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# YAP THIAM HIEN AND ACEH

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*Editor's Note:* This article is actually the first chapter of a biography of Yap Thiam Hien which Daniel Lev had almost completed when he died on July 29, 2006. Arlene Lev has kindly given us permission to publish it here in her husband's memory, pending the eventual publication of the entire manuscript. We take this occasion to inform readers that the next issue of *Indonesia* will contain a special In Memoriam for Dan Lev, written by his friend Goenawan Mohamad.

Yap Thiam Hien (1913-1989) was a lawyer and human rights activist. He was a founding member of the Badan Permusyawaratan Kewarga-Negeraan Indonesia (Baperki) and a major proponent of strengthening the rule of law in Indonesia. He defended the unpopular former foreign minister, Subandrio, in the Mahmillub [Military Tribunal-Extraordinary] trials in 1966 and was a firm advocate of the full legal equality of Chinese Indonesians. He was closely involved in the Legal Aid Institute (LBH, Lembaga Bantuan Hukum) and in nearly every major national project of legal reform or defense of human rights in Indonesia. He was the first recipient of the Justice William J. Brennan award for the defense of Human Rights.

Ask just about anyone who knew Yap Thiam Hien and soon you will be told that what accounted for his character is that he was from Aceh. Indonesia's ethnic variety makes for this kind of easy, stereotypical generalization. Javanese are soft-spoken, subtle, manipulative, and sophisticated masters of compromise. Minangkabau (from West Sumatra) are business-like traders, while north-Sumatran Bataks are tough, vulgar, and self-serving. Acehnese, from the northern-most tip of Sumatra, are devoutly Islamic, stubborn, independent, and given to violence. Yap Thiam Hien was indeed stubborn, uncompromising, blunt, principled, and outspoken; so it must be, of course, because he was from Aceh. Occasionally, in lighter vein but also with a note of pride, Yap explained himself in the same way.

If only it were so. As tempting as these simple-minded formulae are, they fall apart in no time under even mildly rigorous questioning. If Aceh explains Yap Thiam Hien, why aren't there more Yap Thiam Hiens, whether ethnically Chinese or ethnically

Acehnese, from Aceh? Or for that matter—since Yap’s qualities are sometimes attributed to (or blamed on) his Christianity—why aren’t there many more Indonesian Christians like him? The questions provoke puzzled silence.

It is not that Aceh is unimportant to explaining Yap Thiam Hien. It is in fact critically important, but not in the simplistic terms of cultural style that most people mean. Actually, he did not have all that much to do with stereotypical Aceh or Acehnese—not enough so, in any event, to have had a profound influence on him. Where he grew up, in Kutaradja (now Banda Aceh, the capital of the province), which could as well have been the title of this chapter, the majority of the population then were, like himself, Chinese. He did not speak Acehnese, or even a Chinese language, as it happens, but rather Malay and Dutch. His education, from start to finish, was Dutch. And to make matters more complex, the woman who cared for and deeply influenced him after his own mother died was a Japanese immigrant. So much for the Aceh factor.

Yet, in other ways, Aceh’s influence explains a great deal about Yap Thiam Hien. That he was born there means, obliquely, that he was not from Java, which dominated the colony and now dominates the independent state. He was always an outsider, in some ways even a stranger, to the intricate networks of family associations and power in the Javanese center. And, of course, Aceh is where he grew up until age thirteen. The earliest formative influences on him, from family and education, were obviously from there. Those influences make sense, however, only with the help of some light shed by the history into which Yap was born. It is a mistake to try to understand him simply as a Chinese, but it is impossible to understand him without attention to the flow of Chinese immigration, the structure of the ethnic Chinese community, and the colonial state that established the conditions of Chinese existence in the Netherlands–Indies. There is no need here to recapitulate the entire history of the Chinese minority in Indonesia, but a few brief comments will help.<sup>1</sup>

By the middle of the nineteenth century, when Yap Thiam Hien’s great-great grandfather arrived on the island of Bangka, Chinese communities in Indonesia already had a long history that gave them a distinctly Indonesian cast with its own coloration and fault lines. Chinese were relatively secure but not altogether comfortable in the Netherlands–Indies. Unlike Thailand, where the absorption of Chinese immigrants was eased by ethnic and religious affinity and not obstructed by a European-dominated state, in Indonesia the immigrants were decidedly different in an ethnically Malay society and predominantly (though often superficially) Islamic setting; and where colonial authority surrounded them. Unlike Malaysia, where large numbers of Chinese immigrants—eventually enough to make up about 33 percent of the population—could protect themselves adequately, in Indonesia they only constituted about 3 or 4 percent—though maybe more, for a precise and persuasive estimate is hard to come by—and so were always vulnerable. They fit into the colonial economy of the Netherlands–Indies, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, as a superior source of hard-working talent to perform particular jobs that the Dutch were not

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<sup>1</sup> For a voluminous new, detailed, and interesting description and interpretation of ethnic Chinese as they were enveloped into Indonesian history, see Benny G. Setiono, *Tionghoa dalam Pusaran Politik* (Chinese in the vortex of politics) (Jakarta: Elkasa, 2003). For a much shorter but useful introduction to ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, see G. William Skinner, “The Chinese Minority,” in *Indonesia*, ed. Ruth T. McVey (New Haven, CT: Yale Southeast Asian Studies and HRAF, 1963), pp. 97–117.

interested in (so-called middlemen roles), but which, by colonial logic, were best denied to indigenous Indonesians. As a minority—since the mid-nineteenth century legally classified as “Foreign Orientals,” as were the smaller groups of Arabs, Indians, and Japanese until early in the twentieth century—Chinese were intrinsically vulnerable and dependent on Dutch goodwill. They were never popular with the Dutch, who found them useful but not likeable. They had always to be kept in their place. In 1740 Chinese had been brutally massacred by Dutch and indigenous bands in Batavia (now Jakarta) and elsewhere along the north coast of Java. Few such reminders were necessary.

