

CHINESE SECRET SOCIETIES AND LABOUR CONTROL IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY STRAITS SETTLEMENTS

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[Much has been written about the Chinese Secret Societies; their dominant role in Chinese society, both historical and current, is universally acknowledged. However, the intimate ties between these "shady" communities and the eminent personalities of their times have seldom been explored.

This paper attempts to trace the close links between the activities of the Chinese secret societies and the upper echelons of Chinese society in the nineteenth century Straits Settlements. The contention here is that the early capitalists - the planters and tin miners - were dependent on the secret societies for the success of their enterprises and for the protection of their interests. The crucial link, in this regard, is the control over the Chinese labour force being brought in to work the plantations and mines.

The secret societies' monopoly over the brokerage of Chinese labour was almost complete. Hence, when British concern in the Straits Settlements and Malay States extended beyond merchantilism, it was this monopoly that had first to be broken. The hitherto halfhearted efforts at controlling the secret societies turned into an aggressive campaign towards their total elimination. The secret societies were banned at the end of the nineteenth century.

Banyak penulisan menghuraikan kegiatan kongsi-kongsi gelap Cina serta peranan dominannya dari segi sejarah walaupun buat masa kini sudah diketahui dunia. Tetapi apa yang jarang dibongkar ialah perhubungan komuniti 'sulit' ini dengan orang-orang penting semasanya.

Kertas kerja ini cuba membicarakan perhubungan rapat di antara kongsi-kongsi gelap ini dengan lapisan atasan orang-orang Cina di negeri-negeri Selat pada abad kesembilanbelas. Penulis berpendapat yang kapitalis-kapitalis awal disektor ladang dan lombong bijih bergantung pada kongsi-kongsi gelap ini bagi kegiatan-kegiatan dan kepentingan mereka. Dalam hal ini, mereka menguasai tenaga pekerja Cina yang dibawa masuk untuk dikenali di ladang-ladang dan lombong bijih.

Penguasaan kongsi-kongsi gelap di atas pekerja-pekerja Cina hampir-hampir bulat dimonopoli. Dengan itu, apabila kepentingan British di negeri-negeri Selat dan negeri-negeri Melayu menukar ke peringkat Kapitalisme, monopoli ini terpaksa dipatahkan. Jadi, usaha melepas batuk di tangga dalam mengawal kongsi-kongsi gelap bertukar menjadi satu kempen sengit ke arah penghapusan sepenuhnya. Kongsi-kongsi gelap diharamkan pada penghujung abad kesembilanbelas.]

SOCIAL ORIGINS OF THE SECRET SOCIETIES

Although cultural traditions invariably have their impact on societal

developments, it is inadequate to explain away the existence of secret societies in nineteenth century Malaya merely as one of those things Chinese immigrants brought along with them. The role of the secret societies was central in the entire social and economic set-up, especially in Penang and Singapore during the larger part of the century. For them to have reached such prominence, reasons must be found in the particular nature of economic organisations and transformations taking place in these British colonies as they embarked on capitalist merchantilism and production.

Early Agricultural Enterprises

The British by no means “discovered” or “founded” Singapore, for besides the indigenous and Malay populations, Chinese settlements were already established when the English first set foot on the island. In effect, there is an anecdote relating to how a Chinese, Chow Ah Chi, planted the Union Jack to mark the British claim. By 1822, three years after the British landing, Raffles wrote that the Chinese on the island could be divided into three classes, viz, the lower classes of handicraftsmen and personal labourers, the cultivators and the merchants.¹ It is on the last two mentioned groups that our attention will be focused.

Besides the cultivation of vegetables and fruits to feed the population of the town, the only agricultural activity which was of importance in Singapore during the first half of the century was the cultivation of gambier and pepper. It is of particular interest to us here because the gambier and pepper plantations were the seedbed of the secret societies in Singapore. Each plantation usually consisted of the pioneer planter and nine to ten workers, established at a distance from the town limits in areas variously described as “the interior”, “the jungle around the high hill of Bukit Timah” but both conveying the element of them being removed from the center of British control and interests.² Indeed it was acknowledged that this “interior” of the island was unknown to Europeans since the only concern of the Europeans in Singapore at this time was mercantile and Chinese compradores acted as the intermediary between them and the native population whose goods composed part of the European trade. However, it was not in order to escape British control that the plantations were opened in the interior. Rather, it was because the gambier leaves had to be processed, through boiling, very soon after harvesting thus necessitating the location of the plantations in the jungle or its fringes where firewood were in abun-

¹Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years of the Chinese in Singapore* 1967, p. 11

²Lee Poh Peng, *Chinese Society in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Singapore : a socioeconomic analysis*, pp. 55-56; Song Ong Siang pp. 34, 45

dance. Nevertheless, this meant the existence of the plantation workers quite autonomous from any form of formal governance and left the field open for secret societies to undertake control. It is not surprising then that the first mention of secret societies in Singapore (1831) linked them with the interior:

"Several murders were reported in one week, while no proper measures were available to trace the criminals or to secure life and property in the outlying parts of the town. Very little was known of the island beyond the hills behind the town and convict labour was being employed in road-making from Kampung Glam. While a gang of Chinese convicts were at work on a road on the outskirts of the town, a number of Chinese ran out of the jungle and rescued ten of these convicts by carrying them off and knocking off their irons. It was said at that time that there was a secret society exceeding 1,000 men established in the jungle and that they had actually an armed fort there."³

This did not mean, however, that there were no links between the Chinese in the jungle and those in the town. The gambier and pepper plantations were all financed by the merchants in the town who advanced the beginning capital to the pioneer planters on the pledge that the pioneers would surrender all or part of the crop to the financier under conditions favouring the latter until the debt was discharged. It was also the practice that the adventurer would supply the provisions and clothes of the plantation workers at prices above the market value. These same financiers were also junk owners, or had links with them, and were thus involved in the supplying of labour and the remittance of the workers' money to China.⁴ It can be seen quite clearly, then, that it was the financiers who reaped the highest returns in this enterprise. Since the price of gambier was never too high, the pioneers, often workers who had worked off their contract, usually ended up with a loss and had their plantations appropriated.⁵ As the financiers had so much stake in the plantations they needed a means of control whereby absconders, both pioneers and workers, could be traced and brought to "justice" - the secret societies fulfilled this role.

This relationship was perhaps best exemplified in the person of Tan Che Sang. That he was a man of great wealth was universally attested to. In the early 1820s he offered to build a market in Singapore at his own expense if he was permitted to hold it free of tax for a number of years.⁶ It can be

³Song Ong Siang, p. 29

⁴Lee Poh Peng, pp. 56-61

⁵Jackson, J. C. *Planters and Speculators, Chinese and European agricultural enterprises in Malaysia 1786-1921*, 1968 p. 9

⁶Song Ong Siang, p. 13

reasonably concluded that he was involved in the provisioning trade and possibly gambier cultivation. A secret society petition in 1889 named Tan Che Sang as having invited a Chinese secret society leader in China to organise the Chinese in Singapore.⁷

The condition under which agricultural enterprises were executed in Penang during this same period was a replica of the Singapore set-up accounted above, with the capital coming from the merchants in Georgetown. Although the Europeans had begun investing in sugar and spices plantations in Province Wellesley and Penang since 1840s, the plantations were left in the control of Chinese contractors who had the onus of providing, supervising and paying the labourers. Most of the European proprietors had other interests, the plantations being only a side-line, and the contract system left them free to pursue their primary concerns.⁸ It is to be expected then that the same system of control, i.e. secret societies, was in existence in Penang. The power of these societies would not have been so considerable if they did not also control labour supply to the settlements.

