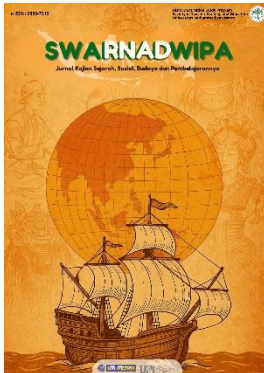


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Changes in Colonial Labor Policy Post-Chinese Workers' Uprising in Wanayasa 1832

Misbahudin Misbah¹

¹Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia
*Email: misbahudin2572@gmail.com

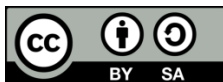


Abstract

This article explores the transformation of colonial labor policy in the Dutch East Indies following the rebellion of Chinese workers at the Wanayasa tea plantation in 1832. Triggered by exploitative labor practices, including irregular wages, forced labor, and the absence of formal contracts, the uprising marked a turning point in labor governance under colonial rule. The research employs a historical-sociological method, supported by Ted Robert Gurr's theory of Relative Deprivation, to examine the structural inequalities that led to collective resistance. Primary sources include colonial archives, local manuscripts, and autobiographical reports from colonial officials. The study finds that the rebellion pressured the colonial government to issue the Governor-General's Decree of 1833, introducing formal labor contracts and a more structured wage system. While implementation remained inconsistent, this marked the beginning of a shift from informal exploitation to regulated labor relations. The article contributes a novel perspective by combining historical narrative with social theory to highlight the agency of marginalized labor groups in shaping colonial policy. It also offers new insights into the roots of labor consciousness and early worker mobilization in Indonesia's colonial context.

Keywords: Colonial labor policy, Wanayasa rebellion, Chinese workers, colonial Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

The colonial labor system in the Dutch East Indies from the early 19th century was built within a framework of economic exploitation and political domination over both local and migrant labor. One of the most extreme forms of injustice in this system was evident in labor practices in the plantation sector, particularly during the expansion of tea cultivation. The colonial government recruited laborers from abroad, especially from China, to work on tea plantation projects – such as in Wanayasa, Purwakarta – without adequate legal and social protection. These labor practices were marked by low wages, unclear contract systems, and unilateral punishments, all of which led to social tensions among the workers (Serièrè, 1849; Van der Chijs, 1892).

The Chinese laborers' rebellion at the Wanayasa Tea Plantation in 1832 was a significant event that reflected the accumulation of disappointment and socio-economic frustration. This resistance did not occur in isolation but took place within the context of deep-rooted structural inequalities in colonial relations between the state and the working people. It was not merely a spontaneous act of violence, but rather a political expression of a marginalized working class. The rebellion also spread to surrounding areas such as Cilangkap and Karawang, posing a serious threat to the stability of colonial rule at the time (Deenik, 1927; Ekadjati, 2000).

In response to the uprising, the colonial government issued a decree from the Governor-General on April 18, 1833, which regulated wages and labor contracts for foreign workers on plantations. Although the regulation still favored colonial interests, it marked the beginning of administrative reforms in managing labor relations in the Dutch East Indies (Cohen Stuart, 1924; *Geschiedkundig Overzicht*, 1914). Therefore, it is crucial to further examine how this rebellion served as a catalyst for systemic changes in colonial labor policy.

This article aims to analyze the transformation of colonial labor policy following the 1832 Wanayasa rebellion by employing a historical approach and Ted Robert Gurr's (1970) Relative Deprivation theory, which emphasizes the relationship between the disparity of expectations and reality as a trigger for social mobilization. Through this approach, the article seeks to contribute to an understanding of the role of social resistance as a key factor in the shift of colonial policies, and to build a historical narrative from a bottom-up perspective (people's history), which has long been marginalized in Indonesian colonial historiography.

RESEARCH METHODS

In conducting this research, the author employed the historical research method. The steps in the historical method include Heuristics, Source Criticism, Interpretation, and Historiography.