Although conveniently conceived by the Dutch and most Indonesians as an undifferentiated aggregate, the Chinese were, of course, diverse (like minorities nearly everywhere), with their own elongated class structure and cultural cleavages. They were divided not only by provincial Chinese origins, languages, and customs, but also more deeply by the extent of their adaptation in Indonesia. Like most immigrants anywhere, the longer they stayed the more likely they were to assimilate and acculturate. By the nineteenth century, a distinct stratum had long since emerged of acculturated *peranakan*—“children of the land,” or *baba*, as they were usually called in Sumatra as in Malaya across the straits. As Chinese women did not begin to join the men until relatively late, many immigrants married Indonesian women, indicating perhaps that local prejudice needed time, encouragement, and the right conditions to flourish. Some Chinese probably were absorbed into an Indonesian genetic stream. Many others who were not gradually drifted into local cultural streams, assimilating local values and norms, relinquishing Chinese roots (though not necessarily identity) and putting down new ones in local history and language. The Indonesian Chinese *peranakan* was as different from Chinese elsewhere as the American Jew was from Jews elsewhere or the French Armenian from Armenians elsewhere.

By contrast, new immigrants, called *totok* (full blood or newcomer) in Indonesian or *singkeh* (“new guest,” Mandarin *xinke*), as always came fully equipped with rich memories of the homeland, mainly Kwantung and Fukien provinces, and their Hokkien, Hakka, and other languages. They remained *totok* beyond the first and second generations so long as these memories and the language lasted. Between *peranakan* and *totok*, the one deracinated but at home and the other with identity intact but essentially foreign, tension was inevitable. Looking down (on) and up (to) at the same time cannot be easy, but it is a discomfort with which distinct generations of immigrants everywhere have no doubt learned to live.

The differences between *peranakan* and *totok* were social and economic as well as cultural, and became increasingly so in the twentieth century as new educational and career opportunities became available. The more recent immigrant, limited by language and connections, was more likely to feel restricted to whatever money-making opportunities there were. This usually meant opening a shop of some sort, which, with ability and luck, might develop into something more profitable. Despite the myth of Chinese business acumen, many never made it beyond the cart or small store. By contrast, the *peranakan*, equipped with Javanese, say, and Malay and possibly Dutch, eventually had a wider range of choices. He (and in time she) could imagine becoming a doctor or lawyer or clerk or teacher as well as a shop owner or

businessman. For some, once this happened (in about the 1910s), it became almost a matter of pride not to be good at trading, the mark of the *totok* Chinese.

Like other ethnic groups in the colony, the Chinese were governed indirectly and at minimal cost to the Dutch administration. Basic patterns of indirect rule were established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by the Dutch East India Company, the private ancestor of the colony that was formally created in the early nineteenth century after the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars. The governing principle was that “like should rule like,” with each ethnic community administered by its own leadership: Europeans by the Dutch, Javanese by Javanese, Chinese by Chinese, Arabs by Arabs, and so on. Through the agency of separate ethnic elites, for each of which a mutually advantageous relationship was fashioned, the Dutch governed the whole. Indirect rule over Java, the heartland of the country, was predicated on a political alliance between the Dutch and the Javanese royal houses and the *priyayi* aristocracy. The same pattern basically held elsewhere as Dutch power penetrated the rest of the archipelago.

As Chinese immigrants had no obvious governing class, the Dutch created one for them. *Officiëren*—with military ranks of *majoor*, *kapitein*, and *luitenant*, depending on the importance of the locale and the community—were appointed by the colonial authorities to administer to Chinese needs according to Dutch requirements. These Chinese *officiëren* were not of the same order of importance as the Javanese bureaucratic aristocracy, or of indigenous elites elsewhere, because in the colonial scheme of things the Chinese were considered to be fundamentally less important. Conceived as intermediaries between the Dutch and the Chinese, *officiëren* were intended to: maintain order in their communities, make sure that Dutch orders were carried out, inform the administration about affairs in the Chinese zones, and represent their communities to the colonial government.<sup>2</sup>

Williams has argued that the *officiëren* barely deserve consideration as instruments of indirect rule.<sup>3</sup> By the twentieth century, indeed, the institution had begun to collapse, losing the respect of Chinese communities and the economic perquisites and political support once supplied by the colonial administration. When the *officiëren* disappeared with the colony, they had long since ceased to exercise any real authority. Still, they meant a good deal until early in the century, a point of some importance here because Yap Thiam Hien belonged to the family of an *officier*. *Officiëren* were influential enough because the colonial government relied on them and they reaped huge benefits as a result. They did not have the status of indigenous rulers, and so were not treated as respectfully, but they received no less by way of advantage. Local aristocracies were compensated, for their services to the colony, with guarantees of their political positions and social status. The Chinese *officiëren* were granted *pachten*, monopolies, over the immensely profitable opium trade, for example, and other commercial opportunities. Like ethnic Indonesian elites, the *officiëren* were accorded special privileges of legal status and access to superior Dutch education.

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<sup>2</sup> On the *officiëren*, see Lea E. Williams, *Overseas Chinese Nationalism: The Genesis of the Pan-Chinese Movement in Indonesia, 1900–1916* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1960), pp. 124ff and *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

As new strata of educated Indonesians, including Chinese Indonesians, began to come into their own and to think about change early in the twentieth century, privileged elites came under attack. Indigenous aristocracies, the Javanese *priyayi* particularly, had no difficulty surviving, because they were essential to the Dutch and no one doubted their authority among the peasant majority. The *officiëren* had no such advantage. Before the turn of the century, their dealings in opium had turned especially odious among Dutch reformers, so that this monopoly, among others, soon was taken over by the colonial administration.<sup>4</sup> More than anything else, it was the loss of these financial benefits that destroyed the institution of *officiëren*. Thereafter the colonial administration tried to revive it with various incentives, some of them shallow and silly, but it declined steadily.<sup>5</sup> There was too little popular Chinese support to shore up the *officiëren*, who were, after all, the servants of an administration not obviously sympathetic to the Chinese, and whose services were no longer all that useful to many and were irritating to others. *Peranakan* and *singkeh* alike, affected by the nationalist wave emanating from China, contemptuously lumped the *officiëren* together with zoning laws and travel restrictions as humiliations imposed on the Chinese. A Dutch journalist, Henri Borel, distinguished between the officers of Java and the outer islands, challenging the former because they were *peranakan* and therefore no longer authentic Chinese, while the latter, to his mind, were more legitimate precisely because they were mainly *singkeh*.<sup>6</sup> While Borel's point reveals some odd thinking about who was Chinese, it also calls attention to the important differences between the Chinese of Java and the other islands, only one of which, Sumatra, interests us here. In Java, as Dutch authority and economic control were consolidated, the Chinese population stabilized under the domination of long-time resident *peranakan* families well known in Javanese society and Dutch administrative circles. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Chinese immigration to Java had slowed. Outside of Java, where Dutch power began to extend rapidly in the second half of the nineteenth century, new Chinese immigration followed suit as the Dutch sought workers for the plantations of East Sumatra and the tin mines of Bangka and Belitung (Billiton), islands off the eastern coast. At the same time, immigrants were pouring into western Malaya, also to mine tin, and Singapore.