Labour Recruitment and Distribution

"It is well known that there is a teeming surplus population in China, who find the greatest difficulty in scraping together the means of supporting the barest exigencies of life. When there is a demand for labour at remunerative rates in any neighbouring country which is favourably known by reputation in the Maritime Districts, it may be said that a practically unlimited supply is obtainable of able bodied men willing to go abroad for a few years, save some money, and return to their native land."⁹

Syndicates were at work in China, establishing coolie houses in the ports of Amoy and Swatow where the labourers were held in transit until sufficient numbers of men had been gathered to fill up the ships. The *khehtows*¹⁰ were most often returned emigrants sent by their employers to recruit workers from their own villages. During the early part of the century, most of the emigrants were contract labourers which meant that their passages from China were paid for by the recruiting agents. The workers then had to redeem themselves through a specified period of labour. The syndicates in China had their partners or agents in Singapore or Penang who carried out the transaction with local employers. Abuses were rampant

⁷*Singapore Free Press*, February 18, 1889

⁸Jackson, J. C. pp. 100-130

⁹Report of the committee on the Condition of Labour in the Colony (RCCL)

¹⁰*Khehtow* ("head of the guests") denoted the headman of coolies

on board the coolie junks: overcrowding, disease, inadequate food, death - leading to these junks being popularly termed "floating hells."

But hell did not end with the floating. Upon arrival, the *sinkhehs* were herded into houses rented by the brokers - such houses were, according to a Colonial Officer, "not fit to keep pigs in." The brokers frequently preferred to put the men in an old junk or a ship in the harbour as it made for greater difficulty if the coolies attempted to escape. On July 26, 1876, one such steamer, the "Cheang Hock Kim" was boarded. It

"had arrived the day before from Amoy and Swatow, with one thousand immigrants. She is a fine vessel specially fitted for this and the Pilgrim trade. About one hundred and eighty immigrants were still on board, and a good deal of clamouring was going on among them. It was explained that they had not yet paid their passages, and, as the ship was discharging cargo, could not be allowed on deck, as they would escape on board the cargo boats, and that they were clamouring at the heat below."

On another occasion, "upon information received by the Police, the Colonial Secretary and Inspector General of Police visited two houses in Kam-pung Glam and found in them fifty Chinese coolies. The windows were barred, the doors were guarded by *samsengs* ("Chinese fighting men") and the coolies had been locked up in this manner for a week.¹¹

These measures were essential, as far as the brokers were concerned, because large amounts of money had been advanced for the passages of the coolies and any escaped coolie meant a cut in the profits. It was here that services of the secret societies, with their complement of arms and *samsengs* became indispensable. They constituted the surveillance preventing the workers from absconding. Another instrument of surveillance was, of course, the registering of the coolies as secret society members. In this manner, their names and identities were on record for the use of the secret societies. The *sinkhehs* were more often than not enrolled without their knowing: some *khehtows* registered their coolies in their own societies as a routine procedure, crediting the subscription fee to the account of the coolies. The *khehtows*, in fact any secret society member, received commission for bringing in new members.¹² Other forms of "inducement" included taking the coolies to brothels and gambling houses (also under the control of the secret societies) where the coolies ran up debts to the head of the gangs and were thus deposited into their sphere of jurisdiction.¹³

¹¹The above has been drawn from RCCL

¹²Report of the Commissioners on the Penang Riots (PRCP)

¹³RCCL

The intimate link between the coolie traffic and the secret societies is clearly demonstrated by the table below. Only five recruiters (not included in the list) were recorded as having no secret society affiliations.

FIGURE 1
SHOWING THE LIST OF LICENSED RECRUITERS IN PENANG FOR 1881¹⁴

Name of Recruiter	Society to which they belong	Membership of society in 1879
Ee Seng Khoon Ow Tek Kong Any Khye Tan Ah Tsin Ee Ah Leng Chong Ah Yong Gow Mah Hong Chin Chee Shin Lew Ah Yet Yap Ah Chew Ngui Ah Pat Vong Ah Kee Teh Tio Tsong We Sin Su Shak Chun	Ghee Hin	22939
Tan Kee Koan Lee Ah Thiam Tiouh Chye Oo Lee Ah Kiah Teh Ah In	Toh Pek Kong	8116
Gow Kong Khow Ah Chia Heng Ah Hoa Thung Nai Kean Yap Ah Ngee	Ho Seng	4623
Vong Shak Kui	Ho Hap Seah	not available
Fu Ah Chan	Hai San	394

That the coolie trade was overwhelmingly in the hands of the secret societies is irrefutable and it can be seen from the table above that a direct correlation existed between the degree of control over labour recruitment

¹⁴Compiled from Chinese Protectorate Annual Reports (CPAR) for 1879 and 1880 in Straits Settlements, Proceedings of the Legislative Council (SSPLC), 1880 and 1881 respectively

and the size, hence power, of the secret societies. Smaller societies like the Ghee Hok and Tsun Sim were not represented above at all. Khoo Thean Tek, head of the Toh Pek Kong or Kien Tek Society (one of the two most powerful in Penang) and secret society headman *par excellence*, was

“paid a thousand dollars or more by parties in Swatow. He has a house on purpose to receive coolies. The coolies are kept under restraint in this house and men who wish to engage them are admitted. He receives all the coolies who are unable to pay their passage money, from wherever they come in China.”¹⁵

His depot, Chop Khim Ho, was licensed to receive the largest number of coolies.¹⁶

There is no reason to believe that things operated differently in Singapore. The coolies were invariably first landed in Singapore: the number reaching Penang being determined by the market in Singapore which also supplied the Indonesian islands, Siam, etc. There must have been close communication between the Penang societies and their counterparts in Singapore in order to secure their supplies.

Having brought them so far, the secret societies were not likely to abandon their charges at this juncture. While the coolies were confined in the coolie house or boats, the *khehtows* were making the rounds of the gambier plantations to solicit buyers for their respective gangs. Prices, of course, varied according to the rules of supply and demand and where agreements were struck, the employers were issued tickets with which they claimed their numbers of workers from the brokers.¹⁷ The *khehtows* were often engaged as the contractor on the plantations, mediating between the employers and his gang of workers, and were henceforth referred to as the *tindals*. The *tindals* fulfilled the role of supervisor to the workers under his charge: paying their wages, supplying them with provisions and other “needs” such as opium and spirits. In this manner, the network of the secret societies were extended to the work place. However, it was not only at this level that the secret societies exerted control. “The Toh Pek Kongs numbered among their members most of the wealthy merchants and shopkeepers of Beach Street.”¹⁸ Recalling that it was these merchants who financed the plantations, it is clear whence the power of the secret societies

¹⁵RCCL

¹⁶CPAR 1881

¹⁷RCCL

¹⁸PRCR

emanated. The business enterprises of the secret societies extended further afield. The dockyard near Jelutong (in Penang) was known to belong to the Ghee Hins and during the Penang Riots of 1867, Ghee Hin members were cautioned not to plunder the dockyard because the vessels there were the properties of their brethren.¹⁹ The Larut Wars which erupted intermittently between 1861 dan 1874 revealed the extensive involvement of the secret societies in tin-mining. The intimacy of the relationship between the Penang societies and those in Larut can be gauged from the fact that the Larut headman were appointed from Penang.²⁰

Revenue Farming and Prostitution

The Dutch, during their rule in Malacca, had instituted the system of appointing Chinese headmen (termed Capitan China) to administer the affairs of the Chinese community. The Malay ruling class added their own appendage to the system and began the practice of farming out the right to collect duties on opium, tin, attap, etc. to the Capitans. This system was adopted by the British: the most lucrative farms composing the duties on opium, spirits, gambling and pawnbroking. The returns from opium farms constituted the largest item of revenue for the British through much of the nineteenth century. The opium farmer (an individual or a syndicate) had the monopoly over the importation of the raw opium into his locality by paying a monthly rent on the farm to the British. He then sold the opium to the *tindals* and other retailers who processed the drug into its consumable form, *chandu*, and sold them to the coolies. An elaborate monitoring mechanism was necessary to prevent any smuggling or illegal sales of the *chandu*: the agency of the secret societies was again called into operation.

