering was appointed as the Protector of the Chinese.

<sup>59</sup> “Report of The Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into The State of Labor in The Straits Settlements and Protected Native States [1890 Labor Commission]” (1891), C.O. 275/41, 181.

<sup>60</sup> The Siak Treaty of 1858 established Batavia's authority. Even so, the Sultan of Deli had refused to acknowledge Deli's dependency status to Siak, even though the Sultan recognized the ultimate authority of the Dutch. See L.H.W. van Sandick, *Chineezen Buiten China* (s-Gravenhage: Van der Beek, 1909), 318.

<sup>61</sup> Buischool, “Prominent Chinese During the Rise of a Colonial City: Medan 1890-1942,” 34.

<sup>62</sup> Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast*, 33.

The expansion of colonial jurisdiction over the Chinese in Deli featured prominently in the solidification of Dutch government control, which limited the movement of Chinese migrants. An agreement from 1862 between the Sultan of Deli and Batavia had affirmed that the Sultan possessed jurisdiction over “Foreign Orientals,” a category that mainly encompassed Chinese and Arabs.<sup>63</sup> As the tobacco industry expanded in the late 1860s, the Sultan granted plantation managers the ability to exercise legal authority over their own employees, including the Chinese, in cases of offences and minor crimes. They devised their own contracts and wage arrangements, punished their workmen, and ruled in disputes.<sup>64</sup> Planters even gained the authority to operate their own police force.<sup>65</sup> The colonial government began to exert its authority in 1872 when the Sultan of Deli issued a new declaration that all Europeans, Chinese, and Indians who worked on agricultural enterprises were to be classified as government subjects.<sup>66</sup> Authorities in Batavia had become alarmed by the Sultan’s use of the death penalty. Planters tried to wrestle back control and filed a petition of complaint to reclaim legal and policing powers over their Chinese employees. Yet to their dismay, Batavia extended the Assistant Resident of Deli’s jurisdiction over the Chinese in 1873, thus affirming the colonial government’s legal control over migrants in the frontier. Through laws like the *Staatsblad* 1872, Dutch authorities also required all temporary visitors classified as “Foreign Orientals” to register for an entry permit at an Immigration Office and restricted Chinese from entering city quarters they were not assigned to.<sup>67</sup>

Like the colonial bureaucrats in the Straits Settlements, the planters in Deli began to systematize the screening of migrants entering Deli out of frustration with Chinese brokers they

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<sup>63</sup> The Japanese were also categorized as Foreign Orientals (*Vreemde Oorstelingen*) until 1895. Nienhuys and the Chinese laborers who lived with him in 1865 were under the Sultan’s legal authority.

<sup>64</sup> Sandick, *Chineezzen Buiten China*, 318.

<sup>65</sup> Modderman, T Volker, and G Veen, “Gedenkboek Uitgegeven Ter Gelegenheid van Het Vijftig Jarig Bestaan van de Deli Planters Vereeniging,” 24.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>67</sup> On the *Staatsblad* 1872, see Bastiaan Nugteren, “The Impossible Colonial Border: Chinese Migration and Immigration Policies in the Netherlands East Indies, 1880-1912” (Master’s Thesis, Leiden University, 2016), 42, 53. On the pass system in the Netherlands Indies, see Lea E. Williams, *Overseas Chinese Nationalism: the Genesis of the Pan-Chinese Movement in Indonesia, 1900-1916* (Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1960), 27-36.

accused of manipulating the labor trade. In 1879, forty-one plantation companies formed the Deli Planters Association (DPV) to better lobby for their interests and cooperate against what they saw as the manipulation of brokers in Penang and Singapore.<sup>68</sup> Even as the planters relied on contracts signed in front of the Straits Protector of Chinese, they decried the “evil practices of the Straits brokers,” accusing them of exchanging the “good, healthy men” who appeared before the Protector for weaker men before they left British territory.<sup>69</sup> Dissatisfied, the planters sent laborers they found unfit back to the Straits Settlements.

Doing so was nevertheless expensive, and the planters tapped the local Chinese elite in Deli to screen migrants entering the region instead. In particular, the planters appointed the Chinese Lieutenant in Labuan to check the contracts of each Chinese immigrant as they arrived in the port of Belawan.<sup>70</sup> In Deli, planters first approached Lieutenant Ban The in 1880,<sup>71</sup> and when he retired in 1885, appointed the new Lieutenant Tjong Yong Hian to the role. Plantation managers in the DPV agreed to only hire laborers with contracts prepared in front of the Protector of the Chinese and signed with the approval of the Chinese Lieutenant or his agents.<sup>72</sup> Both colonial governments on each side of the Straits thus managed the movement of poor Chinese migrants across their borders by relying on the network and influence of elite Chinese men—either as depot-keepers or legislative councilors, or as enforcers of contracts and policemen for runaway migrants.

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<sup>68</sup> Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast*, 70.

<sup>69</sup> Hendrik Johannes Bool, *De Chineseche Immigratie Naar Deli* (Utrecht, 1904), 2.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. Under the Dutch system of indirect rule, a parallel government run by elite Chinese men had administered the Chinese population of the Netherlands Indies under the authority of the local Dutch Resident, with titular ranks ranging from Lieutenant, Kapitan, and Major. See Mona Lohanda, "The Kapitan Cina of Batavia, 1837-1942," PhD diss., SOAS University of London, 1994, 76-78 for a description of how the system worked in Batavia.

<sup>71</sup> Buiskool notes that the Chinese Lieutenant at the time was Ban The. See Buiskool, “Prominent Chinese during the Rise of a Colonial City,” 123.

<sup>72</sup> It was not long, however, until the planters decided that the Chinese Lieutenant’s supervision was too lax; apparently, laborers still found ways to leave the Dutch colony and cross the Straits of Melaka before their contracts expired. The DPV then paid for the creation of a “Controller” role to supervise the arrival and departure of Chinese emigrants in the port of Belawan. While a European man initially held this position, the Chinese Lieutenant took over the role again in 1903. Bool, *De Chineseche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 5.

Surveillance of the Chinese migrant to Deli increased as the DPV employed technologies of photography and medical examination in response to pressure from the Straits Settlements, drawing each migrant into the documentary fold of the two colonial states. The practice of sending back coolies across the Straits drew the ire of the Protector in Singapore who threatened to stop issuing contracts for Deli laborers unless the planters stopped sending back migrants who had just left British territory. In 1881, both parties compromised to require planters to pay for a doctor to examine the fitness of each coolie contracted, thus removing physical “unfitness” as an excuse to deport the migrants.<sup>73</sup> By 1886, the two parties also agreed to require a photograph of the laborer to be attached to each contract.<sup>74</sup> These photographs served to fix each laborer’s image in print to prevent the dubious exchange of laborers mid-transit, defining each migrant to be a unique, categorizable object to the state. To disincentivize the broker from manipulating the identity of the laborer, the planter also made the broker financially liable to pay for the return of each laborer they deemed to be “unfit.” Each broker also had to carry a power-of-attorney, ensuring that only those trusted by the planters were able to hire laborers.<sup>75</sup> Hence both the Deli planters and the Straits Protector found new legal and administrative tools to further surveil and manage the flow of laborers across the two colonies.

Nevertheless, cross-border entanglements continued to result in jurisdictional ambiguities in the legal court. In 1905, the Chinese coolie Wong Yew signed a contract before the Protector of Chinese in Singapore to labor for ten months in Tebing Tinggi in Eastern Sumatra.<sup>76</sup> Wong Yew left his employer after working for three days and absconded to Singapore where he was arrested. He alleged that he had been ill-treated on the plantation. The public prosecutor charged Wong Yew under the 1896 Crimping Ordinance, which compelled any laborer who absconded to return to his employer. During the trial, however, the judge ruled that

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<sup>73</sup> Bool, *De Chineesche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 2.

<sup>74</sup> Sandick, *Chineezzen Buiten China*, 324.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> *The Attorney General V. Wong Yew* [1908] X Straits Settlements Law Reports 44.

the British colony's courts had no jurisdiction over a crime that was committed by someone who was not a British subject and was supposed to labor in Dutch territory, even though his contract was signed in the Straits Settlements. Extended jurisdiction was confined to British subjects, to seamen on British ships, and residents of British protectorates.<sup>77</sup> The new territorial border hence also appeared in the legal sphere, fixing the jurisdictional category of a Chinese labor migrant in Deli, even as he appeared in the British colonies on his first stop in the corridor.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

The Chinese migrant to Deli was a central figure in the imperial entanglements of Dutch and British colonial interests: efforts to control the movement of these migrants reinforced the concurrent project of border-making. The obsession that colonial governments held over the “freedom” of migrants, and the narrative these states put forth of duplicitous brokers and helpless coolies, led to the emergence of systems of surveillance that strengthened borders in the Straits of Melaka. This chapter has narrated the story of colonial officials and the obstruction of the corridor. The next turns the focus to the transformations that Deli planters sought to bring through its redirection, and the planters' discovery that coolies—especially those who gained mobility as recruiters—were not as helpless as imagined. In fact, the system of rules and documents regulating migration proliferated as colonial officials became concerned with how migrants enacted “freedom” on their own terms.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CONTESTING THE CORRIDOR, 1882-1905

I have come to bring about Immigration on which tobacco agriculture thrives / ... /  
When a boat comes, everyone is happy and delighted  
No! None of this would have happened  
Without the Immigration Bureau

—*Then and Now* (1894)<sup>78</sup>

Thus read a verse sang by the character of “the Immigrant” in a musical play commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Deli Maatschappij.<sup>79</sup> The verse’s imagery of a boat and the Immigration Bureau emerged at a time when planters had established direct lines of labor recruitment from Xiamen and Shantou to Sumatra, bypassing the Straits Settlements as a node of transit. In 1889, Deli planters secured a permit from Qing bureaucrats for emigrants to leave directly for Deli. The Deli Planters Association (DPV) established a private Immigration Bureau that regulated such mobilities outside of the colonial administration.

The DPV’s formation of a direct channel of recruitment from southern China was an inter-imperial attempt at constructing a new route of migration, which would maintain Dutch, instead of Chinese, control over the China-to-Deli corridor. But even as the Deli planters attempted to wrestle control away from Chinese brokers and merchants in the Straits Settlements, the DPV relied on the pre-existing Chinese networks of coolies working on Deli’s plantations to recruit new migrants. The DPV’s dependence on these recruiters fed into a reinforcing loop of perennial anxiety over their trustworthiness, which in turn, fostered the creation of an ever-expanding bureaucratic regime of documents meant to minutely control their actions. Nevertheless, the recruiters and brokers found ways to evade and resist the DPV’s attempts at control.

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<sup>78</sup> *Voorheen En Thans* [Then and Now: Occasional Revue For The 25-Year Anniversary of the Deli Company], Medan: Deli-Maatschappij, 1894, 15.

<sup>79</sup> The character of the Immigrant likely represented the Chinese Kapitan in Deli.

## Redirection and Negotiation

By 1882, Deli planters had become suspicious of Straits officials like Pickering and saw them as susceptible to the interests of Chinese plantation owners in British Malaya. Planters like J.F. Cremer, manager of the Deli Maatschappij, were angered that officials from the Chinese Protectorate met with Khaw Boo An, a rich Teochew sugar planter in Wellesley.<sup>80</sup> Together with a group of Chinese merchants in Penang, Khaw had met with the Assistant Protector Karl to convince him to ban Deli recruiters until the demand for labor in Singapore and Penang was fulfilled.<sup>81</sup> Khaw asserted that Chinese emigrants had “no real wish to go out of British territory,” and were deceived to leave for Deli, where they are cheated by Chinese overseers that kept them in debt.<sup>82</sup> Chinese plantation owners like Khaw had a vested interest in keeping laborers within the British colony, as they competed for workers on their plantations in Wellesley, Kedah, and Perak.<sup>83</sup> The DPV concluded that having Singapore and Penang as nodes of transit impeded the flow of labor to Deli. The Deli planters attempted to send their own agents to recruit laborers from China through the Straits Settlements, but the agents reported that they found “little assistance and encouragement from officials.”<sup>84</sup> Straits officials found trivial errors in the agents’ paperwork, forcing them to return to Sumatra to revise their certificates of authorization.<sup>85</sup> When the agents returned to Singapore, the emigrants they brought had dispersed.

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<sup>80</sup> J.F. Cremer and Deli Planters’ Committee, “The Deli Coolie Question” (Deli: Deli Planters’ Committee, 1882), Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen, 18.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>83</sup> The Labor Commission of 1890 reported that merchants and brokers who testified in the commission regarded competition for labor with Sumatra as a contributor to the scarcity of Chinese labor in the Straits Settlements. See C.O. 275/41, 183.

