

COMMENTARY ON A PHOTOGRAPH OF A CHINESE FAMILY IN MANADO



Tjan Ang family, Manado, 1898, courtesy of Onnie Tjia & Wiwi Tjiook

This photograph was taken just before the beginning of the 20th century in Manado, Celebes, the current day Sulawesi. The main subject of the photograph was a group of 3 adults and 5 children; there were 2 other persons in the background. The attire of the people reflected the prevailing fashion in late 19th-century Dutch East Indies - this is an important photograph as it documented the attire worn by the Chinese outside Java and Sumatra. It showed the influence of 3 main cultures - Chinese, local and European. The photograph was probably taken during a festive occasion, most probably during the Chinese new year season.

The 2 adult males, seated first and third from left, wore a combination of Chinese and European clothes and accessories. On their heads were European hats: the left had a straw boater with the typical thick ribbon around the crown; the right wore a rimmed hat, rather similar to a felt Homburg. The adult male standing on the left in the background wore a Chinese headgear called *uah-boh*, which literally means "bowl hat".

These 3 adult males had their hair styled according to the requirements imposed on all Chinese men by the Qing government till 1911. All 3 did not appear to have side burns, so probably their front half of their heads were shaven and they were still wearing their queues, or *thau-cang*.

The 3 adult males were wearing a Chinese shirt known as *baju tui-khim*. The photograph showed two styles of *baju tui-khim*: the man seated on the left wore one with collar; and the one on the right, a collarless version. Some sources claimed that only Chinese officials appointed by the colonial government were given the privilege to wear collared shirts; this privilege was extended to their relatives and children. The man standing on the left wore a collared version.

Such shirts had a frontal opening with 5 frog buttons. The loops and knots of frog buttons were usually made of the same fabric as the shirts. However, the knots on the shirts of all three men were metallic, which could be brass-gilt, silver-gilt or gold. Such buttons were considered fancy and often worn during festive and special occasions. The seated male of the right had the chain of his pocket watch attached to one of the loops of his frog buttons.

Both seated men wore Western-style, tailored trousers instead of the traditional, baggy, pyjama-like, Chinese trousers called *celana komperang*; and on their feet were European shoes. The standing male on the left in the background was most probably wearing a *celana komperang*; such trousers worn by adults were often of a lighter colour.

The wearing of Western clothing items was considered “trendy” and indicated “progressiveness”. It was often a way of showing one's economic means and social position. It could have also been part of a desire to demand greater freedom from the colonial government; or an indirect or subtle way to flaunt the rules imposed on them. The prohibition on wearing European clothes for non-Europeans was lifted only about a decade after the photograph was taken. Until then, European clothes were strictly reserved for those with legalised European status.

There was only 1 adult female in the photograph; she was seated second from left. She wore local clothes though in Peranakan Chinese style and taste, thus the Chinese version of local dress. She was dressed in a long kebaya-like blouse known as a *baju panjang*. The blouse had a frontal closure that was fasten by brooches. These brooches, known as *peniti*, were often linked by chains.

She wore a batik *sarung* either made in Lasem or one of the towns on the Javanese north coast. The *sarung* was in the traditional Pasisir style with a *kepala* of triangular *tumpals*, and a *badan* of stylised floral vines. On her feet were Peranakan Chinese slippers with embroidered uppers and thick soles made of leather and paper. Slippers worn on festive occasions were often embroidered with metallic threads on velvet.

The 2 young boys flanking the adult female both wore collared *baju tui-khim* and *celana komperang*. The one on the left had a necklace with a butterfly ornament; the other with one which looked like a dragon or *qilin*. These ornaments often served as amulets for protective and auspicious reasons.

Both boys wore embroidered caps on their shaven heads. Such caps were often worn by young Chinese children during festive occasions. The caps were usually embellished with beads and sequins, and appliquéd with embossed silver-gilt pieces of flowers, animals and auspicious motifs.

Both boys wore socks and shoes. The one standing wore a pair of traditional Chinese cloth shoes with the classic Chinese *ruyi* cloud design on the uppers; this could be most clearly as seen on his left foot. Such shoes had very thick soles. The younger boy seated on the lap of the adult female had embroidered shoes with straps around his ankles.

Like the adult female, all 3 girls seated on the right were dressed locally in *baju panjang* and *sarung*. The *baju panjang* of the girl in the middle was usual - it had a row of buttons along the frontal opening. She wore a traditional Pasisir-style batik *sarung*, similar to the adult female. The *baju panjang* of the other 2 girls had trimmings of probably *broderie anglais* or some other decorative material. Both wore sarungs of some other material instead of the usual cotton batik.

Both girls wore on their shoulders a cape-like cloud collar. These collars were often made of velvet and decorated with metallic appliqués - a local interpretation of the traditional Chinese embroidered version. Such collars were similar to those worn by Peranakan Chinese brides in West Java. Both girls wore multiple beaded necklaces, similar to the indigenous people of neighbouring Borneo. Both girls seemed to have folded handkerchiefs in their hands. These accessories were not part of everyday dress.

All 3 girls had their hair combed back tightly and probably styled into a bun. Hairpins could be vaguely seen on the girl on the left. The girls had huge circular earrings and wore on their feet similar embroidered slippers, with soles pronouncedly curved anteriorly, as the adult female.

The attire of females in the photographs was predominantly local, whereas the clothing of the men were mostly Chinese with European elements. The boy standing on the right, probably the *jongos* or houseboy (or perhaps the *tukang kebun* or gardener) of the family, was probably not of Chinese descent. He wore a collarless top with trousers and appeared to be holding a big leaf in his hands.

The house, like most houses in the tropics, was raised from the ground for cooling and ventilation purposes. The house seemed to be decorated for a festive occasion. The curtains had tiebacks of another material.

An altar could be vaguely seen beyond the front doors. The altar was decorated with an embroidered *tokwi*, or altar frontal, that was decorated with tiny circular mirrors on the upper panel. There seemed to be five *qilins* embroidered on the lower panel of the altar frontal. Such altar frontals were made of silk and imported from China. Elaborate altar frontals were used during festive occasions. Altar frontals were also made locally by Chinese batik ateliers in Java.

There were two candlesticks on the altar and between them was a decorative hexagonal wooden stand known as *cian-ap*. This was unusual as most *cian-ap* among Indonesian Chinese were rectangular and made locally. Hexagonal ones, commonly found among Peranakan Chinese in the British Straits Settlements, were imported from Swatow, China. *Cian-ap* were used only on important feast days; these decorative stand often held candied fruits strung onto wires twisted into fancy designs. These carved stands were often lacquered red or black, and heavily decorated with gold leaf.

On the veranda, on both sides of the front door, were two huge locally-made, colonial, Biedemeier-style benches. A pair of Chinese couplets written in black ink on red paper, each with 7 characters, were pasted on the left and right door posts. These couplets were often found at the main doors for auspicious and decorative purposes.

Hung in front of the door opening was a hexagonal or octagonal glass lantern. Two Chinese words “天燈” (*tian teng*, literally “heaven lamp”) could be vaguely seen on one of the glass panels. The lantern was dedicated to *Thi Kong*, the Lord of Heaven, also known as *Tuhan Allah* by the Peranakan Chinese. Hidden partially behind this lantern is a Dutch oil lamp of cast iron with a glass lamp shade.

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