1. Heuristics (Collection of Historical Sources)

Heuristics is the initial stage in historical research, which serves to discover, collect, and identify sources relevant to the research topic. In this study, the author accessed a variety of primary and secondary sources.

Primary sources include colonial documents such as *Mijne Loopbaan in Indië* by G. de Serière (1849), *Geschiedenis van De Gouvernements Thee-Cultuur Op Java* by Van der Chijs (1892), as well as official Dutch East Indies documents on labor policy in 1833. The author also utilized the local manuscript *Wawacan Carita Perang Cina di Tanjungpura* as part of the Sundanese community's collective memory that culturally records the events.

Meanwhile, secondary sources in the form of books and academic journals were used to strengthen the analysis, including Cohen Stuart's work in *Gedenkboek der Nederlandsch Indische Theecultuur* (1924), and an article by Bambang Sulistyono on the dynamics of labor movements in Indonesia. Literature searches were conducted through digital libraries (National Library of Indonesia, Leiden Online), as well as university catalogs.

2. Source Criticism (Validation and Verification of Sources)

Source criticism is carried out in two forms: external and internal criticism. External criticism is used to assess the physical authenticity of sources, while internal criticism analyzes the credibility and content of the sources.

Criticism was directed at official colonial reports, considering the frequent bias in the ruling power's narratives. Therefore, cross-validation was conducted through critical readings of local sources such as *Wawacan Carita Perang Cina*, and by comparing colonial

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narratives with scholarly articles and previous studies such as the work by Nurosyifah (2022).

3. **Interpretation (Historical Analysis)**

Interpretation is the process of deriving meaning from the historical facts that have been collected and critiqued. In this stage, the author analyzed the Wanayasa uprising using the Relative Deprivation theory by Ted Robert Gurr (1970). This theory emphasizes that the gap between expectations and reality is a key factor in the emergence of social uprisings. The interpretation involved tracing the socio-economic dynamics of Chinese laborers before and after the uprising, as well as the systemic implications of colonial policies on the labor structure.

4. **Historiography (Historical Writing)**

The final stage is the writing of a historical narrative in a chronological, analytical, and argumentative manner. This article is structured in an academic format that integrates empirical data with an interdisciplinary approach from history, sociology, and anthropology. The writing prioritizes coherence between historical narratives and theoretical understanding, with a critical orientation toward colonial power structures and the voices of subordinated groups.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study finds that the transformation of colonial labor policy following the Chinese workers' uprising in Wanayasa in 1832 reflects the complex socio-political dynamics of colonialism in the Dutch East Indies. The main findings of this study can be categorized into four major themes: the labor system before 1832, the characteristics of the rebellion, the policy changes after the rebellion, and the impact of these policies on workers. These findings were derived from a literature review of local manuscripts, colonial reports, Dutch East Indies government policy archives, and a socio-historical analysis approach to the colonial labor system.

1. Labor Conditions Before the 1832 Rebellion

Before the uprising, the labor system at the Wanayasa Tea Plantation was highly exploitative. The Chinese workers brought from Guangdong by Jacobson worked without formal contracts, had no legal protection, and were entirely subject to the will of the plantation management. They worked under conditions resembling forced labor: long hours, low wages, and no clear schedule for wage payment. Penalties were imposed unilaterally and used to punish minor infractions, including wage deductions without verification. This led to accumulated social and economic frustration among the workers.

2. Characteristics of the May 1832 Rebellion

This rebellion was not a spontaneous event but a systematically planned movement. Based on analyses of local manuscripts such as *Carita Perang Cina di Tandjoeng Poera* and colonial documents, the rebellion was coordinated simultaneously in several strategic locations: Wanayasa, Cilangkap, and Tanjungpura. The workers attacked administrative offices, burned government-owned tea warehouses, and freed prisoners. This movement was a form of social protest against a repressive system rooted in the disparity between workers' life expectations and their harsh working realities.

