

'The Eurasian Question'

Historische Migratiestudies 6

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‘The Eurasian Question’

The colonial position and postcolonial options of colonial mixed ancestry groups from British India, Dutch East Indies and French Indochina compared.

door

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I Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter first introduces the main question. This is followed by several sections that clarify why this question is interesting and relevant, and which key concepts are used in this book. This includes an overview of debates on ‘mixing’ and mixed relationships, both of which are highly contested concepts. Furthermore, the group that takes central stage in this book – the Eurasians – are described and compared to similar groups, such as the Euraficans. All this leads up to a heuristic framework and a set of working hypotheses, which structure this book. The section on historiography explains what this book adds to the literature. The chapter concludes with sections on method and material, and a brief outline of the rest of the book.

1.2 Main question

The migration of Europeans to the colonies was part of the process of colonisation. Many of these migrants entered into – what were labelled – racially mixed relationships, which were mostly between colonising men and colonised women.¹ When in the mid-twentieth century the European colonial empires in Asia – namely, British India, the Dutch East Indies and French Indochina – fell apart, the populations of mixed ancestry had to choose whether to stay in or leave the former colonies. Both the colonial authorities and the rulers of the newly independent countries viewed these mixed ancestry groups as a problem. This led to large debates before and after decolonisation on what was called, at the time, ‘The Eurasian Problem’, ‘The Eurasian Question’ and ‘The Eurasian Dilemma’.² In the late nineteenth century, this ‘Eurasian Question’ only preoccupied the British middle class living in British India.³ In the following decades there were, however, extensive debates about this issue in all three colonial contexts.⁴ When independence was discussed, the colonisers and the future rulers of the soon to be independent countries developed policies for the Eurasians, which was a challenge as the Eurasians did not form a legal category nor a well-defined or fixed group. There was no consensus on who was to be considered Eurasian, and as a result it was also difficult to establish how many Eurasians there were, or which colonial and postcolonial policies would best deal with them. Once the colonies became independent, the problem became urgent because the Eurasians had to choose between staying in or leaving the former colony.

In this book, I use the terms ‘Anglo-Indians’, ‘Indo-Europeans’, and ‘*Métis*’ for the mixed ancestry groups in, respectively, British India, the Dutch East Indies and French Indochina, while I use the term ‘Eurasian’ to refer to the group as a whole. The labelling and categorisation of the mixed population, currently and at the time, have been highly debated and contested issues, with some people strongly opposing certain labels while advocating others.⁵ I discuss this point at length below. Notwithstanding the debates, I use the term ‘Eurasians’ throughout this study since that *was* the prevalent term in use at the time.⁶ Categories may be linguistic constructions from a Foucauldian perspective, but their use, especially by policy makers and other state authorities, has concrete societal consequences, because states have the authority to decide who belongs to which group and divide rights accordingly.⁷ Rather than attempting to avoid or abandon particular labels, or to introduce new ones, the way forward, in my view, is to identify how colonial authorities and others (including the Eurasians themselves) categorised people and to explain why this changed over time. I am aware that the term ‘Eurasian’ may not meet the approval of all readers. Yet, in the absence of another collective term and because scholars continue to use the term in the related historiography, I felt that this was the most appropriate term to consider Anglo-Indians, Indo-Europeans and *Métis* together (see below for a further discussion of the term).

This book deals with the position of Eurasians before and after decolonisation in three colonial settings. Although some of the phenomena I describe happened before 1900, I focus on the period between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1960s. This study is about the position of Eurasians in colonial society, how, when and why their position changed, and to what extent this affected the margins within which they made their choices. The main question is: Which factors determined the margins within which the Eurasians made their choices to stay in or leave the former colony, and why did these factors differ between the three colonies? Sub-questions are: How did state citizenship policies and the Eurasians’ sense of belonging affect their decisions to stay or leave? What was the dominant discourse in media and government circles of the Eurasian dilemma? How did this influence state policies?

Debates ran their course through a complicated interplay between Eurasians and their interest organisations, former colonial governments and the governments of the newly independent nations. These discussions revealed a great deal about the form of colonial rule and the categorisations of people. Governments set criteria for acquiring or losing citizenship and rights to stay in the former colony, or to leave for the mother country. In this book, I use the term ‘mother country’ instead of ‘metropolis’ or ‘metropole’ because ‘mother country’ is the word that is generally used in the literature on colonialism, post-colonialism and decolonisation. The words ‘metropolis’ or ‘metropole’ are less suitable given their general meaning of a ‘large city’.