<sup>84</sup> J.F. Cremer and Deli Planters’ Committee, “The Deli Coolie Question,” 7. In 1889, the planters had also set up a regular service between Deli and Singapore through the Ocean Steamship Company, allowing for the direct transshipment of laborers from one blue-funnel steamer to another, thinking that it would allow them to be exempted from the onerous regulations in the Straits Settlements. Yet, the Protector still brought laborers to sign contracts before him.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

Planters were even warier of Chinese brokers and depot-keepers who they feared held enormous power to influence the migrant's decisions. In a public spat with Pickering, four planters from the DPV wrote that the "smallest interference on the slight flaw in formalities [in the Straits Settlements] ... is calculated to arouse suspicions in the very suspicious Chinese nature."<sup>86</sup> They speculated that the Chinese elite and British officials in the Settlements colluded to prevent laborers from going to Sumatra. In 1886, the Chinese newspaper *Lat Pau* in Singapore published an article decrying horrible labor conditions in Deli.<sup>87</sup> The four planters suspected that Chinese brotherhoods had spread such news to discourage migration to Deli. Even the Straits Protector Pickering suspected that the brokers were deliberately sullyng Deli's reputation, as the terms offered by the Deli planters would "deprive them of the exorbitant squeezes which the weakness of the Protectorate staff at Penang allows them to make there."<sup>88</sup> More importantly, the planters were frustrated that brokers controlled prices to bring laborers across the Straits. As the *Deli Courant* newspaper saw it, "coolie merchants had appropriated a monopoly of the coolie supply."<sup>89</sup> Brokers demanded a price of \$129 for each Hailokhong laborer recruited and \$75 for each Hakka recruited, which the planters deemed as extortion.<sup>90</sup> The various plantations banded together in 1885 to fix payments of \$50 for each laborer, but the cartel broke when some owners realized that they could obtain a larger number of workers outside it.<sup>91</sup>

Frustrated with Chinese capture over networks that facilitated migration across the Straits Settlements, Deli planters desired to establish a direct corridor of movement from southern China in a deliberate attempt to maintain their control. In later retellings of these efforts, company spokesmen declared that the planters had one aim: "to become independent of the brokers in the Straits," "to get out of their hands," and "break their influence."<sup>92</sup> In their

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>87</sup> Bool, *De Chinesche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 4.

<sup>88</sup> "Report on the Chinese Protectorate, Singapore, for the year 1890," C.O. 275/25, 127.

<sup>89</sup> "De koelies op de ondernemingen ter Oostkust van Sumatra," *Deli Courant*, February 17, 1903.

<sup>90</sup> Bool, *De Chinesche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 4..

<sup>91</sup> Bool, *De Chinesche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 4.

<sup>92</sup> Bool, *De Chinesche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 6 and Sandick, *Chineezgen Buiten China*, 328.

eyes, the Chinese brotherhoods in Singapore and Penang were “portly scoundrels” with “tricks and gimmicks,” which had “secured for themselves the monopoly of the commonest human trade.”<sup>93</sup>

In 1886, four of the largest tobacco companies in Deli appointed the sinologist J. J. M. de Groot to advocate for their interests in China and establish a direct channel of migration. The wide authority de Groot obtained to represent the companies in official negotiations shows how minor administrators in bureaucracies often shaped the nature and practice of imperial power.<sup>94</sup> The companies heard of de Groot’s plans to visit China for a scholarly project and issued a power-of-attorney to give him all legal rights to secure laborers for Deli.<sup>95</sup> De Groot spent much time in Xiamen and Shantou meeting with local administrators, planning to contract Teochew laborers to leave from Xiamen for Sumatra. Suspicious that British merchants had vested interests to thwart the Deli planters’ plans, de Groot avoided Shantou, which had a large British presence. What Diana S. Kim calls “the strength of weak actors” in her work on the prohibition of opium in Southeast Asia is apparent here.<sup>96</sup> In this case, Dutch scholars of China, who occupied less prestigious positions compared to those in the colonial civil service, became conduits of empire that produced new routes for indentured migration.<sup>97</sup>

German private and state actors in China were central to the planters’ efforts, illustrating the importance of formal and informal networks between European empires in the coolie trade. De Groot soon discovered that since he was a private citizen, local Qing administrators did not judge his standing highly.<sup>98</sup> The Dutch consulate in Guangdong had shut down, leaving non-

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<sup>93</sup> “De koelies op de ondernemingen ter Oostkust van Sumatra,” *Deli Courant*, February 17, 1903.

<sup>94</sup> Diana S. Kim, *Empires of Vice: The Rise of Opium Prohibition across Southeast Asia* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 607.

<sup>95</sup> Sandick, *Chineezzen Buiten China*, 325.

<sup>96</sup> Kim, *Empires of Vice*, 12.

<sup>97</sup> De Groot’s friends noted that de Groot chose a less prestigious career by working as a Chinese interpreter in the Netherlands Indies. See Werblowsky and Walravens, *The Beaten Track of Science*, 15.

<sup>98</sup> The planters themselves embarked on a reputational campaign to ensure that Qing officials approved of this new route. At the behest of negotiating parties like de Groot, the Resident of Sumatra’s East Coast wrote a letter that painted the enterprise in the best light possible. The Resident’s involvement showed how the colonial state, not just the private DPV, was invested in this venture. Discussing the advantages of direct migration for the coolies, the Resident described how the migrants would receive high wages and how family members would benefit from direct

Dutch businessmen recognized as honorary consuls present in southern China.<sup>99</sup> The Qing “regarded the Dutch flag as nothing more than decoration for a trading house,” and de Groot was too suspicious of the British merchant who acted as Dutch Consul in Shantou.<sup>100</sup> Instead, de Groot contracted two German shipping companies, Pasedag and Co. in Xiamen, as well as Lauts and Haysloop in Shantou, to secure a permit for this new route. He also approached the German Consul in Shantou, Freiherr von Seckendorff, alongside his counterparts in Guangdong and Xiamen. The German consuls had a vested interest in the success of the Deli planters’ project, as it brought revenues for German trading houses and steamship companies.<sup>101</sup>

The Dutch Minister-Resident stationed in Shanghai, J.H. Ferguson, was of little help as he opposed the coolie trade, another striking example of how individual bureaucrats maintained power as nodes in the exercise of imperial sovereignty. De Groot and the planters suspected that Ferguson deliberately failed his task to increase the flow of laborers from China to the Netherlands Indies because of his opposition to the coolie trade.<sup>102</sup> De Groot noted in his diary that in April 1888, Ferguson even told him to abandon all efforts to establish the new route for the direct recruitment of laborers to Sumatra.<sup>103</sup> De Groot was incensed, expressing his astonishment that: “That is the first time a high-ranking civil servant tries to persuade me, also a civil servant, by lies, to neglect my duty. How low that man’s morality must have sunk! And what stupidity on his part not to understand that I should grasp who the real cheat was.”<sup>104</sup>

Nevertheless, Dutch records show that upon arrival in China in 1873, Ferguson did inquire

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remittances. In his portrayal of Deli, planters encouraged their workers to send savings certificates to China, provided adequate water and medical treatment, wrote off coolie debt early, and offered proper burial rituals. As part of such a campaign, the Deli Planters Association donated \$4,000 to the provincial administrations of Guangdong and Fujian during floods in 1889. See “Report on the Chinese Protectorate, Singapore, for the year 1890,” C.O. 275/25, 127 and Bool, *De Chineesche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 4.

<sup>99</sup> Werblowsky and Walravens, *The Beaten Track of Science*, 43.

<sup>100</sup> Bool, *De Chineesche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 7.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>102</sup> A Dutch daily newspaper later criticized de Groot’s choice to collaborate with the Germans, but de Groot claimed that he had no choice because of Ferguson’s hindrance. Werblowsky and Walravens, *The Beaten Track of Science*, 44.

<sup>103</sup> See Werblowsky and Walravens, *The Beaten Track of Science*, “Appendix: Extracts from de Groot’s “Diary” relating to Ferguson, coolie-recruitment and the consular question,” 31.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

about such a route to the Qing Zongli Yamen (Foreign Office).<sup>105</sup> But the Qing responded that the Dutch had to follow regulations the Qing proposed to British and French diplomats in the 1866 Emigration Convention, which would require a Chinese Consul to be placed in the Netherlands Indies—a request the Dutch would not accept.

It is perhaps more accurate to describe Ferguson not as an opponent of the entire coolie trade, but as a supporter of greater Qing regulation over the migration of Chinese laborers. Ferguson made his distaste for the industry of Chinese indenture clear in his book, *The Philosophy of Civilization*. Noting that “Asiatic coolie-traffic and the African slave trade stand as yet in dusky array against civilization,” Ferguson decried “civilized Governments” like the Netherlands that continued in the “lucrative trade in human beings” through Chinese labor.<sup>106</sup> Ferguson instead praised the “present enlightened government of China, who in their noble effort to protect their subjects from greedy labor speculators, have forbidden the engagement in China of Chinese laborers under contract.”<sup>107</sup> Contrary to de Groot’s claims of Ferguson’s obstruction, Qing records showed that Ferguson did, in fact, communicate with Qing officials on the matter of labor recruitment to Deli. He was amenable to working with the Qing, as he explained existing Chinese migration routes through the Straits Settlements, responded to questions by Guangdong provincial administrators to investigate allegations of abuse, and shared contract drafts for Fujian administrators to review.<sup>108</sup> Ferguson represented an alternative way to establish a route of migration that invited the Qing imperial state to assert its own claims over the corridor.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Jan Helenus Ferguson, *Reglement Voor de Aanwerving van Arbeiders in China, Om Onder Contract Voor Een Bepaalden Tijd, Veld of Fabriekarbeid Te Verrigten in Nederlandsche Koloniën* (Beijing, 1873), 10-11.

<sup>106</sup> Jan Helenus Ferguson, *The Philosophy of Civilization: A Sociological Study*, (The Hague, London, Hong Kong: Martinus Nyhoff, W.B. Whittingham & Co, Kelly and Walsh, 1889), 305.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>108</sup> From Dutch Resident-General Ferguson 和國公使費果蓀 to Headquarters 總署, 11 November 1888, “華人自廈門汕頭直往蘇門達拉生理可期無弊由 [Chinese From Shantou and Xiamen leaving directly for Sumatra will face no harm and live a good life]”, No. 01-35-001-02-002, Zongli Yamen Collection, Chinese Labor Series, Dutch Recruitment, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica; and From Fuzhou General Xi Yuan 福州將軍希元 to Headquarters 總署, 20 June 1889, “和公司招華人往蘇門達拉工作查詢尚無虐待茲將合同等件一併呈核由 [The Dutch company recruiting Chinese to labor in Sumatra hereby submits the contract and documents for approval]”, File No. 01-35-001-02-005, Zongli Yamen Collection, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica.

<sup>109</sup> In his book, Ferguson proposed the use of contracts that specified the rights of each laborer and the establishment of regulated depots for emigrants in southern China. See Ferguson, *The Philosophy of Civilization*, 307.

The DPV's successful redirection of the China-to-Deli corridor was hence anchored in the efforts of its German allies.<sup>110</sup> The Deli Company's spokesman Bool bragged that when authorities in Fujian and Guangdong demanded that consuls be put in place in Sumatra to protect the laborers, the German consul bribed lower-ranked officials to produce reports that showed how laborers were treated well in Deli.<sup>111</sup> The German consul used his relationship with administrators in Shantou to produce a favorable report for the Governor-General of Guangdong and Guangxi, Zhang Zhidong, who possessed the authority to approve of direct emigration.<sup>112</sup> The Qing records, however, suggest that Qing officials also exploited these negotiations to fulfill their own interests.<sup>113</sup> They succeeded in getting the German consuls and the DPV's representatives to draft regulations that, at least on paper, would ensure humane conditions on migrant ships, provide a proper burial, and require the use of a Qing-approved contract. On April 29, 1889, the Qing allowed the emigration of migrants to Deli. The first arrival of the German steamer "China," which carried 70 laborers to Belawan Harbor, was later burnished into the myth of Deli, and recounted time and time again in the Deli Company's histories.<sup>114</sup>

With the arrival of the first ship, the Deli planters created a new private, non-state bureaucracy to manage the mobility of migrants: the Immigration Bureau. Although it was a

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<sup>110</sup> The trappings of such reliance became clear in 1888, when the Deli planters dispatched the sinologist Hoetink to establish new routes of emigration from Beihai, a port in Guangxi Province, and Haikou on Hainan Island off the coast of Guangdong. Like de Groot, Hoetink too depended on the local networks of the German consul in Canton. Yet, the consul, who was British in nationality, desired to contract a British firm to manage the flow of labor alongside Lauts and Haysloop. British firms also wanted to profit from the lucrative migration enterprise. Bool, *De Chineesche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 16.

<sup>111</sup> Bool, *De Chineesche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 9.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> From Fuzhou General Xiyuan and Others 福州將軍希元等 to Headquarters 總署, 29 April 1889, "招工往蘇門達拉現據興泉永道議稽查章程六條由" [Recruitment to Sumatra is now in accordance with the Six Inspection Regulations from the Xingquan Yongdao (administrative unit in Fujian)], 01-35-001-02-004, Zongli Yamen Collection, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica and From the Governor of Guangxi and Guangdong Zhang Zhidong 兩廣總督張之洞 to Headquarters 總署, 8 March 1889, "據和使稱由汕頭直往蘇門達拉即無弊端有利益而無虐待擬准如所請粘單咨呈由" [Plan to permit what the Ambassador has proposed and attachment of document to Headquarters stating that there is no harm and no abuse from Shantou to Sumatra], 01-35-001-02-003, Zongli Yamen Collection, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica.