3. Colonial Government Policy After the Rebellion

The Dutch East Indies government responded to the uprising with the first formal policy on colonial labor. On April 18, 1833, the Governor-General issued a decree mandating that all foreign workers must have a work contract before being recruited. The

contract specified the rights and obligations of workers, including the amount and schedule of wage payments. Colonial officials such as residents and plantation heads were appointed to oversee the implementation of this policy.

This step marked the beginning of bureaucratization in labor relations within the plantation sector. The government began to acknowledge the importance of contractual systems to prevent further rebellions. Although the policy did not directly promote workers' welfare, it did signify a shift from a repressive to a preventive-administrative approach.

4. Evaluation of Policy Impact on Workers' Conditions

Normatively, the 1833 policy opened up new opportunities for minimal protection of workers. Notable changes included:

- **Wage certainty:** Salaries were determined from the start and recorded in writing.
- **Work hours and leave:** A rotation system began to be implemented.
- **Penalties:** Punishments had to be reported to the resident official and could not be imposed unilaterally.

However, in practice, policy implementation was far from ideal. Many plantation managers continued old systems due to weak supervision and limited administrative personnel. This was especially prevalent in remote areas like Cianjur and Wanayasa, far from the administrative center in Batavia. Moreover, work contracts were often formalistic and not fully understood by workers, who generally faced literacy and language barriers.

The study also found that the policy failed to eliminate structural inequality between labor and the colonial state. Workers continued to be positioned as instruments of production within the colonial economy. However, the existence of written contracts became a new tool for the government to systematically control labor relations.

5. Early Indications of Workers' Collective Consciousness

The 1832 rebellion and subsequent policy response also demonstrated the early emergence of class consciousness among workers. Laborers began to understand the importance of solidarity across ethnic and regional lines in resisting colonial pressure. This was evident in the inter-regional coordination and collective action planning during the rebellion. Although it did not result in the formation of modern labor unions, the action served as an embryo of early labor movements in the Dutch East Indies.

To visually summarize the research findings, the following table is provided:

Table 1. Impact of the Wanayasa Rebellion on the Colonial Labor System

Aspect	Before 1832	After 1833
Work contract	Not available	Mandatory and written
Wages	Uncertain, often reduced	Fixed and scheduled
Supervision	Weak, informal	Involving resident officials
Work sanctions	Unilateral, no legal process	Must be reported and approved
Workers' position	Production tools, no rights	Formally recognized (though limited)

Overall, the findings show that the 1832 Wanayasa incident was a **turning point** in the history of colonial labor in Indonesia. Although the resulting changes were partial and did not address structural injustice, they opened initial space for administrative recognition of laborers' existence and basic rights under an authoritarian colonial regime.

Discussion

The 1832 Wanayasa uprising provides an important foundation for understanding the dynamics of the relationship between workers and colonial power in Indonesia's social history. Using Gurr's theory of *Relative Deprivation* (1970), this collective action can be viewed as a response to the gap between the Chinese workers' expectations of a better life in the Dutch East Indies and the oppressive reality they experienced. The tea workers

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brought from Guangdong possessed specialized skills required for tea production but were not treated as skilled professionals. Instead, they were subjected to a veiled forced labor system that stripped them of their basic rights.

In colonial history studies, it is important to situate this uprising within the framework of power relations. As noted by Soetopo and Mursidi (2010), colonial labor policies were more geared toward maintaining economic stability and productivity than ensuring social justice. Therefore, the Governor-General's decree in 1833 should be interpreted as a mitigative measure to prevent security and economic threats, rather than a result of labor rights awareness. This is supported by Mursidi's (2019) findings that the colonial system tended to normalize structural violence in socio-economic regulation.

From a sociological perspective, this rebellion reflects class conflict within a hierarchical colonial system, where laborers were a subordinate group with no access to advocacy tools. Karl Marx posited that class conflict is the driving force of history, and in the Dutch East Indies context, the colonial economic system served as a tool of domination that placed workers in absolute dependence on the state. The mobilization of Chinese workers in Wanayasa was driven not only by material suffering but also by a desire to assert their existence and dignity as human beings.