I chose British India, the Dutch East Indies and French Indochina as case studies because they were located in the same region. Furthermore, they all were exploitation colonies (with the colonisers exploiting natural resources and labour) rather than settler colonies (such as New Zealand and Australia).⁸ Lastly, these were the most prestigious Asian colonies of the Dutch, British and French empires and they played an important role in the imagination of these empires. They were portrayed in similar

terms as respectively 'Gordel van Smaragd' (Emerald Belt, Dutch East Indies), the 'Jewel in the Crown' (British India) and 'la Perle d'Extrême-Orient' (the Pearl of the Far East, Indochina).⁹ These were the key colonies on which the Eurasian debate focused. I could, for instance, also have included British Malaya, but it did not have the same status as British India in the British Empire and its Eurasian population was not that large.¹⁰

The choice between leaving and staying was not taken at one point in time. Decision-making was a process in which Eurasians pondered the idea of staying or leaving. Little is known about the context or the margins partly resulting from state policies, in which people made their choices and the reasons for making them. It was a process that for some Eurasians took years because conditions, for example criteria for citizenship, changed. Part of the dilemma – staying or leaving – sprang from the 'in-between' position of the Eurasians. I elaborate on this point in the sections below. Debates about the position of Eurasians were intense after 1945, when British India, the Dutch East Indies and French Indochina became independent. However, I also look at the period prior to decolonisation (from around 1900 onwards) because, as I will show, the colonial legacy had an influence on the options Eurasians had and the choices they made. In short, in this book I describe the position of the Eurasians before, during and after decolonisation, and I explain the context in which they made their choices. The Eurasian people themselves and authorities in all three former empires were confronted with a dilemma: what would or should happen to a people sometimes labelled the 'colonial remnants' by European authorities? The goal of this book is to go beyond the conventional national perspective in (post)colonial studies by providing an overarching perspective of the experiences of Eurasians in the period before, during and after decolonisation in Asia. This enables me to highlight unexpected common features and connections between the cases as well as unique national specificities of each single case.

1.3 'Mixing'

European colonialism in Asia – which started well before the nineteenth century – created a population which was regarded as being of mixed ancestry. The issue of mixing led to widespread and long-lasting debates among policy makers, journalists, the Eurasians themselves and others. These debates showed continuity over time. In 1949, the Bishop of Birmingham gave his Galton Lecture to the Eugenics Society in London on the subject of 'Mixed Marriage'. According to the Bishop, mixed marriages generally led to decay, but there was some hope. Under good conditions – and the Bishop specifically mentioned the Eurasians at this point in his speech – mixed races could attain a certain measure of stability, with good qualities of their own.¹¹ The Bishop's speech illustrates the way of thinking about mixing at that time, and in the decades before.

In current academic literature, the concept 'mixed' is contested because it suggests that there *are* 'races' that can be 'mixed'.¹² The notion of 'mixed' draws on the idea that 'races' are real entities, an idea to which the Bishop quoted above, adhered.¹³ 'Race'

is however not a reality, but a social construction. ‘Race’ is not something, but its use *does* something.¹⁴ It is a fluid, shifting, situational and relational category of power, similar to and intersecting with gender, class, sexuality and religion.¹⁵ Some authors have addressed this intersection. Ann Laura Stoler and Bart Luttikhuis, for instance, discussed whether race or class was more important in the attempts of mixed people to climb the social ladder in colonial societies.¹⁶ In my view, and as this book will show, class had more prominence in the Dutch East Indies case, while race was more important in the British Indian case. Indochina took the middle road as a young colony. Gender, class, sexuality and religion are not only categories of power, but also of identity. People – in this case Eurasians – use these categories for their self-definition.

All these categories of power and identity work to include and exclude people via discourses and practices (including laws).¹⁷ Categorisation is the key element of governmentality in the Foucauldian sense. According to Foucault, discourse is about the way knowledge is created by power strategies that are hidden in various kinds of texts.¹⁸ The stereotypes that were used in the colonial discourse not only reflected colonial and postcolonial ideas, but also reinforced those stereotypes as a performative power.¹⁹ Categorisations are used to legitimise differences within policies and between groups of people.²⁰ According to Foucault, categorisation does not describe social order but rather shapes and reshapes power relations.²¹ Within the Foucauldian perspective, race, like gender, sexuality, class and religion, are regulatory ideals that were created to discipline and govern.

Part of the literature on ‘race’ is rather us-oriented and ignores the influence of race on colonisation and genocides around the world. Conceptualisations of race formed the basis for colonialism, genocide and slavery. Europeans ranked themselves as the most advanced race in an invented racial hierarchy and believed this gave them the right to enslave, kill, exploit or educate those whom they ranked lower on the racial ladder. To avoid confusion, it is important to note that the us literature commonly uses the term ‘race’, while the European literature favours the term ‘ethnicity’. There is in essence little difference between the use of these concepts. Both have evolved along the same lines: both were originally perceived as static and real, and over time both were increasingly recognised as social constructions.²²

Debates about race or ethnicity are connected to debates about whiteness.²³ Whiteness is also a construction, along gendered lines, and is created as much by culture, education, class, religion, occupation, and geography as by phenotype.²⁴ In the words of Fanon in his study *The Wretched of the Earth*: ‘you are rich because you are white: you are white, because you are rich.’²⁵ In the late colonial period, ‘modernity’, ‘westernisation’, and ‘whiteness’ were interlocking concepts with none of these three having predominance.²⁶ Whiteness was not only about skin colour, some Eurasians could ‘pass’ themselves off as white if they were well-educated, upper class and Christian. Bhabha uses the word ‘mimicry’ to describe this imitation of whites. For example, Eurasians mimicked Europeans by wearing European clothes and speaking the coloniser’s language perfectly.²⁷

‘Race’ was used to define some people as inferior and within that perspective, ‘mixing’ was constructed as a threat.²⁸ Authorities in many countries introduced anti-miscegenation laws to prohibit relationships and marriages that were defined as mixed.²⁹