Khoo Thean Tek once again made an appearance here. He was, for much of the second half of the century, the opium farmer in Penang - this line of interest of his culminating in the exclusive deal he concluded in 1879 with the British Resident in Perak. The Penang Riots of 1867 should be seen in the context of the long-standing feud between the Ghee Hins and the Hai Sans (of which the Toh Pek Kong was their Penang affiliate) over the tin-mining rights in Larut - perhaps explaining why this was the only riot in which Malay societies were involved. However, the immediate spark of the Penang Riots was the loss of Khoo Thean Tek's opium farm to his competitors, the Ghee Hins. According to a witness called before the Penang Riots Commission, a great deal of *chandu* was smuggled from Kotah and

¹⁹PRCR

²⁰Blythe, W. *The Impact of the Chinese Secret Societies in Malay, A Historical Study*, 1969, p. 25

Kuala Muda (both in Province Wellesley) into Penang by Khoo Thean Tek and his partner, Lee Toh, in the course of the riots.²¹ "The riots were of use to Thean Tek because during the riots, the Police and Revenue Officers could not act and make seizures: the Revenue Officers would not venture to go about and the police would be otherwise employed."²²

The gambling farm granted the holder the exclusive right to license gambling houses, the proprietors of which were again the ubiquitous secret society headmen. Opium and gambling had always been held up as the prime vices of the Chinese labourers. They also constituted the means most frequently used by employers to keep their workers in debt and thus bound to them for longer periods of service. On one account, the Protector of Chinese remarked that he encountered some seventy gambling houses with in a fifteen minutes walk. Although some public consciences were agitated by their pervasiveness, most of the legislators contented themselves with the justification that gambling was so deep-rooted a habit among the Chinese that any act of suppression could only be equated with the promotion of illegal gambling. Moreover, the British administration was in no capacity to take effective measures against illicit gamblers. In the end, all it meant was that the government would be deprived of a source of revenue.²³

One distinctive feature of the Chinese population in the period considered was the tremendous imbalance in the sex ratio. The men had emigrated with no intention of spending more than a few years in the Straits Settlements, hence never bringing their family with them. It is no surprise, then, that prostitution became a very lucrative trade. Where money was to be found, the omnipresent hands of the secret societies were not to be excluded. After all, if they controlled the men, why not their women too? Women of various ages were brought in from China on the pretence of being purchased as domestic servants. They were mostly orphans or children of poor parents, the victims often being no more than six years of age. On arrival in the Straits Settlement, they are first put into a brothel where they were employed in singing songs to entertain the frequenters or waited at their suppers. Afterwards, they graduated to being regular prostitutes. If the women did not submit to the orders of the keepers or if their earnings did not come up to the expectations of the pimps, they were subjected to punishment ranging from stoppage of food, solitary confinement to flogging. It was reported that the women commonly took poison to kill themselves but "the keepers administered emetics", thus prolonging their

²¹PRCR, Evidence 51

²²PRCR. Evid 44

²³Report of the Committee on Public Gaming and Lotteries

tortured existences. "The brothel keepers forced these wretched women to continue prostitution until their physical systems were utterly broken down and they were rotten from diseases, when they may be left to die or even put out of the way more expeditiously."²⁴

Not only did it appear that the owners of the brothels were members of secret societies but both they and the inmates had to pay monthly contributions to the secret societies and blackmail to the *samsengs*, who in fact lived on "the unfortunate females inhabiting the houses of ill-fame." A report cited the instance of a brothel keeper who "used to pay \$100/- a year as contribution from the brothel to the Ghee Hok Kongsee. Besides that he had to pay so much a head for each prostitute, usually twenty cents per head per month. These payments were irrespective of any urgent demands that might be made by the Kongsee as in the case of riots etc. Each brothel keeper had to provide for the support of certain *samsengs* who lived in the brothels, but were under the orders of the head of the Kongsee and were obliged to attend to him whenever called upon: they acted as bullies in the brothels."²⁵

The Singapore Connection

From the above account it is obvious that the intrusion of the secret societies into the workers' lives was complete: from employment to food, shelter, leisure, even sex. It is also clear that the intricate network of the secret societies and the enterprises they engaged in required enormous financial backing. The connection between the capitalist and the secret societies has been established in a general way and, in Penang, the richest capitalist, Khoo Thean Tek, and the most powerful secret society headman was one and the same. We will now attempt to trace the relationship between some prominent capitalists of Singapore and the secret societies in the island.

Tan Kim Cheng was undoubtedly one of the foremost capitalists of his time. He was engaged in the shipping industry and owned rice mills in Saigon, Siam and elsewhere. His influence thus spread afar: he was the Consul-General and Special Commissioner for Siam to the Straits Settlements and he was reported to have had great influence among the

²⁴Correspondence re : the Repeal of the Contagious Disease Ordinance

²⁵Report of the Commission to Enquire into the Working of the Contagious Disease Ordinance (RCCDD)

Chinese in Kelantan and Patani.²⁶ Although Tan Kim Cheng consistently denied any connections with the secret societies, the crucial link is provided us through his involvement in the Larut conflict in 1872. Pickering, one of the mediators between the Ghee Hins and Hai Sans, bore a letter from Tan Kim Cheng to the Penang Ghee Hin leaders as a result of which they agreed to surrender their weapons and war-boats and to place all Larut affairs in the hands of the Governor of the Straits Settlements. Later, the Menteri of Larut offered him \$16,000/- to arrange for the Ghee Hins to be driven out of his territories, Tan Kim Cheng declined. Pickering's biographer, N.R. Jackson, declared that Tan Kim Cheng was the leader of the Ghee Hins in Singapore.²⁷ It was well known that the most powerful leaders of the secret societies often removed their names from the societies' books. For instance, the Protectorate of Chinese had on record Tsung Tien Tun and Khoo Mah Pean as the principal headman of the Toh Pek Kong even though Khoo Thean Tek's identity was everyone's knowledge.²⁸ The Singapore capitalists might have felt more compelled to conceal this objectionable connection because they were all heavily involved in trade with the European community and had to maintain some image of respectability.

Figure 2 displays the interlinkages between some of the best known capitalists in Singapore; linkages that were often reinforced through marriage. A few highlights might offer glimpses into the more shadowy side of this consortium. Tan Kim Cheng's brother-in-law, Lee Cheng Tee, had the all Perak Chandu Farm in 1874,²⁹ Tan Seng Poh (brother-in-law of Seah Eu Chin) was the head of his syndicate in opium and spirits farming,³⁰ Tay Han Long was the first opium and spirits farmer of Singapore,³¹ Kiong Kong Tuan was the Singapore opium and spirits farmer in 1848.³² Our earlier accounts revealed how indispensable the secret societies were to the effective working of the farms. It might also be of interest to note that links, whether direct or indirect, can be traced between those involved in opium and spirits farming and the Capitans China of Perak and Malacca included in the Chart.

