From Straits Brokers to Javanese *Werek*: The Dynamics of Coolie Recruitment for the Deli Tobacco Plantations, East Sumatra, 1880–1915

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Abstract

Between 1880 and 1915 the tobacco plantations of Deli, East Sumatra, absorbed tens of thousands of Chinese and Javanese contract laborers, yet the mechanisms that brought them to the estates have received far less attention than the disciplinary regime they met on arrival. This article reconstructs the recruitment of coolies for the Deli tobacco industry from the first Coolie Ordinance (*Staatsblad* 1880, No. 133) to its revision in 1915. Using the historical method of heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography, it draws on the 1880 ordinance, publications of the Deli Planters Vereeniging, H. J. Bool's account of Chinese immigration, R. Broersma's regional histories, the colonial press, and KITLV photographs. The article argues that recruitment was not a fixed procedure but a shifting system shaped by labor demand, colonial regulation, diplomacy, and the profit imperatives of plantation capital. Chinese recruitment moved from dependence on brokers in the Straits Settlements to direct emigration from Swatow organized through the Immigranten-Bureau after 1888, only to be partly reclaimed by informal intermediaries. As costs rose and Chinese supply faltered, planters turned to Java, where European agencies and village recruiters (*werek*) worked through promises, deception, and debt, a process reinforced by the emigration program of the Ethical Policy. Read through Marx's concept of labor-power, recruitment emerges as the pre-production stage of plantation exploitation, and its enduring legacy was the multi-ethnic society of East Sumatra.

Keywords: Deli; tobacco plantations; coolie recruitment; Coolie Ordinance; Chinese emigration; Javanese labor; East Sumatra; colonial capitalism

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Introduction

The history of plantation agriculture in Indonesia cannot be separated from the politics of colonial rule, in which a colony was a territory to be organized and exploited for the economic interests of the ruling state.[1] Plantation enterprise, long concentrated in Java, moved beyond the island in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, and Sumatra became its principal new frontier.[2] Nowhere was the shift more dramatic than on the east coast, which the Dutch called the *cultuurgebied* (plantation district) or simply "Deli."[3] Its fertile volcanic soils proved exceptionally suited to tobacco and later to rubber and oil palm.[4] Within a few decades, estates owned mainly by Dutch capital dominated the region's exports, and East Sumatra, previously peripheral to colonial concerns, became one of the most important economic zones outside Java.[5]

The frontier rested on a political bargain. The sultan of Deli welcomed foreign capital in the early 1860s, and in 1866 Jacobus Nienhuys and three other planters secured land-use agreements for ninety-nine years;[6] the colonial Agrarian Law later opened land to private enterprise on a massive scale.[7] Land, however, was never the planters' scarcest resource; labor was. The coastal Malays refused to work for wages, the Batak of the interior showed no interest, and an attempt in 1864 to bring ten *hajis* from Penang failed.[8] Unlike the plantations of Java, which drew on surrounding villages, the East Sumatran estates were built on imported labor, first from China and then from Java in numbers that eventually reached hundreds of thousands, housed in barracks and bound by contracts that placed them in conditions resembling servitude.[9] Recruitment thus became a structural problem of the plantation economy, mediated by brokers, agents, foremen, and an immigration bureau, and frequently manipulative and coercive. The colonial state's answer was the Coolie Ordinance (*Koelie Ordonnantie*) of 1880 for the Residency of Sumatra's East Coast. Issued partly in response to planters' complaints that coolies absconded with their advances, it

[1] Sartono Kartodirdjo and Djoko Suryo, *Sejarah perkebunan di Indonesia: Kajian sosial ekonomi* (Yogyakarta: Aditya Media, 1994), 79.

[2] Allan Akbar, "Perkebunan tembakau dan kapitalisasi ekonomi Sumatera Timur 1863–1930," *Tamaddun* 6, no. 2 (2018): 62.

[3] Devi Itawan, "Dari hutan purba menjadi perkebunan: Fotografi, propaganda kemakmuran, dan perubahan lanskap di Sumatera Timur, 1860an–1930an," *Jurnal Sejarah* 3, no. 2 (2020): 29, https://doi.org/10.26639/js.v3i2.266.

[4] Ann Laura Stoler, *Kapitalisme dan konfrontasi di sabuk perkebunan Sumatra, 1870–1979* (Yogyakarta: Karsa, 2005), 3–4; Dian Mariana Sinaga, "Aktivitas perdagangan Deli Maatschappij di Sumatera Timur 1870–1930," *AVATARA, e-Journal Pendidikan Sejarah* 6, no. 1 (2018): 260.

[5] Jones Febryn Simamora, Aminah Safitri Siregar, and Mita Dina Prastiewy, "Di bawah bayang-bayang kolonial: Kehidupan kuli kontrak perkebunan Deli," *Jurnal Penelitian Ilmiah Multidisiplin* 8, no. 5 (2024): 541; Devi Itawan, "Ekspansi perkebunan dan pertumbuhan penduduk di Sumatra Timur, 1863–1942," *Handep: Jurnal Sejarah dan Budaya* 6, no. 2 (2023): 110, https://doi.org/10.33652/handep.v6i2.350.

[6] Hokkop Fritles Nababan, *Sejarah sosial masyarakat perkebunan di Deli (1870–1945)* (Malang: Kreatif Publishing, 2019), 36–37; Jan Breman, *Menjinakkan sang kuli: Politik kolonial pada awal abad ke-20* (Jakarta: Pustaka Utama Grafiti, 1997), 22–23.

[7] Nababan, *Sejarah sosial*, 37.

[8] Breman, *Menjinakkan sang kuli*, 24.

[9] Stoler, *Kapitalisme dan konfrontasi*, 3; Enggar Istiyana, "Kuli perempuan India di perkebunan tembakau Deli 1883–1930," *Journal of History Education and Historiography* 6, no. 2 (2022): 1–2.

bound imported workers to written contracts and punished desertion,[10] while its protective clauses, such as the ten-hour working day, were routinely ignored.[11]

The labor regime that emerged has a substantial historiography. Jan Breman's study of the "taming" of the coolie remains the most powerful account of how the Coolie Ordinance and its penal sanction functioned as instruments of power, binding the colonial state to European capital and exposing the violence used to discipline workers from China, Java, India, and Sumatra.[12] Ann Laura Stoler traced capitalism and confrontation in the plantation belt, Thee Kian-wie situated labor supply within East Sumatra's export-led growth, and Houben and Lindblad examined coolie labor relations in the Outer Islands in the early twentieth century.[13] Indonesian scholarship has added studies of wages, resistance, and the lives of Javanese and Chinese coolies.[14] Closest to the present inquiry, Yasmis analyzed the operation of the Coolie Ordinance in the Deli estates between 1880 and 1915, from contracts and wages to surveillance and the gambling and prostitution that companies tolerated to trap coolies in debt,[15] while Amelia Sriandini related the growth of the industry under the Deli sultanate between 1864 and 1924 to European demand, new infrastructure, and foreign capital.[16]

These works emphasize either the disciplinary order that coolies encountered on the estates or the macroeconomic expansion of the industry; recruitment usually appears as a preamble. Yet the decades between the first Coolie Ordinance and its revision were precisely those in which the means of procuring labor were repeatedly redesigned. How and why the channels of Chinese and Javanese recruitment changed, and what they reveal about the relationship between colonial law, plantation capital, and foreign states, have not been examined as a process in their own right. This article therefore asks, first, what socio-economic conditions and pattern of plantation development in Deli generated the demand for imported Chinese and Javanese labor, and second, how these coolies were recruited between 1880 and 1915 and how recruitment changed. The period is bounded by the first Coolie Ordinance of 1880 and

[10] Bachtiar Akob and Guntur Arie Wibowo, "Kuli Cina di perkebunan tembakau Sumatra Timur abad 18," *Jurnal Seuneubok Lada* 2, no. 2 (2015): 60; Ervin Herdiansyah, "Kehidupan kuli kontrak Jawa di perkebunan tembakau Sumatera Timur tahun 1929–1942," *AVATARA, e-Journal Pendidikan Sejarah* 4, no. 3 (2017): 944.

