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Colonial urban governance and ethnicized commercial rivalry: Arab-Chinese socio-economic relations in Surabaya, 1906-1919

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Abstract

This article examines Arab-Chinese socio-economic relations in colonial Surabaya between 1906 and 1919 by asking how urban governance and commercial competition shaped ethnicized tension. Rather than treating the 1912 violence as an isolated ethnic clash, it argues that rivalry emerged from the everyday workings of a racialized port city. Drawing on colonial newspapers, municipal regulations, and historical scholarship, the article shows how Surabaya's transformation into a *Gemeente*, the persistence of ethnic residential regulation, and unequal access to colonial legal protection structured relations between Arab and Chinese trading communities. Bumiputra consumers occupied the center of this field as buyers, debtors, neighbors, and sources of commercial trust. Competition over credit, textiles, batik, schooling, legal status, and recognition made economic life politically charged. The 1912 unrest in Tuban and Surabaya exposed, rather than created, this fragile order. The article contributes to colonial Indonesian historiography by reading intercommunal conflict as a product of colonial mediation within racially ordered urban everyday life, not primordial hostility.

Keywords: Arab-Chinese relations; colonial Surabaya; commercial rivalry; ethnicized violence.

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Introduction

In the early twentieth century, Surabaya was not merely a port city through which goods, migrants, debts, rumors, and imperial papers passed. It was a colonial machine of sorting. Ships arrived at its harbor, warehouses thickened along commercial routes, and markets drew into themselves a dense population of Europeans, Bumiputra, Chinese, Arabs, and other so-called Foreign Orientals. Yet this plurality did not produce an open urban cosmopolitanism in any simple sense. Colonial Surabaya made difference administratively useful. Race, residence, tax-

ation, trade, and legal status were not separate matters; they leaned on one another, quietly and stubbornly, in the making of everyday urban life. After the expansion of its port economy and the deepening of its hinterland connections, Surabaya became one of the Dutch East Indies' most important commercial cities. Its streets carried more than commodities. They carried a hierarchy.[1]

The year 1906 sharpened this hierarchy in a new administrative form. On 1 April of that year, Surabaya was formally established as a *Gemeente*, a municipal body expected to manage its own budget and urban affairs under the broader architecture of Dutch colonial decentralization.[2] The change did not abolish older patterns of colonial ordering. It rearranged them. Long before municipal autonomy promised a language of local management, Surabaya had already been mapped through the *wijkenstelsel*, a system that pressed ethnic groups into designated residential quarters. Chinese residents were concentrated around the eastern side of the Kalimas and the Jembatan Merah area, later extending toward Jalan Coklat, Slompretan, and Karet as the regulation loosened in the early twentieth century. The Arab community, by contrast, was associated especially with Ampel and Semampir, northeast of the city's administrative and commercial core.[3] These were not inert neighborhoods. They were watched, taxed, crossed, remembered, and traded through. In 1905, Surabaya's population reached 150,188 people: 124,437 Bumiputra, 14,843 Chinese, 8,063 Europeans, 2,482 Arabs, and 327 other Foreign Orientals.[4] Numbers such as these do not speak by themselves. But they do reveal the scale of a city in which minority trading communities lived close enough to compete, yet differently enough to be governed.

The Arab and Chinese communities who inhabited this urban order were neither marginal strangers nor homogeneous blocs. Among Arabs, distinctions between *wulaitii* and *muwallad* shaped questions of origin, descent, and belonging; among the Chinese, the difference between *totok* and *peranakan* marked generation, language, and cultural orientation. These divisions matter because they disturb the lazy grammar of ethnic history. "Arab" and "Chinese" were not sealed containers. They were living social worlds, internally layered and commercially active. Some were shopkeepers. Some were itinerant sellers. Others lent money,

[1] Howard W. Dick, *Surabaya, City of Work: A Socioeconomic History, 1900-2000* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 33-47; William H. Frederick, *Visions and Heat: The Making of the Indonesian Revolution* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989), 23–31.

[2] *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië* 1906, no. 149; Dick, *Surabaya, City of Work*, 45.

[3] Handinoto, *Arsitektur dan Kota-Kota di Jawa pada Masa Kolonial* (Yogyakarta: Graha Ilmu, 2010), 358; Shinta Devi Ika Santhi Rahayu, *Boen Bio: Benteng Terakhir Umat Khonghucu* (Surabaya: JP Books, 2005), 7-8.

[4] Handinoto, *Perkembangan Kota dan Arsitektur Kolonial Belanda di Surabaya, 1870-1940* (Yogyakarta: Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengabdian Masyarakat Universitas Kristen Petra Surabaya, 1996), 53.

owned property, brokered goods, or moved through markets where credit and trust often mattered as much as cash.[5]

Their rivalry, then, did not emerge from ethnic difference alone. It took shape inside a colonial city that organized difference and made it economically consequential. Arab and Chinese traders often moved through overlapping commercial fields, especially in relation to Bumiputra customers. The Arab community's commercial life was tied to textiles, Indian cotton, preserved foodstuffs, metal goods, property investment, and credit relations; its social proximity to Bumiputra Muslims could become an advantage, though never a guarantee of harmony. Chinese traders, meanwhile, operated through wider commercial circuits involving rice, tea, coffee, imported goods, and retail networks increasingly supported by colonial commercial law. The two communities occupied a similar intermediate position beneath Europeans and above, beside, or among Bumiputra society, depending on the transaction, the street, and the administrative gaze. But similarity did not produce solidarity. Chinese access to certain forms of legal protection, schooling, commercial recognition, and post-1911 confidence unsettled the fragile hierarchy among non-European groups. Arab traders faced their own restrictions, suspicions, and forms of colonial surveillance. What appeared later as "ethnic disharmony" was therefore not a natural inheritance. It was a historical formation: commercial competition, legal inequality, status anxiety, and colonial urban governance slowly tightening into a knot.[6]