The resulting demographic changes were less significant for Indonesia than for the British colony to the north, but they were important. In 1860, of the 222,000 Chinese resident in Indonesia, 67.6 percent were in Java. By 1895 the total had increased to 469,000, of whom 54.6 percent lived in Java and 45.4 percent in outer Indonesia, with 33.9 percent of the total in Sumatra. In 1920, of the 809,000 Chinese in Indonesia, only 47.5 percent were in Java; 52.5 percent were in the other islands, with 37.6 percent of

<sup>4</sup> On Chinese revenue farming, see Williams, *Overseas Chinese Nationalism*, pp. 24ff. In exchange for the monopolies, which started during the East Indies Company (VOC) period, before the onset of the nineteenth century, the revenue farmers paid licensing fees to the Dutch administration. By the time the monopolies—opium, above all—came under challenge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the colonial administration was well enough organized to regulate the private economy without resorting to private monopolies.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126–28. Once the monopolies were removed, the administration considered paying salaries to the *officiëren*, but decided against it on the grounds that the wrong men might be attracted.

<sup>6</sup> Henri Borel, *De Chineezzen in Nederlandsch-Indië* (Amsterdam: L. J. Veen, 1900), pp. 33–41. The pieces in this book were originally published in Indies newspapers.

the total in Sumatra.<sup>7</sup> The numbers of new migrants to outer Indonesia never lent them influence to match that of ethnic Chinese in Java, from whom they were distinguished in other ways as well. Chinese migrants to outer Indonesia spread out over much larger areas and were economically more diverse—miners, plantation workers, farmers, and fishermen, as well as small shop owners and substantial businessmen.<sup>8</sup> Many were more oriented to the Chinese communities of Penang, Singapore, and the Malayan mainland, where some had recently settled relatives, than to the established *peranakan* groups of Java. Because of the speed and concentration of the new migration, it may be that outer island *singkeh* underwent a slower metamorphosis into *baba* than did those who had preceded them in Java. The outcome was also different, to the extent that the cultural habits they absorbed were as different from those of Java as the local languages were different from Javanese. The process, however, as the Yap family history demonstrates, followed a more or less common pattern.

### Family Background

Yap Thiam Hien's paternal great-great-grandfather joined the exodus from south China in about 1844. In Chinese kinship the paternal line counts for more than the maternal, so that no one in the Yap family remembers much at all about the mother's side. As it happens, not much is known either about the great-great-grandfather himself. In the family tree sketched by Thiam Hien's father in the late 1940s, he has no name. But he was a Hakka from the interior of Kwantung province, the district of Moyan, sub-district Lo-yi. He settled, after the voyage, in Baturusa, on Bangka Island. What exactly he did there is unclear, for while thousands of Chinese had come as contract laborers to work in the tin mines, many soon grew pepper instead or fished or took up trades or opened shops. In Baturusa he soon married a local Indonesian woman, as nameless as he, by whom he shortly had four children—three sons and a daughter. The name of the daughter is also unknown, but the three sons, in order, were Yap A Kang, Yap A Piang, and Yap A Sin (also known as Yap Sin Tjhong). This third son, Yap A Sin, was Thiam Hien's great-grandfather. Born in Baturusa in 1849, he was evidently a capable and ambitious man, tough and courageous enough to move on in search of better opportunities. It was he who established the family anew in Aceh. Exactly how and when he got there is not clear, but the move greatly improved the family fortunes.

Aceh was not a particularly hospitable or promising place for Chinese, few of whom settled there before the 1870s. The Acehnese apparently were not eager to have new foreigners take root, and traders could ply the region without moving in. Aceh was thought to be unhealthy—though where was it not then? By the last third of the century, moreover, political tension in the area finally broke out into a thirty-year war as the Dutch sought, successfully but not easily, to incorporate Aceh definitively into the Netherlands-Indies. The Dutch presence created more attractive conditions for

<sup>7</sup> See Skinner, "The Chinese Minority," Table 2 at p. 100.

<sup>8</sup> On the nineteenth century Chinese immigration to outer Indonesia, see Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia*, second edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 419–34; W. J. Cator, *The Economic Position of the Chinese in the Netherlands Indies* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1936), pp. 127ff.

Chinese. Traders from Penang had been active in Aceh, but few were willing to take up residence until the Dutch began actively to encourage them with land and opium revenues in the 1870s. In the early 1880s, Acehese attacks on Chinese immigrants encouraged many of them to leave again.<sup>9</sup>

In 1875 the Dutch had little success in recruiting indentured labor from China, but in 1876 had more luck with labor contractors in Penang and Muntok, in Bangka. At about the same time, the Dutch administration appointed a Chinese *kapitein*.<sup>10</sup> In about 1874 Yap A Sin married the daughter of *kapitein* Tjoe Ten Hin of Kutaradja, capital of Aceh. Tjoe Ten Hin was originally from Pontianak, in west Borneo, where the Dutch evidently preferred to recruit their earliest Chinese officers for Aceh from the well-established and relatively autonomous Chinese community there. The *Kapitein's* daughter, Tjoe Koei Yin (1857–1915), was born in west Borneo. How she came upon Yap A Sin is not clear, though it may have been arranged by an intermediary in search of a husband to suit a fairly well off young woman. If so, this may mean that Yap A Sin had already established himself as a success in Baturusa, perhaps as a labor contractor. As such he would have been known to Dutch officials and to the Tjoe family in Aceh.