<sup>114</sup> Modderman, Volker, and Veen, *Gedenkeboek Uitgegeven Ter Gelegenheid van Het Vijftig Jarig Bestaan van de Deli Planters Vereeniging*, 16.

private office, the Immigration Bureau retained a wide berth in managing the flows of these migrants.<sup>115</sup> It possessed three aims: to promote direct migration from China, to counteract the influence of brokers in the Straits Settlements, and to supplement any shortage of coolies.<sup>116</sup> Through this office, the DPV would be free of the “intrigues of Singaporean competitors and jealous coolie *bongs* (merchants)” that they had depended on.<sup>117</sup> A new bureaucratic system had thus emerged outside of the state’s fold in the Netherlands Indies, producing new regulations that would control the movement of emigrants from China.<sup>118</sup>

### **Spectacular Struggle, Everyday Resistance**

Inter-imperial networks played a crucial role for the DPV to secure Qing China’s approval to construct a new corridor of movement for Chinese emigrants to Deli. Yet whether a villager in the southern coast of China would decide to migrate depended on the local connections of Chinese migrants themselves. Soon after the establishment of the Immigration Bureau, planters realized that they could take advantage of the pre-existing networks of the coolies toiling in their fields to maintain and increase the size of the plantations’ labor force. Planters paid a commission and reimbursed expenses for *laoke* (old-hands; 老客) to recruit new workers.

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<sup>115</sup> The four companies that had borne \$11,500 in expenses for the first two ships realized that once laborers arrived in Deli, other plantations had benefited for free, as laborers were free to go to any company they wanted. The Immigration Bureau solved this problem by pooling the capital of plantation estates in Deli to pay for recruiting expenses in China, transportation, food, a warranty for the boats, and the maintenance of a house for laborers. Bool, *De Chineesche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 11-12.

<sup>116</sup> Sandick, *Chineez en Buiten China*, 326 and Modderman, Volker, and Veen, *Gedenkboek Uitgegeven Ter Gelegenheid van Het Vijftig Jarig Bestaan van de Deli Planters Vereeniging*, 51.

<sup>117</sup> Bool, *De Chineesche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 17.

<sup>118</sup> The Netherlands Indies government could also exploit this corridor for their own commercial and political interests, such as to pursue other forms of forced movement of ethnic Chinese. In 1901, the colonial administration in Batavia tasked the sinologist Hoetink to find a route to expel ethnic Chinese men branded as criminals and vagrants, and those suffering from leprosy and beri-beri, away from Java. Roughly two hundred Chinese migrants were removed annually from Java between 1889 to 1901 for these reasons. Boats carrying returnee laborers from Deli were an attractive option to facilitate such movement. The physical infrastructure was already in place, and Dutch penal authorities could send the men on top of oil freight tankers that made stops in the Belawan harbor of Deli. The Residency of Sumatra’s East Coast could build a compound with surveillance facilities next to the prison in Labuan Deli for these men while they waited for boats carrying coolies from Shantou. The ‘deported’ men would then leave Belawan with the coolie returnees. Deli planters were themselves wary of this plan; they surmised that local authorities in Shantou would be appalled by the famished and sick appearance of the deportees. See B. Hoetink, “Verslag van Eene Reis Naar Deli En Singapore, in Voldoening Aan de Opdracht Bedoeld by Het Gouvernementsbesluit van 12 Januari 1901,” *Weltevreden* 1901.

As coolies were re-classified into *laoke*, they gained the opportunity to become mobile. *Laoke* transited in Hong Kong on their way to Shantou and, in theory, could return to their villages in the countryside of Fujian and Guangdong.<sup>119</sup> Tang Sing Kah, a Teochew laborer who worked at the Kwala Mengirim plantation in Deli, went to his village in Chaozhou.<sup>120</sup> Others who elected to return to Deli sometimes missed their direct boats and stopped by the Straits Settlements, transiting in the ports they had perhaps once been in as newly-recruited laborers.<sup>121</sup> The planters profited: the costs of obtaining a new worker with a *laoke* through the Bureau amounted to \$66, a third of the amount charged by brokers in the Straits.<sup>122</sup>

But while in theory the planters planned for the *laoke* to return to their villages, this newfound mobility afforded the *laoke* freedom to recruit laborers where they could and where they wanted, whether in a different province or without even leaving Shantou. Planters wanted the *laoke* to return to their villages as they searched for the elusive ideal Chinese coolie: a laborer who would adapt to the hot climate in Sumatra, was strong, and able to toil nonstop.<sup>123</sup> And indeed, some *laoke* like Kong Ha Hong, a Hakka laborer, recruited other Hakkas from his village.<sup>124</sup> Yet others skirted the rules listed by the Immigration Bureau, and found laborers from shops that traded the debt of coolies in Shantou instead. The head overseer of the Paya Bakong Estate, for example, worked as a *laoke* but refused to return to his village in Haifeng, claiming that he “did not want to burden people from his village,” lest his relatives asked about him.<sup>125</sup> At one point, the *laoke* carried more cash compared to other professional recruiters, so they received preferential treatment from shops trading coolie debt in Shantou.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Article 3, “Appendix III: General Regulations Concerning the Immigration Bureau,” in Sandick, *Chineezzen Buiten China*, 341.

<sup>120</sup> J. Stecher, “Emigratie van China naar Deli” (Shantou, 1905), 35.

<sup>121</sup> Sandick, *Chineezzen Buiten China*, 326.

<sup>122</sup> Article 4, “Appendix III: General Regulations Concerning the Immigration Bureau,” in Sandick, *Chineezzen Buiten China*, 342.

<sup>123</sup> “Nederlandsche Kolonien,” *Algemeen Handelsblad*, December 11, 1894.

<sup>124</sup> Stecher, “Emigratie van China naar Deli,” 35.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> It was apparent that some *laoke* recruited laborers from these shops when they left on the exact ship they arrived in, a couple of days after they first debarked in Shantou. Stecher, “Emigratie van China naar Deli,” 9.

Suspicious of their actions, the planters created a world of documents around the figure of the *laoke*. Each *laoke* was to carry with him an English introductory letter specific to his name that listed his company, estate, and the advance payment he received.<sup>127</sup> The *laoke* was supposed to bring his letter to Lauts and Haysloop upon arrival in Shantou to get it stamped before returning to their villages. But he could only receive his payment on the way back when leaving China. Each letter hid the amount of cash the laborer would receive with a complex code of 7 letters.<sup>128</sup> The difficulties the *laoke* faced in receiving his payment, which he might need to purchase necessities and pay for expenses, illustrate the planters' anxieties that the *laoke* would take the money midway, or even disappear into the bustle of the port-cities of southern China. Perhaps planters were also worried that the *laoke* would misrepresent the amount of funds they were supposed to receive, deceiving the staff from Lauts and Haysloop.

Planter imaginations of how the documentary regime would operate often did not match with reality, manifesting as discrepancies or disregarded rules. Some *laoke* carried back letters of introduction from two different companies, or carried letters with mistakes, and often received advance payments for the wrong laborer. Others did not return to Deli, or contracted themselves to another plantation.<sup>129</sup> Lauts and Haysloop reported that several *xinke* (new recruits; 新客) had devised ways to trick the system. On a ship leaving Shantou, two *laoke* tried to claim their payment after seeing that the *xinke* they recruited had passed the medical examination, only to find that their payment had been given to someone else.<sup>130</sup> Apparently, one of their *xinke* had pretended to be a *laoke* and received the advance from Lauts and Haysloop instead. *Laoke* and *xinke* alike found ways to make profit within the system, feeding into the planters' worries of their inability to control all aspects of the migration process.

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<sup>127</sup> Article 5, "Appendix III: General Regulations Concerning the Immigration Bureau," in Sandick, *Chineezen Buiten China*, 343.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Bool, *De Chineesche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 56.

<sup>130</sup> Stecher, "Emigratie van China naar Deli," 14.

The planters most feared that their dependence on Chinese workers to fill this corridor with emigrants would mean relinquishing control again to Chinese actors in the migration industry, resurrecting the specter of the Straits broker. In an 1898 trip to China, the interpreter B. Hoetink warned the planters that: “The delivery of *xinke* is threatening to fall entirely into the hands of the Chinese, ... the Delian industry is in danger of seeing itself lose its control over emigration, and find itself in the unpleasant position it used to be in vis-à-vis the broker in the Straits.”<sup>131</sup> The increasing anxiety of losing control over the migration process is not only palpable in Hoetink’s warning, but also apparent in a circular sent by the Planters Committee on August 22, 1898, asserting that: “The greatest advantage of our own migration is that it is well-managed and under European control ... for once it is in Chinese hands again, we shall be for good at their mercy and will have to pay exorbitantly high prices.”<sup>132</sup> This constant worry signified how the management of this corridor is better characterized as a contentious economic struggle, rather than a totalizing form of dominance exerted by the plantocracy in the Netherlands Indies.

The planters viewed the coolies, which came from different parts of southern China, through a prism of racial hierarchies. Coolies who were Teochew (Chaozhou), Luichiu (Leizhou), Hailokhong (Hailufeng), and Hokkien (Fujianese), and especially those from rural villages, were considered as first-class.<sup>133</sup> Keh (Hakka), Punti, Macao, and urban Hokkien men from Xiamen and Beihai were second-class. Those of the first-class received higher contractual deposits of \$25, twenty percent greater than the latter. A 1913 handbook for young European men aspiring to be an assistant planter in Deli reveals some of the planter’s racial logic:

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<sup>131</sup> B Hoetink, *Reis Naar China in Verband Met de Deli Emigratie* (Shantou, 1898), 10. Hoetink was particularly concerned about the *ketou* (客头), Chinese men from the plantation estates who were sent by Chinese foremen in Deli as recruiters. Unlike the *laoke*, these *ketou* retained a special position on the plantation, as managers of the small estate shops where laborers could buy goods with paper coupons, as highly skilled workers like carpenters, and as vegetable growers. On the *ketou*, see Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast*, 56.

<sup>132</sup> Circular No. 192 of the Planters Committee (DPV) of August 22, 1898, cited in Bool, *De Chineesche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 36.

<sup>133</sup> Article 11, Classes of Coolies, “Appendix III: General Regulations Concerning the Immigration Office,” in Sandick, *Chineezgen Buiten China*, 347.

A Hailokhong is noisy, temperamental and hot-tempered; Keh and a Macau are calmer and more tolerant, although more inclined to treat someone who they someone they hate secretly out of the way or forge plans to do so. The Hailokhong is commonly mistaken for the best builder, is stronger, better in able to do heavy work than the other tribes, who, on the other hand, are more careful and tidier, though somewhat slower in doing their work.<sup>134</sup>

The classification of these workers into tiers shows how Deli's planters had commodified and categorized these Chinese migrants through a warped logic of hierarchical stratification.

Shipping networks constituted the key piece of infrastructure that allowed the planters to control the movement of a commodified "cargo" of Chinese emigrants. It was an expensive investment: planters initially chartered steamboats, but revenues from passage fees were not enough to cover the costs. In October 1890, the Immigration Bureau contracted the firm Meyer and Co. in Hong Kong, which operated two ships to bring potential workers to Deli.<sup>135</sup>

Established in 1851, Meyer and Co. was a German firm that chartered ships for Chinese emigrants leaving to California, as well as coolie labor to Chile in the 1850s.<sup>136</sup> Meyer and Co.'s role as a node in the transportation of labor migrants to Deli in the 1890s illustrates how, after the abolition of indentured Chinese migration to South America in 1874, businesses that facilitated the wider coolie trade to the Americas persisted to manage new forms of unfree migration, now to Southeast Asia. Since 1904, the Bureau contracted two steamships from the German firm Jebesen and Co. in Xiamen, whose ships were chartered by many Chinese merchant houses to transport commodities such as coal, wood, sugar, rice, and livestock across cities in southern China.<sup>137</sup> The infrastructure that moved Chinese laborers to Deli was hence deeply embedded in the inter-regional trading infrastructure of coastal China.

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<sup>134</sup> Chris J. Dixon, *De Assistent in Deli; Practische Opmerkingen Met Betrekking Tot Den Omgang Met Koelies. Met Een Voorrede van J. F. Niermeyer*. (Amsterdam: J. H. De Bussy, 1913), 40.

<sup>135</sup> Bool, *De Chineesche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 26.

<sup>136</sup> Smith, Carl T. "The German Speaking Community in Hong Kong 1846-1918." *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 34 (1994): 31

<sup>137</sup> Elizabeth Sinn and Christopher Munn, *Meeting Place: Encounters across Cultures in Hong Kong, 1841-1984*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, HKU, 2018, 109-112.