Bumiputra society stood at the center of this competitive field. Not as scenery, but as market, neighbor, debtor, religious interlocutor, and measure of commercial trust. Arab traders could draw on Islamic proximity with Bumiputra Muslims, yet credit often roughened that closeness; a *Bintang Soerabaia* report on a Bumiputra debtor avoiding an Arab collector reveals how debt turned commerce into pursuit, embarrassment, and tension. Chinese traders also cultivated Bumiputra markets through retail and commodity circulation, though their position was tied more visibly to colonial commercial law and imported-goods networks. Textiles and batik sharpened the overlap. Sarekat Dagang Islam, later Sarekat Islam, emerged in this crowded commercial world, where Muslim traders sought protection against European capital and Chinese competition.[7]

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[5] L. W. C. van den Berg, *Hadramaut dan Koloni Arab di Nusantara*, trans. Rahayu Hidayat (Jakarta: INIS, 1989), 92; L. W. C. van den Berg, *Orang Arab di Nusantara*, trans. Rahayu Hidayat (Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu, 2010), 124; Onghokham, *Migrasi Cina, Kapitalisme Cina dan Anti Cina* (Depok: Komunitas Bambu, 2017), 21.

[6] *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, no. 256, November 4, 1912; *Bintang Soerabaia*, June 19, 1912; Giok Kiauw Nio Liem, *De rechtpositie der Chinezen in Nederlands-Indië 1848-1942: Wetgevingsbeleid tussen beginsel en belang* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2009), 281; Deliar Noer, *Gerakan Modern Islam di Indonesia, 1900-1942* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1980), 66.

[7] *Bintang Soerabaia*, June 19, 1912; Noer, *Gerakan Modern Islam di Indonesia*, 115-20; Takashi Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912-1926* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 34-39.

After 1911, the field grew more combustible. The Chinese Revolution traveled into the Dutch East Indies through newspapers, kinship, commerce, and rumor, giving sharper public force to claims for dignity, schooling, legal recognition, and social status. For Arab observers, Chinese upward mobility could appear unsettling, not because rivalry was inevitable, but because colonial status was always comparative. One group's advance could feel like another's displacement. By 1912, when violence in Tuban and Surabaya entered the press, retaliation had acquired a stark moral formula: "life for life."[8] The phrase condensed more than anger. It gathered credit, status anxiety, legal asymmetry, and urban proximity into collective revenge.

The historiography of colonial Surabaya has given considerable attention to the city's port economy, municipal transformation, kampung politics, demographic growth, and the uneven effects of colonial urban policy.[9] Studies of the Chinese community in the Dutch East Indies, meanwhile, have often foregrounded migration, capitalism, education, legal status, nationalism, and anti-Chinese sentiment.[10] The Arab, especially Hadhrami-Arab, presence has usually been approached through Islam, genealogy, religious authority, mobility, commercial networks, and relations with Bumiputra Muslims.[11] These bodies of scholarship are indispensable, but they still leave a small, stubborn gap. Arab and Chinese communities often appear beside the same colonial city, but not always within the same analytic frame. This article enters that space. It reads them not as two separate ethnic histories occasionally colliding, but as intermediary trading communities whose relations were made inside the same port city, under the same racialized administration, and through overlapping struggles over law, status, education, credit, and Bumiputra markets.

Drawing on colonial newspapers, municipal regulations, and relevant historical scholarship, this article reads reports of trade, debt, schooling, legal status, and violence through source criticism and contextual interpretation, not as trans-

[8] *Bintang Soerabaia*, May 13, 1912; *De Preanger Bode*, September 31, 1912; Liem, *De rechtpositie der Chinezen in Nederlands-Indië 1848-1942*, 281.

[9] Purnawan Basundoro, "Penduduk dan Hubungan Antar Etnis di Kota Surabaya pada Masa Kolonial," *Paramita* 22, no. 1 (2012): 1–13; Dick, *Surabaya, City of Work*, 33-47; Basundoro, "Politik Rakyat Kampung di Kota Surabaya Awal Abad ke-20."

[10] Onghokham, *Migrasi Cina, Kapitalisme Cina dan Anti Cina*; Liem, *De rechtpositie der Chinezen in Nederlands-Indië 1848-1942*; Mary Somers Heidhues, *Southeast Asia's Chinese Minorities* (Hawthorn, Victoria: Longman Australia, 1974).

[11] Berg, *Orang Arab di Nusantara*; Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadrami Awakening: Community and Identity in the Netherlands East Indies, 1900-1942* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1999); Huub de Jonge, "Contradictory and against the Grain: Snouck Hurgronje on the Hadramis in the Dutch East Indies," in *Transcending Borders: Arabs, Politics, Trade and Islam in Southeast Asia*, ed. Huub de Jonge and Nico Kaptein (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002), 219–36.

parent mirrors of communal life.[12] It asks how colonial urban governance and commercial competition shaped Arab-Chinese socio-economic relations in Surabaya between 1906 and 1919, a period framed by Surabaya's establishment as a *Gemeente* and by the loosening of older restrictions on Arab immigration, residence, and mobility before their fuller dismantling in 1920.[13] Its answer is not that ethnic difference simply produced conflict. Colonial Surabaya turned difference into an administrative habit and an economic grammar. Within that grammar, Arab and Chinese traders met one another through Bumiputra markets, credit relations, legal asymmetry, education, status claims, and segregated urban space. The violence reported in 1912 was not the beginning of the story. It was the moment when a longer rivalry became publicly legible as ethnic revenge.

