

## Dynamics and Existence of Angkong in East Sumatra

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### Abstrak

This paper reviewed the 'Dynamics and Existence of Angkong in East Sumatra'. Angkong is one of the public transportations used during the Dutch East Indies period in East Sumatra. This transportation is also known as the Hong Kong rickshaw. Humans formerly pulled it by running. These human-drawn angkong were generally brought indirectly by the Chinese who worked on the plantations. As Viktor Purcell wrote, most Chinese worked in the logging industry and as angkong porters. Before this, other forms of transportation were used, such as horse-drawn carriages, ox-carts, or buffalo carts. These kinds of transportation were used for special needs, such as in forest areas, and as a means to enter plantation areas that gardeners used at that time. This research intended to explain the dynamics and existence of rickshaw transportation in East Sumatra using the desk research method on research reports, various sources of books, journals, and related articles. This research also utilized the historical explanation theory from Kuntowijoyo. The distribution of angkong in East Sumatra did not immediately become public transportation but started from private ownership. It started with the gardeners seeing and supervising the plantations they manage.

**Keywords:** Angkong; Dynamics; Existence; Chinese society; Dutch East Indies.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, a variety of transportation has become the choice of urban communities. Everything is available, from mass transportation such as trains to more personal transportation such as online motorcycle taxis.

However, traveling long distances was still a luxury for the people of the past. Machinery had not yet been invented earlier, so transportation of the past used power found in nature, from animal power such as horses to human sinew power.

In China, the *angkong* landed in Shanghai and Hong Kong in 1874. Both cities are indeed known as the center of the West's presence in East Asia. Interestingly, the Shanghai people even have a factory that produces cheaper rickshaws and can compete with those made in Japan. *Angkong* reached Beijing, the capital of the Qing Dynasty, in 1886.

The British introduced *angkong* to India through Shimla city in 1880. However, the existence of *angkong* became popular after the Chinese brought it to Calcutta in 1914.

The Chinese formerly used *angkong* to carry groceries. It was written by Shirren Hyrapiet and Alyson L. Greiner in the article '*Calcutta's Hand-Pulled Rickshaws: Cultural Politics and*

*Place-Making in A Globalizing City*'. They continued that the Chinese community then asked the government for permission to use *angkong* to transport people.

*Angkong* was also found in Singapore. It was first introduced in 1880. *Angkong* beat the existence of the *gharry* (horse carriage) that had dominated the streets of Singapore. The number of registered *angkong* reached 29,646 units in 1922.

In Indonesia, the most striking and existing traces of *angkong* can be traced in East Sumatra, currently known as Medan city. Azmi Abubakar, the founder of the Chinese Peranakan Pustaka Museum, tweeted, "*Angkong puller was one of the jobs of the Chinese in Medan at past*". Therefore, Indonesians also call this vehicle *lanca* or *langca*, which comes from the Hokkien language. Unfortunately, there has been no further research on the existence of *angkong* in Indonesia.

In August 1937, the Sumatra Post's special correspondent submitted a report on the city of Shanghai. One of the cities in China at that time had been divided into colonial zones by some Western countries such as Britain, France, Germany, and Japan. Although Shanghai has developed into a modern industrial city in China and earned the nickname "*the city of millions of dollars*". Most of the Chinese population in Shanghai city lived in poverty. In fact, they also experienced discrimination from white people or what they called "*red-haired devils*".

One of the reports from the correspondent *De Sumatra Post* talked about the life of the *angkong* porters. According to this newspaper, these *angkong* porters were the natural face of Shanghai. Shanghai does not just consist of black smoke constantly billowing from factory chimneys, shipyards stocked with vast tanks of oil, or British, French, and American armored cruisers docked at the docks.

According to this special correspondent for *De Sumatra Post*, it takes time to adjust to being able to sit on the *angkong*. An overwhelming doubt overcame him. The *angkong* porter is also human. He has nothing but his *angkong*. He sleeps in it, and he lives on it.

Forgive them for their outrageous behavior. Do not look at him scornfully when you find out he increased his fare 20 times. Alternatively, when he almost agrees with you, four or five of his co-workers, fellow *angkong* porters suddenly fight about who will take you.

If you end up choosing to walk, they will surely starve. They will look at you with pleading eyes. The gratitude of a child will shine on his face the moment you get into the *angkong*. Then, the *angkong* ran like a flying feather, swinging. The correspondent once had a scary experience. In the middle of the *angkong* running, the *angkong* porter collapsed when the cart hit him. Was it a consequence of starvation? Fatigue? Did he run maybe six or eight

hours continuously? If he fainted or passed away, no one cared about that.