Coolies and Straits brokers alike attempted to wrest back control over the corridor along these infrastructures of shipping. Planters claimed that the maiden voyage of the ship *China*, which brought laborers directly to Deli for the first time, only had a few men on board because brokers in Shantou had incited potential migrants to not sign any contracts to Deli. Uprisings also occurred on board ships. In 1889, 272 coolies on the *China* broke into open mutiny when they saw the Singaporean harbor, threatening to throw the DPV's recruiters off the ship unless the captain allowed them to disembark, claiming that the recruiters in Hong Kong had told them that they were going to Singapore.<sup>138</sup> A journalist reporting this incident described how "it was quite a sight to see [the coolies] scrambling over the sides into the sampan boats awaiting to take them ashore."<sup>139</sup> The incident produced interesting jurisdictional questions of its own, as the migrants begged the Straits officials to let them stay in Singapore instead of Deli. After discussing with the German and Dutch consuls, the Chinese Protector in Singapore Francis Powell decided to let the migrants into Singapore, as the Germans and Dutch had no authority to detain them while they were under British jurisdiction.<sup>140</sup> Similar events happened in December, when migrants revolted on the ship *Kiel*, and again the following year, when 670 men on the steamship *Decima* demanded to be transferred to Singapore, refusing to be processed by the Immigration Bureau in Deli.<sup>141</sup> The Residency of the East Coast of Sumatra even dispatched a battle steamship with a detachment of soldiers on board in case further violence occurred.<sup>142</sup> The planters blamed Straits brokers who spread rumors that the migrants would never be heard of again if they ended up in Deli, even claiming that it was their *modus operandi* to get on board ships to force each Deli-bound ship to stop in Singapore.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> "Annual Report on the Chinese Protectorate, Singapore for the year 1889," C.O. 275/36, 96. See also newspaper reports of the incident, "The coolie difficulty on the German steamship 'China,'" *The Straits Times*, March 30, 1889; "The Coolie Trade," *The Straits Times*, April 15, 1889; and "The Deli Coolie Trade," *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, May 23, 1889.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> C.O. 275, 96. The *Decima* incident is also recorded in Sandick, *Chineezzen Buiten China*, 332.

<sup>142</sup> Sandick, *Chineezzen Buiten China*, 332.

<sup>143</sup> "Coolie brokers against Planters," *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, 4 February 1890. The broker could well be a scapegoat in these situations, but cases where labor intermediaries led strikes aboard ships are not unheard of in

In 1889, Deli planters accused brokers of conducting a massive propaganda campaign against the Heng Thai *bong* (trading house) in Hong Kong. Heng Thai maintained twenty shops that traded coolie debt in the port-city and possessed an exclusive contract to supply workers to Lauts and Haysloop.<sup>144</sup> Placards set up in Shantou called for the Heng Thai to be punished for human trafficking.<sup>145</sup> The Deli Company spokesman Bool described the placards to have depicted “the fate of the coolies in Deli in the darkest of terms possible, and the sons of the Chinese owners of the firm Heng Thai, the greatest barbarians.”<sup>146</sup> Locals in Shantou had accused the Heng Thai of kidnapping their relatives and extorting money, threatening to lodge a complaint to the Qing administration.<sup>147</sup> The issue was resolved when the Dutch Resident Ferguson was able to get the Qing provincial administrator to release a statement condemning the accusations, stating that workers in Deli were not oppressed and had paid for their passage on their own means. Even the migrants’ home communities posed a challenge for the DPV planters in their attempts to control the China-to-Deli migration corridor.

## Chapter Conclusion

The task the Deli planters faced in redirecting the China-to-Deli corridor away from pre-existing networks in the Straits Settlements had never been a simple one. Despite planters’ efforts to exert control over migrants through bureaucratic and documentary practices, they often fell short in practice when faced with the *laoke*, broker, and coolie’s own networks and ingenuity. These attempts to shift the corridor revealed to us instead a fluid landscape of allegiance that depended on political, economic, or geographic circumstance. While the *Deli Courant* warned of an age of “Coolie Brokers against Planters,”<sup>148</sup> the vision of agency that emerges is not one of

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voyages across the Indian Ocean in the nineteenth century. See Aaron Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring, 1780-1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest and Mutiny* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: The Boydell Press, 2015), 97-125.

<sup>144</sup> Stecher, “Emigratie van China naar Deli,” 7.

<sup>145</sup> For a broader context of human trafficking in imperial China during the Qing dynasty, see Johanna S. Ransmeier, *Sold People: Traffickers and Family Life in North China* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017).

<sup>146</sup> Bool, *De Chineesche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 17.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> “Coolie brokers against Planters,” *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, February 4, 1890. *The Straits Times* republished the article, which was originally printed in the *Deli Courant*.

opposition, but rather one that is variegated. As we shift perspectives between the planter, the Dutch Resident Ferguson, the *xinke*, the interpreter de Groot, the Straits merchant, and the broker, we see that each of them enacted agency at multiple levels of the migration corridor, even if it was circumscribed within their own structural circumstance. In the following chapter, I will examine how both Chinese migrants and the Qing state advanced twin visions of the corridor that added to its polyphony of voices.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A CHINESE WORLD OF MOVEMENT, 1882-1911

Nine hundred and thirty miles to the north of Shantou, Zhou Yazhao spent his days in sweat, fastening thick ropes and chains onto ships. In 1892, he was only twelve years old: a child who left his home village in Wuhua County, Meixian, Guangdong to labor at a ship rigging company in Zhenping, Henan.<sup>149</sup> His family history was carved with the untold sins of migration. His father left for the Netherlands Indies when he was young—a ghost who left no trail of letters behind. Zhou lived with his sixty-year-old mother and uncle. They did not own land and offered their manual labor to neighbors, who often refused them because of their old age. The family spent many nights in hunger. Zhou left for Henan to lighten his family's burdens and earn a livelihood rigging ships. It was work he thought of as arduous and risky, but nevertheless necessary.

As a twenty-year-old, Zhou visited the county's capital. There, he encountered a labor broker from Deli. Zhou later recalled: "The broker (*ketou*, 客头) deceived me. He said that it was easy to make money abroad, and the work wouldn't be as laborious as rigging ships. His sweet-honeyed words fooled me."<sup>150</sup> Zhou found himself spending seven days on a ship to Sumatra's Belawan Harbor not knowing that he was to become a "piglet." Zhou ultimately spent thirty years in Deli's tobacco plantations and only returned to China as an eighty-year-old in 1960.

How did emigrants like Zhou Yazhao think about their ties to "China," and how did "China" think about them? The China-to-Deli corridor was a zone where Qing China and its emigrants worked out their relationship with one another—independently, but also concurrently. On the one hand, laborers in Deli maintained ties with China that are tethered to their home communities. They extended their traditional social and religious worlds onto the plantations,

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<sup>149</sup> Yuzun Liu, *Zhubuzai huagong fangwen lu* ["Piglet" Chinese Labor Interview Records] (Guangzhou: Zhongshan daxue Dongnanya lishi yanjiusuo, 1979), 61-66.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

while maintaining an active channel of connection through the flow of letters and remittances. On the other hand, the Qing government envisioned a relationship of state obligation, which the Qing embedded in Confucian ideals of paternal benevolence, but articulated through a new language of sovereignty and diplomacy. The China-to-Deli corridor hence became a space to configure a globalizing “China,” as coolies reconstructed Chinese institutions in the land of tobacco and Qing diplomats pushed for China’s integration into an international system of sovereign states.

### **Migrant Imaginations and the Native-Place**

As he arrived in the port of Belawan, a Hakka sojourner like Zhou Yazhao would discover that cultural and religious institutions from his home province of Guangdong had preceded him along the same migratory route. In 1884, the Dutch-appointed Major Tjong Yong Hian built the Guandi Temple as a space for various clans from Guangdong to congregate. He also constructed another temple for the sea deity Mazu.<sup>151</sup> Even though rituals like the placement of ancestral tablets in temples were expensive and often limited to the wealthy,<sup>152</sup> epigraphic evidence suggests that coolies like Zhou participated in religious life in Deli. The Zhenjun Temple, a temple managed by Teochew emigrants from Lufeng County in Chaozhou province, owned a wooden tablet that a laborer named Zheng Cifu donated together with other coolies from his plantation.<sup>153</sup> The temple was a center of worship for the deity Zhenjun from northeastern Guangdong, a 13<sup>th</sup>-century soldier who achieved fame for suppressing pirates and robbers. The wooden tablet suggests that poorer immigrant laborers in Deli used their own meager capital to participate in the devotion of deity cults from their home provinces, staking

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<sup>151</sup> Buiskool, “Prominent Chinese during the Rise of a Colonial City,” 200, 318. Mazu was a deity worshipped in coastal China and in overseas Chinese communities in the Nanyang (“South Seas,” referring to Southeast Asia) known to protect seafarers and sailors. Religious spaces that worshipped ocean deities were found across Chinese and Indian diasporic communities across Southeast Asia. See Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 164. For a similar case with Indian migrants to Southeast Asia, see Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), 89.

<sup>152</sup> Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 167.

<sup>153</sup> Franke, Salmon, and Siu, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Indonesia*, Vol. 1: Sumatra, 103.

their claims to the religious corridor even in the elite-dominated space of the temple. The German photographer Charles Kleingrothe also captured a Chinese temple standing on a plantation estate: its architecture an eclectic synthesis of traditional Chinese architectural features and classical motifs. The temple likely served as a center of ritual for the coolies on the plantation.<sup>154</sup> There too, the labor migrant found means to reconstruct a sense of religious connection to his native-place.

As the annual payday approached, coolies also gained the opportunity to watch a performance of Straits Chinese street opera (*wayang*).<sup>155</sup> The performance connected the laborers to the broader Chinese world in the Straits of Melaka. Chinese foremen on the plantation would pay a troupe that performed at temples and clan associations in the Straits Settlements to come to Deli. The genres of *wayang* were often specific to each dialect group. For example, opera troupes performing *fujianxi*, or a form of Hokkien opera in the Minnan dialect, would narrate folk tales from Fujian through a melodic performance of song and percussion.<sup>156</sup> In 1880, the troupe seemed to have performed on make-shift wooden stages (Figure 6),<sup>157</sup> but by 1900, some estates had a dedicated theater for these performances (Figure 7), suggesting that it had perhaps become a regular practice. By 1908, a Chinese opera company in Singapore even operated a theater group that performed specifically in Deli.<sup>158</sup> Kleingrothe captured a picture of a *wajanghuis*, or “house for *wayang*” located between the coolie barracks on the Amsterdam Deli Company’s estate, with a Chinese inscription writing: “the echo of the music rings loud” (餘音嘹亮).<sup>159</sup> Perhaps in the high-pitched operatic retelling of these regional folk tales, the laborers

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<sup>154</sup> Overseers seldom allowed the laborers to leave the estate, always suspicious that they would run away, hence it would have been unlikely for them to go to the larger temples in the urban center of Medan. See Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast*, 146.

<sup>155</sup> Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast*, 125.

<sup>156</sup> Tong Soon Lee, *Chinese street opera in Singapore*, University of Illinois Press, 2009, 43.

<sup>157</sup> “Chinese komedievoorstelling, vermoedelijk te Deli, [Chinese comedy performance, presumably in Deli]” (c. 1880), Southeast Asian and Caribbean Images Collection (KITLV).

<sup>158</sup> “Chinese Theater Proprietors,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, 13 February 1908, 109.

<sup>159</sup> C.J. Kleingrothe, “Chinees Wajanghuis Op de Tabakspiantage van de Amsterdam Deli Compagnie Te Padang Boelan Bij Medan” (Munich: JB Obernetter, c. 1900), Southeast Asian & Caribbean Images Collection (KITLV).

could hear echoes of their hometowns in Fujian and Guangdong, even if faintly, in a moment of brief respite from the brutal violence of plantation life.

Laborers who had spent their lives in Deli incorporated their new homes into the religious worlds they inhabited. The history of the Five Ancestors Temple (五祖廟) in Tanjung Morawa, 16 kilometers east of Medan, offers an illuminating example of the construction of local Chinese deity cults in Southeast Asia.<sup>160</sup> Oral tradition tells of the murder of a Dutch overseer on an estate. In 1871, the colonial police caught and arrested five laborers—Li Sandi, Chen Bingyi, Huang Luoqi, Wu Tusheng, and Yang Guiling—who had allegedly murdered the overseer as revenge for abuse.<sup>161</sup> Although only one of them committed the act, the five men had sworn a blood oath to the same brotherhood and refused to divulge the murderer's identity. The police sentenced the five coolies to death by hanging.<sup>162</sup> Their bodies were buried in a cemetery for migrants from Chaozhou, and a small temple was constructed in their memory. Over time, the five coolies become venerated. One can enter the temple today to find five sacrificial bowls placed in front of their tombstone.<sup>163</sup> The apotheosis of these coolies into local deities in the pantheon of Chinese folk religion suggests how these migrants fit their new landscapes into old religious worlds, and found solace, if not solidarity, from these affinities.

Some laborers also joined brotherhoods whose organizational web radiated outwards from the Chinese world of the Straits Settlements.<sup>164</sup> Records from the Netherlands Indies annual report in 1885 documented clashes between the Ghee Hin and Ho Seng brotherhoods in

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<sup>160</sup> Medan was the metropolitan center of the colonial-era plantation region of Deli in Sumatra's East Coast.

<sup>161</sup> Franke, Salmon, and Siu, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Indonesia*, Vol. 1: Sumatra, 275. The precise date of this event is ambiguous. Taomo Zhou, *Migration in the Time of Revolution: China, Indonesia, and the Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2019), dates it to 1871.