Colonial Surabaya as a racialized port city

Surabaya's importance in the early twentieth century cannot be understood apart from water. The city sat on the northern coast of Java, near the mouth of the Brantas river system, with Kalimas cutting through its commercial life like a narrow artery. Behind it stretched a fertile hinterland; before it opened the sea. This geography mattered. It made Surabaya a place where agricultural produce, imported cloth, credit, labor, migrants, and colonial paperwork moved with unusual density. Ports do not merely receive goods. They thicken social relations. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Surabaya had become one of the Dutch East Indies' most important trading cities, tied to export agriculture, shipping, warehousing, and inland distribution.[14] For Arab and Chinese traders, such a city was not simply attractive because it promised profit. It offered access to circulation itself: to ships, brokers, warehouses, markets, debtors, religious networks, European firms, and Bumiputra consumers. The port made contact frequent. It also made comparison unavoidable.

Municipal status gave this commercial city a sharper administrative frame. On 1 April 1906, Surabaya was formally established as a *Gemeente* under the wider logic of Dutch colonial decentralization.[15] At first glance, this seems like a dry bureaucratic fact, the sort that sits quietly in a *Staatsblad*. It was not quiet. The new municipality made urban management more explicit: budgets, taxation, mar-

[12] Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), 118-40; Kuntowijoyo, *Pengantar Ilmu Sejarah* (Yogyakarta: Bentang Budaya, 1995), 89-105.

[13] *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië* 1906, no. 149; Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadrami Awakening: Community and Identity in the Netherlands East Indies*, 28-34.

[14] Dick, *Surabaya, City of Work*, 33-47; G. H. von Faber, *Oud Soerabaia: De Geschiedenis van Indië's Eerste Koopstad van de Oudste Tijden tot de Instelling van den Gemeenteraad 1906* (Soerabaia: Gemeente Soerabaia, 1931), 1-12.

[15] *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië* 1906, no. 149; Purnawan Basundoro, *Sejarah Pemerintahan Kota Surabaya: Sejak Masa Kolonial sampai Masa Reformasi, 1906–2012* (Yogyakarta: Elmatera, 2012), 6.

kets, roads, sanitation, slaughterhouses, and public order became matters through which the colonial city touched daily life. Yet municipal government did not mean equal urban citizenship. The *Gemeenteraad* itself reflected colonial hierarchy, with European representatives dominant and only limited representation for Bumiputra and Foreign Oriental groups.[16] Surabaya, therefore, was being modernized without being democratized. Its administration could speak the language of improvement while preserving racial distinction as common sense. For Arab and Chinese communities, the *Gemeente* did not erase older boundaries. It made the city more legible to colonial power and, in doing so, drew trading minorities more deeply into the routines of regulation, taxation, and urban competition.

The demographic composition of Surabaya made hierarchy visible in numbers before it was encountered in the street. In 1905, the city counted 150,188 inhabitants: 124,437 Bumiputra, 14,843 Chinese, 8,063 Europeans, 2,482 Arabs, and 327 other Foreign Orientals.[17] The figures show more than plurality. They reveal a colonial population order in which the largest group did not possess the highest status, and smaller communities could occupy commercially significant positions without gaining political equality. Europeans remained the privileged legal and administrative class; Bumiputra formed the demographic majority; Chinese and Arabs stood in the uneasy category of Foreign Orientals, useful to trade, visible in the city, yet still marked as subjects to be classified, supervised, and differentiated. In such a setting, everyday encounters were never merely personal. A sale, a debt, a permit, a school, or a street crossing could carry the quiet weight of colonial ranking.

Space made this ranking harder to ignore. The *wijkenstelsel* did not simply place people somewhere; it taught the city to think ethnically. Chinese residents were concentrated around the eastern side of the Kalimas, near Jembatan Merah, before their commercial presence expanded toward Jalan Coklat, Slompretan, and Karet as restrictions loosened in the early twentieth century.[18] Arab residents were associated especially with Ampel and Semampir, an area northeast of the city's commercial core, remembered in colonial and local descriptions through its dense lanes, damaged roads, and crowded settlement.[19] These quarters were not sealed boxes. People crossed them for trade, debt collection, worship, work, errands, and curiosity. Still, the old spatial grammar mattered. It gave Arab and Chinese communities recognizable urban bases, strengthened internal networks, and allowed colonial authorities to see them as governable groups. The colonial city did not merely contain ethnic communities; it arranged them, named them,

[16] *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië* 1906, no. 149; Dick, *Surabaya, City of Work*, 45.

[17] Handinoto, *Perkembangan Kota dan Arsitektur Kolonial Belanda di Surabaya*, 53.

[18] Handinoto, *Arsitektur dan Kota-Kota di Jawa pada Masa Kolonial*, 358; Rahayu, *Boen Bio: Benteng Terakhir Umat Khonghucu*, 7-8.

[19] Berg, *Orang Arab di Nusantara*, 124; Handinoto, *Perkembangan Kota dan Arsitektur Kolonial Belanda di Surabaya*, 53.

separated them, taxed them, and made them legible through administrative categories.

By the early twentieth century, the loosening of the *wijkenstelsel* allowed greater movement across these older ethnic quarters, but mobility did not dissolve hierarchy. It only made contact more frequent. Arab and Chinese traders could now meet one another more often in markets, streets, credit relations, and competition over Bumiputra customers, while still being read through colonial categories that marked them as different kinds of Foreign Orientals. Surabaya therefore intensified relations without equalizing them. It brought communities closer, yet kept them ranked. This was the city's peculiar force: it made commercial encounter ordinary, and made every encounter carry the memory of regulation.