[11] Herdiansyah, "Kehidupan kuli kontrak Jawa," 944–45.

[12] Breman, *Menjinakkan sang kuli*. Breman's work is cited here from its Indonesian edition.

[13] Stoler, *Kapitalisme dan konfrontasi*; Thee Kian-wie, *Plantation Agriculture and Export Growth: An Economic History of East Sumatra, 1863–1942* (Jakarta: LEKNAS-LIPI, 1977); Vincent J. H. Houben, J. Thomas Lindblad, et al., *Coolie Labour in Colonial Indonesia: A Study of Labour Relations in the Outer Islands, c. 1900–1940* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999).

[14] Dyna Ronauli Hutagaol and Lister Eva Simangunsong, "Sistem pengupahan kuli perkebunan tembakau di Sumatra Timur pada masa kolonial," *Puteri Hijau: Jurnal Pendidikan Sejarah* 5, no. 1 (2020); Dwi Winandar, "Perlawanan buruh terhadap dominasi perkebunan tembakau di Deli 1880–1930," *Jurnal Prodi Ilmu Sejarah* 4, no. 3 (2019); Herdiansyah, "Kehidupan kuli kontrak Jawa"; Akob and Wibowo, "Kuli Cina."

[15] Yasmis, "Kuli kontrak di perkebunan tembakau Deli–Sumatera Timur tahun 1880–1915" (Universitas Indonesia, 2007).

[16] Amelia Sriandini, "Perkembangan perkebunan tembakau pada masa Kesultanan Deli Sumatera Timur pada tahun 1864–1924" (Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, 2024).

its revision for Sumatra's East Coast (*Staatsblad* 1915, No. 421), which took effect on August 1, 1915.[17]

The article makes three contributions. It shifts attention to the pre-production phase of the plantation labor regime: how workers were found, moved, contracted, and integrated into estate production. It treats recruitment as a transnational system negotiated among planters, the colonial government, British authorities in the Straits Settlements, Qing officials, German merchant houses, and recruiters in Java. And it reads Dutch-language sources rarely used in Indonesian scholarship (H. J. Bool's account of Chinese immigration, the publications of the Deli Planters Vereeniging [DPV], R. Broersma's regional histories, and the colonial press) alongside visual evidence, through Marx's concept of labor-power. It argues that recruitment in Deli was a dynamic system continuously reshaped by labor demand, regulation, diplomacy, and the profit imperatives of plantation capital, and that its effects outlasted the contracts in the multi-ethnic society of East Sumatra.

Method

This study employs the historical method in its four stages: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography.[18] Heuristics, the collection of relevant sources,[19] was conducted in the Batoe Api library, the West Java Regional Library, and the National Library of Indonesia, and online through Delpher, Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections, and the Tropenmuseum (now Wereldmuseum). Following Gottschalk, primary sources were understood as testimony produced by eyewitnesses, or by recording devices, present at the events.[20] They comprise the Coolie Ordinance (*Staatsblad* 1880, No. 133); John Anderson's *Mission to the East Coast of Sumatra* (1826); articles and notices in the Medan-based *Deli Courant* (1885–1897) and *De Sumatra Post* (1899–1913); two DPV publications of 1914 and 1915; and KITLV and Tropenmuseum photographs of plantation workers and of Chinese laborers arriving at Belawan.[21] Secondary sources, accounts by those who did not witness the events, consist of books, journal articles, and unpublished academic studies.[22] Colonial-era works such as Bool's *De Chineesche immigratie naar Deli* (ca. 1905),

[17] *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië* 1915, no. 421 (Koelie Ordonnantie "Sumatra's Oostkust," in force from August 1, 1915).

[18] Dudung Abdurrahman, *Metodologi penelitian sejarah Islam* (Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2011).

[19] Sulasman, *Metodologi penelitian sejarah* (Bandung: Pustaka Setia, 2014), 93.

[20] Louis Gottschalk, *Mengerti sejarah: Pengantar metode sejarah* (Jakarta: Yayasan Penerbit Universitas Indonesia, 1975), 35–36.

[21] Among others: "Arbeiders op een plantage in Deli," photograph, ca. 1900, KITLV 86780, Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections, accessed May 3, 2025, http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:916350; "Javaanse koelie op een tabaksplantage van de Amsterdam Deli Compagnie bij Medan," photograph, ca. 1900, KITLV 78316, Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections, accessed May 3, 2025, http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:906764; "Chinese koelies aan het werk in een fermenteerschuur op een tabaksonderneming in Deli," photograph, ca. 1900, KITLV 8014, Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections, accessed March 13, 2025, http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:786511; "Aankomst van Zuid-Chinese contractarbeiders in de haven van Belawan aan de Oostkust van Sumatra," photograph, ca. 1903, KITLV 2565, Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections, accessed May 3, 2025, http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:784014.

[22] Gottschalk, *Mengerti sejarah*, 35.

Broersma's two volumes on Sumatra's East Coast (1919, 1922), W. H. M. Schadee's regional history (1918), and the *Deli-data* (1938) occupy an intermediate position: written close to the plantation establishment and drawing on its records, they are indispensable but were read with the same caution as the colonial press.

External criticism tested authenticity by asking when, where, and by whom a source was produced, from what material, and whether it survived in its original form.[23] The *Deli Courant* of August 1, 1894 (no. 61), obtained through Delpher, was published in Medan at the height of plantation expansion, and its typography, layout, date, and place are consistent with a local colonial newspaper; the KITLV photograph of laborers arriving at Belawan, dated to about 1903, comes from a reliable colonial collection whose digitization has not altered its content. Internal criticism assessed credibility.[24] The 1894 article "Chineesche koelie-immigratie" is reliable evidence of the colonial press's view of Chinese immigration but not socially objective, for it conceals the suffering, violence, and racial inequality of the estate system; likewise the Belawan photograph, probably taken for the government or a company such as the Deli Maatschappij, foregrounds order and success.

Interpretation combined analysis and synthesis, reassembling facts within a theoretical framework.[25] The framework adopted is Marx's theory of exploitation. Capital, Marx argued, buys a peculiar commodity, labor-power: not labor as such but the capacity to work for a definite period,[26] and profit derives from the surplus value that the worker produces beyond the wage.[27] In Deli, recruitment through agents, brokers, and *laukeh* brought labor-power into production, and the search for ever-new sources (the Straits Settlements, then Swatow and Amoy, then Java) can be read as capital's effort to secure a continuous supply of exploitable labor. Historiography, finally, arranged the findings chronologically and thematically into a factual narrative.[28]

Results

Deli before Tobacco and the Making of a Plantation Frontier

Along the east coast of Sumatra five Malay sultanates, Langkat, Deli, Serdang, Asahan, and Kotapinang, displayed until about 1800 a hierarchical order of sultan, aristocracy, merchants and religious figures, and peasants and fishermen.[29] The population consisted essentially of Malays on the coast and Batak in the interior, both later recognized by the colonial government as indigenous, with their agrarian rights and customary law acknowledged.[30] When John Anderson visited in 1823 on behalf

[23] Sulasman, *Metodologi penelitian sejarah*, 101–2; Abdurrahman, *Metodologi penelitian sejarah Islam*, 105–7.

[24] Kuntowijoyo, *Pengantar ilmu sejarah* (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana, 2018), 77–78.