<sup>162</sup> Such incidents are not unheard of and similar reports appeared throughout the historical newspaper record of the period. In 1885, six Chinese men murdered an overseer at the Lingga Estate in Deli, and were executed. A journalist reporting the incident took pleasure in the fact that news of the execution quickly spread among the coolies, noting how "the [coolies'] realization that a strict, even if slow, hand reigns here [in Deli] cannot fail to have a beneficial effect on the Chinese population who is too willing to disrupt order and discipline." See *De Locomotief*, September 2, 1885.

<sup>163</sup> Franke, Salmon, and Siu, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Indonesia*, Vol. 1: Sumatra, 274.

<sup>164</sup> Brotherhoods are forms of social organization in China, where young marginalized men found mutual support and protection. In the Straits Settlements, a brotherhood took the form of a *kongsi*, compatriot organizations that bridged class lines and encompassed merchants, financiers, revenue farmers, and coolies.

Deli, where “disturbances were so serious that police and military were forced to use firearms to restore order,” reporting that many plantation coolies were members.<sup>165</sup> As two prominent *kongsi* operating in Singapore and Penang, the Ghee Hin and Ho Seng’s presence in Deli showed how networks of Chinese social organization crossed the border in the Straits of Melaka to create alternative geographies rooted in Chinese kinship and commercial ties.<sup>166</sup> As early as 1869, the sinologist Maurits Schaalje discovered a brotherhood’s diploma in Deli held by a Chinese man from Penang.<sup>167</sup> The diploma referred to Penang as the brotherhood’s headquarters, generating worry among Dutch colonial officials wary of the emergence of a strong cross-straits Chinese network emerging amid attempts to enforce the Anglo/Dutch border.<sup>168</sup>

The 1894 novel *Bright Celestials* further illustrates how brotherhoods created a space that connected Deli to Singapore, Penang, and the broader Chinese world. After detailing Tek Chiu’s arrival in Deli, the novel follows the character as he meets two Penang-born Chinese overseers desiring to form a branch of the Ho Seng brotherhood there.<sup>169</sup> The two overseers extoll the benefits of joining a brotherhood: it grants newly-arrived coolies “unskilled in the intricacies of the foreigner’s law” protection against injury, provides them with “friendly aid and sympathy,” and offers a community where Chinese traditions are preserved.<sup>170</sup> In the novel, Tek Chiu ascends the ranks on the plantation to become an overseer and leads 223 Chinese workers through an initiation ritual on a secluded part of the estate. There, they establish the “Great Dragon Lodge” branch of the Ho Seng brotherhood. One of the overseers had sent the Ho Seng’s official insignia from Penang, as well as other ritual paraphernalia, including regalia, scrolls, and books for the ceremony. The authors Tan and Lamont write, “the physical

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<sup>165</sup> Sandick, *Chineez en buiten China*, 337.

<sup>166</sup> Trocki, *Opium and Empire*, 155. The Ghee Hin was the first brotherhood founded in Penang. It counted Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew and Hakka men among its members. For the Ghee Hin, see Wong Yee Tuan, “Hokkien Merchants and the Kian Teik Tong: Economic and Political Influence in Nineteenth-Century Penang and Its Region.” *Frontiers of History in China* 11, no. 4 (2016): 600–627.

<sup>167</sup> Maurits Schaalje, *Bijdrage tot de kennis der Chinesche geheime genootschappen* (Lands-Drukkerij, 1873), 1.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. Also see Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders*, 134.

<sup>169</sup> Tan and Lamont, *Bright Celestials*, 155-171.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, 164-165.

surroundings of that great meeting were literally in consonance with the conditions that surrounded the inception, in the reign of the Emperor Kangxi, of the Heaven and Earth Society of China.”<sup>171</sup> The rituals of brotherhood produced a new imagined Chinese space based on compatriotism and corituality even within the plantation estate.<sup>172</sup>

Surname and native-place associations tied these migrants further to their home communities, if not in life, then in death. The social structure of Chinese emigrants revolved around the burial ritual.<sup>173</sup> For poorer overseas Chinese, lineage organizations functioned to provide funerals that conformed with ritual practice, especially for those whose remains could not be shipped back to China.<sup>174</sup> Tombstones marked with lineage surnames dating as early as 1876 dot the landscape of the Chinese cemetery in Labuan.<sup>175</sup> Common graves for those of the same dialect group could also be found across various cemeteries in Deli, including in the Chaozhou Cemetery where the five apotheosized coolies were buried.<sup>176</sup> Yet at least in 1889 it had been custom for estates to shovel their dead into a piece of wasteland.<sup>177</sup> The ability to join one’s own lineage in death might have been the privilege of a select few.

In life, laborers maintained ties with their homes through *qiaopi*, letters and remittances that flowed back across the migration corridor.<sup>178</sup> Families in the villages of Guangzhou and Fujian waited for traces of news from their loved ones. In 1889, a riot occurred in Xiamen

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid, 177. While these words represent Tan and Lamont’s own attempts at capturing the lives of the laborers, Tan probably knew of, or was connected to, members of such brotherhoods in Singapore as chairman of a night school for working adult Chinese and as editor of the Chinese newspaper, the *Daily Advertiser*. Doran, “Bright Celestial: Progress in the Political Thought of Tan Teck Soon,” 50.

<sup>172</sup> Kuhn defines compatriotism to be shared native-place bonds based on common regional origins in provinces, counties, towns, villages, or dialect groups. Corituality is the shared devotion to particular deity cults. See Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 43 and 161.

<sup>173</sup> Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 167.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> For photographs of a common grave for those with the surname Wu, and two other tombstones of common graves for those with the surname Liu, Guang, Zhang, and Zhao see Franke, Salmon, and Siu, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Indonesia*, Vol. 1: Sumatra, 124.

<sup>176</sup> For examples, see the photographs of the Fujian Cemetery in Franke, Salmon and Siu, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Indonesia*, Vol. 1: Sumatra, 130-136. Also see a common grave for emigrants from Guangdong and Fujian in the town Kisanan on page 197 and a common grave for emigrants from Guangdong in Tanjung Pura on page 285.

<sup>177</sup> Breman, *Taming The Coolie Beast*, 123.

<sup>178</sup> Gregor Benton, *Dear China: Emigrant Letters and Remittances, 1820–1980* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 6.

protesting the disappearance of relatives.<sup>179</sup> The DPV defended itself for not being able to send the letters sent by the coolies, blaming the coolies for addressing them vaguely.<sup>180</sup> Since this issue occurred, the Immigration Bureau took over the sending of the workers' letters. *Laoke* returning to China would bring these letters alongside cheques for coolies' families. From 1903 to 1907, the Immigration Bureau processed an annual average of \$160,982 in remittances.<sup>181</sup> The mechanisms that facilitated the recruitment of laborers to Deli hence also transmitted the material goods that tied them to their native-place.

In 1905, Major Tjong Yong Hian and his nephew Lieutenant Tjong A Fie established the Tong Sian Kiok bank to facilitate the transfer of the laborers' remittances to China, further intensifying this form of connection.<sup>182</sup> Through the Tong Sian Kiok, Chinese workers in Deli were able to regularly send *qiaopi* to their relatives.<sup>183</sup> But while *qiaopi* is commonly understood as a migrant form of connection, Deli's plantation owners could also manipulate these Chinese networks for their own commercial interests. Recognizing that familial networks in the native-place undergirded the movement of Chinese emigrants, the colonial interpreter Hoetink emphasized in the *Deli Courant* that the coolie had aimed "to return to China with cash, and especially to be able to send money to his relatives in absence."<sup>184</sup> Preventing the flow of remittances would mean that Deli's reputation as a promising destination would deteriorate. The DPV even issued a circular reminding estate owners to urge coolies to send remittances home several times a year.<sup>185</sup> The interests of the plantation elite and the coolie migrant overlapped to further deepen the transportation of money across the corridor.

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<sup>179</sup> The DPV claimed that the laborers had written letters addressed to "the son of his father" or "the brother of his brothers," and so, it could not send the letters to their destination. Bool, *De Chineesche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 13.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Sandick, *Chinezen Buiten China*, 330.

<sup>182</sup> B. Hoetink, "Eene Chineesche Remise-Bank," *De Sumatra Post*, 16 June 1905.

<sup>183</sup> Such institutions are present across overseas Chinese communities, including in California where neighborhood shops offered services to Chinese laborers on the Transcontinental Railroad to send remittances, or in Singapore, where the Post Office took on the role. See Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, 86.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Modderman, Volker, and Veen, *Gedenkboek Uitgegeven Ter Gelegenheid van Het Vijftig Jarig Bestaan van de Deli Planters Vereeniging*, 148.

For the emigrants, “China” remained largely in the realm of kinship, shared native-place bonds, and religion. The China-to-Deli corridor was a space where both material goods and cultural institutions traveled, often through networks that defied colonial borders. Yet such imaginations contrasted with the Qing government’s ambitions to protect its emigrants. Since 1881, the Qing state began to advocate for the Deli laborers’ rights to consular protection. The Qing government hence imbued the migration corridor with a different set of meanings that linked perceived helpless subjects in Deli to the Chinese state, rather than the migrants’ own channel of connections between the plantation and the native-place.

### **Qing Protection and State Sovereignty**

The efforts of the Qing government to protect emigrants was rooted in a new consciousness over national sovereignty that emerged in Qing China’s encounter with the indentured trade to Cuba and Peru. The Qing government’s navigation of international politics from 1860 to 1874 planted the seeds of a revolutionary change in China’s articulation of sovereignty and diplomacy. Even though the British and French refused to ratify the Qing’s proposed regulations in the Emigration Convention of 1866, Qing officials learned to define China’s interests in terms of the rights of its overseas population as they crafted rules that would limit contract lengths and allow them to intervene in the recruitment process.<sup>186</sup> The imperial state was no longer the same as it was under the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Yongzheng Emperor, who labelled the overseas Chinese as “not law-abiding subjects,” reflecting the popular sentiment of emigrants as traitors (*hanjian*).<sup>187</sup>

Through investigative commissions sent to Peru in 1873 and Cuba in 1874, the Qing government developed the new diplomatic practice of sending imperial officials abroad to document the conditions of Chinese living outside its territorial jurisdiction.<sup>188</sup> In 1874, amid international outcry over the mutiny of coolies on board the Spanish ship *Maria Luz* headed to

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<sup>186</sup> Chan, *Diaspora’s Homeland*, 35.

<sup>187</sup> Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 20.

<sup>188</sup> Robert L. Irick, *Ch’ing Policy Toward the Coolie Trade, 1847-1878*, (Chinese Materials Center, 1982), 322-353.

Peru, the Qing pressured the Portuguese to ban the coolie trade in Macao, and later ratified treaties banning the trade with Peru in 1876 and Spain in 1878.<sup>189</sup> When the Qing government discovered that Chinese emigrants had also been laboring under conditions of indenture in Dutch Sumatra a decade later, these innovative diplomatic practices emerged in a fuller form as tools to assert a new understanding of Chinese sovereignty and the rights it conferred to protect a perceived helpless overseas population.

In 1881, a low-ranking Fujianese prefect first alerted the Qing government to the plight of Chinese emigrants in the Netherlands Indies. The prefect Li Mian wrote to the newly-appointed Governor-General of Jiangsu and Jiangxi, Zuo Zongtang, and called for the placement of a consul in the Dutch colony. In his petition, Li emphasized the importance of such diplomatic representation to protect the Chinese population in the Netherlands Indies and to secure China's coastal provinces against a Dutch military threat. Li painted a world where "the West is encroaching on China," and the Chinese emigrant population is suffering.<sup>190</sup> He stoked fears of Dutch military might and invoked the Dutch occupation of Taiwan during the Ming's reign, reminding Zuo that the Dutch had "caused trouble with the coastal residents of Fujian and Guangdong."<sup>191</sup> Li even alerted Zuo to the events of the Aceh War that had begun since 1873, where the Dutch succeeded in undertaking a military campaign to conquer the Muslim polity of Aceh in northern Sumatra and gain full control over the island. Li framed the Dutch's control over Aceh as a launching pad to "slowly encroach on Zhejiang and Guangdong."<sup>192</sup> Since the Dutch posed a military threat to China and controlled a significant number of Chinese subjects in its territory, Li argued that the Qing government should assert itself and establish a consular representative in the Netherlands Indies. While Li exaggerated the Dutch's military capabilities, as well as the distance between Aceh and southern China, his decision to frame the issue of the

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<sup>189</sup> Chan, *Diaspora's Homeland*, 38.

<sup>190</sup> *Zhude Shiguan Dangan Zhao [Archives of the Embassy in Germany]* (Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng Shuju, 1966), Volume 1, 266.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

overseas Chinese in militaristic terms showed how, by 1881, even low-ranked officials in the Qing bureaucracy understood the issue of the overseas Chinese as a pragmatic issue that was intertwined with matters of foreign policy and national security.