Whatever the case, Yap A Sin and his new wife apparently lived for a short time in Baturusa, where their first-born son, Yap Joen Khoy, Thiam Hien's grandfather, was born in 1875. Soon thereafter they moved to Kutaradja, where Yap A Sin at length succeeded to the lieutenantancy, a position earlier held by Tjoe Ten Hin's son (and Koei Yin's older brother), Tjoe Lim Tzoy. The latter may have died without a brother to take his place, into which Yap A Sin stepped.

Kutaradja then was small but growing and gathering facilities because of the long Dutch war of conquest. Dutch civil and military administrations were established there, working out of the old Sultan's palace, along with a substantial garrison of troops. There was a new mosque, consecrated in 1881, but also a new Christian church, which was allowed by the authorities for the benefit of those Dutch and indigenous officials who were brought in to administer the war (and such peace as there was). There were also Dutch-language schools.

By the 1890s Kutaradja already had a tramline and telegraph, and limited telephone service—mainly, no doubt, for military purposes. The population, however, though growing, was still small. In 1896, apart from the military camps, there were 4,799 city residents, of whom 2,427 were Chinese. There were 1,854 ethnic Indonesians. These were mainly Acehese, but also included Minangkabau from West Sumatra—one of the mature Yap Thiam Hien's close friends, Jamaluddin Datuk Singomangkuto,

<sup>9</sup> J. Langhout, *The Economic Conquest of Acheen by the Dutch* (The Hague, 1924). I am grateful to Anthony Reid for calling my attention to this source and for making other information from his files available to me.

<sup>10</sup> Communication from Anthony Reid, November 2, 1986, whose sources were from English and Dutch archives. On political conditions at the time, see Anthony Reid, *The Contest for North Sumatra: Atjeh, the Netherlands and Britain 1858–1898* (London: Oxford University Press and University of Malaya Press, 1969). I have no information on the early Chinese *officieren* in Aceh, though it may be available in colonial archives, but the first or at least an early *kapitein* may have been Hsieh Yung-kuang (1848–1916), a Hakka born in Pontianak. Hsieh traded successfully in Aceh and would have been there at about the time the Dutch were trying to encourage immigration. He lost interest in Aceh, however, and moved his commercial interests to Penang—not an unusual story. See Yen Ching Hwang, *The Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 272–73.

was a Minangkabau who grew up in Aceh and went to school with Thiam Hien's younger brother. In addition, there were east Sumatrans, Ambonese, Javanese, and Menadonese, among others, many of whom worked for the government. Among the rest were 158 Europeans (mainly officials), 22 Arabs, and 338 other "foreign orientals," presumably Indians, Arabs, and Japanese.<sup>11</sup> As in other cities in the colony, each ethnic group had its own quarter, a *wijk*, which in the case of the Chinese particularly was something like but not quite a ghetto. The *wijk* was headed by an unpaid but influential *wijkmeester*, who was responsible for registrations, travel passes, and other administrative matters affecting the community. The Chinese *wijkmeester* in Kutaradja during Thiam Hien's early years was his grandfather, Yap Joen Khoy.

Through the early 1910s the family was well off, one of the wealthiest in Kutaradja, though by standards in Java or such major Sumatran commercial centers as Medan and Palembang the family's lifestyle might well be described as "provincial." The population was too small to generate an immense fortune, though inter-island and foreign trade (in copra, for example) helped. Yap A Sin's most substantial income may have come from the opium monopoly or some share of it, depending on his relationship with the *kapitein*, his father-in-law, about whom I have little information. But he also had a coconut plantation, fish ponds, and no doubt other ventures. He and his large house, very imposing as his great-great-grandchildren remember it, were the hub of the family's existence. At this house the numerous members of the family would gather on Sundays. Thiam Hien, as the eldest son of an eldest son, was privileged to enter Yap A Sin's bedroom, where he witnessed the old man's preparation of opium for smoking.

Yap A Sin's business manager was his first son, Yap Joen Khoy (1875–1919), the *wijkmeester*, who lived in another substantial house owned by his father on the same short street. (Still another house on this street was owned by a wealthy trading family, the Hoans, into which Thiam Hien's father, Yap Sin Eng, married.) Thiam Hien spent his first years in this house, where his parents lived, along with many other family members, in their own comfortable quarters. Joen Khoy and his first son, Sin Eng, were key transitional figures in the evolution of the Yap family from *totok* to *baba*. Only forty-four years old when he died, a year before his father, Joen Khoy never had the chance to assume the lieutenancy to which he was heir, but apparently he was a capable manager of the family enterprises. A stern, handsome man, he belonged to the Chinese community but had connections beyond it. His public clothes were not European but a somber tunic, not entirely, perhaps, because Dutch officials expected it of him. Joen Khoy had worn a queue, as had his sons, but shaved it off (as did his sons) after the revolution of 1911 in China and thereafter kept his head nearly bald. Hakka was his first language but he may have used some Cantonese or Hokkien—most of his charges in Kutaradja were Hakkas and Cantonese, with fewer Hokkiens and Hok-Chias, a Hokkien subgroup—but probably not *kuo yu* (Mandarin). He undoubtedly knew Malay and he used Dutch, which he needed for dealing with officials. What is more important, he insisted that his children and grandchildren learn Dutch well. With his grandchildren, Joen Khoy spoke Dutch. Under social pressure from the local *totok* community, perhaps, he forced the grandchildren to attend a Chinese-language

<sup>11</sup> *Encyclopaedie van Nederlandsch-Indië*, vol. II (Hague and Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, E. J. Brill, nd), p. 302.



(Mandarin) school for a time, but they never took to Mandarin or any other Chinese language.

Joen Khoy exercised firm authority over his family, and commanded respect—the grandchildren remember him as strict and demanding, befitting a Chinese elder of high standing—but there were tensions too, at least with Sin Eng. The root of them had to do with a concubine who played a critical part in the lives of Thiam Hien and his younger brother and sister. Joen Khoy had married Tjoa Soei Hian (1876–1909), from Muntok, who died quite young.<sup>12</sup> A couple of years before his wife died, Joen Khoy went to Saigon and returned with a young Japanese girl, Sato Nakashima. By all accounts she was a remarkable woman. Tjoa Soei Hian was not happy about her, naturally. No one would have dared raise an issue with Joen Khoy about it, but Sin Eng (Thiam Hien's father) evidently resented Nakashima deeply, supposing that she was the cause of the illness that soon killed his mother. In time, however, their relationship changed, a matter to be taken up later.