[25] Abdurrahman, *Metodologi penelitian sejarah Islam*, 111; Kuntowijoyo, *Pengantar ilmu sejarah*, 78.

[26] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Frederick Engels, vol. 1 (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1906), 186.

[27] Marx, *Capital*, 235.

[28] Sulasman, *Metodologi penelitian sejarah*, 147–48.

[29] Michael van Langenberg, "National Revolution in North Sumatra: Sumatera Timur and Tapanuli, 1942–1950" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 1976), 12.

[30] Itawan, "Ekspansi perkebunan," 113.

of the government of Prince of Wales Island (Penang), he was told that Deli's Malays numbered about 7,000, alongside numerous Batak and smaller groups of Acehnese, Javanese, Minangkabau, Bugis, and Chinese.[31] Rice barely met local needs and in poor seasons had to be brought from Asahan and Batubara.[32] Pepper was the principal export, grown by Karo cultivators whom local chiefs such as the *orang kaya* of Sunggal supplied with rice, salt, and tools before buying their harvest cheaply.[33] Between 1819 and 1822 the east-coast states exported 93,048 *pikul* of pepper to Penang, 57,773 of them from Deli.[34] Tobacco was grown in small plots between the pepper vines, mainly for household use,[35] and the label "Deli tobacco" appeared only after the 1860s.[36]

The political conditions for the plantation economy were created under Sultan Mahmud Al-Rasyid Perkasa Alamsyah (r. 1858–1873).[37] On August 22, 1862, he signed the *Acte van Verband* with Resident Elisa Netscher, pledging loyalty to the Dutch crown, and a supplementary agreement of March 5, 1863, forbade the sale of land to Europeans or other foreigners, tying the sultanate to the colonial state and laying the groundwork for later exploitation.[38] In 1863 Said bin Abdullah bin Umar Bilsagih, a Surabaya merchant of Arab descent, persuaded Dutch traders that Deli produced some 30,000 *pikul* of fine tobacco a year.[39] Nienhuys reached Labuhan on July 7, 1863,[40] and obtained a twenty-year concession of about 4,000 *bau* (1 *bau* ≈ 0.7 hectare).[41] His attempt to apply the "Java system" of advances to local growers failed, because scattered Malay fields could not be supervised, but the few thousand plants he obtained demonstrated the leaf's quality.[42] In March 1864 the first fifty bales reached

[31] John Anderson, *Mission to the East Coast of Sumatra, in M.DCCC.XXIII* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood; London: T. Cadell, 1826), 295–96. On the context of Anderson's mission, see Bonatua Silalahi, *John Anderson 1823: Misi ke Pantai Timur Sumatera; Terjemahan lengkap disertai ulasan sejarah versi Pires, Pinto, Marsden dan kekinian* (Bandung: Widina Media Utama, 2025), iii.

[32] Suprayitno et al., "From Labuhan Deli to Belawan: The Removal of Harbor in Medan during the Dutch Colonial Period of 1863–1942," *Budapest International Research and Critics Institute-Journal* 3, no. 2 (2020): 1394, https://doi.org/10.33258/birci.v3i2.999.

[33] Karl J. Pelzer, *Toean keboen dan petani: Politik kolonial dan perjuangan agraria di Sumatra Timur 1863–1947* (Jakarta: Sinar Harapan, 1985), 21. *Orang kaya* denotes members of the elite who were not of royal birth.

[34] Anderson, *Mission to the East Coast*, 424.

[35] Hanif Harahap, Dimas Ade Gunawan, and Sri Karina, "Dari petani tradisional menjadi koeli perkebunan: Perubahan mata pencaharian masyarakat Deli (1863–1869)," *Mukadimah: Jurnal Pendidikan, Sejarah, dan Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial* 7, no. 2 (2023): 497.

[36] Edi Sumarno, "Pelestarian dan perlindungan tembakau Deli: Sebuah perspektif historis," *Jurnal Pertanian Tropik* 3, no. 3 (2016): 188.

[37] Muhammad Takari, A. Zaidan B. S., and Fadlin Muhammad Dja'far, *Sejarah Kesultanan Deli dan peradaban masyarakatnya* (Medan: USU Press, 2012), 79.

[38] Charlis Sianturi, "Sejarah konsesi tanah kerajaan Melayu di Sumatera Timur (1877–1892)," *Seuneubok Lada: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Sejarah, Sosial, Budaya, dan Kependidikan* 9, no. 2 (2022): 134.

[39] Mohammad Abdul Ghani, *Jejak planters di Tanah Deli: Dinamika perkebunan di Sumatra Timur 1863–1996* (Bogor: IPB Press, 2019), 39.

[40] W. H. M. Schadee, *Geschiedenis van Sumatra's Oostkust*, vol. 1, Mededeeling no. 2 (Amsterdam: Oostkust van Sumatra-Instituut, 1918), 171–73.

[41] Sumarno, "Pelestarian dan perlindungan," 190.

[42] Schadee, *Geschiedenis van Sumatra's Oostkust*, 1:174; R. Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, vol. 1, *De ontluiking van Deli* (Batavia: Javasche Boekhandel & Drukkerij, 1919), 32.

Rotterdam and were praised as cigar wrappers.[43] In 1866, exploiting a controleur who did not understand the English of the negotiations, Nienhuys and his partners concluded ninety-nine-year contracts without formal government approval, and by planting widely spaced banana trees amid uncleared land Nienhuys had some 12,000 *bau* measured out to him.[44]

Capital followed success. Backed by the merchant G. C. Clemen and ƒ30,000 from P. W. Janssen, the 1868 planting yielded a profit of about ƒ67,000, its first lot fetching 225 cents a pound, while Deli's harvest of some 142,000 pounds averaged 142 cents,[45] and in 1869 the Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij joined them in founding the Deli Maatschappij, the first limited-liability company in the Netherlands Indies, with a capital of ƒ300,000 and some 10,000 *bau* of land.[46] Output grew from 50 bales worth about ƒ4,000 in 1864 to 6,409 bales worth about ƒ1 million in 1872.[47] By 1872 there were fifteen estates, production rose roughly tenfold between 1873 and 1883, and Deli acquired the nickname "dollar land."[48] In 1873 the Deli Maatschappij alone held about 26,000 *bau*;[49] around 1888 some 148 estates grew tobacco, and export value peaked in 1913 at around 50 million.[50] In 1913 *De Sumatra Post* recalled P. J. Veth's verdict that Deli revealed "the astonishing natural wealth of Sumatra, which seems in no respect inferior to that of Java."[51]

The Labor Question: Local Refusal and the Turn to Imported Labor

Rapid expansion turned labor into the bottleneck of the plantation economy.[52] Nienhuys judged the local population undisciplined and classed the Batak as incapable.[53] As Tengku H. M. Lah Husny observed, Karo and Malays preferred independent work to being bound as estate laborers, whereupon the Dutch called them lazy and untrustworthy, and A. J. van der Aa's geographical dictionary branded the Malays of Deli pirates.[54] Tengku Luckman Sinar read the matter differently: the Malays had never consented to the surrender of their fertile land, from which the sultan, his chiefs, and the planters profited, and their reluctance to work on the estates

[43] *Deli-data 1863–1938*, Mededeeling no. 26 (Amsterdam: Oostkust van Sumatra-Instituut, 1938), 5; Ghani, *Jejak planters*, 20.

[44] Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, 1:37; Breman, *Menjinakkan sang kuli*, 23.

[45] Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, 1:37; Willem Westerman, *De tabakscultuur op Sumatra's Oostkust* (Amsterdam: J. H. de Bussy, 1901), 3.

[46] Pelzer, *Toean keboen dan petani*, 58; Stoler, *Kapitalisme dan konfrontasi*, 27; Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, 1:38.