Li's petition worked its way through the Qing bureaucracy and landed on the desk of Zuo Binglong, the Chinese Consul in Singapore, who affirmed that the Qing should engage with its emigrant population in the Netherlands Indies based on principles of Confucian state paternalism and international diplomacy. In a follow-up report written for Zuo Zongtang, Zuo Binglong revealed how Qing bureaucrats worried that its migrant population in Deli had renounced China.<sup>193</sup> Writing that the Dutch have “treacherous intentions,” Zuo claimed that the Dutch had recruited Chinese laborers to “change into foreign clothes” and “lure them to join their Western nationality.”<sup>194</sup> As historian Shelly Chan noticed in Prince Gong's call for the Zongli Yamen to begin protecting China's emigrant population in the 1860s, the Qing saw “emigrant labor [as] an instrument belonging to the Qing polity that should be respected and returned.”<sup>195</sup> Viewing the ties between China and its emigrant population in terms of Confucian principles of state responsibility, Zuo argued that by establishing a consul in the Indies, the Qing would “win the heart” of its overseas population who would no longer “give up their old country even if naturalized.”<sup>196</sup> Zuo noted that international law (*gongfa*; 公法) was an instrument that could be used to exert pressure on the Dutch. Zuo argued that since the Dutch had allowed the British, French, and Americans to place a consul in Batavia, the Dutch would perform a “violation of public example and precedent” if they refused to let China establish a consul in the Netherlands Indies.<sup>197</sup> Doing so would violate the principles of reciprocity embedded in international law. Zuo's report offered a sophisticated articulation of Qing China's sovereign right to diplomatic representation. In his view, it was a tool to fulfill both the ideological

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<sup>193</sup> Zhude Shiguan Dangan Zhao, Volume 1, 304.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Chan, *Diaspora's Homeland*, 34.

<sup>196</sup> Zhude Shiguan Dangan Zhao, Volume 1, 275.

<sup>197</sup> Zhude Shiguan Dangan Zhao, Volume 1, 275-276.

imperative of Confucian benevolence and the pragmatic need to offer state protection to an overseas population that seemed to have turned its back on China.

In 1886, the Qing's plans to send an investigative commission to collect information on the Chinese population in Southeast Asia resurrected the issues that Zuo had raised. The commission followed the template established in the public debate over the coolie trade to Cuba and Peru in the 1870s. Then, the Governor of Guangdong Jiang Yili argued that China should emulate the practice of Western states to send officials to manage their subjects overseas.<sup>198</sup> With such commissions now becoming a regular practice, the initiative this time came from Zhang Zhidong, the Governor-General of Guangdong and Guangxi, who had taken an active interest in the overseas Chinese population. He worked together with Zhang Yinhuan, who had been appointed as Chinese Minister to the United States, Peru, and Spain, to establish the commission.<sup>199</sup> Although the historical scholarship on Chinese labor migration is often divided between those focusing on the Americas and Southeast Asia, the issues of the overseas Chinese in both regions were intertwined in the Qing's eyes. As Zhang Yinhuan pushed for the Qing court to approve of such a commission to Southeast Asia, he was also responding to the Rock Springs and Hells Canyon massacres of Chinese laborers in Wyoming in treaty negotiations with the United States.<sup>200</sup>

The Qing's commission to Southeast Asia left Guangdong on August 25, 1886, just as the sinologist de Groot was headed in the other direction to establish a direct corridor to recruit laborers for Deli. Yu Zhun, a native of Guangdong and the former Chinese Consul in Nagasaki, and Wang Yonghe, a native of Fujian, led the commission.<sup>201</sup> They represented the two largest dialect groups that constituted the Chinese population in Southeast Asia. While the

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<sup>198</sup> Irick, *Ch'ing Policy Toward the Coolie Trade, 1847-1878*, 280.

<sup>199</sup> Yen, "Coolies and Mandarins: China's Protection of Overseas Chinese during the Late Ch'ing Period (1851-1911)," 156-157.

<sup>200</sup> The treaty would be known as the Bayard-Zhang Treaty. Yen, "Coolies and Mandarins: China's Protection of Overseas Chinese during the Late Ch'ing Period (1851-1911)," 236-237.

<sup>201</sup> Yen, "Coolies and Mandarins: China's Protection of Overseas Chinese during the Late Ch'ing Period (1851-1911)," 159.

commissioners planned to visit cities such as Singapore, Penang, Rangoon, Batavia, Semarang, and Sydney, they only realized that there was a significant Chinese population in Deli on their visit to Penang. The Qing records suggest that the commissioners had met with local officials and merchants who alerted them to the plight of “more than 60,000” laborers in Deli.<sup>202</sup> Bool, the Deli Company’s spokesman, claimed that the planters had invited the commissioners when they were in the Straits Settlements to improve Deli’s reputation.<sup>203</sup> Regardless, the discoveries that emerged in Deli would shape Qing China’s view of the conditions of the Chinese population in the Netherlands Indies.

The commission’s visit to Deli was a moment of encounter between two “Chinas,” the paternal state on the one hand and the migrant’s realm of clans and villages on the other. The commissioners saw themselves as an extension of the Qing state, which had arrived in Dutch territory to demand the rights of its subjects. Yu and Wang conducted a thorough investigation: they toured plantation estates, interviewed the Chinese headmen, met with Dutch officials, and collected evidence.<sup>204</sup> While the commissioners were previously unaware that there had been Chinese migrants in Deli, their visit provided them with an in-depth understanding of the migration corridor to Dutch Sumatra. Yu and Wang picked up on the nuances of the coolies’ journey, noting that many of them had arrived in Singapore, only to be deceived to enter into contracts for Deli, even as the migrants declared their consent in front of British officials.<sup>205</sup>

In their report on Deli, the commissioners painted an image of Chinese subjects in despair, facing inhumane labor conditions from “evil” Dutch plantation owners and an unjust legal system. The motif of the helpless Chinese subject is apparent in their narration of the abuse of Wen Yalong, a coolie who had been beaten to death.<sup>206</sup> His fellow workers had attempted to

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<sup>202</sup> *Qingji Waijiao Shiliao [Historical Materials of Qing Diplomacy]*, vol. 74, 1932, 24.

<sup>203</sup> Bool, *De Chineesche Immigratie Naar Deli*, 4. This visit is also recorded in the annual report of the Straits Settlements Chinese Protectorate in 1887, C.O. 275/35, 10.

<sup>204</sup> *Zhude Shiguan Dangan Zhao*, Volume 2, 687-701.

<sup>205</sup> *Zhude Shiguan Dangan Zhao*, Volume 2, 701, 1113.

<sup>206</sup> *Zhude Shiguan Dangan Zhao*, Volume 2, 696-700.

petition the Chinese Lieutenant in the Netherlands Indies government for justice, but their efforts bore no fruit. The commissioners cynically commented that “to appeal to the Dutch government’s officers is the same as letting the murderer loose.”<sup>207</sup> In their view, the violence they witnessed in Deli confirmed that Chinese laborers there required the protection of the Qing government. The commissioners pushed for the establishment of a Qing consul in the Netherlands Indies. Without a consul, there was “no one who could pursue charges of exploitation and no one to act as an advisor for the Chinese.”<sup>208</sup> The presence of a consul would improve the relationship between state and subject, bringing the forlorn emigrant back into China’s fold.

Qing officials began to collect evidence that would justify the establishment of a consulate in the Netherlands Indies based on principles of international law, including petitions from merchants in Java. A group of Fujianese and Guangdong merchants in Batavia had written a petition calling the Qing court to address the unjust treatment they faced in Batavia’s legal courts.<sup>209</sup> The merchants also drew attention to the plight of laborers in Deli, describing how the laborers’ “rights are seized by the harsh pitilessness of the Westerners.”<sup>210</sup> Including the petition in a written report, Qing officials emphasized how the Qing government must appeal to foreign ideals of international law and reciprocity. The officials argued that the Netherlands would have to accept the appointment of a Qing consul, as they “must be afraid of other people’s criticism and dare not fail to abide to international law,” positioning both China and Netherlands as states equal in stature subject to similar legal constraints.<sup>211</sup> The officials conceived of a China that was no longer a weak state forced into unequal treaties by conniving Western powers, but rather, a China that could wield the tools of international law to “manifest its national prestige” so that

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid, 698.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid, 683.

<sup>209</sup> *Zhude Shiguan Dangan Zhao*, Volume 2, 1097. For a description of major grievances that the Chinese community in the Netherlands Indies had against Dutch rule, which fed into the growing Chinese nationalist movement in the Dutch colony, see Williams, *Overseas Chinese Nationalism*, 27-35.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid, 1113-1114.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid, 1118.

Western powers would “no longer dare to ignore China’s kindness (善)” and “dare not scorn the Chinese emigrants.”<sup>212</sup> The protection of migrants in Deli was hence a manifestation of national sovereignty and an assertion of China’s rightful place in the Western-led system of nation-states.

With such evidence, Zhang Zhidong memorialized the court to establish consuls across the Nanyang, including a Vice-Consul in Deli.<sup>213</sup> Zhang emphasized that Dutch plantation owners in Deli had violated local laws, abused coolies, and failed to list the coolies’ rights in their contracts.<sup>214</sup> The general Li Hongzhang agreed with Zhang’s recommendations.<sup>215</sup> He noted that the Deli planters’ strong desire to recruit coolies from China offered an opportunity for provincial administrators in Guangdong and Fujian to negotiate regulations that would prohibit the abuse of Chinese migrants in Deli. Li saw the Deli emigrant’s plight as intertwined with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act in the United States and anti-Chinese campaigns in Australia.<sup>216</sup> Were the Qing able to abolish the abuse in the migration of Chinese laborers to Deli, the plantations would be an attractive alternative for poor coastal Chinese men to migrate amid the ban in Chinese migration elsewhere.<sup>217</sup> Li took a pragmatic view towards migration in recognizing that sojourning was a primary form of livelihood for many families on China’s southeastern coast. Li’s approach is reminiscent of Emperor Kangxi’s reversal of the maritime ban in 1694, which Kangxi justified by recognizing the historical dependence of China’s coastal provinces on maritime trade and the economic income they derive from such trade. Li applies a similar lens here on the issue of migration.<sup>218</sup> Thus, not only did Qing officials articulate ideas of

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid, 1118.

<sup>213</sup> *Qingji Wajiao Shiliao [Historical Materials of Qing Diplomacy]*, Volume 74, 1932, 22.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> From Beiyang General Li Hongzhang (北洋大臣李鴻章) to Headquarters (總署), “咨據荷屬蘇門達拉地方允除荷待華工積弊由各關道與荷員妥議章程由 [After consultation with local officials in Dutch Sumatra, it is possible to eliminate the accumulated abuses of the Dutch on Chinese workers where regulations should be negotiated with the Dutch staff],” 25 October 1888, 01-35-001-02-001, Zongli Yamen Collection, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid. See Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 21-22, for a discussion of Kangxi’s pragmatic perspective.

<sup>218</sup> Other officials had taken a similarly pragmatic approach. In their memorial discussing the petition of Chinese merchants in Batavia, Qing officials also noted that if the overseas Chinese felt unsafe in the Netherlands Indies, the number of returnees to coastal China would increase, potentially also increasing the number of vagrants (游民) there and threatening the domestic stability of China. The officials called for the protection of the overseas Chinese

state sovereignty through the China-to-Deli corridor, but they also deployed the route itself as a negotiating token to reconfigure power relations in the realm of international diplomacy.

The significance of the Qing government's assertions was not lost on Dutch commentators who viewed these efforts as a signal that China had entered the "family of nations." A Dutch writer for the daily paper *Soerabaijasch Handelsblad* in Surabaya, Java saw in the Qing's overtures proof that "a new spirit is prevailing in the great Mongolian empire."<sup>219</sup> Unlike the past, Qing China was now looking to develop closer diplomatic relations with its neighbors in Asia. While China had long been "outstripped by the smaller Japan," the Qing's assertive call to protect its emigrant population in the Netherlands Indies now signified that "it is day in the East." For this writer, the Qing government's explicit attempts to demand consular representation showed that China followed what "other nations are doing for their emigrant children," protecting them in their overseas home and strengthening relations between "the motherland and the emigrant colony."<sup>220</sup> The writer's recognition of a change in China's position in the Darwinian hierarchy of nations showed how foreign observers too recognized that the corridor was a potential space for China to articulate its sovereignty.

Nevertheless, the process to establish a consul in the Netherlands Indies dragged on for the next two decades. The Zongli Yamen decided that negotiations with the Dutch would be too difficult, and the issue of the Chinese in Deli was put aside until 1897 when Lu Haihuan, the Qing's Consul to Germany, Netherlands, Russia and Austria, restarted negotiations with the Dutch government.<sup>221</sup> Negotiations stalled again, even as Lu tried to include a clause demanding consular representation in the Netherlands Indies in the post-Boxer settlements.

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as a strategy to "eliminate near-term worries," in addition to fulfilling longer-term priorities. See *Qingji Waijiao Shiliao* [Historical Materials of Qing Diplomacy], Volume 74, 1932, 25.

<sup>219</sup> The writer is anonymous, only appending an initial K. at the end of his article. "Chineesche Consulaten," *Soerabaijasch Handelsblad*, 10 November 1888.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Yen, *Coolies and Mandarins*, 193.