Yap Sin Eng (1894–1949), Joen Khoy's first son, was the first of the line to be identifiably as much or more *peranakan* than *totok*. Able to speak Hakka and Hokkien, he was the last to use any Chinese language well, or at all, and he also spoke Malay and Dutch, with a Dutch education, a privilege allowed the children of the *officieren*, like other ethnic elites. He dressed by preference in European style, often modishly. Also, he seems to have been generally attracted to things European—for instance, he bothered to learn to play the violin (as did Thiam Hien later). Eventually Sin Eng took an office job.

Moreover, he took a wife from an unequivocally *baba* family, of Hokkien origin, an indication that *singkeh* essences had faded in favor of *peranakan* melding. At age eighteen or nineteen he married Hoan Tjing Nio (1896–1922), who was from a Muntok family that had become wealthy in retail trade. Her parents, lacking a son, adopted one, a common Chinese custom. For the rest, however, her family had acculturated earlier than the Yaps. Tjing Nio's photograph shows a young girl in the typical *baba* dress of Sumatra and Malaysia. At home she and Sin Eng and their children spoke Malay—that is, Indonesian—the only language, apparently, that Tjing Nio knew. It was also the children's first language.

Thiam Hien's generation of the Yap family, then, the fifth in Indonesia, was essentially *peranakan*. One consequence, which they shared with many others, was social marginality, made the more difficult in their case by financial disaster. All three of Sin Eng's children turned out to have remarkable character, filled with fibers of pride, courage, stubbornness, and responsibility. However one tries to figure out the psychological sources of their toughness, about whose quality, I suspect, no one who knows them will disagree, the starting place is Kutaradja.

<sup>12</sup> Although the men in the family tended to go back to Bangka for their wives, two of Joen Khoy's brothers arranged marriages with Hokkien women from Penang (perhaps through intermediaries). Joen Khoy had three brothers and two sisters, Thiam Hien's great uncles and aunts. That Joen Khoy also had a Hokkien name, Yap Hok Hay, may mean that there were significant commercial or other connections with Hokkien communities.

### Thiam Hien's Childhood

Thiam Hien was born on May 25, 1913, his brother Thiam Bong on March 8, 1915, and his sister Thiam Lian on January 18, 1917. Two more children followed, a boy and a girl, one of whom died in less than a year and the other within two years. For a few years they lived comfortably in their own rooms in Joen Khoy's big house, with gardens for the children to play in, secure among a host of parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. What they lacked, as each of them recalls, was intimacy, seldom overdone anyway in many Chinese families, but especially hard to come by amidst a crowd of relatives.

What intimacy there was came at first from their mother, Tjing Nio, and later from Nakashima, their Japanese *omah* ("grandmother," in Dutch). Tjing Nio, only sixteen when she married Sin Eng, was never very strong. She was tubercular. Five children in as many years probably did not help her condition. At Thiam Hien's birth she was just seventeen. Only he had much time with her before she died. After a trip to Bangka for the wedding of her adoptive brother, Tjing Nio was ill continually until she died in August 1922. Thiam Hien was then nine (ten by Chinese reckoning), Thiam Bong seven, and Thiam Lian five.

Thiam Hien remembers his mother as loving but also strict for fear that his father would be even stricter. As the eldest child, responsible for his siblings, Thiam Hien took the most punishment—maybe not very often—from a rattan or hard pinches. (He remembers how, when he swam in the river, which was forbidden, and took his brother Thiam Bong with him, as he had to, a servant told their mother, who punished him severely enough for him to remember it forever.) Thiam Bong recalls his mother mainly as weak and constantly sick. Thiam Lian, the youngest, was with her mother all the time before she died, yet only for a few years; she remembers her least yet suffered the most from Tjing Nio's loss.

As usual then in Chinese families, their father, Sin Eng, was distant. Thiam Lian, nicknamed Non, remembers him affectionately, but Hien and Bong never got along well with him. Sin Eng was strict, though probably no more so than most Chinese fathers of his class and time. He laid down a few hard rules to which there were no exceptions. The family had to eat together, the children had to study hard in school, and gambling, a common pastime, was forbidden. Once his father came upon Thiam Hien and some friends playing a harmless card game. Thinking they were betting, he slapped his son, which, despite the injustice of it, evidently drove the point home. None of the children, I suspect, ever took to drinking or gambling or other prosaic vices even in minor ways. Thiam Hien certainly didn't, and the reasons precede his conversion to Protestantism in the 1930s.

For the most part Hien, Bong, and Non did not see all that much of their father or, in any event, had only a reserved relationship with him. They were cared for by the women of the family, either their mother or grandmothers. There was nothing unusual in this, but after Tjing Nio died the distance between Sin Eng and his sons began to fill with tension and even dislike—one reason, perhaps, for the huge fund of anger on which Thiam Hien always drew. It was naturally a time of turmoil for them, not only because their mother had died but because the family empire, such as it was, had evaporated. But Sin Eng was still a very young man, only twenty-eight when his wife

died, and much on the move in search of ways to make a living. He never remarried, though once, when Hien was about thirteen, he came close to doing so with a woman of mixed European and Chinese parentage. The children hated the idea, partly out of loyalty to their mother but also because they did not want a stepmother. For other reasons as well, no doubt, the marriage was called off at the last moment. Sin Eng, however, had other women friends, and painful and embarrassing rumors got back to Hien and Bong. Kutaradja was a small town and the Chinese community even smaller. They would not have said anything to their father, of course, but they held it against him. Other tensions between Sin Eng and his sons grew indirectly from the dramatic collapse of the family fortunes and status. The children were too young to understand exactly what happened, but the effects of it lasted a lifetime.

The wealth on both sides of the family disappeared in a short period during the 1910s and early 1920s, a bad time for the *officier* class. As a six- or seven-year-old boy, Hien experienced the decline as a puzzling diminution of the *ang pow* (gifts of money) given him by the patriarch Yap A Sin: from the substantial *ringgit* to a *rijksdaalder*, soon a guilder, and finally only a half guilder, each coin oddly smaller than the last. It was a metaphor of the calamity visited on the family as the lieutenantcy slipped away and all their property disappeared.