The article was published in the August 17, 1937 edition of the *De Sumatra Post*. This newspaper was founded in 1898 by Jozeph Hallermann, a German owner of the Varekamp en Borkhandel Co bookstore on Kesawan Street. *Sumatra Post* became the third newspaper after *Deli Courant*, published in 1885, and *De Ooskust* (1895), published in East Sumatra. If the *Deli Courant* is better known for taking the direction of defending the interests of plantation entrepreneurs, it is the contrary with *De Sumatra Post*. The newspaper's first editor-in-chief was the well-known lawyer Johannes van den Brand. In his 1898 editorial, he wrote: "*Did De Sumatra Post's aim to use honest beliefs? To discuss issues of public interest*".

Van den Brand is best known as a lawyer and author of the pamphlet "*De Milionen uit Deli*" against the "*Poenale Sanctie*" Ordinance. He also questioned the practice of "*slavery*" of porters on plantations in East Sumatra. He was also a member of the East Sumatra council.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research utilized the *historical explanation* theory from Kuntowijoyo. History as a science, in this case, the explanation of history, will be explained. Concerning the type of science, the author was based on the following three things: (1) the explanation of history is the hermeneutics of *verstehen*, interpreting, and understanding; (2) historical explanation is an explanation of the lengthening of time; and (3) historical explanation is an explanation of a single event (Kuntowijoyo, 2008:10). This research also interpreted and analyzed the events happening in East Sumatra concerning *angkong*, period, socio-culture of the community. The event in question was about the *Dynamics and Existence of Angkong in East Sumatra*; thus, it *became* a character and identity of a region.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Dynamics of the Angkong in East Sumatra

One of the crucial issues reported quite intensely by the *De Sumatra Post* was about rickshaws, or in East Sumatra, called *angkong* or Hong Kong rickshaws. It was a wheeled carriage drawn by human beings. It is not known when the rickshaw entered East Sumatra. However, it was inseparable from the Chinese community in East Sumatra, which at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were Chinese immigrants who were imported from the Malay Peninsula, Singapore, and Penang as plantation porters.

In 1894, the *Deli Courant* reported that a large gardener on the *TM Estate* hit a rickshaw

in front of the RC rectory at breakneck speed. The Chinese *angkong* porter saw his *angkong* collapse, and its passengers, a maid, and a child, fell last (Deli Courant, 24/10/1894).



**Figure 1.** Koeli Rickshaw in Medan, 1927-1932  
(Dock. KITLV - digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl)

In 1914, *De Sumatra Post* stated that there had been 500 rickshaws in East Sumatra with 800 towing porters who had changed to carry passengers to support their families. The existence of *angkong* as a mode of urban transportation, apart from wagons, invited much debate. Generally, Europeans, initially when they came to East Sumatra, were surprised to see that there were train carriages drawn by humans, not animals such as *sados* or wagons drawn by horses. However, eventually, they got used to it and felt happy because the porters could run fast and agile to take them into narrow alleys (Sumatra Post, 31/20/1914).

However, for J. Van de Brand, a lawyer who mostly defended the interests of Deli plantation workers, *angkong* transportation is a form of exploitation of humans. It is why the newspaper he leads supported the campaign to abolish *angkong* by writing various stories about the negative side of *angkong*. Eventually, J. Van de Brand only served as editor-in-chief until 1903, when he was replaced by AJCM Tetvoorren (Mohammad Said, 1976).

In 1914, it was reported that Assistant Resident Vorstman, in a meeting with the East Sumatra council, supported Major Tjong A Fie's proposal to abolish the *angkong* or a rickshaw business. Tjong A Fie considers the work of pulling a cart with people sitting on it as an unworthy job for humans and harms the physical health of the *angkong* porters.



**Figure 2.** Koeli Rickshaw on a street in Medan, 1920  
(Dock. KITLV - digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl)

Tjong A Fie also viewed the work of pulling carts as an insult to the dignity of the hometown of *angkong* porters. Honor should be preserved in East Sumatra. He also regretted that people traveling to the East Coast of Sumatra for the first time initially saw the train being pulled by humans, not animals, as an unpleasant thing (Sumatra Post, 31/10/1914).

Tjong A Fie also predicted that the longest *angkong* porters would work only for five years, and during this time, they could withstand pulling *angkong* because they consume opium. He also proposed medical examinations for *angkong* porters, but the East Sumatra council rejected Tjong A Fie's proposal (Sumatra Post 24/4/1925).