[47] Schadee, *Geschiedenis van Sumatra's Oostkust*, 1:186.

[48] Rizka Hanifah Febriana, "Perubahan struktur sosial masyarakat sebagai akibat dari konflik agraria di Sumatera Timur tahun 1946," *Seuneubok Lada: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Sejarah, Sosial, Budaya, dan Kependidikan* 10, no. 1 (2023): 16.

[49] Nababan, *Sejarah sosial*, 40.

[50] Ghani, *Jejak planters*, 20.

[51] "... den verbazenden natuurlijken rijkdom van Sumatra, die voor dien van Java in geen enkel opzicht schijnt onder te doen." "Terloops," *De Sumatra Post*, May 5, 1913.

[52] Ghani, *Jejak planters*, 63.

[53] Breman, *Menjinakkan sang kuli*, 23.

[54] Tengku H. M. Lah Husny, *Lintasan sejarah: Peradaban dan budaya penduduk Melayu-pesisir Deli Sumatra Timur, 1612–1950* (Jakarta: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, Proyek Penerbitan Buku Bacaan dan Sastra Indonesia dan Daerah, 1978), 158.

was a form of protest.[55] Protest could become armed resistance. Land alienation in Sunggal led Datuk Kecil, Datuk Jalil, and Sulong Barat to mobilize about 1,500 Malay and Karo fighters in 1872; estates were burned, and three Dutch expeditions were needed before Datuk Kecil was captured on October 24, 1872, and exiled to Java, although guerrilla resistance continued until Datuk Sunggal Badiuzzaman was exiled in 1895.[56]

Planters therefore turned to outside labor, first through Chinese brokers in Penang and Singapore, although they soon realized that workers from Java were cheaper.[57] Chinese workers became indispensable in the fermentation sheds, where leaves were tied, fermented, sorted, and baled.[58] Nienhuys's first Chinese recruits had been promised high wages in Penang but received only a few ringgit, and many ran away.[59] Deserters were punished harshly, some made to work in chains weighted with iron balls, until a controleur appointed after 1864 took over supervision of punishment.[60] Desertions and riots led planters to widen their search to Java and to the Banjarese of Kalimantan,[61] targeting poorly educated villagers to whom Deli was painted as a "paradise."[62]

The Coolie Ordinance of 1880

After a draft circulated in 1877 and revised in consultation with the planters in May 1879, the first Coolie Ordinance was enacted as *Staatsblad* No. 133 of July 13, 1880, for Sumatra's East Coast.[63] Its purpose was to prevent coolies from leaving the estates or refusing work.[64] Its fourteen articles required a registered written contract specifying a maximum working day of ten hours, a maximum term of three years, wages, rest days, and the employer's duty to provide housing, medical care, and clean water; where a contract had been concluded without adequate emigration supervision, officials were to verify the worker's free consent. Workers could not leave without written permission. The penal clauses, however, exposed a stark asymmetry: an employer who breached a contract faced a fine of at most *ƒ*100, whereas a worker who absconded or repeatedly refused work could be sentenced to up to three months of unpaid forced labor on public works, and repeat offenders to up to a year (arts. 8,

[55] Usman Pelly, Rata R., and Soenyata Kartadarmadja, *Sejarah sosial daerah Sumatera Utara Kotamadya Medan* (Jakarta: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, Direktorat Sejarah dan Nilai Tradisional, Proyek Inventarisasi dan Dokumentasi Sejarah Nasional, 1984), 20–21.

[56] Tengku Luckman Sinar, *Sejarah Medan tempo doeloe* (Medan: Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengembangan Seni Budaya Melayu, 1996), 26–27.

[57] Ririn Darini and Dyah Ayu Anggraeni, "The Life of Deli Tobacco Plantation's Workers in East Sumatera, 1880–1930," *Indonesian Historical Studies* 5, no. 1 (2021): 34.

[58] Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, 1:39; "Chinese koelies aan het werk."

[59] Hutagaol and Simangunsong, "Sistem pengupahan," 72.

[60] Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, 1:40–41.

[61] Pelly, Rata, and Kartadarmadja, *Sejarah sosial daerah*, 22.

[62] Darini and Anggraeni, "Life of Deli Tobacco Plantation's Workers," 35.

[63] *De poenale sanctie in de Koeli-Ordonnantie* (n.p.: Snelpersdrukkerij Agam, 1918), 8–9.

[64] Akob and Wibowo, "Kuli Cina," 60.

12).[65] Provisions against employers remained largely formal; in practice, sanctions fell on laborers.[66]

This penal sanction was the key to keeping workers on the estates, and fingerprint registration allowed planters to hunt down runaways.[67] Notices such as that placed by Ramoenia Estate in the *Deli Courant* in 1885 listed absconding Chinese coolies by name, age, and height, among them Chew Ah Chep, aged 25 and 154 cm tall (figure 1a).[68] By guaranteeing a contract-bound workforce, the ordinance gave planters sweeping authority over Chinese and Javanese laborers alike and became the linchpin of continuous tobacco production.[69]



Weggeloopen: [120]

van RAMOENIA ESTATE

de Chineesche koelies

Chew Ah Chep	Keh 25	jaar	154 cm.
Tan Ah Liay	Keh 30	„	158 „
Cham Ah Sin Haylohonh	38	„	160 „
Ngoh Ah Kiouw	Keh 30	„	161 „
Eh Kwie Chye	Keh 30	„	162 „



ENTLAUFEN.

1 Javane, Namens „Kasan"

MIT

1 Frau und 2 kleinen Kindern.

Alter 35 Jahre. — Höhe 161 cM.
Kennzeichen linkes Auge blind.

Um Benachrichtigung ersuchen

A. SIEMSSEN & C°.,
Post: Tebing-Tinggi-Deli.

(Deli-Courant 1899).

Figure 1. Runaway notices for absconding contract coolies: (a) "Weggeloopen" notice of Ramoenia Estate, 1885; (b) "Entlaufen" notice for the Javanese coolie Kasan, 1899. Sources: (a) "Weggeloopen," Deli Courant; (b) J. van den Brand, De millioenen uit Deli (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, 1902), reproduced from the Deli Courant (1899).

Recruiting Chinese Coolies: From Straits Brokers to Direct Emigration

Brokerage in the Straits. Planters first sought Chinese labor, valued for its skill in sorting leaf, through the Straits Settlements,[70] housing the predominantly male workforce in barracks near fields and sheds.[71] Recruitment in Penang and Singapore through Chinese brokers was rife with fraud. H. J. Bool recorded that men were lured to wayang performances and then seized and shipped to Deli, or told they were bound for Johor and taken to Deli regardless,[72] and unfulfilled promises of high wages made migrants prone to resistance.[73] The Straits authorities responded with a Crimping

[65] *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië* 1880, no. 133 (Koelie Ordonnantie for the Residency of Sumatra's Oostkust).

[66] Marwati Djoened Poesponegoro and Nugroho Notosusanto, *Sejarah nasional Indonesia IV: Kemunculan penjajahan di Indonesia (1700–1900)* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 2019), 395.

[67] Anthony Reid, *The Blood of the People: Revolution and the End of Traditional Rule in Northern Sumatra* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979), 41.

[68] "Weggeloopen," *Deli Courant*, May 30, 1885.

[69] Dirk Aedsge Buiskool, *Shaping Medan: The Role and Impact of Prominent Chinese, 1890–1942* (Leiden: Brill, 2025), 37.

[70] Deli Planters Vereeniging, *De Deli Planters Vereeniging* (Medan: Deli Planters Vereeniging, 1914), 4; Pelly, Rata, and Kartadarmadja, *Sejarah sosial daerah*, 49.