Years later, maybe with a touch of Protestant moralism, Thiam Hien wondered whether the misfortune was not visited on his great-grandfather for the sin of selling opium. More likely, however, it was because Yap A Sin could no longer sell opium. For the same reason, the *luitenant* position was no great loss. The institution of *officiëren* had already begun to fall apart. Chinese revenue farming—the monopolies over opium, gambling, slaughtering, and so on—was restricted before the end of the century and abolished afterward.<sup>13</sup> The effect on Chinese *officiëren* throughout the colony was evidently immediate, making the positions much less attractive; and the administration was unable thereafter to make them more so. Only if they had already begun to diversify and invest well could the *officiëren* families recoup the losses from revenue farming. Many went broke. Yap A Sin had taken out loans from banks and companies to support his ventures in the copra trade, among others, a bad investment at the time. His enterprises failed in the economically difficult years following the first world war. The loans were called in, either during the last year of his life or immediately after his death, and the family went bankrupt.<sup>14</sup> The houses, including Joen Khoy's (in which Thiam Hien spent his first years), were sold, along with the coconut plantation, and the family goods were auctioned off.

At the same time, the once profitable store owned by the Hoan family, on Hien's mother's side, went under, but for different reasons. The store, named Muntok after the homebase in Bangka, and the bakery—after which their grounds were named the *kebon roti* (bread garden), and whose wonderful aromas Thiam Hien loved and where he could get hot rolls—used to sell heavily to the Dutch officers and soldiers in town. In the end those were not the best customers. Many of them left on transfers without

<sup>13</sup> Williams, *Overseas Chinese Nationalism*, pp. 24ff and 126–28.

<sup>14</sup> Yap used the term “bankrupt,” but it is not clear that what happened involved a legal action. It may be that all the family's property was simply sold off to pay the accumulated debts. In either case the effect was much the same, not the least being the shame and a serious decline in social status.

paying off their substantial chits for supplies and liquor. Especially at the end of each year, large bills were run up for Christmas celebrations. The eternal hope that all would eventually be paid never worked out. It may also be that by the early 1920s, as mopping-up operations following the “pacification” wound down, the military garrison and the Hoan’s clientele, reliable or not, shrank. For a while Sin Eng helped in the store, trying to balance the accounts, because he had worked in the Kutaradja branch of the Javaasche Bank soon after graduating from high school and understood accounts. But it ended badly, and the store and bakery also disappeared by the mid-1920s.

For the children this was a time of instability, to put it mildly, beginning with Joen Khoy’s death and the disappearance of Yap A Sin’s estate. By no means were they destitute, however. Resources were available from the extended families of Yaps and Hoans. But they were suddenly dependent on others, albeit relatives, a condition to which Thiam Bong, especially, but the others, too, were sensitive. When Yap A Sin’s houses were sold, the family had to move into the big house still owned by Tjing Nio’s family. The children were not happy there, for their maternal great-grandmother ruled over the household with a heavy dictatorial hand. They stayed there after their mother died, until Sin Eng, who had gone to Batavia to find work, returned with a friend to start a supply and catering business serving the military garrison. The children, Non especially, disliked this young man, who they thought had a bad influence on their father. From Sigli, in provincial Aceh, he and Sin Eng spent much time together, men about town. It was then that rumors flew about Sin Eng. But the business went well for a few years, and Sin Eng rented an apartment in a house owned by the Japanese widow of a Swiss officer in the colonial army, so that the children, Nakashima (*omah*), and father were on their own again. Later they rented a substantial house owned by the new *kapitein*. While there, Sin Eng bought a car, a small Austin, which Thiam Hien was once allowed to drive as a reward for good grades when he returned home during his first year in Java. But the business declined, and Sin Eng gave it up. When he returned to Batavia for good, probably in 1927, to work as a clerk in a commercial house, the children and their *omah* had to move again to a single room in a house owned by one of Joen Khoy’s younger sisters. From there they moved again to an uncle’s place. And so it went. In better times the family had a place of its own, in worse times they were farmed out to relatives.

From Hien’s and Bong’s point of view, Sin Eng was somehow responsible for their decline, or at least he failed to make up for it. For this, too, they never quite forgave him. And their resentment—never expressed to him, for his patripotestal privilege made that impossible—may have been tinged with a bit of contempt. In *peranakan* circles, success was even more important than for *totok*, in good part, perhaps, because of a sense that the Dutch were watching and maybe the Indonesian elite, too, not just other Chinese.

Sin Eng seemed to flit from job to job, trying this and that, as his sons saw it. Actually, good times were interspersed with bad times, but steady financial stability and security were in the past. For whatever reasons of character, skill, and opportunity, Sin Eng could not replace the family fortune. Like many *peranakan* sons, especially from *officier* families, Sin Eng may not have been especially well suited to business. He could not, like a *singkeh*, start from the bottom to accumulate capital. Nor,

apparently, did he have contacts with capital to spare in Aceh or in Java. But with a Dutch-language high-school education, he had other possibilities and may have preferred the risk-free security and social status of an office employee. His one business venture, the catering service, which he established with his friend from Sigli, eventually failed, and he never tried again. He was also young enough—only twenty years older than Thiam Hien—and in some ways high-living enough not to scrimp on money merely for the sake of his sons. He might have saved for their educations by taking out insurance policies, as some parents did, but lacking foresight, knowledge, or concern, or maybe even money, he did not. Thiam Hien and Thiam Bong believed they suffered for it.

They did, though not in fact all that much. No less than most Chinese fathers, especially from educated *baba* strata, Sin Eng saw to it that his sons got good educations. When they wanted to go to Java to finish their studies, he made it possible for them. It was their sister, Lian (Non), who was hurt most by their father's inadequate income. A sensitive child, she felt most the lack of a mother and the frequent absence of her father. Imaginative, intelligent, and as ambitious as her brothers, she was also a daughter in a culture oriented to sons. Once out of the Dutch-language primary school, she too wanted to go to Java to continue her education. Sin Eng told her that her brothers had prior claim to support from the family's resources, that a woman had less need for education. When first Hien and then Bong left for Java, Non stayed behind in Aceh, until the late 1930s.<sup>15</sup> She nevertheless found an opportunity to study in a new Catholic school, which in time invited her to join the teaching staff. While still in Kutaradja she was baptized a Catholic, years before Hien became a Protestant.