Arab and Chinese communities as intermediary traders

Arab and Chinese traders were not simply ethnic outsiders in Surabaya. They were intermediary actors, positioned between the colonial economy, urban markets, and Bumiputra consumption. Their work connected warehouses to streets, imported goods to household needs, credit to obligation, and colonial demand to everyday survival. This did not mean that they always stood against one another. In many ways, they inhabited the same uneasy middle: commercially necessary, socially visible, legally marked, and politically subordinate. Yet precisely because their activities overlapped, comparison became unavoidable. The colonial city placed them in neighboring categories; the market pushed them toward neighboring customers. Rivalry began there, not in some timeless hatred, but in the ordinary pressure of making a living under unequal rule.[20]

The Arab community itself was not a single, smooth surface. The distinction between *wulaitii*, those born in the ancestral Arab homeland, and *muwallad*, those born from Arab-Bumiputra descent or shaped more deeply by local society, mattered for status, marriage, belonging, and social orientation.[21] Economic differences cut through the community as well. Some Arabs traded from shops, especially those with stronger capital; others moved through the city as itinerant sellers, carrying goods and credit into Bumiputra neighborhoods. Their commodities ranged from cloth and Indian cotton to gold, silver, preserved foodstuffs, earthenware, and metal goods.[22] Islam often gave Arab traders a language of proximity with Bumiputra Muslims. It could soften distance, open doors, and make commercial relations feel morally familiar. But that closeness had limits. Debt could sour trust. Credit could turn neighborliness into surveillance. A small report in *Bintang Soerabaia* about a Bumiputra debtor avoiding an Arab collector

[20] Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 1–28; Dick, *Surabaya, City of Work*, 33-47.

[21] Berg, *Hadramaut dan Koloni Arab di Nusantara*, 67-76; Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadrami Awakening: Community and Identity in the Netherlands East Indies*, 28-34.

[22] Berg, *Orang Arab di Nusantara*, 113-25; Noer, *Gerakan Modern Islam di Indonesia*, 66.

after failing to repay on time suggests how quickly trade could acquire a harder social edge.[23] The Arab position in Surabaya, then, was double-faced: religiously near to many Bumiputra, yet economically entangled with them in relations that could produce both dependence and resentment.

The Chinese community was no less internally varied. The distinction between *totok* and *peranakan* marked different histories of arrival, language, family formation, and cultural attachment to Java. Some Chinese residents remained closely tied to migrant networks from southern China; others were already deeply embedded in local colonial society. Their commercial reach, however, was unmistakable. Chinese traders moved through rice, coffee, tea, textiles, imported goods, retail networks, and credit, often with wider access to commercial arrangements protected by European legal norms.[24] This mattered because law could turn trade into security. A debt, a contract, a shipment, or a dispute did not carry the same consequences when one community was more visibly connected to colonial commercial protection than another. Their growing demographic presence also sharpened their visibility in Surabaya. Migration from China around the turn of the century, driven partly by political and economic instability in China itself, increased the size and confidence of Chinese communities in the Indies.[25] Education became another sign of this changing position. The establishment of Chinese schools, and the debates around language and recognition, showed that commercial strength was beginning to seek social form.[26] To Arab observers, such movement could look like a rearrangement of the colonial middle, especially when Chinese claims to status seemed to approach the privileges of Europeans.

This is why Arab-Chinese relations in Surabaya cannot be read only through the vocabulary of ethnicity. Both communities were traders, migrants, subjects, competitors, and intermediaries. Both depended on the city's circulation. Both met Bumiputra society not from afar, but through cloth, rice, debt, shops, worship, gossip, and the small frictions of daily exchange. They were not permanent enemies. But they were placed close enough, and unequally enough, for commercial comparison to harden into social suspicion. The next question, then, is not whether they competed. They did. The sharper question is where that competition found its most sensitive arena: the Bumiputra market.

[23] *Bintang Soerabaia*, June 19, 1912.

[24] Onghokham, *Migrasi Cina, Kapitalisme Cina dan Anti Cina*, 21; Liem, *De rechtpositie der Chinezen in Nederlands-Indië 1848-1942*, 281.

[25] Handinoto, *Perkembangan Kota dan Arsitektur Kolonial Belanda di Surabaya*, 53; Heidhues, *Southeast Asia's Chinese Minorities*, 14-27.

[26] *Darmo-Kondo*, September 10, 1908; Claudine Salmon, *Literature in Malay by the Chinese of Indonesia: A Provisional Annotated Bibliography* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1981), 25-31.

Competing for Bumiputra consumers: credit, textiles, and everyday social relations

Bumiputra consumers were not passive recipients of Arab and Chinese commercial activity. They constituted the social and economic field through which both communities negotiated profit, trust, debt, religious proximity, and colonial regulation. To call them "consumers" is useful, but too thin. They were buyers, borrowers, neighbors, worshippers, workers, clients, and sometimes fugitives from repayment. Their choices, hesitations, loyalties, and evasions gave texture to the market. In Surabaya's colonial economy, Arab and Chinese traders did not merely sell to Bumiputra society; they had to read it. They had to know where credit could be extended, where trust could be claimed, where a debt might become shame, and where economic obligation might quietly turn into resentment.[27]

Credit made commerce intimate, and therefore dangerous. A cash transaction could end at the stall, but credit followed people home. It entered the lane, the doorway, the family conversation, the memory of a promise. In one report from *Bintang Soerabaia*, a Bumiputra debtor was said to have avoided an Arab collector after failing to repay his debt on time.[28] The episode is small, almost ordinary. That is precisely why it matters. It shows how trade could become pursuit; how obligation could produce embarrassment; how a relationship framed as economic exchange could acquire a social wound. Arab and Chinese traders both worked within this world of deferred payment, although not always through identical strategies or with equal legal security. Credit was not simply a tool of profit. It was a fragile social technology, binding seller and buyer together while giving each reason to distrust the other.

For Arab traders, religious proximity to Bumiputra Muslims could become a commercial resource. It made conversation easier, reduced certain forms of social distance, and allowed trade to borrow the language of shared faith. Yet proximity was not peace. The same relationship that opened a household to a seller could later expose it to debt, interest, pressure, and moral unease. Colonial observers and later scholars often noted Arab involvement in credit and moneylending, sometimes in terms hostile enough to require caution.[29] Still, the point is not to reproduce colonial suspicion. It is to see the contradiction: Arab traders could be culturally near and economically resented at the same time.