Leonard (2013) supports this analysis, stating that labor history in Indonesia has often been written from institutional and elite perspectives, thus obscuring the role of workers as historical actors. Therefore, it is crucial to reexamine colonial historiography by centering workers' voices. The *people's history* approach proposed by Mursidi et al. (2018) becomes relevant in highlighting the dimensions of resistance, defiance, and the resilience of marginalized communities throughout history.

A study by Adam and Wallace (2019) in the *International Review of Social History* notes that colonial labor policies were often ambivalent: formally offering protection, yet structurally maintaining exclusion and domination. This study can be used to compare the Dutch East Indies context with British colonies in India and Africa. Even as contractual systems were introduced, colonial authorities retained control over recruitment, dispute resolution, and termination processes.

This finding is reinforced by Adriana's (2016) study, which highlights the weak administrative control in inland colonial regions. As a result, the work contracts introduced after 1833 were not always implemented properly. Some plantation managers continued covert exploitation, including wage deductions, extended working hours, and arbitrary punishments. Thus, despite administrative changes, power relations in the field remained unequal.

Interestingly, in local manuscripts such as *Wawacan Carita Perang Cina di Tanjungpura*, the Wanayasa rebellion is portrayed not only as a political act but also as a cultural rejection of the colonial system. In these texts, workers are depicted as heroic figures who bravely defy injustice. This suggests that resistance to colonialism occurred not only in the economic realm but also at symbolic and cultural levels. This aligns with Geertz's (1973) ideas about the significance of symbols and meaning in social actions.

A study by Morsink et al. (2021) on labor resistance in East African plantations shows similarities. They emphasize that resistance does not always take the form of overt violence but can include sabotage, mass absenteeism, or minimal production as forms of silent negotiation against exploitative labor systems. In the Wanayasa case, the rebellion was explicit and confrontational, but the seeds of resistance likely emerged earlier through smaller, undocumented practices.

The post-1832 colonial policy marked an attempt at reform, but it did not fully dismantle the structural inequalities of the labor system. In fact, over time, the regulations born from this moment laid the foundation for a more systematic bureaucratic control over

labor. As Sulistyono (2010) argued, the colonial era marked a transition from physical exploitation to administrative exploitation, where workers remained subjects of control, but now through contracts, workbooks, and registrations.

In the context of modern Indonesia, this colonial legacy is still evident in the structure of formal labor systems that do not always side with workers. The prevalence of contract labor, outsourcing, and weak protection for informal workers demonstrates that the colonial logic of labor management has not been entirely eradicated. Thus, historical studies like this are vital for reflecting on the roots of injustice in the contemporary labor world. As Zulkardi (2002) emphasized, history education should foster critical awareness of unjust systems and provide conceptual tools to encourage change.

Therefore, this discussion shows that the Wanayasa rebellion was not merely a local event but part of a global movement rejecting colonial exploitation. It opened new space in the study of Indonesian social and labor history and provides inspiration for today's labor rights struggles. The rebellion also proves that colonial states were not immune to pressure from below, and that change can be driven through collective solidarity.

Ultimately, a key lesson from this rebellion is that effective policy must be born from dialogue and equality – not coercion or fear. The state, both in colonial times and today, has a moral and legal obligation to create a just and humane labor system. History has proven that when workers' voices are ignored, they will speak louder – through resistance.

CONCLUSION

This research aims to answer questions related to the colonial labor system in the Dutch East Indies before 1832, the chronology and social significance of the Chinese laborers' rebellion in Wanayasa, the policies issued by the colonial government in response to the event, and their impact on the socio-economic conditions of the workers. Based on the research conducted and analyzed using the theory of Relative Deprivation, several key conclusions can be drawn as follows:

1. The colonial labor system and policies before the 1832 rebellion operated within an exploitative framework with minimal legal protection. Chinese tea laborers brought to Wanayasa by the Dutch East Indies government were not granted formal employment guarantees, experienced wage insecurity, and had no access to grievance mechanisms. The relationship between workers and plantation managers was one-sided and hierarchical, placing workers merely as objects of production rather than as legal subjects. These social and economic disparities created an accumulation of suppressed dissatisfaction, forming a strong basis for the emergence of collective resistance.
2. The 1832 Wanayasa Rebellion marked a significant turning point in the social history of colonial labor. This event did not occur spontaneously but was coordinated across regions among Chinese labor groups in Wanayasa, Cilangkap, and Tanjungpura. The rebellion was carried out in an organized manner: freeing prisoners, burning warehouses, and attacking symbols of colonial power. From a social theory perspective, the event was an articulation of collective anger resulting from the ongoing disparity between expectations and reality experienced by the workers. In this context, the rebellion became a political expression of a marginalized group and an attempt to demand recognition of their rights and dignity as human beings.
3. The Dutch East Indies government's post-rebellion policies, particularly through the Governor-General's Decree of 1833, represented an administrative response to the social crisis triggered by the uprising. This policy marked the beginning of formal labor relations in the plantation sector through regulations on work contracts, wages, and administrative supervision. However, the reforms were more oriented toward colonial stability and control rather than structural justice. The contract system remained

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favorable to plantation managers, with minimal effective oversight and low legal literacy among workers. These reforms were legalistic in nature, not transformative.

4. The impact of these policies on the workers' socio-economic conditions shows a duality. On the one hand, there was a normative increase in protection through written contracts and wage arrangements. On the other hand, policy implementation was ineffective due to weak supervisory bureaucracy and continued colonial practices that maintained unequal power relations. This situation demonstrates that policy changes did not address the core of power imbalance but merely improved its administrative aspects.

Thus, this research shows that the transformation of colonial labor policy following the 1832 Wanayasa Rebellion was a complex phenomenon inseparable from the dynamics of colonial power, working-class resistance, and oppressive social structures. The rebellion proves that even under repressive conditions, marginalized groups possess the capacity to voice dissent and influence colonial state policies. In the context of Indonesia's social history, this event stands as a significant milestone in the emergence of labor class consciousness, which would later contribute to the formation of modern labor union movements.

This research also contributes to the writing of history from a people's history perspective, positioning workers not only as objects of exploitation but also as historical agents with their own will, narratives, and resistance strategies. Amid the dominance of colonial historical narratives that often focus on elites or rulers, this study presents an alternative narrative sourced from the concrete experiences of the lower class. Therefore, this article not only fills a gap in the historiography of labor in Indonesia but also offers a new paradigm for interpreting colonial social dynamics.

This study opens up many possibilities for further exploration, both thematically and methodologically. Thematically, the Wanayasa Rebellion can serve as an entry point for deeper examinations of other labor uprisings across the Dutch East Indies, such as sugar factory rebellions in Central Java or mining workers' protests in Sumatra. Comparative studies of this kind will provide a broader picture of the patterns of colonial working-class resistance and systemic responses from the colonial state to social movements.

Moreover, follow-up studies can examine how the colonial contract labor system introduced in 1833 evolved and influenced Indonesia's labor system into the modern era. In this context, a labor policy history approach could be employed to trace the continuities or discontinuities between colonial and contemporary labor systems.

From a methodological standpoint, interdisciplinary approaches that combine history, sociology, and anthropology should continue to be developed. Social historical studies enhanced by contemporary theories will provide a sharper and more contextual understanding of class dynamics and power structures. The use of local manuscripts such as *Carita Perang Cina* should also be expanded through philological studies and manuscript digitization as part of the effort to preserve collective memory.

Furthermore, the findings of this study can be applied in educational and labor rights advocacy contexts. History curricula in schools and universities should incorporate studies on labor resistance to colonialism to foster critical awareness among younger generations about the labor class struggles in Indonesian history. In activism, narratives like Wanayasa can serve as inspirations for non-elite resistance rooted in social justice.

Therefore, this research does not end with academic analysis alone but also opens space for reflection to reread history as an emancipatory force that gives voice to groups silenced by colonial structures and official state narratives.

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