[71] Ghani, *Jejak planters*, 24; "Huizen voor Chinese koelies op een tabaksplantage van de Amsterdam Deli Compagnie te Padang Boelan bij Medan," photograph, 1900, KITLV 78312, Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections, accessed May 3, 2025, http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:902013.

[72] H. J. Bool, *De Chineesche immigratie naar Deli* (n.p., [1905]), 1–2.

[73] Ghani, *Jejak planters*, 63.

Ordinance and, in 1877, the Chinese Protectorate, before whose officials contracts were signed; when brokers still substituted weaker men for those shown to the Protector, planters had the Kapitein Cina at Labuhan, under an 1880 agreement, examine arriving immigrants' contracts.[74] Under the Coolie Ordinance, free labor gave way to "contract coolies."[75] Brokerage was also expensive. On March 28, 1885, planters capped the fee at $50 for each *sinkeh* (newcomer) delivered; the cap proved unrealistic, was revoked on January 14, 1887, and in that year the fee reached $120.[76]

Toward direct emigration. Rising costs pushed planters to bypass the Straits. The Deli Maatschappij had tried in 1873 to contract workers in China under the 1866 regulations agreed among China, Britain, and France, which limited the working day to nine hours, banned debts incurred during the voyage, and guaranteed repatriation, but the Chinese authorities at Canton, Swatow, and Amoy, mindful of abuses in emigration to the Americas, rejected contract emigration. J. T. Cremer therefore proposed in 1875 to send *laukeh*, experienced Deli coolies, to recruit men without prior contracts. The Singapore–Deli steamer service opened in 1880 favored this route, but William A. Pickering, the Protector of Chinese in Singapore, insisted that contracts be signed in Singapore, which returned coolies to the brokers' grip.[77]

The decisive initiative came in 1886, when the sinologist J. J. M. de Groot, sent to conduct ethnographic research in Fukien and Kwangtung, was commissioned by five firms to develop an emigration scheme.[78] Working from Amoy with the German house Pasedag & Co., whose head was also the Dutch consul, he planned to recruit Tio-tsoe (Teochew) laborers while avoiding British influence at Swatow. When the Chinese authorities stalled, the planters sought permission for free emigration in 1887, relying on the German firm Lauts & Haesloop and on German consular weight under Bismarck; later that year, however, the Chinese authorities, prompted by officials in Kwangtung, prohibited free emigration to Deli, whose reputation the Straits abuses had tarnished.[79] The planters answered with a campaign to rehabilitate Deli's image: the resident reported on wages, administration, medical care, and the immigrant depot, and leading managers promised repatriation, curbs on gambling and debt, savings, clean water, and decent burial.[80] Practice belied such pledges. Setiono notes that planters provided gambling, opium, and prostitution in the barracks, so that coolies exhausted their wages and renewed their contracts, sparing planters the cost of new recruitment.[81] German consular pressure eventually softened the Viceroy at Canton; on February 11, 1888, H. C. van den Honert of the Deli Maatschappij concluded an agreement with Lauts & Haesloop, and on April 29, 1888, the authorities of Kwangtung and Fukien approved free emigration.[82] In the DPV's words, conditions

[74] Bool, *Chineesche immigratie*, 2.

[75] Benny G. Setiono, *Tionghoa dalam pusaran politik* (Jakarta: TransMedia Pustaka, 2008), 220; Pelly, Rata, and Kartadarmadja, *Sejarah sosial daerah*, 48.

[76] Bool, *Chineesche immigratie*, 5–6.

[77] Bool, *Chineesche immigratie*, 6–8.

[78] Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, 1:241.

[79] Bool, *Chineesche immigratie*, 8–10.

[80] Bool, *Chineesche immigratie*, 10–11.

[81] Setiono, *Tionghoa dalam pusaran politik*, 220.

[82] Bool, *Chineesche immigratie*, 11–14.

in the Straits had been "unsatisfactory," and in 1888 emigration was organized directly from Swatow.[83] The first shipment under this scheme, initiated by five large tobacco companies, brought only about seventy men, whom accompanying brokers pressed not to sign until their commissions were paid.[84]

The Immigranten-Bureau and its limits. On July 2, 1888, five companies proposed that the DPV, founded by planters in 1879, manage immigration collectively, with costs apportioned by tobacco output. The resulting Immigranten-Bureau was to organize direct emigration and curb the brokers, and members were obliged to obtain *sinkeh* exclusively through it; it handled reception, selection, and transport and remitted workers' savings to their families in China.[85] It charged $60 per coolie, employed a German firm at Swatow as agent for Amoy, Swatow, Hoihow, Pakhoi, and Hong Kong, and paid the return passage of men who withdrew on arrival at Belawan.[86] Direct recruits were contracted at the bureau, whereas Straits recruits, having signed before the Protector, went straight to the estates (figure 2).[87] Transport required heavy subsidies, about $226,000 (*f*520,000) in 1889, until long-term contracts with Meyer & Co. (1890) and Jebsen & Co. (1904) of Hong Kong provided regular sailings, by 1914 in purpose-built steamers with a doctor aboard.[88]

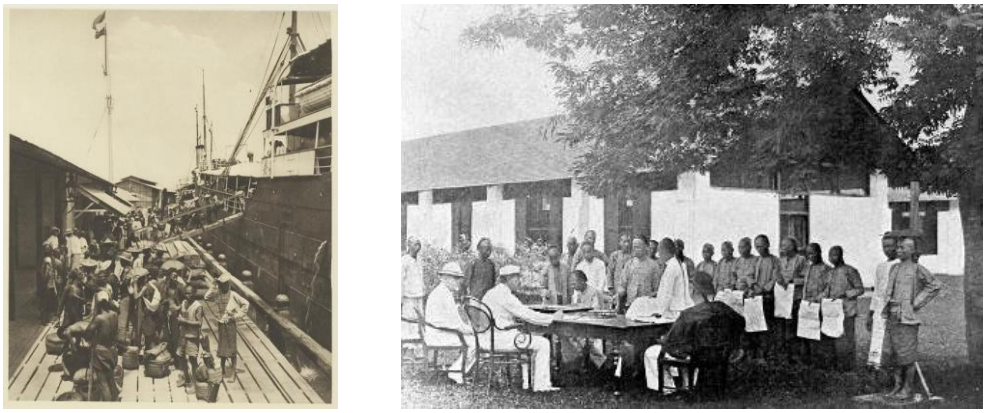


Figure 2. Chinese contract laborers at Belawan and before a colonial official: (a) arrival of South Chinese contract laborers at Belawan, ca. 1903; (b) Chinese immigrants being contracted before an official in Deli Serdang (undated). Sources: (a) "Aankomst van Zuid-Chinese contractarbeiders"; (b) "Contracteren van Chinese immigranten ten overstaan van een ambtenaar te Deliserdang, Sumatra," photograph, n.d., Tropenmuseum collection, Wereldmuseum, Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (NMVW).

The Chinese state remained an active party. After a permanent Dutch consul general for South China was appointed in 1890,[89] the Chinese government presented Consul General P. C. Hamel in 1891 with a regulation demanding Chinese consuls in

[83] "De Chineesche werkkrachten werden in den aanvang door de planters in de Straits Settlements geëngageerd. Hierbij heerschten echter onbevredigende toestanden. In 1888 werd dan ook, nadat de toestemming voor de emigratie van de Chineesche autoriteiten was verkregen, een emigratie direct van Swatow." DPV, *De Deli Planters Vereeniging*, 4.

[84] Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, 1:238; Bool, *Chineesche immigratie*, 15.

[85] Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, 1:240; Thee, *Plantation Agriculture*, 35.

[86] Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, 1:241.

[87] Bool, *Chineesche immigratie*, 42.

[88] Bool, *Chineesche immigratie*, 35–36; DPV, *De Deli Planters Vereeniging*, 5.

[89] Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, 1:241.