### **Nakashima**

After their mother died, the central figure in the lives of Hien, Bong, and Non was their Japanese *Omah*, Sato Nakashima (1890?–1949). From here I capitalize "*Omah*," Dutch familiar for "grandmother" (as already explained), only because they talked about her that way. Nothing is so odd in the family's history and Thiam Hien's as this woman. Some basic information about her is missing, unfortunately, because just before the Japanese invasion in early 1942 the Hien family panicked and destroyed her passport and other papers to protect her. (It was Thiam Hien who actually did so.) The children were utterly devoted to her; even in old age, each of them saw her still as a fundamental, formative influence.

When Joen Khoi brought her back with him from Saigon, she was no more than seventeen. Born around 1890 in Nagasaki, she left as a teenager—as did many others leave a crowded Japan that was in the process of remaking itself. She traveled to Southeast Asia to live with a relative and find work. According to the only credible explanation I have heard—from Thiam Lian—about how she got to Kutaradja, Joen

<sup>15</sup> Thiam Lian remained behind in Kutaradja for years after Hien and Bong departed to Java. She was there long enough to ask, as a grown woman, sensitive questions about the family and to listen to stories told by her relatives.

Khoy met her in a Japanese-owned store in Saigon, where he bought supplies.<sup>16</sup> Nakashima worked there for an aunt. When, half joking, he asked whether he could take the girl, the guardian replied, in effect, why not? Joen Khoy never legally married her, even after his wife died. It was mentioned earlier that Sin Eng resented her, and no doubt others in the family did not like her intrusion, but she was close to Joen Khoy, and the children took her for granted as part of the family.

Outsider though she was, Nakashima made herself a respected member of the Yap family. Intelligent and unwilling to be idle, she had skills—as a seamstress, among other things—and involved herself assiduously in the family's weddings and other rituals. But she was best known as a midwife. She delivered many of the Yap family's babies and did the same for others who asked for her help, even when doctors were available. It is possible that she helped to deliver Hien, Bong, and Lian. Apparently she was well known in the small town of Kutaradja. Sometimes homesick and lonely, in the limited Japanese community in Kutaradja Nakashima found friends with whom she could speak in her own language and play cards. But she moved rather freely in other communities as well, one of few who ignored the real and implicit ghetto lines.

Nakashima returned to Japan twice in the 1910s. On the first trip, a few years before the world war broke out, she adopted the son of her younger brother. Her family was poor, and her own secure position in Aceh enabled her to help the boy. If this was the reason, it may explain why she decided to remain in Kutaradja after Joen Khoy died. In any event, she brought her nephew to Kutaradja for a time before taking him back to Japan (Nagasaki) to begin school.<sup>17</sup> None of this would have been thought strange by the Yap family, for the adoption of children, often from relatives, was common in Chinese custom, as it is also in ethnic Indonesian societies. Nakashima's nephew was educated in a naval academy. Sometime in the 1920s, while still a cadet, he contracted cholera and died in Bangkok, according to Thiam Lian. Nakashima never returned to Japan thereafter. Lian believes that she swore never to go back once she received news of her nephew's death. After World War II, when Thiam Hien returned from his studies in Holland and offered to take her home to Nagasaki, she refused because she knew, she said, that all of her family had been destroyed by the atomic bomb.

When Joen Khoy died, Nakashima was not yet thirty. Whatever his misgivings, Sin Eng, as Joen Khoy's only child, assumed responsibility for her, and she moved in with his family. In turn, when Tjing Nio died, Nakashima assumed responsibility for Hien, Bong, and Lian. Along with Sin Eng's other resentments of Nakashima, he may have become jealous of her close relationship with his children, as Non thought, but he

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<sup>16</sup> Thiam Hien and Thiam Bong did not know how their *Omah* reached Aceh. By the turn of the century there were many Japanese residents in the colony—and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Only a small number ended up in Aceh.

<sup>17</sup> When, exactly, Nakashima went to Japan the first and second times is not clear, because Hien, Bong, and Lian were all too young to remember. Lian believes she may have taken her adopted son back to Nagasaki just before the war broke out, was caught there when hostilities began, and stayed for the duration. It is even possible, according to Lian, that she was in Japan when Joen Khoy died, but returned anyway because of her affection for the Yap children. There may be some truth to this, for by then Nakashima was fully at home in the family and belonged there as much as anywhere else. But it is also true that no other place offered her quite so much by way of home and family and support as did Kutaradja.

nevertheless depended on her taking care of the youngsters since he was seldom around.

Devoted to the children, she gathered them in at a critical time in their youth. Hien was six or seven when she joined them and barely nine when his mother died. If one can identify any single extraordinary influence on the kinds of adults Hien, Bong, and Non became, it had to be Nakashima. After Tjing Nio's death they spent more time, more intimately, with her than anyone else, and in ways out of the usual for Chinese families. The children all remember her as very strong psychologically, but, as Bong put it, you could not see her strength, only feel it: "She was wonderful, a remarkable woman. She never raised her voice, never. But what she told us stayed in our minds. She was mother, father, and grandmother at the same time. Our father was not often at home. She was the only person who took care of us."<sup>18</sup>

The family talked in Malay, which Nakashima never completely mastered, but although she spoke with a heavy accent, she nevertheless managed to make herself understood. At home, wherever home happened to be, she cooked, made clothes—putting up with Thiam Hien's protests over her choice of style when he was in school—and in many ways established a center of gravity for them. Nakashima liked to sleep late, and the children made their own breakfasts. However, on days when Hien had an examination at school she would make him a breakfast of miso soup to calm his nerves. Then she would wait for him to come home to tell him that he had done well and that his test score would be good. On birthdays she cooked Japanese noodles for long life. Hien had a lifelong taste for Japanese food.