²⁶Song Ong Siang, p. 92

²⁷Jackson, R. N. *Pickering: Protector of Chinese*, 1965, p. 21; Blythe, pp. 182-185

²⁸CPAR 1879

²⁹Blythe, p. 191

³⁰Song Ong Siang, p. 131

³¹Ibid, p. 119

³²Ibid, p. 39

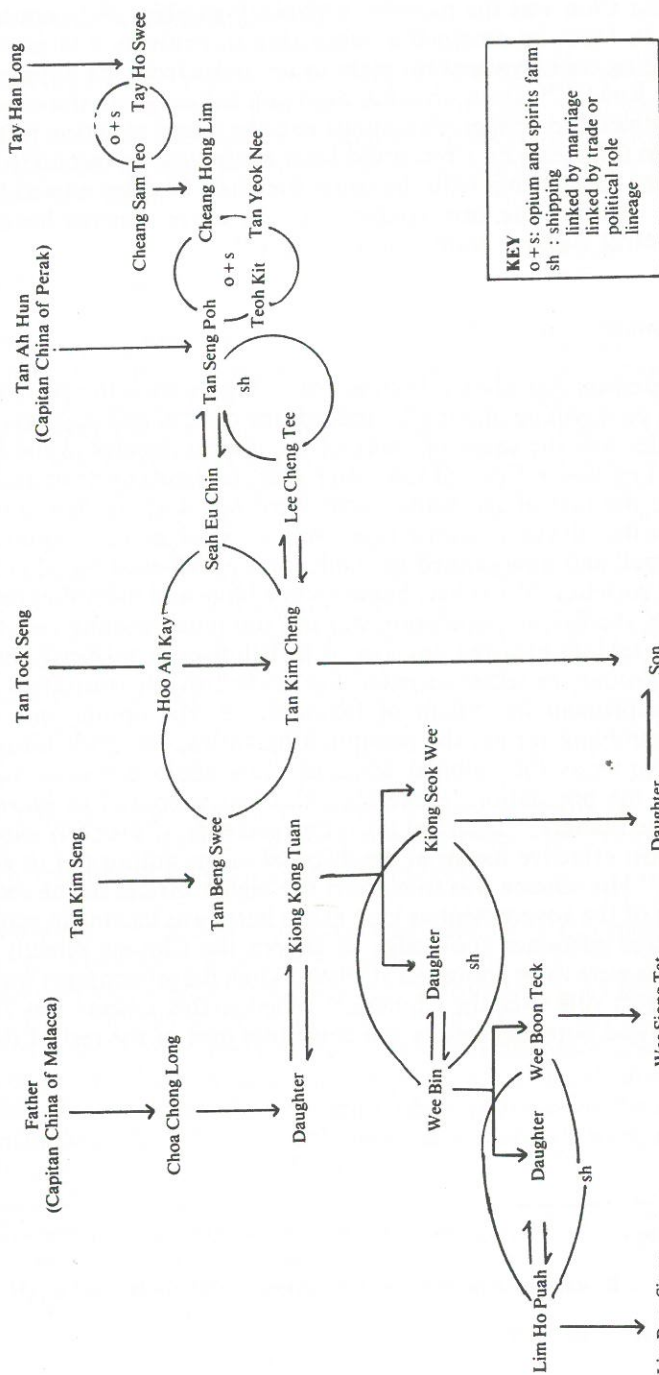


FIGURE 2: CHART SHOWING THE MOST PROMINENT MERCHANTS OF SINGAPORE AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS
 (Compiled from: Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*)

Seah Eu Chin was the pioneer in growing gambier and pepper on a large scale. In 1835, he obtained a concession to cultivate a large area of land "extending countrywards for eight to ten miles from the upper end of River Valley Road."³³ Given what has been said earlier about the concomitance of gambier and pepper plantations and the secret societies, it is quite inconceivable that Seah Eu Chin could have made such an inroad if he did not have some relationship with the secret societies. Buckley named him as the "person who had the most control over the secret societies headmen" and such control was not granted to outsiders.³⁴

British Response

The question has always been asked, "Why didn't the British Colonial Office do anything about it?" Indeed, the control and suppression of secret societies was the cause of some of the hottest debates in the Straits Settlements Legislative Council year after year, particularly after each major riot. But the fact of the matter was: there was nothing they could do about it. The British administration then was too weak and unconsolidated, it was too small and unorganised to challenge the well-established network of the secret societies. Moreover, besides some blots and blemishes on their public image, the British population was not too much endangered. Secret society feuds seldom incurred any loss of British lives or property. In fact, it was only through the secret societies that the British administration could effectively implement its system of taxation, i.e. the opium and spirits farms, the gambling farms, the pawnbroking farms, the pork farms and other such farms as the colonial administrators could devise to squeeze more out of the population. Pickering, who was supposed to know best about Chinese matters, "regarded the secret societies, if properly supervised, as the most effective means at the disposal of the authorities to govern the Chinese." His scheme was to convert the higher offices of the societies into agencies of the government as long as the latter was lacking in staff and did not possess adequate knowledge to govern the Chinese directly. The secret societies were to be abolished at leisure when the government was able to assume direct rule over the Chinese.³⁵ Whether this scheme was finally implemented and bore any results will constitute part of the rest of this investigation.

³³Ibid, p. 20

³⁴Buckley, C. B. *An Anecdotal History of Singapore in Old Times*, 1965 p. 151

³⁵Jackson, R. N. pp. 80-81

A REALITY TRANSFORMED

Beginning in the latter half of the 1870s, a series of developments, both in the economic and political spheres, wrought significant changes in the social fabric of the Chinese population. These were not merely conjunctural, but each fed upon and fueled the other - resulting in the rapid pace of such developments.

Western Enterprises³⁶

We have earlier alluded to the participation of Europeans in the plantation economy and pointed out the fact that these were mainly "amateur" planters whose primary interests were in the colonial administration or mercantile trade. However, the coming of sugar planters from the Mauritius in the 1840s precipitated a change towards investments in cash cropping as a professional endeavour. The European plantations were generally much larger in scale than the Chinese and required a relatively large input of capital and labour. Since cultivation of sugar was tremendously labour intensive, labour cost constituted the major part of the capital input. The first European sugar estate in Penang was the Otaheite Estate in Ayer Itam. In 1841, over 6,500 acres of forest land in Province Wellesley were leased to Europeans for sugar planting. These earlier estates in the Straits Settlements were denied the preferential import duty accorded under the Sugar Act of 1836 to the sugar and rum imported into the United Kingdom from other parts of the Empire. Agitation by the Penang planters, however, caused the extension of this preferential duty to the Straits Settlements, with the exception of Singapore in 1846. This caused a marked expansion of European sugar planting in Province Wellesley in the late 1840s and 1850s and also an abortive attempt to establish estates in Malacca.

By 1858, "the sugar industry had become a European-controlled enterprise. Most of the planted areas and that held in reserve lay on European-owned estates."³⁷ However, the increasing European control of the industry did not deprive the Chinese of their "monopoly of field work."³⁸ A situation arose whereby cultivation depended upon long standing Chinese methods based on the intensive use of hand labour whereas processing was supervised by experienced Europeans using the most up-to-date technology. In this way, although the Europeans were not directly

³⁶The section on agricultural enterprises is drawn entirely from J. C. Jackson pp. 128-207. Page references will only be given for direct quotations.

