

Ming Govaars, *Dutch Colonial Education: The Chinese Experience in Indonesia, 1900–1942*. Translated by Lorre Lynn Trytten. Singapore: Chinese Heritage Centre, 2005. 273 pages.

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Thanks to the Chinese Heritage Centre of Singapore for publishing this work, based on meticulous reading of the archives and other sources, in a good English translation.¹ The tale of how the Chinese minority in the Netherlands Indies successfully pressured the government to establish publicly subsidized Western education for Chinese children has been told elsewhere. Here, Ming Govaars presents the full picture, including details of bureaucratic infighting supported by newspaper accounts, statistics, photographs, and results.

First, the book introduces the reader to the Chinese community in the Indies and offers a brief review of early educational opportunities among the Chinese there. Next it shows how the beginning of Tiong Hoa Hwe Koan (THHK) and other modern Chinese schools, and the influence of Chinese nationalism, forced the colonialists finally to open the first Dutch–Chinese school (Hollands–Chinese school, HCS) in 1908. The elite of the locally oriented, non-Chinese-speaking *peranakans* soon moved their children there (and sometimes to schools intended for Dutch children). The THHK and similar schools remained numerically more important and continued to serve both *totok* Chinese, who were China-oriented and Chinese-speaking, and many less wealthy *peranakans* as well.

A theme that recurs throughout the book is the wish of Chinese parents, whether *peranakan* or *totok*, that their children learn Mandarin, even in Dutch schools. The Chinese-language schools met this wish; they used Mandarin as the language of instruction (although this language was often foreign to its beginning pupils). In contrast, the Dutch schools—HCS, where the teachers were predominantly European—not only used Dutch as a language of instruction, but held to the curriculum of the European schools, which was strictly oriented to the Netherlands's system of education, leaving no room for classes that might teach Mandarin as an additional foreign language. The only Asian element in the HCS, in fact, was the pupils themselves, who were transported by the schools into an environment that had little or nothing to do with their own heritage.

The colonial authorities stubbornly refused to alter the plan of study to allow for Chinese lessons. It is somewhat ironic to find *peranakans* demanding a right to instruction in their “mother tongue,” when most of them spoke Malay or Javanese in family circles. Some schools tried to give extra-curricular instruction after hours, but learning Mandarin is not a part-time activity, as the children and the elders soon realized. Would results have been better if Mandarin had been a required subject, given the heavy load of other requirements of the system? The author seems to be in doubt.

¹M. T. N. Govaars-Tjia, *Hollands Onderwijs in een koloniale samenleving: De Chinese ervaring in Indonesië 1900–1942*, dissertation (Leiden: University of Leiden, 1999). See my review in *Archipel* 62 (2001): 212–213.

An unusual aspect of the HCS story is the teachers' academy (Hollands–Chinese *kweekschool*), founded in 1917, to bring ethnic Chinese teachers into the system (and, by paying them less than European teachers, to save money). As a gesture, the academy offered some instruction in Mandarin, but it proved difficult to find capable teachers. Although there was no fee or tuition to attend the academy, and several dozen graduates completed the program, few of them actually became teachers. The male graduates sought better-paying jobs. The women often left to start families. As Govaars points out, this was not due to a lack of gratitude or loyalty on the part of the Chinese who failed to assume the responsibility of teaching. Rather, it was a political failure on the part of the government to pay better salaries.

Finally, this work looks at the situation of the majority of Chinese children who attended no school at all. Curiously, the suggestion that “Malay–Chinese schools” be provided for this group, modeled on native Malay schools, aroused a storm of protest from community leaders and from the press about “cut rate” and “inferior” education. In the end, only a few of these Indonesia-centered elementary schools were available, instructing some two thousand pupils. Meanwhile, as many as eleven thousand ethnic Chinese children attended “native” schools before the fallout from World War II changed everything.

The book also speculates about resinification and what it calls the “neo-Chinese Movement” in the 1930s. The background to this change in orientation among the *peranakans* included the problems of the Depression, increased economic competition, lower colonial expenditures for education, and, of course, the Japanese advances in China. Finally, the author refutes the often-repeated assertion that *peranakans* who had lost their (Chinese) language were therefore a people without a culture.

In the end, “colonial education” may be an oxymoron, especially if we contrast the ideal of “education” (universal, cosmopolitan, and uplifting) with the ethnocentric, utilitarian, and manipulative approach of the colonial administration. Although many individuals gained greatly from having access to Western education on the Dutch model, and others profited from Western education on a Chinese model, its meaning for Indonesia was not as salutary. Or, as Wang Gungwu puts it in his introduction to this edition, “The tragedy was that, in that struggle to gain influence and advantage, most of the *totok* and *peranakan* were not prepared for yet another possible outcome, the ultimate victory of the indigenous nationalists...”