Deli, higher pay, maintenance for weak coolies with $4 a month for their families, a $5 monthly limit on the money coolies could draw personally, the balance to be remitted home, and a ban on gambling dens and opium shops.[90] Planters rejected it, with Hamel's concurrence, as a threat to migration's main attraction and an attempt to divert earnings to China; when it resurfaced in March 1892 Hamel held firm, and the threatened suspension of emigration never materialized.[91] By 1894 the *Deli Courant* reported that "the sight of emigrants returning from there with a full purse is the best advertisement for that prosperous colony."[92] As table 1 shows, direct emigration outstripped Straits recruitment from 1889, and the latter became negligible after 1899.

The fall in 1892 reflected a crisis in the tobacco industry, and that of 1897 conflict in Hoelai and Huihong;[93] epidemics, migrants' fear of dying abroad, and strict medical selection at Swatow, which the DPV retained on the principle that fewer but fitter workers were more profitable, also restrained numbers.[94] Bureaucratic control, moreover, eroded from within. *Laukeh* recruitment increasingly drew on Swatow lodging houses and on professional intermediaries known as *kheh-thau*, who revived the brokerage the bureau had been created to abolish, reducing the bureau to administration and transport.[95] A warning quoted by Bool urged that only *laukeh* "actually in the service of an enterprise" be sent to China, lest *kheh-thau* settle there as brokers and lead planters back to "the detestable brokers' system, as in the Straits."[96] Yet in 1903 the bureau's head conceded that genuine inland recruitment was limited, even as *laukeh* had become integral to a system resting on practices that departed from its aims.[97] The First World War disrupted shipping and, with reduced tobacco production, curtailed recruitment, while many idle coolies were sent back to China.[98] On the estates, Chinese coolies worked in *kongsi* of twenty to forty men under a *tandil* who mediated, in simple Malay, with European assistants.[99]

[90] "Artikel 1 van dit Reglement schreef voor de aanstelling van Chineesche consuls in Deli. [...] Voorts eischte het Reglement, dat er in Deli geen speelplaatsen of opiumkitten zouden toegestaan worden." Bool, *Chineesche immigratie*, 28.

[91] Bool, *Chineesche immigratie*, 28–29.

[92] "Een steeds toenemend aantal koelies begeeft zich uit Swatow naar Deli, en het zien van emigranten, die met een gevulde beurs van daar terugkeeren, is de beste reclame voor die welvarende kolonie." "Chineesche koelie-immigratie," *Deli Courant*, August 1, 1894.

[93] Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, 1:243.

[94] Bool, *Chineesche immigratie*, 32.

[95] Bool, *Chineesche immigratie*, 48; Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, 1:245.

[96] "Wil in de toekomst die vrije emigratie door eigen lieden niet ontaarden en ons terugvoeren naar het verfoeilijke brokers-systeem, zooals in de Straits [...], zoo wijzen wij U er op, dat het een hoofdvereischte is, dat slechts laukehs, werkelijk in dienst van eene onderneming zijnde koelies, voor bovenbedoeld doel naar China worden gezonden [...]." Bool, *Chineesche immigratie*, 48.

[97] Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, 1:245–46.

[98] R. Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, vol. 2, *De ontwikkeling van het gewest* (Deventer: Charles Dixon, 1922), 135; Deli Planters Vereeniging, *Jaarverslag: April 1914 tot April 1915* (Medan: Typ. J. Hallermann, 1915), 6.

[99] Buiskool, *Shaping Medan*, 35.

Table 1. Chinese laborers recruited for Deli directly from China and via the Straits Settlements, 1888–1902

Year	From China	From the Straits	Total
1888	1,152	2,820	3,972
1889	5,176	3,494	8,670
1890	6,666	2,462	9,128
1891	5,351	1,511	6,862
1892	2,160	109	2,269
1893	5,152	730	5,882
1894	5,607	857	6,464
1895	8,163	2,142	10,305
1896	6,661	559	7,220
1897	4,435	1,384	5,819
1898	5,105	1,424	6,529
1899	7,561	331	7,892
1900	6,922	4	6,926
1901	5,556	20	5,576
1902	7,181	3	7,184

Recruiting Javanese Coolies: Agencies, Werek, and the Ethical Policy

Java was not at first a priority: planters regarded Chinese workers as ideal, and Straits recruitment was cheaper because Chinese migrants sought employers, whereas Javanese migration still required stimulus.[100] As demand grew, and later as the war disrupted Chinese supply, planters increasingly recruited in Java, reasoning that Javanese agricultural skills suited estate work and that Javanese wages were lower, while declining welfare in Java pushed villagers to migrate.[101] The government also encouraged the recruitment of Javanese women to sort leaf, whose hopes were soon disappointed by low wages and harsh treatment.[102] Stoler cites sources indicating that hundreds of young women each year had to survive by "serving" men in the Chinese barracks; in 1894 women earned about half men's wages, not enough for food.[103]

Planters recruited in Java through European-run agencies that employed Javanese field recruiters, *werek*, to tour villages, often through exaggerated promises, deception, and pressure.[104] Reports of fraud and kidnapping multiplied from around

[100] Thee, *Plantation Agriculture*, 38.
[101] Hutagaol and Simangunsong, "Sistem pengupahan," 72; Nababan, *Sejarah sosial*, 53.
[102] Herdiansyah, "Kehidupan kuli kontrak Jawa," 942–43.
[103] Stoler, *Kapitalisme dan konfrontasi*, 49–50.
[104] Winandar, "Perlawanan buruh," 417.

1882, and Breman argues that the voluntarily signed contract was largely a colonial construct, since coolies were closely guarded in transit and from their arrival through selection at the depot.[105] The authorities acknowledged the problem: in 1885 the resident of Sumatra's East Coast sought "to prevent Javanese coolies for Deli from being misled about the conditions of their contract and the prospects awaiting them in Deli" by having warnings published in Javanese at Java's main ports.[106] Such information left the structure of recruitment untouched, and deception persisted. In 1897 the *Deli Courant* reported that around Poerworedjo (given as Banjoemas) a foreman in the village of Derik lured a fourteen-year-old boy with *f*2.50; the village head ignored the father's complaint because the foreman enjoyed an influential official's protection, and on the way to the assistant *wedana* of Brengkok for a pass the boy leapt from a bridge into the river and escaped.[107] Recruiters portrayed Deli as a "land of hope,"[108] much as recruiters in Penang had promised Chinese migrants gambling and wayang on feast days.[109]

Disillusionment bred flight, refusal to work, and violence. In January 1899 a correspondent of *De Sumatra Post*, reporting the killing of a European at Soengei Basoemboe by a Javanese newly arrived from Java, traced its cause to recruitment:

The manner in which this recruitment takes place and the evil practices that accompany it are shameful. [...] I saw several gangs, among them one of 30 persons, of whom 2 received their advance in full; of the 28 others not one received more than *f*10. [...] In a gang of 60 men there was not a single one who knew that 6 dollars was *f*7.50.[110]

As J. van den Brand showed, the word *ringgit* was itself a trap: in Java it evoked the rijksdaalder of *f*2.50, in Deli a dollar worth roughly half as much.[111] Runaway notices, such as that for the Javanese coolie Kasan, who fled with his wife and two small children (figure 1b), were routine.[112]

Javanese recruitment acquired a new political framing with the Ethical Policy announced in Queen Wilhelmina's speech of September 17, 1901, whose triad of irrigation, emigration, and education was presented as compensation for the Cultivation System.[113] Its emigration plank, intended to relieve overpopulation in

[105] Breman, *Menjinakkan sang kuli*, 142.

[106] "... een maatregel genomen om te voorkomen, dat Javasche koelies voor Deli misleid worden omtrent de voorwaarden van hun contract en omtrent de vooruitzigten die hen op Deli wachten." "Javanen en Sumatra's Oostkust," *Deli Courant*, July 1, 1885.