³⁷p. 142

³⁸p.145

dependent on a large Chinese labour pool since cultivation was contracted out, they nonetheless had a heavy stake in the availability of the labour because there could be no output from their processing plants if no canes came in from the fields.

British intervention in the Malay states during the second half of the 1870s opened up more land for the European planters to experiment in commercial cultivation of pepper, tea, tobacco and chinchona. The sugar planters expanded into Perak in the early 1880s, the first major successful company being the Perak Sugar Cultivation Company which acquired 6,000 acres of land in 1882 to establish the Gula Estate. This process of experimentation and expansion culminated in the concentration on coffee in the 1890s.

European planters first ventured into coffee growing in Perak in 1877 and the subsequent two years saw several Ceylonese planters visiting the interior parts of the state in search of suitable planting grounds. These early attempts did not meet with very much success, however. Despite the introduction of more favourable land regulations and the growth of an official policy designed to attract European coffee planters to the state there was no noticeable enthusiasm generated until the boom period of the 1890s. Pretty much the same situation prevailed in the other states except in Selangor where greater success was achieved from the late 1880s.

"In 1888 in recognition of his work in pioneering European estate agriculture (Thomas Hesop) Hill was granted rent-free a 10,000 acres agricultural concession in Kuala Kangsar District. This became known as the Kamuning Estate ... The granting of this land to Hill reflects the growing desire of the government officials in Malaya to attract more European planters, for in 1887 the Governor, Sir Frederick Weld, had given permission for Hill to be supported by a loan of public money to enable him to develop this new property. Weld's successor, Sir Cecil Smith, was apparently prepared to extend the same 'indulgence' to others ..."

These generous offers by the various state governments combined with the rising price of coffee in the world market (caused by the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888 resulting in temporary dislocation of the coffee industry) created the coffee boom in Malaya. There was a rush to open up coffee plantations. At about the same time, the sugar industry which had been on the decline since the late 1860s was rejuvenated. The concurrence of demand put great pressure on the labour market, which was aggravated by greater restrictions on emigration by the Chinese government. Under these circumstances, it came as no surprise that a commission was appointed to "enquire into the state of labour in the Straits Settlements and Protected

Malay States" in 1891.

The report of the commissioners, who were mainly European planters and their more prominent Chinese counterparts, came out most strongly against the coolie brokers and depot keepers who still maintained control over the contract labourers. The European planters, both commissioners and witnesses called before them, especially advocated the establishment of government depots to take the coolie trade out of the hands of the Chinese brokers.⁴⁰ This much power the administration did not yet possess and government depots were not established until 1897.⁴¹ Nevertheless, that the planters were launching such a frontal attack on coolie brokerage, a traditional stronghold of the secret societies, signified that certain changes in the balance of power had taken place.

One of the factors which probably contributed substantially to the disintegration of secret societies' near-monopoly over the labour market was the overwhelming control gained by Western companies in shipping. Figure 4 records the rapid dominance of steamers over all other vessels entering Singapore in the 1870s. The majority of the steamship companies were western concerns although the larger Singapore capitalists also engaged in shipping. Lee Poh Peng provided a further testimony that European square-rigged vessels replaced Chinese junks by the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁴² The shipping statistics of 1886 showed the following numbers of square-rigged and native vessels arriving in and departing from Singapore.

FIGURE 3
ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE OF VESSELS
SINGAPORE 1886⁴³

ARRIVALS			DEPARTURES		
	square-rigged	native	square-rigged	native	
Number of	65	9	249	2	To & From
Vessels	404	4	349	43	Within S.S.

⁴⁰Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour in the Straits Settlements and the Protected Malay States (RCSL)

⁴¹SSPLC 1897 App. 21

⁴²Lee Poh Peng

⁴³Great British Parliament. Sessional Papers 1887 Vol. LVII

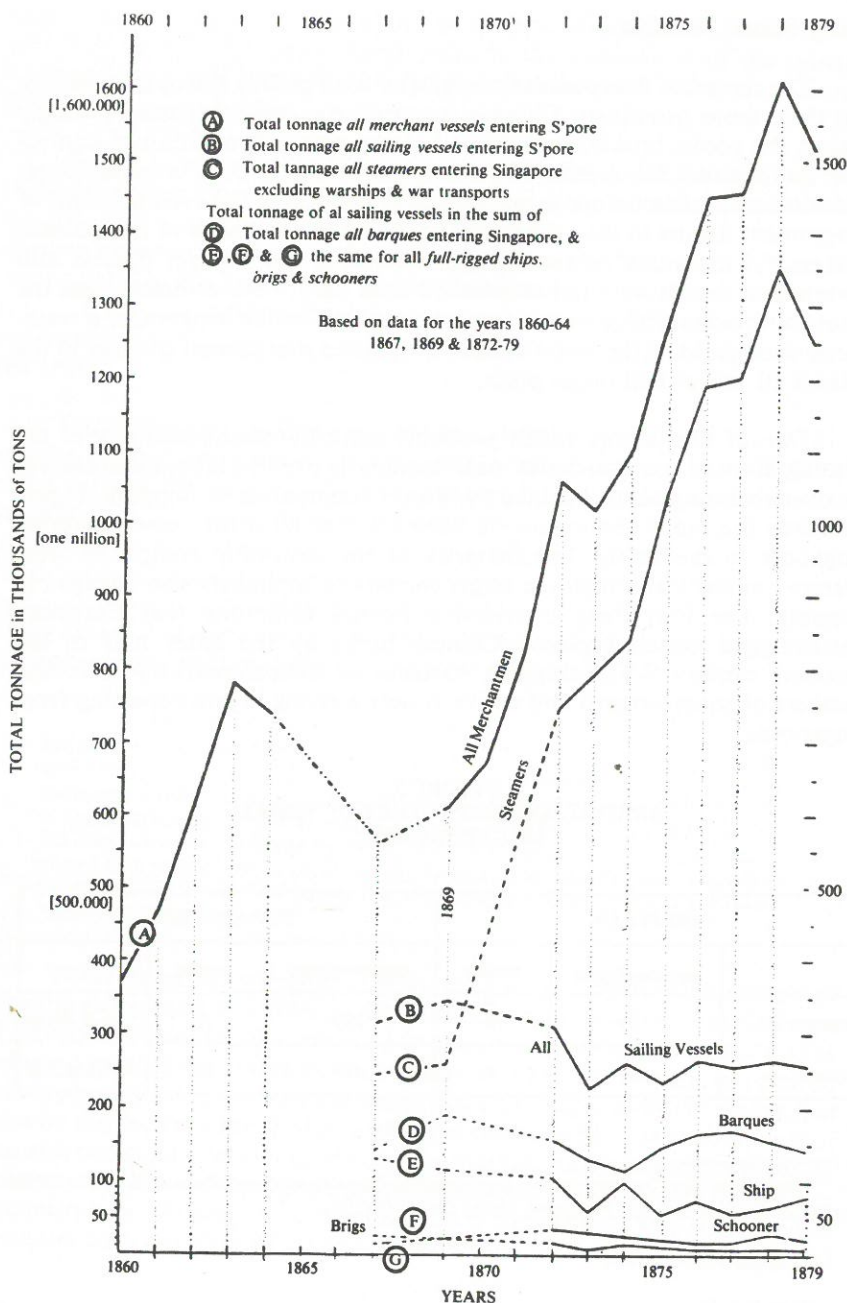


FIGURE 4
GRAPHS SHOWING TOTAL TONNAGE OF VARIOUS
KINDS OF VESSELS ENTERING SINGAPORE (1860-79)