In supporting the campaign to eliminate *angkong*, apart from reporting on debates in the council room, the *Sumatra Post* also published news on the abolition of *angkong* in other countries, such as Burma (Sumatra Post 16/7/1927). Besides, the death of a porter pulling an *angkong* while carrying passengers also occurred on Peking Street (Sumatra Post, 10/7/1927). The *angkong* was hit by a car and injured two passengers. This incident occurred on Hakka Street (Sumatra Post, 27/1935).

However, this newspaper also published news about the hope that East Sumatra would have a taxi car as a substitute for *angkong* (Sumatra Post 23/4/1919), as well as news about the readiness of a factory in Germany to produce three-wheeled tricycles (Sumatra Post, 24/4/1925).

It is how the dynamics of *angkong* as a mode of transportation in East Sumatra in the 1900s have become very political. The question is why in the Dutch East Indies, only in East Sumatra were *angkong* allowed to operate? Why was it forbidden in Batavia and Java? Was it simply because of the sociological and cultural closeness of the Chinese in East Sumatra to the Chinese in the Malay Peninsula? Or was it just a matter of humanity, ethical politics, or racial offense? Were no other intertwined factors with interest in maintaining the existence

and history of *angkong* as an evolving mode of transportation?

### 3.2. Existence of *Angkong* in East Sumatra

*Angkong* is one of the embodiments of manual transportation. This transportation resembles a two-wheeled cart with a soft seat pulled by human power. In its time, *angkong* was revolutionary transportation and became the pulse of Asian transportation.



**Figure 3.** Koeli Rickshaw and European female passenger and child, Abad 19  
(Dock. KITLV - digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl)

The *angkong* was first invented in Japan in 1869, a year after the Meiji Restoration. The *angkong* was one of the first transportations in Japan to have wheels, as the Tokugawa regime forbade wheels to avoid mobilizing an uprising against the Shogunate.

Researchers were still debating the inventor itself. However, according to M. William Steele, in his article entitled '*Mobility on the Move: Rickshaws in Asia*', the application for an *angkong* production permit was first submitted in Tokyo by three entrepreneurs, namely Izumi Yosuke, Suzuki Tokujiro, and Takayama Kosuke.

The cooperation of these three entrepreneurs did not immediately produce results. Therefore, Suzuki was trying to promote the advantages of this fast, cheap, and convenient rickshaw through pamphlets. He also demonstrated this cheap vehicle to his family and friends.

People were slowly seeing the potential of the *angkong*. The price was cheap, and the speed was not much different from the horse carriage. In addition, *angkong* was also accessible through tiny alleys that horses could not pass. In three years, the popularity of rickshaws has increased rapidly. In 1872, the number of *angkong* on the streets of Tokyo reached 40,000 units. Meanwhile, in 1875, its existence was able to reach 100,000 units.

The Japanese called this modern mode of transportation the *jinrikisha*. It meant "people-

*drawn vehicles*". This word was then absorbed into English as *rickshaw* and Dutch into *riksja*.

The popularity of *angkong* has skyrocketed with the innovations presented by Akiha Daisuke, a businessman from Ginza. In the mid-1870s, Akiha modified this transport by adding a loveseat, roof, and wood lacquer to make it more durable. With this innovation, the Akiha's company became the largest *angkong* producer in Japan.

The existence of the *angkong* began to be glimpsed by Western businessmen. They saw the potential of *angkong* as an easy and practical mode of transportation in their colonies. Several business people began to apply for import permits from the Japanese government, especially the Akiha-made *angkong* model. Thenceforth, *angkong* began to spread to Asia.

In Manila, *angkong* was vehemently rejected by the wagon coachman (*cochero*) union. "On May 19, 1902, they released a statement saying '*Filipinos are not animals*' in protest", Michael D. Pante wrote in the journal '*Rickshaws and Filipinos: Transnational Meanings of Technology and Labor in American-Occupied Manila*'.

Meanwhile, *angkong* has become a social problem in Shanghai. The *Shanghai International Settlement Authority* even wanted to reform the *angkong* in 1934. They saw the inhumane economic life of *angkong* porters and their presence, which interfered with city traffic. However, the ratification of this reform policy failed due to the intervention of the mafia, who controlled the ownership of the *angkong*.

In Indonesia, *angkong* was officially banned in 1946 for no apparent reason. Azmi Abubakar wrote that at least 40,000 rickshaws were burned in East Sumatra so they would not be reused.