Chinese-Bumiputra relations followed a different rhythm. Chinese traders were deeply present in retail, commodity circulation, imported goods, and everyday exchange; rice, coffee, tea, cloth, and other goods moved through networks in which Chinese merchants often played a visible role. Their strength, however,

[27] Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion*, 34-39; Noer, *Gerakan Modern Islam di Indonesia,* , 115-20.

[28] *Bintang Soerabaia*, June 19, 1912.

[29] Berg, *Hadramaut dan Koloni Arab di Nusantara*, 92; Noer, *Gerakan Modern Islam di Indonesia*, 66.

should not be flattened into a story of simple domination. It rested on capital, migration, commercial discipline, colonial legal arrangements, and the practical ability to move goods through a port city.[30] Bumiputra customers bought from them, borrowed from them, depended on them, complained about them, and compared them with other traders. That ambiguity mattered. It made Chinese commerce powerful, but also exposed it to resentment.

Textiles and batik sharpened this competition because cloth belonged to ordinary life: it was worn, purchased on credit, resold, carried into neighborhoods, and tied to the small economies of households and traders. Arab and Chinese merchants were both drawn into this field, including through European firms that supplied materials for the textile and batik trade. Faber noted competition between the two communities in Surabaya's batik and textile commerce, although he left its everyday mechanics only lightly described.[31] That partial silence is useful. It suggests a rivalry visible enough to be remembered, but ordinary enough to hide inside routine transactions. Sarekat Dagang Islam, later Sarekat Islam, gave this crowded market a broader Muslim and Bumiputra idiom. In the thesis material, SDI appears as a bridge between Arab traders and Bumiputra Muslims, not only as a religious association but also as an instrument of commercial protection.[32] Its later development into SI widened the vocabulary of collective defense, especially against the pressures of Chinese commercial strength and European capital in batik and textile markets.[33] Here, trade began to carry identity. Cloth, credit, supply, and debt could be folded into a larger story about Muslim protection, Chinese advantage, colonial power, and Bumiputra vulnerability.

The Bumiputra market, then, was not a neutral field waiting to be occupied. It was where Arab religious proximity, Chinese commercial reach, European capital, and colonial law pressed against one another. Bumiputra consumers shaped the rivalry precisely because both communities needed them: as buyers, debtors, allies, proof of trust, and signs of influence. Competition over them did not automatically produce violence. But it made suspicion easy to cultivate. The next layer of the problem lay in status: who received recognition, who received protection, and who appeared to be climbing within the colonial order.

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[30] *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, no. 256, November 4, 1912; Onghokham, *Migrasi Cina, Kapitalisme Cina dan Anti Cina*, 21; Liem, *De rechtpositie der Chinezen in Nederlands-Indië 1848-1942*, 281.

[31] Faber, *Oud Soerabaia: De Geschiedenis van Indië's Eerste Koopstad van de Oudste Tijden tot de Instelling van den Gemeenteraad 1906*, 81.

[32] Akhmad Yusuf, "Dinamika Sosial-Ekonomi Masyarakat Arab: Kajian atas Jaringan Perdagangan Masyarakat Arab di Batavia Tahun 1900-1942," 148; Noer, *Gerakan Modern Islam di Indonesia*, 115-20.

[33] Yusuf, "Dinamika Sosial-Ekonomi Masyarakat Arab," 150; Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion*, 34-39.

Law, education, and status: unequal access to colonial recognition

Commercial rivalry in Surabaya did not unfold on level ground. The colonial state distributed recognition unevenly, and recognition mattered. It shaped who could move with less friction, whose contracts appeared more secure, whose schools were tolerated, whose clothing could become a political sign, and whose ambition seemed threatening. Arab and Chinese traders might both belong to the broad colonial category of Foreign Orientals, but the category itself was not a shelter of equality. It was a device of management. Within it, law, education, mobility, and public status were parceled out in different measures. The market was therefore never only a market. It was also a test of colonial legibility.