Source: Gibson-Hall, *Singapore Old Strait and New Harbour*, Government Printing Office, Singapore, 1956

The impact of this development on the coolie trade must have been inestimable as the emigrants were invariably transported over by sea. A witness testifying before the 1876 Labour Commission stated that the coolie business in Swatow was almost entirely carried on by Europeans, with the Chinese working through such firms as Bradley & Company and Pustam & Company.⁴⁴

“By 1875, the passenger traffic between Amoy and Malaya had passed to Holt’s steamers which after taking cargo to Shanghai (took) passengers from Amoy to Singapore in their between decks ... A few years later the steamers were carrying 9/10s of the traffic from Swatow to Singapore and Siam.”⁴⁵

Holt was also investing in another concern, the Straits Steamship Company, founded in 1890. An important part of its business was the collection and distribution of passengers and cargoes for the ships of the great ocean-going companies which called at the chief Straits ports. In the course of its development it acquired a number of local shipping concerns, the most notable being the Ho Hong Steamship Company owned by Lim Peng Siang (refer Figure 2).⁴⁶

Legislation Affecting the Coolie Trade

This economic assault had been receiving occasional boosts from the government which introduced a number of laws that served to undermine the Chinese coolie importation system. Ordinance II of 1877 provided for the appointment of a Protector and Assistant Protector of Chinese who were empowered to enter and inspect all ships bringing immigrants to Singapore and Penang. It also provided for the establishment of depots for the reception of *sinkhehs* and for their detention therein if deemed necessary by the Protector. This part of the ordinance, however, was not implemented.⁴⁷ Instead, private licensed depots, under the supervision of the government, were introduced.⁴⁸ The workers were required to register at the protectorate and all contracts for work in the Malay states had to be signed in the presence of the protector and the terms of the contract explained to the workers. Ordinance III of the same year imposed penalties on any

⁴⁴RCCL

⁴⁵Allen, G. and A. Donnithorne, *Western Enterprises in Malaya and Indonesia, A Study in Economic Development*, 1957 p. 213

⁴⁶Ibid. p. 217

⁴⁷RCSL

⁴⁸Wong Lin Ken, *The Malayan Tin Industry to 1914*, 1965

person who, "by deceit or other illegitimate persuasion", induced any person to leave the colony for service elsewhere.⁴⁹ This ordinance was passed with the objective of preventing workers being crimped for work outside the Straits Settlement, especially Sumatra, and owed its origin to the demands of sugar planters in Province Wellesley." In order to guarantee the working of this ordinance all those engaged in recruiting labour for work outside the Settlements had to be licensed and crimping became punishable by law.⁵⁰ The above measures allowed the government direct supervision over the importation of labour even if they did not take the process out of the hands of the original brokers and recruiters. They also exposed the labourers to the possibility of an alternative due process and arbitration.

The biggest incursion into the secret society stronghold was to come in the late 1880s when it became unlawful to detain coolies in a depot for more than ten days.⁵¹ This posed a tremendous threat to the viability of the prevailing system as one depot keeper remarked, "as soon as all the coolies get to know that they can leave the depot, I fear they will all leave it." As the legislature had only recently been promulgated "sinkhehs don't know that we have no power to detain them" but the depot keepers could not hope to keep such priced information from the coolies for too long.⁵² It was no surprise that complains about this ordinance was the most recurrent issue brought up by the coolie importers to the 1891 Labour Commissioners; equalled only by the pleading from the European planters to bypass the middlemen, i.e. recruiters, depot keepers, *khehtows*, and brokers.

Expansion of Chinese Enterprises

The Chinese capitalists from the port cities were not far behind the European in making their foray into the peninsular states, in many cases in fact preceding them. The gambier and pepper planters had started expanding into Johore as cultivable land in Singapore became scarce. By the 1860s there were already close to 1,200 gambier and pepper plantations in Johore employing a labour force of 15,000. The financing of the plantations were controlled by residents of Singapore. The 1880s saw the further spread of gambier and pepper cultivations in Sungai Ujong, Selangor and Perak. Several large blocks of land were granted to the Chinese on leases which carried exemption from the monopoly of the opium farmers in the

⁴⁹RCSL

⁵⁰Wong Lin Ken, p. 70

⁵¹Jackson, R. N., p. 70

⁵²RCSL

sale of the drug. A concession at Lukut and Tanah Merah was granted to Loh Cheng Keng and Loh Tee Seng in the late 1880s, the plantation was employing upwards of 1,000 coolies by 1890.⁵³ Sugar growing financed by the Penang Chinese, which was confined to Province Wellesley during the 50s and 60s, also made its way into Perak. In 1881, the British Resident recorded that many estates have been opened "by the enterprising Chinese merchants of Penang."⁵⁴

It was in tin-mining, though, that the greatest pace of development was secured. It is not known when Chinese tin-mining in the Malay states began but the most prominent episode in the early history of this industry was the Larut Wars which contributed directly to British intervention in Perak. This prolonged conflict involved the dispute over tin-mining rights by the Hai Sans and Ghee Hins in the area. Both societies were sustained by financiers in Penang who had direct interests in the mines. The Ghee Hin leader was Ho Ghi Siu, a mining promoter of Penang and the Hai Sans were backed by local-born Hokkiens heading the Toh Pek Kong, with their representative in Larut being Chang Keng Kwee. The dispute was eventually settled by a line of demarcation being drawn across Larut: the mines to the north of which accrued to the Ghee Hins and those to the south to the Hai Sans.⁵⁵

This settlement was a watershed in more ways than one. As mentioned above, it provided the British with the opportunity to plant their first foot in the administration of the Malay states, it heralded a new and rapid phase of expansion in tin-mining which was based on a new relationship of close collaboration between the British administration and the top leaders of the secret societies. The Chinese merchants in Penang advanced the capital to reopen the tin mines after the Larut Wars.

"By March 1874, (one month after the settlement of the dispute) 30 mines were reopened. There was keen competition between the two societies as to which should export the first lot of tin. By the end of 1874, there were 70 rehabilitated and 50 new mines in production, and the tins exports totalled 657 tons, slightly more than 90% of which had been produced only in the last four months of the year. In 1878, exports had increased about fourfold over the exports in 1874, but the rate of increase in production had been slackening since 1876, owing to the unabated fall in tin prices."⁵⁶

⁵³Jackson, J. C. pp. 14-39

⁵⁴Jackson, R. N., p. 156

⁵⁵A detail account of this conflict, which in the process included deployment of arms on both sides, is given in Blythe, pp. 174-188

⁵⁶Wong Lin Ken, p. 82

British fiscal policies helped to prop up the miners during this period of recession: duty on tin was reduced, import duties on all items except opium, spirits and tobacco were abolished and in January 1878 the duty on opium was halved. All these, plus government spending on the construction and maintenance of roads helped the miners to withstand the depression.⁵⁷