[107] "Koeliewerving," *Deli Courant*, December 25, 1897.

[108] Ghani, *Jejak planters*, 71.

[109] Hutagaol and Simangunsong, "Sistem pengupahan," 73.

[110] "De wijze waarop die aanwerving geschiedt en de kwade praktijken die daarbij voorkomen zijn schandelijk. [...] Bij een ploeg van 60 man was geen enkele die wist dat 6 dollars *f*7.50 was." "Koelie-werving," *De Sumatra Post*, January 17, 1899.

[111] Van den Brand, *Millioenen uit Deli*.

[112] Van den Brand, *Millioenen uit Deli*. The notice is reproduced there from the *Deli Courant* of 1899.

[113] Beny Oktavianto and Nurarta Situmorang, "Transmigrasi (kolonisasi) pertama pada masa pemerintahan Hindia Belanda," *Majalah ARSIP*, 2018, 19–21; Tiara Niammusyfah Pasaribu, Juan Carlos Ginting, and Adinda Dwi Saputri, "Dampak kebijakan politik etis Belanda terhadap masyarakat Indonesia," *Ar Rumman: Journal of Education and Learning Evaluation* 1, no. 2 (2024): 601.

Java, was soon harnessed by plantation companies to meet their labor needs.[114] Sending Javanese to the harsh contract regimes of East Sumatra could thus be justified both as a remedy for Javanese poverty and as a response to estate demand, and as Chinese supply declined in the early twentieth century, planters relied increasingly on Java. Recruiters advertised openly. In May 1902 the ESAS office in Surabaya offered "able, young and healthy laborers, Madurese, Javanese and Sundanese as well as Chinese, for agricultural and mining enterprises; risk of desertion from on board at our expense," alongside slaughter and draught cattle from Madura and Bali (figure 3a).[115] In 1907 Falkenberg & Co. sought "75 women from Central Java" for Deli (figure 3b),[116] and the "Midden Java" bureau in Semarang advertised a "specialty in Bagelen people."[117]

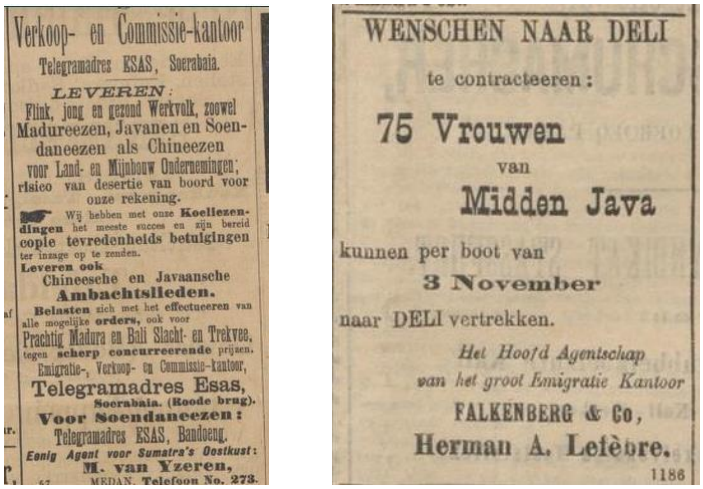


Figure 3. Recruitment advertisements for labor bound for Deli: (a) ESAS sales and commission office, Surabaya, 1902; (b) Falkenberg & Co., "Wenschen naar Deli," 1907. Sources: (a) ESAS advertisement, *De Sumatra Post*; (b) "Wenschen naar Deli," *De Sumatra Post*.

On the estates, debt extended contracts: estates organized gambling on paydays, and losers borrowed from the estate and had to renew.[118] Around 1900 a first generation of estate-born Javanese entered the workforce; planters disliked workers' families but valued the labor of Deli-born children,[119] who tied and sorted leaf and picked pests, at first for wages and later largely as unpaid family labor.[120] By the 1910s the abuses were acknowledged within government: an official inquiry in 1911 and circulars to regional officials led some officials to tighten checks on voluntariness, which frightened villagers away, while Sarekat Islam campaigned against labor emigration.[121] In early 1912 the DPV opened its own recruiting office in Java on the

[114] Oktavianto and Situmorang, "Transmigrasi (kolonisasi) pertama," 20; Febriana, "Perubahan struktur sosial," 18.

[115] Advertisement of the Verkoop- en Commissie-kantoor ESAS, Surabaya, *De Sumatra Post*, May 7, 1902.

[116] "Wenschen naar Deli," *De Sumatra Post*, October 28, 1907 (advertisement of Falkenberg & Co.).

[117] Van den Brand, *Millioenen uit Deli*.

[118] Pelly, Rata, and Kartadarmadja, *Sejarah sosial daerah*, 60.

[119] Breman, *Menjinakkan sang kuli*, 144.

[120] Indrasari Tjandraningsih and Popon Anarita, *Pekerja anak di perkebunan tembakau* (Bandung: Yayasan Akatiga, 2002).

[121] Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, 2:149.

laukeh principle, sending returning workers with letters of introduction to recruit kin and acquaintances for shipment through Semarang.[122] Emigration from Java, nearly halted by the war, reopened in February and March 1915 but fell far short of demand.[123] Table 2 nonetheless shows the decisive shift: by 1913 Javanese workers outnumbered Chinese by more than two to one.

Table 2. Chinese and Javanese laborers in East Sumatra, 1906–1920

Year	Chinese	Javanese
1906	53,105	33,802
1913	53,617	118,517
1920	27,715	209,459

Ethnic difference was built into the labor process. Although both groups had been brought to the estates through deceptive recruitment, they developed no solidarity; mutual stereotypes formed what Nasrul Hamdani calls a latent ethnic conflict, rooted in a discriminatory division of labor in which Javanese were deemed diligent and obedient but slow, and Chinese skilled and better paid but hot-tempered and rebellious.[124] Javanese were first assigned to clearing land and only gradually to planting, while Chinese coolies often gambled away their advances and deserted.[125]

Demographic Consequences

Mass recruitment transformed a population of coastal Malays and highland Karo Batak in both size and composition.[126] Some Chinese returned home after their contracts, but others stayed, settling in designated quarters such as Kampung Cina; Malays called them *singkek*, "new guests."[127] The planter-memoirist Ladislao Szekely caricatured their mobility: "Only a few years ago a tobacco plantation company had sent for him to be a coolie. [...] Within a short time he developed into the powerful taukeh who now, in his turn, sent to China for coolies."[128] Read critically as a planter's stereotype, the passage nonetheless records a real trajectory from coolie to *taukeh* and into labor recruitment itself. Medan became the main destination of Chinese leaving the estates,[129] and its quarter system separating natives, Chinese, Indians, and

[122] Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, vol. 2.

[123] DPV, *Jaarverslag 1914–1915*, 5.

[124] Nasrul Hamdani, *Komunitas Cina di Medan dalam lintasan tiga kekuasaan 1930–1960* (Jakarta: LIPI Press, 2012), 76–77.

[125] Breman, *Menjinakkan sang kuli*, 97; Broersma, *Oostkust van Sumatra*, 1:41.

[126] Pasa Hobi Dermawan Supriyadi, "Dampak sosial-ekonomi perkembangan industri perkebunan di Sumatera Timur pada tahun 1863–1930," *Mozaik: Kajian Ilmu Sejarah* 14, no. 1 (2023): 104–5; Rosmaida Sinaga, Lister Eva Simangunsong, and Syarifah, *Kolonialisme Belanda dan multikulturalisme masyarakat Kota Medan* (n.p.: Yayasan Kita Menulis, 2020), 120.

[127] Husny, *Lintasan sejarah*, 158.