In 1907, the new Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*wainubu*; 外务部) sent the diplomat Qian Xun to collect fresh evidence of Chinese emigrants suffering under unjust conditions in the Netherlands Indies, restarting efforts to place a Chinese consul there.<sup>222</sup> Qian visited Deli, where he heard more than ten cases from coolies on the tobacco plantations, and also received over one hundred petitions and letters detailing the miserable conditions faced by the laborers.<sup>223</sup> Reporting their conditions, Qian indignantly declared that the “Chinese laborer is always drowning in the world’s evil waters and soil, laboring in the drenching rain and the roasting sun.”<sup>224</sup> He told a narrative of exploitation by Western powers, that Chinese emigrants had “been tricked without exception to suffer abuse” whether by the Dutch, British, or the United States.<sup>225</sup> Moreover, like Li Hongzhang, he saw a possible opening that would allow the Qing state to intervene in the complex orbit of indentured migration to Deli. The Dutch had requested new routes for Chinese to emigrate, and the Qing government could seize this opportunity (乘机) to gain leverage in negotiations.<sup>226</sup> It could demand the establishment of a consul in exchange for the recruitment of laborers the Qing had allowed in a piecemeal fashion since 1889. Qian’s evidence was crucial for the Qing’s negotiators to restart talks with the Dutch.

On May 8, 1911, the Qing finally ratified a treaty with the Dutch ambassador in Beijing, allowing a consul to be placed in Batavia. In many ways, it was an unfavorable treaty as it afforded the Qing consul no diplomatic powers and no privileges of extraterritoriality.<sup>227</sup> Before the appointed Consul-General could arrive in Deli, however, in October 1911, uprisings had started in Wuchang and spread all across China. Province after province declared independence

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid, 194.

<sup>223</sup> *Qingji Waijiao Shiliao [Historical Materials of Qing Diplomacy]*, Vol 204, 19. Qian Xun noted how “emigrant laborers had ceaselessly appealed for their personal complaints to officials when the officials were on the island [of Sumatra].”

<sup>224</sup> *Qingji Waijiao Shiliao [Historical Materials of Qing Diplomacy]*, Vol 204, 20.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> “Consular Convention Between the Netherlands and China Relative to the Dutch Possessions and Colonies,” *The American Journal of International Law* 6, no. 4 (1912): 230–36.

and slowly dismantled the Qing state. The first Chinese Consul-General in the Netherlands Indies only arrived in Batavia in August 1912, after the Republican Government took power.<sup>228</sup>

### **Chapter Conclusion**

In *Diaspora's Homeland*, Shelly Chan describes how Chinese time and space proliferated as Chinese emigrants “spun off and became part of other histories” and China itself underwent its own struggles to evolve into a modern nation-state, interdependently producing an “ever more fragmented and more networked” China.<sup>229</sup> The China-to-Deli migration corridor was also such a space for the mutual constitution of these multiple imaginations of “China” and its extension beyond the territorial strictures of the mainland. Even in the enclosed world of the plantation, Zhou Yazhao and other coolies like him engaged with cultural, religious, and commercial institutions tied to their home localities in southern China. Through their lens, we could see the migration corridor as Philip Kuhn saw it, as a “social and economic organism” that connected families and emigrant-sending communities to laborers in Deli.<sup>230</sup> But in the eyes of the Qing, the corridor served as basis to articulate the Chinese state’s relationship with its forlorn subjects and to assert China’s place as one sovereign state among others. The China-to-Deli corridor emerged as a space with multiple orders of meaning where Chinese emigrants and the Qing state influenced each other to constitute a global China in the age of high empire.

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<sup>228</sup> Williams, *Overseas Chinese Nationalism*, 166.

<sup>229</sup> Chan, *Diaspora's Homeland*, 12.

<sup>230</sup> Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 59.

## CONCLUSION

Most unpaid coolies are eaten alive by four sets of people: first, the recruiter and his agents in China, including the *ketou*, who travels with the coolies; next, the depot-keeper in Singapore; next, the planter's agents—sometimes a foreign merchant's firm; and lastly, the planter himself. Now, young friend, be bold. Take my advice, and use your great ability to assert your rights.<sup>231</sup>

So warns Old Song, a former Chinese coolie in Deli, to the protagonist Tek Chiu on a ship headed from China to Singapore in the novel *Bright Celestials*. Old Song tells Tek Chiu that he has been deceived by a broker—that he will not live a rich intellectual life as a scribe in the Straits Settlements, but rather toil as a laborer on a tobacco plantation. The quotation reveals four actors in the migration industry that a Chinese migrant to Deli would face, each with an economic stake in the enterprise. One can imagine the trepidation, fear, and feeling of dispossession that these migrants faced on board. And yet Old Song's admonition hints at the migrant's own agency, perhaps at the very least, his ability to “be bold,” to engage with and to navigate the new environment he is about to enter.

The China-to-Deli corridor was a unique kind of liminal space. The corridor accommodated multitudes of meaning as it weaved together distinct geographies and histories. As the Straits Settlements and the Netherlands Indies sought to control the mobility of Chinese migrants crossing to Deli in the 1870s, each side reinforced the forming Anglo/Dutch border in Southeast Asia. In 1886, as planters dispatched Dutch scholars of China to Shantou, the Qing sent emissaries in the opposite direction, leading to an encounter between the Chinese imperial state and the Chinese emigrant. When planters redirected the corridor through the Immigration Bureau, brokers mounted their own efforts of resistance, demonstrating the struggle of pre-existing Chinese networks to regain control. At the level of everyday life and individual action, the *laoke* and migrants found loopholes in the system of rules that the planters had created. The coolies themselves participated in forms of Chinese cultural life, while they sent letters, goods, and money back through the corridor, reinforcing ties to their native-place. The intertwined

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<sup>231</sup> John Chinaman, *Bright Celestials*, 142.

itineraries of these disparate historical actors illustrate only a slice of the complexity of interests that were at play. It suggests that studying a single “migration corridor” can provide an alternative map to analyzing the circuits of empire and culture that unfolded in late colonial Asia.

Such a map also holds the potential to reveal migrants as protagonists of their own stories. In “Venus in Two Acts,” Saidiya Hartman reflects on the difficulties of writing about enslaved women in the Atlantic world. She asks, “How does one recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death, the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices that claimed them as property, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features?”<sup>232</sup> For the coolie migrants to Deli, it is perhaps these entanglements in the archive, the simultaneous obsessions of three imperial states on the figure of the migrant, which reveal the imprints they left on history. Indeed, these migrants not only asserted their own place in the world, but also through their itinerant movements, shaped the form and practice of imperial states, of borders and laws, and of culture and religion.

The historical imprints of these trans-imperial crossings re-emerged as transnational encounters in the twentieth-century. During the Indonesian National Revolution in 1947, the undercover Chinese Communist Party agent Ba Ren staged the legend of the five apotheosized coolies as a Marxist play to shore up left-wing support in an ideological contest with Chinese Nationalists in Medan.<sup>233</sup> In 1960, Zhou Yazhao, the ship-rigger who left Henan for Deli in 1900, returned to a resettlement farm in Guangzhou in the face of state-sponsored anti-Chinese discrimination in Indonesia, which led to the repatriation of at least 102,000 ethnic Chinese.<sup>234</sup> The migration corridor materializes again as a space-time continuum of movement, of power, and of imagination that transcended imperial and national boundaries. It is there where we discover migrants as a full historical force in their own right.

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<sup>232</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.

<sup>233</sup> Taomo Zhou, *Migration in the Time of Revolution* (Cornell University Press, 2019), 46–49.

<sup>234</sup> Zhou, *Migration in the Time of Revolution*, 115–131, and Yuzun Liu, *Zhuzai huagong fangwen lu*, 61–66.

## Bibliographic Essay

The idea for my Senior Essay germinated on a trip to Penang, Malaysia in my sophomore year. In my travels, I was surprised to find that Chinese speakers in Penang spoke the type of Hokkien that my parents and grandparents from Medan, Indonesia spoke: mixed with a little Malay, with a specific tone and lilt that differed from its Singapore variant.<sup>235</sup> The potential of studying Penang and Medan together as a unit of analysis became clearer when I visited the merchant Cheong Fatt Tze's old mansion (built c. 1897), which detailed how he built an immense rubber and tea business across the Straits of Melaka to Medan. I had also visited the mansion of Major Tjong A Fie in Medan (built c. 1900) who, along with Cheong Fatt Tze, donated large sums of money to build the Chaozhou-Shantou Railway in 1903. For me, these exhibits showed how networks of Chinese migrants formed inter-Asian connections that linked port-cities in Southeast Asia and in China. I was hence strongly attracted to the opportunity to focus on the Chinese diaspora as a way to study mobilities that undermined national boundaries by following the journey of migrants from their point of departure.<sup>236</sup>

Reading Eric Tagliacozzo's *Secret Trade, Porous Borders* early on narrowed down my research trajectory.<sup>237</sup> Tagliacozzo's vivid recording of individuals that criss-crossed the Straits of Melaka captivated me, as he detailed a rapidly consolidating border that followed the two colonial states' expanding regimes of surveillance, military enforcement, mapping, and scientific exploration. A particular chapter on the trafficking of human cargo struck me further. Before then, I had not known about unfree labor in Indonesia. As I started surveying recent literature

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<sup>235</sup> I later learned that the dominant Chinese dialect spoken in Penang and Medan shared roots in the Chiangchew sub-dialect, which distinguished the Penang Peranakan from their counterparts in Malacca and Singapore that spoke with Baba Malay. See Hui Yew-Foong, "Peranakan Chinese in Penang and the Region: Evolving Identities and Networks, Special Issue of the Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Volume 82, Part 2, No. 297, December 2009," *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 9, no. 1 (2013): 93–94.

<sup>236</sup> In the fall semester, I had written a paper about trade in early 17<sup>th</sup>-century Vietnam, where I discovered *huiguan* guildhalls in the port city of Hôì An established by Ming refugees from Zhejiang, Guangdong, and Fujian, which provided accommodation for shipwrecked Chinese merchants. I hence became interested in studying institutions of Chinese migration like the native-place association.

<sup>237</sup> Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915* (Yale University Press, 2005).

on the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, I noticed that the literature tended towards studying rich merchants like Cheong Fatt Tze and Tjong A Fie—whom the Qing Dynasty and Chinese revolutionaries alike courted for their capital, business, and political networks—or intellectuals like the scholar Dr. Lim Boon Keng.<sup>238</sup> Studying unfree laborers in Sumatra allowed me to complicate the vilified stereotype of the “rich Chinese” in Indonesia:<sup>239</sup> often explained in survey works on Indonesia as a remnant of the role that Chinese played as economic middlemen between Europeans and native Indonesians.<sup>240</sup> After reading Jan Breman, Karl Pelzer, and Ann L. Stoler’s studies on the tobacco plantations in Deli, and Carl Trocki and James Warren’s work on Chinese laborers in Malaya, I further realized that scholars have produced rich social histories of laborers on each side of the Straits, but largely neglected the connections between the two colonies.<sup>241</sup> A 1970 article by Anthony Reid is unique in its focus on the migration of Chinese laborers from Malaya to Sumatra.<sup>242</sup> Reid’s research offered detailed insights on the mechanics of migration, yet I was still curious about the debates, actors, and negotiations that undergirded the creation of this corridor of movement, as well as the lived experiences of the migrant laborers.

When I left Yale in March 2020, I departed with a desire to trace the laborers’ geographical entanglements across Asia and address these gaps in the literature. I had secured funding from the Council on Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), the Jonathan Edwards Richter Fellowship, the Mellon Research Grant, and the History Department Senior Essay Research

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<sup>238</sup> See Michael R. Godley, *The Mandarin-Capitalists from Nanyang: Overseas Chinese Enterprise in the Modernisation of China 1893-1911* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Godley, “Thio Thiau Siat’s Network,” in *The Rise and Fall of Revenue Farming* (Springer, 1993), 262–66; Wu Xiao An, *Chinese Business in the Making of a Malay State, 1882-1941: Kedah and Penang* (United States: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003); Mark Ravinder Frost, “Emporium in Imperio: Nanyang Networks and the Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819–1914,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 1 (February 2005): 29–66, and Wong Yee Tuan. “Hokkien Merchants and the Kian Teik Tong: Economic and Political Influence in Nineteenth-Century Penang and Its Region.” *Frontiers of History in China* 11, no. 4 (2016): 600–627.

<sup>239</sup> A dangerous stereotype that led to anti-Chinese violence and pogroms, particularly during the May 1998 riots.

<sup>240</sup> Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 140.

<sup>241</sup> For a discussion of Deli, see Jan Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and the Colonial Order in Southeast Asia* (Oxford University Press, 1989), Karl Josef Pelzer, *Planter and Peasant: Colonial Policy and the Agrarian Struggle in East Sumatra 1863-1947* (Springer Netherlands, 1981), Ann Laura Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra’s Plantation Belt, 1870-1979* (University of Michigan Press, 1995). For a social history of Chinese laborers in Singapore see Carl A. Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910* (Cornell University Press, 1990), James Francis Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People’s History of Singapore, 1880-1940* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>242</sup> Anthony Reid, “Early Chinese Migration into North Sumatra,” *Studies in the Social History of China and Southeast Asia*, 1970, 289–320.

Fund. I planned to travel to the National Archives of Singapore, visit sister temples in Penang and Medan apotheosizing the five coolies in Deli, and spend time in the Indonesian National Archives and the National Library. I imagined combing through newspaper sources in Malay, perhaps even finding photographs of laborers hidden in the reports of local administrators.