When the tin market revived in 1879, a more comprehensive policy was put into action. "The system of revenue farming not only provided a practical way of collecting revenue in the early years of British administration but also an effective fiscal instrument for opening up new areas, or injecting fresh capital and labour into developing areas."⁵⁸ This was because the holding of the farms offered the prospective mining advancers the twin profits of tin and farmed items. This was the strategy used by Hugh Low to induce the Penang capitalists to pour money into the tin fields of Perak in 1879. The Krian-Kurau and South Larut farms held by Oh Wee Kee (Khoo Thean Tek's old Ghee Hin rival since the time of the Penang Riots) were let to Khoo Thean Tek on behalf of the Penang opium farmers." Two new farms on the Perak river for the collection of duty on opium and tobacco were similarly disposed off.⁵⁹ Hugh Low, then British Resident, maintained closed contact with Khoo Thean Tek and learned that "he was naturally keen about the Kurau farms and begs hand for them. He was under engagement to help the Larut people (Chang Keng Kwee et. al.) to buy the big farms of the whole state." Hugh Low's journal continued, "I told Thean Tek I would do all I could to protect the Penang farm by letting him have the farms now held by Oh Wee Kee." Khoo Thean Tek had recently ousted the Ghee Hins who held the Penang opium farm from 1877 to 1879. It was not unexpected then that although Oh Wee Kee tendered the highest bid for the farm it was rented to the syndicate headed by Khoo Thean Tek. The Larut gambling, spirits pawnbroking and tobacco farm which was not included in Khoo Thean Tek's concession went to Chang Keng Kwee.⁶⁰ For the next three years the "allied Kien Tek - Hai San financial group represented by Khoo Thean Tek and Chang Keng Kwee was... paramount not only in Penang but throughout most of Perak."⁶¹ By 1886, Chang Keng Kwee alone financed 30% of the tin output in Larut.⁶²

⁵⁷Ibid. p. 83-84

⁵⁸Ibid. p. 114

⁵⁹Blythe, p. 252

⁶⁰Hugh Low's Journal (A Confidential Despatch) in CO 273/100

⁶¹Blythe, p. 252

⁶²Wong Lin Ken, p. 84

A similar pattern of development was unfolding in Selangor: clashes between the Ghee Hins and Hai Sans culminated in 1870 when "a force of 200 Malays and 400 Chinese under Yap Ah Loy's fighter leaders attacked Kanching and massacred 136 of the inhabitants" who were under the control of the Ghee Hins.⁶³ As in Perak, this provided the initiation of British intervention in the affairs of the state. Measures were immediately taken to rehabilitate Kuala Lumpur and induce the mining labourers who had left the state at the height of the conflict to return.

"Yap Ah Loy was energetically involved in all measures of rehabilitation. He was encouraged in his development schemes by loans from government funds, and was granted the opium, spirits and gambling farms in Kuala Lumpur. During 1876 and 1877, when the price of tin was low, he was saved from financial difficulties by permission to levy a tax on all tin exports from Klang. Until the seat of government was moved to Kuala Lumpur in 1880, the administration of justice was largely in his hands and those of Yap Ah Shak, the other Hai San headman."⁶⁴

Until his death in 1885 Yap Ah Loy dominated almost wholly the tin industry of Selangor which thereafter came under the control of Yap Ah Shak and Yeap Kwan Seng. By 1888 their hold over the industry began to decline.⁶⁵ This allowed for the reassertion of the Ghee Hins. Loke Yew, a leader of the Ghee Hins, was able to clinch the Klang gambling, spirits and pawnbroking farm from 1890 to 1895, the toddy and bhang farm of Kuala Lumpur and Klang for 1890 to 1892, the gambling, spirits and pawnbroking farm of Ulu Bernam from 1893 to 1895 and held, together with Yeap Kwan Seng and Chow Ah Yeok, the Selangor chandu farm from 1892 to 1894.⁶⁶

Although the most powerful of the secret society leaders maintained a stronghold of the tin-industry, the opening up of the Malay states, both for agriculture and tin-mining was to have far reaching consequences. The capital outlay required for tin-mining was small and this facilitated the easy entry of small capitalists into the industry, especially in Perak.⁶⁷ This was to forment substantial changes in the relationship between the employers and the employees. When mining capitalist were few in number, they could easily get together to impose their terms on the workers. The secret society leaders, who were the largest employers, sometimes put aside society quarrels to unite in concerted action against labour: for instance, Chang Keng

⁶³Blythe, p. 173

⁶⁴Ibid. p. 193

⁶⁵Wong Lin Ken, p. 107

⁶⁶Ibid. App. B

⁶⁷Ibid. p 63

Kwee and Chin Ah Yam (who replaced Ho Ghi Siu as the Ghee Hin leader) were frequently present together in various deputations and were both members of the State Legislative Council of Perak.

Until 1888, it was the policy to grant land only to capitalists who could give proof of sufficient working capital. Under the new policy introduced to encourage further investments, anyone who could pay the \$100/- for survey fees and rent could secure and work a 25-acre block.⁶⁸ In this manner, a very large proportion of land came under the ownership of small capitalists. In 1889, the Straits Trading Company

“offered cash payments for ores, thereby enabling the small capitalists who had been dependent on the Penang merchants for credit to buy their own provisions from the local shops and to cut down the cost of production to the extent of the interests and other profits made on the advances ... The wider significance of the company's action was that it broke the monopolistic hold of Chinese capital in the industry, weakened the position of Chinese employers and fostered the growth of small mines.”⁶⁹

The combination of an immensely larger area of the country being developed for settlement and the breaking of the monopolistic hold of the secret society leaders as employers had the effect of loosening the structure of the community.

Absconding was about the only recourse labourers had to relieve themselves from the oppression of their employers and the secret societies. Even this, though, was virtually impossible in the days when mining centers were few and concentrated in a small area, and moreover, controlled by a small clique. The labourers were, therefore, tied to the mines, and their only weapon against the exploitation from the top was to refuse to work the number of hours prescribed by custom. This changed with the changed circumstances and labour militancy increasingly became a force that the employers had to contend with. A comparison between the situation in Selangor and Perak might serve to illustrate the impact of a more spread-out and larger community on the relationship between the employers and employed.

By 1879, Perak mine workers were able to combine in asserting their demands. Hugh Low had hit upon the idea of introducing into Larut a chandu farm to replace the opium farm then in existence. What this change basically meant was that the opium farmer would henceforth be the only one authorised to prepare and sell the chandu - a step calculated to bring higher profits to the farmer, thus raising the value of the farm. i.e., increas-

⁶⁸Ibid. p. 94

⁶⁹Ibid. p. 99

ing the colonial revenue. On October 3, 1879, a large contingent of the Chinese mining population assembled in Taiping to protest the implementation of this scheme. The following account is drawn from Hugh Low's report on the incident⁷⁰:

"The Chinese came up the hill towards the Residency in a continuous crowd until at least 1,500 of them surrounded the house."

The first spokesman was a coolie who voiced his opposition to the imposition of the chandu farm as it would allow the farmers to increase the price of the cooked drug. Several of the *tindals* who received a percentage on the opium supplied to the coolies took up the same line of argument strongly. They demanded free trade in opium under an increased import duty. When advised that they could become agents in the sale of the chandu.

"they repeated that they altogether objected to the Farm and that all the coolies supported them and they demanded that their request be complied with ... One or two men endeavoured to induce the crowd to rush up the steps to attack us ... They asked me when I should be in a position to give them an answer, saying that they would not go back to their work until I had decided.

Hugh Low was finally able to persuade the workers to disperse on the promise that he would give them an answer after consultation with others in the administration.

However, the affair did not end there:

"In the town to which the coolies had returned (Taiping), the crowd had broken into and pillaged the Gambling House which belong to the opium farmer and the owners of two or three shops ... They had also hustled the Police Chief Inspector Dickens (who) in attempting to arrest a prominent rioter, was knocked down and lost his sword ... The town was full of people lining the covered foot-paths on each side of the road, 4, 5, and more lines deep containing not less than 5,000 persons all the miners of Assam Kumbang and Tupai having ceased to work ... The immediate cause of the collision was his (Chief Inspector) personally arresting a man who was about to throw a large stone at one of his men, that the crowd then made a rush at the detachment when he was obliged to fire."