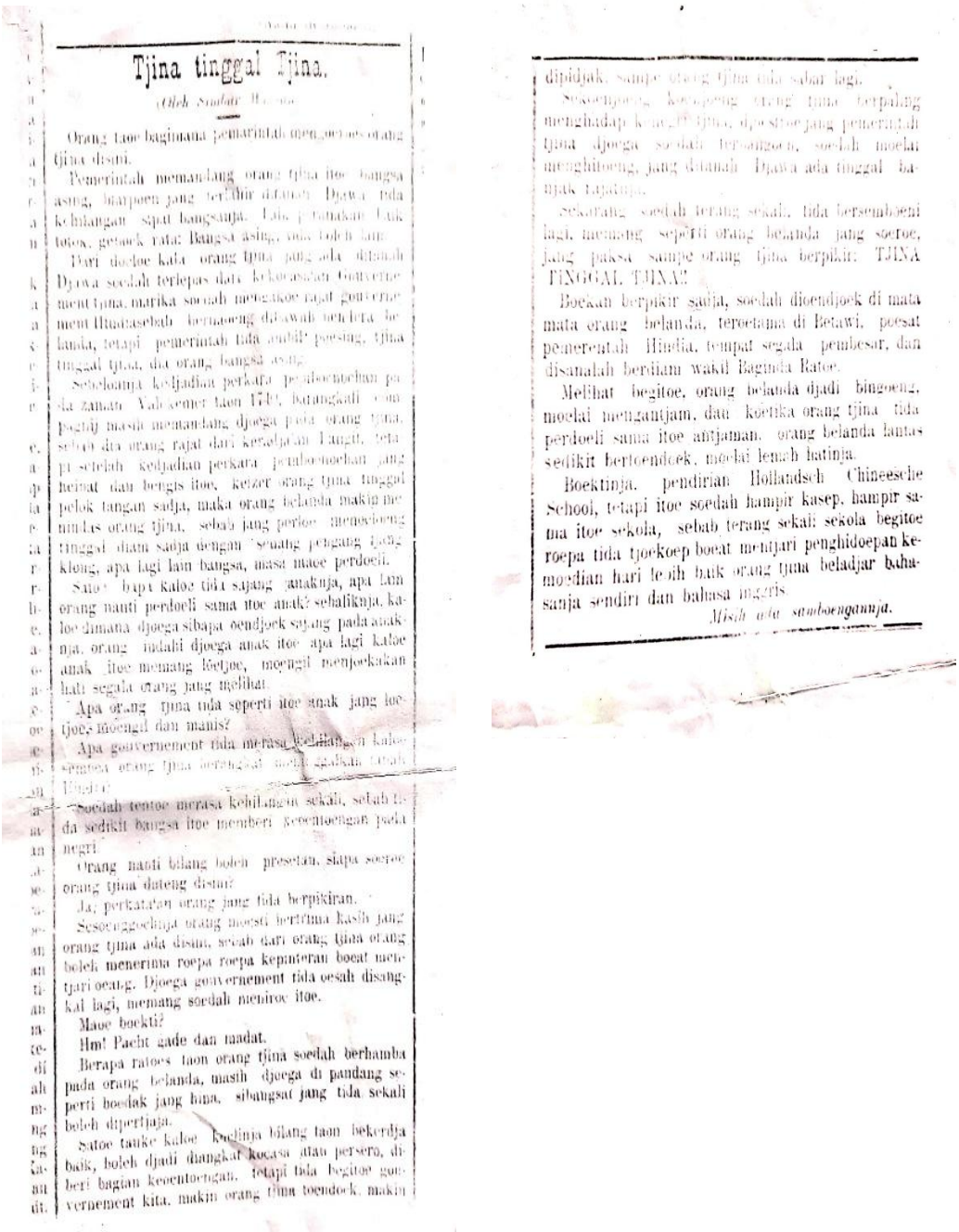
For the Chinese community, commercial strength increasingly leaned on claims to legal and social recognition. Chinese traders in the Indies could, in certain commercial matters, operate closer to European legal arrangements than Arab traders did, and this gave trade a harder institutional backing: contracts, disputes, and commercial protection could be imagined in a different register.[34] Education sharpened the claim. The permission to establish Chinese schools, reported in *Darmo-Kondo* in 1908, was more than an administrative concession; it marked a community's attempt to secure literacy, discipline, and status in a colonial world where schooling had become a costly sign of advancement.[35] The issue was never education alone. Before the 1911 Chinese Revolution, Chinese residents in the Indies had faced humiliating restrictions, including prohibitions on cutting the queue and wearing European-style clothing. After the revolution, cutting the queue and adopting European dress could become gestures of dignity, almost small public rebellions of the body.[36] To Arab observers, such claims unsettled the fragile hierarchy among non-European communities. Chinese upward

[34] Liem, *De rechtpositie der Chinezen in Nederlands-Indië 1848-1942*, 281; Onghokham, *Migrasi Cina, Kapitalisme Cina dan Anti Cina*, 21.

[35] *Darmo-Kondo*, no. D. K. 68, September 10, 1908; Onghokham, *Riwayat Tionghoa Peranakan di Jawa*, 77.

[36] Justian Suhandinoto, *WNI Keturunan Tionghoa dalam Stabilitas Politik Ekonomi Indonesia* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2009), 90; Liem, *De rechtpositie der Chinezen in Nederlands-Indië 1848-1942*, 281.

mobility was not merely a cultural irritation. It suggested that the colonial middle strata could be rearranged, and perhaps rearranged without them.



Tjina tinggal Tjina.

(Oleh Soedara)

Orang itoe baginama pemarintah mengatoer orang tjina disini.

Pemerintah memandang orang tjina itoe bangsa asing, biarpoen yang terlahir ditanah Djawa pada kehilangan sifat bangsanja. Lain perkataan: Tak lebih, semoea rata: Bangsa asing, tida lebih tida koerang.

Dari doeloe kala orang tjina jang ada ditanah Djawa soedah terlepas dari kekoeasaan Gouvernement tjina, marika soedah mengakoe rajat gouvernement Hindia sebab bernaoeng dibawah perlindoengan Belanda, tetapi pemerintah tida soedah' poesing, tjina tinggal tjina, dia orang bangsa asing.

Sebeloemnja kedjadian perkara perdamaian pada zaman Van Gesner taon 1780, barangkali orang pandjij masih memandang djoega pada orang tjina, sebab dia orang rajat dari keradjaan Tiongkok, tetapi setelah kedjadian perkara perdamaian jang heirat dan bengis itoe, kelzer orang tjina tinggal pelok tangan sadja, maka orang belanda makin meindas orang tjina, sebab jang perloe menoeloeng tinggal diam sadja dengan 'senang pengang jang kloeng, apa lagi lain bangsa, masa mace perdoeli.

Satoe bapa kaloe tida sajang anaknja, apa lain orang nanti perdoeli sama itoe anak? sebalikanja, kaloe dimana djoega sibapa oendjoek sajang pada anaknja, orang mulahi djoega anak itoe apa lagi kaloe anak itoe memang lelioe, moengil menjoekakan hati segala orang jang melihat.

Apa orang tjina tida seperti itoe anak jang loetjoe, moengil dan manis?

Apa gouvernement tida merasa kehilangan kaloe semoea orang tjina meninggal soeda[illegible] Hindia?

Soedah tentoe merasa kehilangan sekali, sebab tida sedikit bangsa itoe memberi keoentoengan pada negri.