However, the pandemic worsened and I could not visit archives even in Jakarta. While the CSEAS postponed its funding, the Richter Fund supported my enrollment in a program at University College London teaching Dutch reading comprehension. The basic skills I learned through this course proved to be valuable as none of the Malay sources I had hoped to access in person were digitized, leading me to depend more on colonial sources.<sup>243</sup> The process of translating Dutch and Qing sources in my research was painstaking and time-consuming, but I am grateful for the support of the Council of East Asian Studies language program for seniors, which allowed me to use these sources to undertake my research through a trans-imperial lens.<sup>244</sup>

I began my primary research in English in the colonial records of the Straits Settlements. In the C.O. 273 collection of correspondence, I read over fifty documents I selected based on historian Paul Kratoska's index, and combed through many more, only to find little mention of Chinese emigration to Deli. In the annual reports of the Chinese Protectorate in Singapore, however, I found careful recording of the number of emigrants that left the Straits Settlements for Deli each year, along with occasional comments about laborers being "kidnapped" to the Dutch colonies and the competition between Deli and Straits planters to acquire labor. The 1876 Inquiry Commission and the 1890 Labor Commission reports offered the most promising leads. Deli was very much present in the officials' questions and the witnesses' answers. In addition, digitized newspaper collections at the National Library of Singapore allowed me to find everyday

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<sup>243</sup> I am also grateful to Professor Fabian Drixler's encouragement for me to use Dutch primary sources early on, while I was drafting my grant applications and wanted to focus on the English language sources that I was more comfortable with.

<sup>244</sup> In addition to Chinese classes at Yale, I had spent a summer studying Chinese at Beijing Normal University and tried to write a historical research paper using Chinese sources on the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom History Museum in Professor Denise Ho's research seminar.

instances of “kidnapping.” A weekly column on “Deli News” in the Straits Times further affirmed that actors in the Straits were cognizant of and interested in events in Deli. I noticed that concerns over “crimping” increased the Straits government’s anxieties over the fluid movement of Chinese migrants. Reading these materials in conjunction with Adam McKeown’s work on practices of immigration control emerging out of the management of Chinese migrants in the United States, I realized that the institutions of migrant surveillance that took shape along the Straits of Melaka had reified the process of border production that Tagliacozzo described.<sup>245</sup>

My initial attempts to search for Dutch materials were less successful. Inspired by Eric Tagliacozzo and Oiyen Liu’s call to employ materials at the National Archives of Indonesia—rather than collections in the Netherlands—to write transnational histories of the region,<sup>246</sup> I was excited to employ the archive’s scanning and photocopy service during the pandemic. Yet, the archive did not retain papers from the Residency of the East Coast of Sumatra, and the slow process it took to request the files I was interested in (a month for five documents) along with a limit to view only ten percent of each folder forced me to shift to digital collections instead.<sup>247</sup>

Discoveries at Leiden University’s collections and Yale’s own libraries expanded my research scope to another set of inter-Asian ties between the Netherlands Indies and China.<sup>248</sup> I found reports written by the Dutch sinologist Hoetink, a missive from the Dutch Consul General Haver Droeze stationed in Hong Kong, and publications from Dutch officials and planters in Deli. The imperial formation of this new corridor of migration complicated my initial impression that Chinese migration remained largely under Chinese control in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-

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<sup>245</sup> Adam M. McKeown, *Melanchoy Order*, (Columbia University Press, 2008). McKeown’s broader work was also instructive, “Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842 to 1949,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 1999, 306–37, “Chinese Emigration in Global Context, 1850–1940,” *Journal of Global History* 5, no. 1 (March 2010): 95–124, and *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, and Hawaii 1900-1936* (University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>246</sup> Oiyen Liu and Eric Tagliacozzo, “The National Archives (Jakarta) and the Writing of Transnational Histories of Indonesia,” *Itinerario* 32, no. 1 (March 2008): 81–94.

<sup>247</sup> I was able to obtain several fascinating documents approving the banishment of criminalized Chinese men from the Straits Settlements to the Netherlands Indies, and vice versa, along with their pictures and descriptors.

<sup>248</sup> I would like to think that many of the documents I surprisingly found at Yale were a remnant of Karl Pelzer’s studies on Deli. Karl Pelzer was a faculty member at Yale from 1947 until his retirement in 1977, and he was one of the founding directors of the Council on Southeast Asia Studies. Interestingly, these documents were not housed in Manuscripts and Archives, but at Yale’s library shelving facility in Hamden, CT.

century. A commemorative book issued on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Deli Planters Association in 1929 and a 1904 book by Johann Hendrick Bool celebrated, and offered careful details of, planter efforts to recruit laborers directly from China. I also found a 1909 book written by the Governor of Sumatra's East Coast, L.H.W. Sandick, on global Chinese emigration. Its appendix included a copy of the regulations maintained by the Immigration Bureau in Deli and excerpts from annual reports dealing with the Chinese population on Sumatra's East Coast. In the process of editing my draft, I had to cut my analysis of reports written by diplomats and sinologists like Haver Droeze and Hamel, which detailed how Deli planters attempted to add new nodes to this circuit of migration.<sup>249</sup> In the end, I focused on a few key sources that illustrate how Deli planters struggled to wrestle control of Chinese migration away from Straits officials and Chinese brokers, as I desired to complicate previous narratives of the coolie trade to Deli as purely a colonial affair and instead highlight the agency of brokers.

While reading these materials, I was reminded of historian Shelly Chan's book, *Diaspora's Homeland*, which argued that indentured migration to the Americas ushered China's transition into a Western-led system of nation-states.<sup>250</sup> I could see these same patterns reflected in the sources from Leiden and Yale, which detailed Qing officials engaging Dutch and German envoys in concurrent dialogues about consular protection and labor recruitment. The few works that exist, such as Yen Ching-Hwang's survey, have focused on the broad strokes of the Qing's diplomatic efforts, rather than the language of sovereignty and protection apparent in the Qing's correspondence.<sup>251</sup> Paying attention to the particularities of this language showed how the

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<sup>249</sup> F.J. Haver Droeze, "Reis Naar Deli van Consul Haver Droeze," Hong Kong, 1900 and Hamel, G.A. van. "De Ordonnantien Tot Regeling van de Rechtsverhouding Tusschen Werkgevers En Werklieden in Sommige Gewesten van Nederlandsch-Indië En Hare Toepasselijk-Verklaring Voor Java." [Den Haag]: Indisch genootschap, 1892.

<sup>250</sup> Shelly Chan, *Diaspora's Homeland: Modern China in the Age of Global Migration* (Duke University Press, 2018). My journey tracking the Chinese labor migrant across the digital archives hence mirrored my discovery of them in disparate fields of scholarship. The Chinese laborer in Sumatra appeared in books and articles published in fields ranging from Indonesian studies (Jan Breman, Karl Pelzer, Anthony Reid, Ann Stoler), Dutch studies (Koois Kuiper, Frans van Dongen), studies of China and its diaspora (Philip Kuhn, Yen Ching-Hwang, Robert Irick, Adam McKeown, Shelly Chan), and colonial Singapore and Malaya (Carl Trocki, James Warren).

<sup>251</sup> Frans-Paul van der Putten, "Small Powers and Imperialism: The Netherlands in China, 1886–1905." *Itinerario* 20, no. 1 (1996): 115–31 and Yen Ching-Hwang, *Coolies and Mandarins: China's Protection of Overseas Chinese during the Late Ch'ing Period (1851-1911)* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, National University of Singapore, 1985).

patterns Chan identified in the coolie trade to Cuba and Peru also applied to labor migration to Deli in the Netherlands Indies.

I thus ventured into Chinese primary sources through published collections of records related to Qing foreign relations and the Qing embassy in Germany used in Yen Ching-Hwang's landmark research on late imperial China and indentured labor.<sup>252</sup> These texts included reports from Qing officials who visited Deli in 1886, petitions from the official Li Mian and the Batavia merchant Chen Shi Lin, and memorials from Zhang Zhidong.<sup>253</sup> But some of these texts proved to be unreadable and difficult to transcribe. Fortunately, I was able to find additional documents in Academia Sinica's digital collections. There, I found more correspondence between provincial administrators, as well as reports by the Zongli Yamen engaging with Dutch representatives. I searched for mentions of these events in the Netherlands Indies press through the Koninklijke Bibliotheek's Delpher database, and discovered Dutch commentary on the Qing envoy's visit in 1886 and the Qing's push for consular protection in the 1900s. While I was unable to include many of these sources in my final draft, I chose to discuss those that overtly illustrated themes of sovereignty, allowing me to extend Chan's analysis of the Americas to Southeast Asia.

A question hung over my head throughout this process: where can I find the coolie speak?<sup>254</sup> As I worked my way through the documents, I slowly found fragments where I could catch glimpses of the lived experience of the laborers both in the Middle Passage and in their destination. The Chinese Protector in Singapore included police interviews of migrants in his report on "kidnapping." I transcribed an unpublished handwritten memorandum by the colonial official J. Stecher that offered details about the actions of *laoke* middlemen in Shantou. I also discovered unique sources such as a 1979 collection of oral histories of Chinese laborers in Deli,

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<sup>252</sup> Yen, Ching-Hwang, *Coolies and Mandarins: China's Protection of Overseas Chinese during the Late Ch'ing Period (1851-1911)* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, National University of Singapore, 1985).

<sup>253</sup> Liu Xihong, ed. *Zhude Shiguan Dangan Zhao* [*Archives of the Embassy in Germany*] (Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng Shuju, 1966), and Wang Xiyin, ed. *Qingji Waijiao Shiliao* [Historical Materials of Qing Foreign Relations], 1932.

<sup>254</sup> In the introduction to *Taming The Coolie Beast*, Jan Breman lamented the difficulty of constructing a history of Deli laborers "from the bottom up," as no memoirs like those of the Vietnamese rubber laborer Tran Tu Binh existed in Sumatra. Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast*, 11.

richly illustrated photobooks, Wolfgang Franke and Claudine Salmon's published photographs of Chinese epigraphic materials from temples and cemeteries in Sumatra, and the 1894 novel *Bright Celestials*.<sup>255</sup> While I planned to also examine the laborers' experience of the Middle Passage, since I found sources like the medical inspector Kuenen's report discussing conditions on board migrant ships, I decided to omit those sections in my editorial process, as it required an extensive discussion that was not central to the arguments of my three chapters.

Studies of migration are replete with metaphors of grooves, flows, corridors, networks, and webs. One of my essay's aims is to bring these metaphors to life through the stories of laborers who migrated from southern China to Sumatra. It became clear that the migrant's own lived reality was enmeshed with multiple imperial projects in colonial Asia. Throughout my research, I am inspired by emerging scholarship that studies inter-imperial networks and oceanic histories.<sup>256</sup> In a recent volume, Kristin Hoganson and Jay Sexton call for "connected histories of empire" that traced imperial circuits beyond the British, grasping at networks from their "fine-grained constituent parts."<sup>257</sup> As Sunil Amrith has noted, the journey of diasporas provide a useful basis for studying such narratives.<sup>258</sup> Through such a framework, I discovered that the corridor of Chinese migration to Deli was a space with multiple orders of meaning, a palimpsest that revealed the migrant's own agency, but also the uneven and intersecting political, economic, and cultural changes wrought by a multiplicity of historical actors in late imperial Asia.

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<sup>255</sup> Yuzun Liu, ed., *Zhuzai Huagong Fangwen Lu*, (Guangzhou: Zhongshan Daxue Dongnanya Lishi Yanjiusuo, 1979). A team of four professors from Sun Yat-sen University and Xiamen University visited an overseas Chinese farm in Yangjian County, Guangdong in 1963 and interviewed exiled returnees who had left for Indonesia as contract laborers. Inspired by the potential of using novels as a source, I also surveyed Queeny Chang's memoir (daughter of Major Tjong A Fie) and Madelon Szekeley-Lulofs's fiction novels about life on the rubber plantation in Deli. These latter works provided vital insight into elite life in colonial Medan, but contained little about the coolies.

<sup>256</sup> I was also inspired by approaches on inter-imperial microregions in Jeppe Mulich, *In a Sea of Empires: Networks and Crossings in the Revolutionary Caribbean*, (Cambridge University Press, 2020), on the intersection of legal history and the Indian Ocean in Renisa Mawani, *Across Oceans of Law: The Komagata Maru and Jurisdiction in the Time of Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018) and Nurfadzilah Yahaya, *Fluid Jurisdictions: Colonial Law and Arabs in Southeast Asia*, Cornell University Press, 2020, and on maritime history in Lauren Benton and Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, *A World at Sea: Maritime Practices and Global History* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020) and David Armitage, Alison Bashford, and Sujit Sivasundaram, eds., *Oceanic Histories*, (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>257</sup> Kristin L. Hoganson and Jay Sexton, eds., *Crossing Empires*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 7 and 12.

<sup>258</sup> Sunil Amrith, "Empires, Diasporas and Cultural Circulation," in *Writing Imperial Histories*, edited by Andrew S. Thompson, 216–39, Manchester University Press, 2013.

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