More by example than instruction, apparently, for she was literate but not well educated, she also taught them values, some of which were bound to challenge those of the Chinese community. When necessary she confronted the children's teachers, even Dutch teachers—in broken Malay no less, whose effect one can imagine—something Chinese parents, including Sin Eng, out of respect for the authority of teachers, were exceedingly reluctant to do. Nakashima, evidently, was not overly impressed by the privileges of authority, an inclination she may well have passed on to her charges.

She read to the children often—rather, she translated and then explained to them what she read in books borrowed from her Japanese friends. She and the three children would lie in bed, Hien always on her right, Lian on her left, and poor Bong always at her feet and resenting the favor shown Hien, while Nakashima read or told them stories about great men and heroes—particularly samurai and their *bushido* code—but also Thomas Edison and the like. From those stories she drew moral and ethical lessons. They were simple lessons drawn simply: don't be afraid if you are right, because those who are right will win out in the end; be courageous and loyal, like the samurai; and be honest. Nakashima herself, unsophisticated but firmly constructed, took all of those virtues quite seriously and lived her life accordingly.

Thiam Hien seems to have been her favorite; Bong was not entirely imagining things. Thiam Hien was the eldest, already a bit independent, quite bright, and devoted to Nakashima. But for all three she provided security, affection, intimacy, and

<sup>18</sup>Yap Thiam Bong, Arnhem, August 6, 1987.

a rich source of character. Her own values and her “Japaneseness” (*kejepangan*), as Thiam Hien once characterized it, also offered a counterpoint to Chinese *baba, totok*, Dutch, and local Indonesian norms and their peculiar interaction in the colonial setting.

### Legal Redefinition

For one of the most important advantages in Thiam Hien’s life—European legal status—he had to be grateful to Sin Eng. Indeed, Thiam Hien might not have undertaken the steps for such legal assimilation for himself. In most colonies, some provision was eventually made for allowing local people to assimilate, in some measure, to European status. The application and approval process, always a source both of pride and ignominy, depending on who was judging, was a means of linking elites, of emphasizing European superiority, and of rewarding advantageous behavior. Such formal assimilation was always problematic, and few took the necessary steps. For instance, the French *mission civilisatrice* made it necessary, at least ethically, to reward with legal French status—citizenship—any Vietnamese or Algerian, for example, who had a French education, spoke French, behaved French, was to all intents and purposes French. In the Netherlands–Indies, the law was a bit different but the essence was much the same. In the nineteenth century certain ethnic Indonesian aristocrats and high civilian and military officials were subject to the same criminal-law provisions as Dutch nationals. If they (and eventually others) were interested and could demonstrate that they spoke Dutch and lived essentially by Dutch cultural norms, they could request legal equivalence (*gelijkstelling*) with the Dutch. Few enough ever did so. The same advantage was opened to ethnic Chinese in the early twentieth century, in part no doubt as a compromise solution to a widespread Chinese demand to be accorded the same European status as were the Japanese at the beginning of the century. Japan had won the prized European status by its convincing development of military might during the last few decades since the Meiji Restoration. Some politically conscious ethnic Chinese thought they deserved the same, to distinguish them from native Indonesians, rather missing the point that they lacked the convincing weight of an army and navy. By this time in colonial history, however, what with sparks of nationalism, new local organizations, and tensions generated by the new Ethical Policy meant to upgrade the Indonesian population, the colonial administration sensed a necessity to make concessions. Consequently, while refusing to consider the gift of Dutch status to Chinese generally, the colonial administration did allow them, like significant ethnic Indonesians, to apply for *gelijkstelling*.

As in the case of ethnic Indonesians, not all that many ethnic Chinese actually did so, though proportionately more Chinese than Indonesians took the step of formal application. Many ethnic Chinese treated the process, and those who undertook it, with contempt and derision. From the cost of the stamps required to register the application or affixed on the return letter that informed registrants of their success, those granted the new status were called “penny and half Hollanders,” or *Belanda toen-phoa*, among ethnic Chinese.<sup>19</sup> In the years 1910 through 1920, after which the conversion was no longer allowed, a total of 3,610 applications for *gelijkstelling* were

<sup>19</sup> See Setiono, *Tionghoa dalam Pusaran Politik*, pp. 472ff.



approved, of which 1,711 (47.39 percent) were ethnic Chinese.<sup>20</sup> One of them was Yap Sin Eng, whose conversion, so to speak, also applied to his three children. The transformation was announced officially, in a list of about sixty names, in a statutory instrument (*Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië*, 1918, no. 49). The immediate, instantaneous, impact of the proclamation was that henceforth Jap Sin Eng—Jap is the Dutch spelling—became Sin Eng Jap, and Jap Thiam Hien became Thiam Hien Jap. There is no way of knowing now why exactly Sin Eng took this remarkable step. He might have hoped for some advantageous consequences for himself, at least a more weighty status in society, or more respect from Dutch officials and others, though there is no evidence in the children's memories that he achieved either one. The family's fortunes were then already in decline, and on the verge of serious consequences, and it is conceivable that Sin Eng sought some kind of symbolic reassurance as his *officieren*-rooted prominence slipped away. None of these possibilities makes a lot of sense, however, for the rewards to Sin Eng himself could not have impressed him all that much. There was little enough from European legal status alone that would redound to his advantage. It is more likely that he had the children in mind, precisely because they might well lose the privileges once assured to the *officieren* and their families. Sin Eng himself had a Dutch high school education, which lent him some assurance of both status and employment. If the family lost its position, however, or the *officieren* were no longer needed, Thiam Hien and his brother and sister might very well lose that critical advantage.

It may be that Sin Eng's one most generous and lasting gift to his son was the opportunity of a good education. Without it, it is hard to imagine Yap Thiam Hien.

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<sup>20</sup> Many more ethnic Chinese applied for a different process of limited legal adaptation called the voluntary submission to European private law (*vrijwillige onderwerping aan het Europeesch privaatrecht*), promulgated in a 1917 statute. See A. C. Tobi, *De Vrijwillige Onderwerping aan het Europeesch Privaatrecht* (Ind. Stbl. 1917, no. 12) (Leiden: van Doesburgh, 1927). In this case, many more ethnic Chinese, along with others, would have applied in connection with business interests and transactions. It did not, however, redefine one's personal status.