Orang nanti bilang boleh presetan, siapa soeroe orang tjina dateng distan?

Ja, perkataan orang jang tida berpikiran.

Sesoenggoehnja orang moesti bertrima kasih jang orang tjina ada disini, sebab dari orang tjina orang boleh menerima roepa roepa kepinteran boeat mentjari oeang. Djoega gouvernement tida oesah disangkal lagi, memang soedah menjoe itoe.

Maoe boekti?

Hm! Pacht gade dan madat.

Berapa ratoes taon orang tjina soedah berhamba pada orang belanda, masih djoega di pandang seperti boedak jang hina, sibangsat jang tida sekali boleh dipertjaja.

Satoe tauke kaloe kerdjinja bilang taon bekerdja baik, boleh djadi diangkat kocasa atau persero, diberi bagian keoentoengan, tetapi tida begitoe gouvernement kita, makin orang tjina toendoek, makin dipidjak, sampe orang tjina tida sabar lagi.

Sesoenggoehnja kemadjoean orang tjina terpalang menghadap kemadjoean tjina, djoestroe jang pemerintah tjina djoega soedah bersangsoe, soedah moelai menghiloeng, jang ditanah Djawa ada tinggal banjak tjatjinja.

Sekarang soedah terang sekali, tida bersembojeni lagi, memang seperti orang belanda jang seroe, jang paksa sampe orang tjina berpikir: TJINA TINGGAL TJINA!

Boekan berpikir sadja, soedah dioendjoek di mata mata orang belanda, teroetama di Betawi, poesat pemerentah Hindia, tempat segala pembesar, dan disanalah berdiam wakil Baginda Ratoe.

Melihat begitoe, orang belanda djadi bingoeng, moelai mengantjam, dan koetika orang tjina tida perdoeli sama itoe antjaman, orang belanda lantas sedikit bertoendoek, moelai lemah hatinja.

Boektinja pendirian Hollandsch Chineesche School, tetapi itoe soedah hampir kasep, hampir sama itoe sekola, sebab terang sekali sekola begitoe roepa tida tjoekoep boeat mentjari penghidoepan kemoedian hari lebih baik orang tjina beladjar bahasanja sendiri dan bahasa inggris.

Misih ada samboengannja.

Figure 1. Report on permission for the establishment of a Chinese school, published in *Darmo-Kondo*, 10 September 1908. Source: *Darmo-Kondo*, 10 September 1908.

The Arab community encountered colonial recognition through a different set of doors, many of them narrow. Residency and mobility regulations had long pressed Foreign Orientals into supervised space, while the *passenstelsel* made travel outside designated areas dependent on permits that could arrive too slowly for commercial needs.[37] Arab mobility was also shadowed by another kind of suspicion: the colonial fear of Islam as a transregional force, carried through pilgrimage, Hadhrami networks, teachers, reformist debates, and association. This did not mean that Arab traders lacked initiative. A report in *Bintang Soerabaia* on an Arab entrepreneurial school suggests that education and economic training also mattered within the community.[38] Yet such efforts unfolded in a field where colonial protection was uneven and Arab movement could be read as commercially useful, religiously sensitive, and politically watchable all at once. Recognition came, but never cleanly.

The imbalance between these two positions produced something more historically precise than "envy." It produced status anxiety within the colonial middle strata. After the Chinese Revolution of 1911, Chinese nationalism in the Indies gained a new emotional charge; queues were cut, European-style clothing became more visible, and newspapers helped circulate the language of dignity, solidarity, and collective injury.[39] For Arab traders, this was not merely a matter of fashion or pride. It signaled the possibility that another non-European community might move closer to European recognition while they remained more tightly associated with restriction, religious suspicion, and uncertain protection. When news of violence in Tuban traveled and Surabaya became tense in 1912, the ground had already been prepared.[40] Law had sorted them. Education had marked ambition. Status had turned comparison into unease.

From commercial rivalry to ethnicized collective violence

The violence of 1912 did not create Arab-Chinese rivalry in Surabaya. It exposed it. By the time blood appeared in the record, the rivalry had already been prepared by quieter pressures: credit, textiles, unequal legal protection, religious proximity, commercial suspicion, and the restless comparison of status within the colonial middle strata. To begin with the riot alone would be misleading. It would make the event look sudden, almost meteorological, as though violence had fallen upon the city from a dark sky. The sources suggest something more historical, and more disturbing. The riot was a moment when ordinary frictions found a collective language. Commercial competition became communal injury; resent-

[37] *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië* 1866, no. 57; Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadrami Awakening: Community and Identity in the Netherlands East Indies*, 28-34.

[38] *Bintang Soerabaia*, May 15, 1912.

[39] Suhandinoto, *WNI Keturunan Tionghoa dalam Stabilitas Politik Ekonomi Indonesia*, 90; Liem, *De rechtpositie der Chinezen in Nederlands-Indië 1848-1942*, 281.

[40] *Bintang Soerabaia*, May 13, 1912; *De Preanger Bode*, September 31, 1912.

ment became moral certainty; a local assault could be made to stand for the dignity of an entire group.[41]

Tuban became the spark. On 13 May 1912, *Bintang Soerabaia* reported violence between Arab and Chinese communities there, beginning from an attack that drew in Arab actors and Bumiputra participants against members of the Chinese community. The thesis reads this incident as the beginning of wider Arab-Chinese unrest, but its importance lies less in the incident itself than in the speed with which it became communal property. What may have begun as a specific confrontation was not allowed to remain specific. It was lifted into a larger frame: Arab against Chinese, injury against injury, life against life. The timing mattered. After the 1911 Chinese Revolution, Chinese communal solidarity in the Indies had become more assertive, nourished by newspapers, migrant networks, and a sharpened sense of collective standing.[42] Tuban, then, was not merely a place where violence happened. It was where an older rivalry learned how to speak as collective revenge.