[128] Ladislao Szekely, *Tropic Fever: The Adventures of a Planter in Sumatra* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 65.

[129] Hamdani, *Komunitas Cina di Medan*, 74.

Europeans left a pattern of segregation that outlasted its abolition in 1918;[130] kampongs such as Kesawan, Glugur, and Pulo Brayan acquired a distinctly Chinese character.[131] Javanese ex-coolies, too, left the estates each year despite repatriation provisions; by some estimates at least half became an urban proletariat in Medan, Pematang Siantar, Tebing Tinggi, and Kisaran, while others settled in Malay villages or farmed "borrowed" land.[132]

Table 3. Population of East Sumatra by colonial category, 1880–1915

Year	Europeans	Natives	Chinese	Other Foreign Orientals
1880	522	90,000	25,700	2,533
1890	1,528	191,000	75,325	4,236
1900	2,079	306,035	103,768	9,208
1905	2,667	450,941	99,236	15,573
1915	5,200	681,000	132,000	14,320

Every group grew between 1880 and 1915 (table 3): Europeans tenfold, Chinese roughly fivefold, and "natives" more than sevenfold. Because colonial statistics counted Javanese immigrants among the natives, the growth of this category reflects labor migration far more than natural increase among Malays and Batak. The result was a multicultural society that persists in East Sumatra today.[133]

Discussion

Recruitment as a System in Motion

Coolie recruitment for Deli was a moving system rather than a fixed procedure, with three overlapping phases. Until 1888 Chinese labor came almost entirely through Straits brokers, whose control of supply drove fees from $50 to $120 per *sinkeh* within two years. From 1888 planters acting collectively through the DPV bureaucratized recruitment through direct emigration from Swatow, so that by 1900 nearly all new Chinese recruits came directly from China (table 1). From around 1900 the *laukeh* system was partly reclaimed by *kheh-thau* brokers, while the center of gravity moved to Java (table 2). Each reorganization followed a rise in the cost or a disruption in the supply of labor-power: brokers' fees in the 1880s, the Chinese prohibition of 1887, the demands of 1891, crisis and conflict in 1892 and 1897, and the war in 1914. Continuity lay in the indispensability of intermediaries; change lay in who controlled them. The planters' attempt to replace brokers with a bureau and then with their own "old hands" ended by reproducing brokerage in new forms, in Swatow and, after 1912, in

[130] Buiskool, *Shaping Medan*, 54; Julaihi Wahid, Bambang Karsono, and Bhakti Alamsyah, "Morfologi Kota Medan, awal terbentuk hingga akhir masa kolonial," in *Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium of Nusantara Urban Research Institute: Change and Heritage in Architecture and Urban Development* (Semarang: Architectural Department, Faculty of Engineering, Diponegoro University, 2009), 513.

[131] Hamdani, *Komunitas Cina di Medan*, 96.

[132] Stoler, *Kapitalisme dan konfrontasi*, 56–57.

[133] Sinaga, Simangunsong, and Syarifah, *Kolonialisme Belanda*, 141.

Java. This refines Breman's emphasis on the disciplinary order of the estates: the coolie was subjected to discipline long before reaching the plantation, through contract registration, the depot, photographs, fingerprints, and the guarded voyage.

Labor-Power and the Fiction of Consent

Marx's distinction between labor and labor-power clarifies what recruitment accomplished. Planters bought the capacity of human beings to work for a fixed term, and recruitment was the market through which that capacity was found and delivered. Surplus value depended on the gap between the low cost of that capacity and the high value of Deli wrapper leaf in Europe, and every element of recruitment documented here widened the gap: advances promised but not paid, wages denominated in a currency recruits misunderstood, gambling that turned wages into debt and debt into renewed contracts, and children absorbed as unpaid family labor. Yet Deli also stretches Marx's model. His wage laborer is free to sell labor-power, whereas the Deli coolie, bound by the penal sanction, was not free to withdraw it. Recruitment fused market and compulsion: it began with a sale, often obtained by deception, and ended in an obligation enforced by the state. Breman's judgment that consent was a colonial construct is borne out by the warnings of 1885, the Derik case of 1897, and the report of 1899, while the ESAS advertisement, offering laborers alongside cattle, renders the commodification of labor-power almost literal.

Agency, States, and the Limits of Planter Power

The sources also reveal agency on many sides. Coolies deserted (figure 1), refused work, and occasionally killed; a fourteen-year-old boy chose the river over the recruiter. The refusal of Malays and Batak to become estate laborers, which colonial writers attributed to idleness, is better understood with Luckman Sinar as protest against the loss of land, a reading consonant with Syed Hussein Alatas's critique of the "lazy native" as an image serving the ideology of colonial capitalism.[134] States, too, shaped recruitment. The Qing authorities delayed, prohibited, and finally licensed emigration, and in 1891 sought consular protection for emigrants and control over their earnings; the Straits Protectorate, German firms and consuls, and the Dutch consular network all mediated access to labor; and in Java the inquiry of 1911 and Sarekat Islam's opposition constrained recruitment from within. The planters' power was great but never unconditional, and the ethnic hierarchy they cultivated between Chinese and Javanese workers suggests one reason why contestation remained fragmented.

Sources and Historiographical Position

These conclusions depend on reading colonial sources against the grain. The *Deli Courant* of 1894 framed direct immigration as a "great success" with "good treatment," mentioning "bad elements" and a killing by an estate assistant only in passing;[135] the Belawan photograph presents an orderly flow of labor; and planter

[134] Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London: Frank Cass, 1977).

[135] "Chineesche koelie-immigratie," *Deli Courant*.

publications treat recruitment as a matter of costs, brokers, and diplomacy, silent on the experience of recruits. Precisely because these sources speak in the planters' voice, their admissions of fraud, of the resurgence of the *kheh-thau*, and of the failure of protective pledges carry particular weight. Within the historiography, this article complements rather than supersedes existing work. Where Breman and Yasmis analyze the contract regime after arrival, and Stoler and Thee the longer political economy of the plantation belt, it reconstructs the pre-production phase in which that regime was assembled; where Sriandini explains tobacco expansion through European demand, it shows how that expansion became a demand for imported workers; and where Houben and Lindblad examine twentieth-century labor relations, it documents the earlier experiments that preceded them.

Conclusion

Before the tobacco boom, Deli was part of the Malay coastal world, with Batak communities in the interior and pepper as its leading export. Nienhuys's venture from 1863, the success of Deli tobacco in Europe, and the inflow of Dutch private capital made it one of the most important tobacco-producing regions of the Netherlands Indies, and the resulting demand for labor, which local Malays and Batak would not meet, led planters to import Chinese and then Javanese workers.

Recruitment between 1880 and 1915 was dynamic. For Chinese labor, it moved from dependence on brokers in the Straits Settlements to direct emigration from China organized through the Immigranten-Bureau after 1888, before informal intermediaries again gained ground. Rising demand, escalating costs, and the disruption of supply by international conditions pushed planters toward Javanese labor, regarded as cheaper and agriculturally suited to estate work. Javanese were recruited through intermediaries ranging from European agencies to village *werek*, and their recruitment was bound up with the emigration program of the Ethical Policy. In both channels recruitment was marked by deception, coercion, and the manipulation of information, and it provoked flight, refusal to work, and violence against estate personnel.

The mass recruitment of Chinese and Javanese labor enlarged the population of East Sumatra and transformed a society dominated by Malays and Karo Batak into a multicultural one. The article's contribution lies in reconstructing this recruitment as a transnational and changing system rather than a static preamble to plantation discipline. Its novelty lies in combining Dutch planter publications, the colonial press, and visual sources to show that the exploitation of plantation labor in Deli began not in the tobacco field but in the means by which labor-power was found, purchased, and moved.

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