The existence of *angkong* was still a matter of debate in Calcutta, the last city to legalize *angkong* to this day. According to Calvin Trillin's "*Last Days of the Rickshaw*" coverage for *National Geographic*, some considered *angkong* a colonial legacy that enslaved rickshaw porters. Many *angkong* porters were low-income and lived in unsanitary conditions, and the Calcutta government had already planned to replace them.

In its development, *angkong* also evolved into new transportation. The combination of rickshaws and bicycles eventually gave birth to pedicabs, while the combination of rickshaws and machines resulted in motorcycle pedicabs or *bajaj*. *Angkong* was eventually replaced by pedicabs and *bajaj* in cities such as Singapore and Indonesia.

### **3.3. *Angkong Abolition in East Sumatra***

A letter from the reader on behalf of m.d.R, supporting the idea of eliminating *angkong*

on humanitarian grounds. "*Surely, everyone still remembers the unpleasant sensation he experienced when he first rode an angkong in his life*". The letter's author also mentioned that people in Java are no longer seen as drag animals on public roads. On the other hand, the horse breed in East Sumatra is also excellent, and the profession as a *sado* driver also operates freely. (Sumatra Post, 9/5/1916).

However, the council in East Sumatra was unmoved by their decision. Whereas the ethical-political movement, an acknowledgment of the Dutch kingdom that something was inappropriate in the practice of colonialism in the Dutch East Indies, was inspiring the struggle of the indigenous movement.

Citing Medan Chinese historian and historian Dirk A. Buiskool, in his article '*Prominent Chinese during the Rise of a Colonial City: Medan 1892-1942*', the council's refusal was met with disappointment by members of the council from the Chinese group. The job as *angkong* porters for them is seen as a disgrace to the Chinese race and, therefore, to China's national pride.

All *angkong* porters were Chinese. Moreover, East Sumatra was the only city in the Dutch East Indies where rickshaws appeared on the streets. Although *angkong* was widely used in Singapore, at the same time, the use of *angkong* was also heavily criticized there, even being called "killer calls" because many *angkong* porters only lived half the average person's lifespan.

According to Dirk Buiskool, apart from Major Tjong A Fie, another council member who had submitted a proposal to abolish the *angkong* was Tan Boen An in 1918. However, until eight years later, the council had never discussed the proposal. Then, in 1926, when council member Gan Hoat Soei resubmitted the proposal, the council accepted. Gan Hoat Soei proposed a gradual abolition. According to him, it is unfair and unwise for westerners to go against the wishes of these easterners. Nevertheless, J.W. Duys, another council member, considered that Gan Hoat Soei did not represent the voices of Chinese citizens in East Sumatra. The two Chinese members on the council represent only a tiny fraction of the Chinese electorate.

Another board member, W. Jaski, also opposed the abolition of *angkong* by comparing the occupation of *angkong*-porters to that of gondolier in Venice. Alderman de Waard considered this opinion unreasonable. He believed that the *angkong* porter occupation was undignified and should be abolished.

Another council member, Mohamad Thahar, also disagreed with Duys' statement that the



Chinese councilors did not represent the Chinese population in East Sumatra. He claimed a small group of voters had chosen them; hence, this group was no bigger and was not the fault of the Chinese but the fault of the voting system. Another member, Abdullah Loebis, said that all indigenous newspapers had written their support for removing *angkong*.

Finally, the council approved the proposal for the gradual abolition of *angkong* with nine votes in favor against five votes against. However, complete abolition did not materialize before the second world war. Therefore, in the 1930s, fewer rickshaws were seen in East Sumatra.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

As a cultural product, the *angkong* showed a declining condition starting from 1890-1935. The function, role, form, and meaning were contained in the *angkong*. *Angkong* might no longer be found in big cities nowadays. However, the space left behind will be filled with more modern vehicles in the future.

The existence of *angkong* in East Sumatra dates back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, not only as a mode of transportation for its time but also describes the self-esteem of the Chinese nation, the issue of humanism, to purely business interests. However, over time, the use of *angkong* in Indonesia began to decline and was even officially banned in 1946. It was due to the increasing number of other forms of transportation, such as wagons, and mass transportation, such as trams and trains. Meanwhile, in other countries, *angkong* encountered much opposition for various reasons.

The author considered that the *angkong* in East Sumatra could not be simply eliminated. *Angkong* was the only transportation capable of traveling through plantations, narrow alleys, and floods. Some *angkong* porters even worked odd jobs in the homes of upper-middle class people. In addition, they also became regulars for gardeners and other colonial officials, and some were contracted to be housekeepers at night. The social contract that was formed made the disappearance of *angkong* potentially cause broader social problems.

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