[41] Azyumardi Azra, "The Indies Chinese and Sarekat Islam: An Account of the Anti-Chinese Riots in Colonial Indonesia," *Studia Islamika* 1, no. 1 (1994): 25–52; *Bintang Soerabaia*, May 13, 1912.

[42] *Bintang Soerabaia*, May 13, 1912; Ahmad Kosasih, "Pers Tionghoa dan Dinamika Pergerakan Nasional di Indonesia 1900–1942," *Jurnal Kajian Sejarah & Pendidikan Sejarah* 1, no. 1 (2015).

OE TIE KIONG
en TJIN SIOK POO
DJAMAN KARADJA-AN
Tong Tiauw
Namanja di poedji tersoehoer
Gagah en setia
dari itoe namanja sampe sekarang tida bisa loepa krana
OE TIE KIONG
SELAMANJA MINOEM TEROES Münchener Erlanger bier
TJIN SIOKPOO
TIDA MINOEM LAIN DARI PILSENER ERLANGERBIER
SILAKEN TOEWAN TOEWAN TJOBAMINOEM
ERLANGER
BOLEH DAPET PADA
Tio Siek Giok
DI PERTJINAN KORLON EN F L'AAL SIMPANG,
Figure 2. Report on the Arab-Chinese unrest in Tuban, published in *Bintang Soerabaia*, 13 May 1912. Source: *Bintang Soerabaia*, 13 May 1912.

News mattered. It gave distance a pulse. The unrest in Tuban did not remain trapped in Tuban because early twentieth-century Chinese communal life in the Indies was already tied together by newspapers, associations, commercial routes, kinship memories, and the emotional afterlife of the 1911 Revolution. Reports did not merely inform readers; they arranged injury into a story that could be shared. A beating, a threat, a rumor of humiliation, a call for revenge, each could travel faster than the slow machinery of colonial order. The thesis rightly treats this as part of the transformation from personal conflict into collective behavior, but the language can be sharpened: what took form was an ethnicized mobilization, a process in which violence became intelligible through the honor, fear, and solidarity of a named community.[43] Once an incident was read that way, restraint became more difficult. To remain still could look like weakness. To retaliate could be dressed as duty.

Surabaya then became the larger stage. A report attributed to *De Preanger Bode* described Chinese attackers firing a revolver at Arabs passing near their camp; Sech Arab Salim bin Sleman Balasjeraf and Sech Said bin Hoesin Hoebis were reportedly wounded in the right hand. The retaliation that followed carried its own ritual cruelty. Arab anger answered Chinese attack; when Chinese men passed near an Arab camp, they were assaulted, and one victim was said to have died with a knife still lodged in his body.[44] The phrase "life for life" did not simply name revenge after the fact. It authorized it. It gave killing the sound of moral balance, as if death could settle what law, trade, and colonial hierarchy had left unsettled. But this language should not tempt us into treating the violence as primordial hatred. Its brutality was real, but its conditions were historical: segregated residence, competitive commerce, uneven legal recognition, post-1911 Chinese confidence, Arab anxiety over status, and a city where communities lived close enough to wound one another, yet not equally enough to trust the rules that governed them.

In this sense, the 1912 violence did not create Arab-Chinese rivalry; it exposed the fragility of a colonial urban order in which commercial competition, legal inequality, and ethnic solidarity had already become entangled. The thesis describes the episode through the language of collective behavior, and that remains useful, provided it is made more historically exact. What occurred was not merely a crowd losing control. It was ethnicized collective violence: an act of mobilization in which people interpreted injury, rumor, and retaliation through the name of a community.[45] Such violence was neither inevitable nor accidental. It emerged because Surabaya had made Arab and Chinese traders commercially

[43] Kosasih, "Pers Tionghoa dan Dinamika Pergerakan Nasional di Indonesia 1900-1942"; *Bintang Soerabaia*, May 13, 1912.

[44] *De Preanger Bode*, September 31 [sic], 1912.

[45] Oman Sukmana, *Konsep dan Teori Gerakan Sosial* (Malang: Intrans Publishing, 2016), 34-35; Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3-22.

close, legally unequal, spatially legible, and socially comparable. The riot was therefore not the article's destination, but its warning flare. It revealed how a colonial city could turn trade into rivalry, rivalry into status anxiety, and status anxiety into the terrible arithmetic of revenge.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Arab-Chinese socio-economic relations in Surabaya between 1906 and 1919 were shaped less by inherited ethnic hostility than by the structure of the colonial city itself. Surabaya's port economy brought Arab and Chinese traders into close commercial contact, while municipal administration, segregated residence, legal classification, and unequal access to colonial protection made that contact unstable. Bumiputra society stood at the center of this field. Arab traders approached Bumiputra customers through commerce, credit, and religious proximity; Chinese traders operated through dense retail networks, imported goods, commercial discipline, and stronger links to colonial legal arrangements. Their rivalry was therefore not simply a matter of two communities disliking one another. It was produced in the daily crossings of debt, cloth, law, status, and trust.

The violence of 1912 was the most visible rupture in this arrangement, but not its origin. It revealed how commercial competition could become ethnicized when colonial law ranked communities, urban space separated them, and rapid Chinese status mobility after 1911 unsettled the fragile balance among non-European groups. The Surabaya case therefore suggests that intercommunal conflict in the Dutch East Indies should not be read merely as horizontal ethnic tension. It was also mediated by colonial rule: by the ways the state organized space, distributed recognition, protected some claims more than others, and made social comparison painfully consequential. This article has relied on colonial newspapers, municipal regulations, and historical sources that must themselves be read critically, since they carried the language, anxieties, and categories of their time. Even so, they show something important: interethnic tension in colonial Indonesia was not simply inherited from communal difference. It was historically produced through the everyday workings of colonial law, urban space, commercial competition, and unequal recognition.

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