Close to thirty men lay dead and sixty others were brought to the hospital with severe wounds as a result of the "obligated" firing. The next morning, all the shops in the town were closed and most of the mines were not working. It was reported that the coolies were going to re-assemble and not disperse until an answer was given to their demands.

Hugh Low immediately conferred with his Chinese leaders: Chang Keng Kwee, Khoo Thean Tek, Go Sew Swee and the representatives of all

⁷⁰CO 273/100

the chief farms as to what step to take next. These leaders got together a meeting at the gambling house in Taiping to discuss the matter but on the next morning returned to Hugh Low with the consensus that they had to adhere to the demands of the workers. The British Resident could only concede, but not before making a show of being adamant that the mines must be opened before he gave his word of agreement so it would not appear that he had submitted under coercion, by the workers, no less.⁷¹

In Selangor, by contrast, mining was essentially confined to the Klang Valley and remained in the hands of a relatively small number of big capitalists. In 1890, the most powerful of them combined to establish the Shiah Mee Kongsi which was a central coolie depot where all *sinkhehs* to the area had to be registered and could be accommodated by their brokers at 50c per head until employment was found. When a shortage of labour occurred, employers could apply to the Shiah Mee Kongsi manager who would then communicate with Singapore. On completing his term of service, the *sinkheh* received a discharge ticket from his employer which he presented to the depot, thus becoming a *laukeh* and free to accept fresh engagements.

The Discharge Ticket System was introduced in Selangor in 1883 whereby employers were liable to be fined for employing labourers with no discharge tickets or for not providing their workers with the tickets on completion of their term of service. Employers were also rewarded for sending to the nearest depot any labourer seeking employment without a discharge ticket and authorised to search premises for absconded coolies. Labourers who violated the regulations were punishable through fine, imprisonment or whipping. By administering the Discharge Ticket System, the Shiah Mee Kongsi functioned as an effective instrument of labour control by the employers. When the Shiah Mee Kongsi was formed in 1890, the five persons who constituted the management committee were described as "the most important employers and the most influential Chinese among their clansmen." In subsequent years, the committee was expanded to absorb any important new employer - hence, ensuring that all the leading employers had an interest in maintaining the Discharge Ticket System. This consolidated power of the employers over their workers was only broken in 1896 when the Discharge Ticket System and compulsory registration of workers at the depot was abolished.⁷²

Two additional factors which strengthened the position of the workers at the expense of secret society cohesion were: labour shortage and the changing composition of the labourers imported. With restrictions in China becoming more stringent and rapid increase in labour demand due to

⁷¹Hugh Low's Journal

⁷²Wong Lin Ken, pp. 106-108

expanded economic development, the workers were in a much better bargaining position then before. In Perak, employers could no longer depress wages at will and exploit the truck system to the same extent as before. The workers would simply leave or lay down their tools. Moreover, by 1876 "paid immigrants" (those who paid their own passage and were thus essentially free agents on arrival) formed a larger proportion of the immigrants and the number increased progressively in the next two decades. This was due to the increasing difficulty faced by recruiters in getting *sinkhehs* pass the restrictions imposed by the Chinese government - restrictions which increased the cost of conducting the trade because of the necessity to pay "squeezes" to the Chinese officials. The net effect of this was that recruitment of *sinkhehs* did not excite as much enthusiasm, given that the returns were much lower and the risks compounded. The parents of some *sinkhehs* had taken to reporting to the Chinese Mandarins that their sons had been transported to the Straits Settlements against their will, upon which broker concerned had to trace the "missing" *sinkheh* and return him to China. Heavy retributions were levied on those brokers who failed to produce the wanted man: one broker was executed in the later 1880s for this offence.⁷⁴

The following table shows the changing ratio of paid to contract labourers coming to the Straits Settlements:

FIGURE 5
CHINESE IMMIGRANTS LANDED IN PENANG AND SINGAPORE
(1881-1890)⁷⁵

Year	Paid	Credit	Ratio of Paid to Credit
1881	57,487	32,316	1.8:1
1882	72,594	28,415	2.6:1
1883	82,690	26,446	3.1:1
1884	81,877	24,871	3.1:1
1885	85,065	26,391	3.2:1
1886	105,325	39,192	2.7:1
1887	124,042	42,400	2.9:1
1888	131,746	34,607	3.8:1
1889	125,607	21,213	5.9:1
1890	117,309	14,965	7.8:1

In the earlier days when "free labourers" were only a scattered few compared to contract labourers, their freedom was only nominal because

⁷³Ibid. p. 66

⁷⁴RCSL

⁷⁵Adapted from Wong Lin Ken, p. 67

the power of number easily coerced the paid coolies to conform to the rules set by the secret societies. The scales were tipped, however, when the number of coolies who arrived with no obligations exceeded those bound to the coolie brokers and by implication the secret societies.

Relationship Between the British Administration and the Secret Societies

The British Administration's relationship with the secret societies might appear to offer much material for the study of schizophrenia, but in the end, however, their policies were quite consistent. It remains an irony nonetheless, that they attempted the most severe measures when they were least able to implement them. The first such measure was the 'Act for the Better Preservation of the Peace' passed in August 1867 in the aftermath of the Penang Riots. This act allowed for the arrest and even banishment of persons engaged in riotous activities and empowered the Governor to proclaim it an offence to possess arms under certain circumstances.

Impressive indeed was this Act which at one stroke endowed the government with tremendous powers to deal with riotous persons or situations. Its actual effectiveness, however, was to be demonstrated by the fact that the government was forced to commute the death sentence of Khoo Thean Tek, convicted as the prime mover of the very riots which led to the promulgation of this Act. His sentence was commuted to one of seven years' transportation although the Governor himself admitted that in the prevailing state of the law such a sentence could not be effected because Khoo Thean Tek, being born in Penang, was a British subject to whom the penalty of transportation did not apply. But the governor promised that 'at no distant period' it was his intention to substitute a sentence of two years' imprisonment with hard labour.⁷⁶

The report of the Commission on the Penang Riots caused a big stir among the European legislators who immediately appointed a committee to investigate into the operation of the secret societies. Their report did not unearth anything deviating from the conclusions of the Penang Riots Commission but their recommendations for action were more tame: calling for registration and regulation of the secret societies instead of the suppression advocated by the earlier commissioners. In December 1870, the 'Ordinance for the Suppression of Dangerous Societies' was passed but the name of the ordinance was a misnomer because the ordinance did not provide for suppression but registration, and of all societies whether dangerous or not. "In reporting to London the governor stressed that his intention was not necessarily to take action under the new ordinance, but to impress upon the

⁷⁶Blythe, p. 140

Chinese that the government was now armed with far greater power.”⁷⁷ He could not have spoken closer to the truth because the government was in no way equipped to enforce the letter of the ordinance. However, to what extent the Chinese were impressed was everyone’s question because what greeted the passing of the ordinance was not a cowed population but the biggest riot ever in Singapore.

After the Singapore Riots of 1871 had subsided, the Inspector General of Police, Plunket, turned his attention to the registration of the secret societies which, to his consternation, was found to have been most shoddily done previously.⁷⁸ Often, names of headmen were derived merely from hearsay and few of the names registered were those of the actual headmen. It was only in 1877, when the Chinese Protectorate was established that a more comprehensive system of monitoring the activities of the secret societies was available.

The work of the legislative arm was buttressed by that of the Police. The temerity of the Singapore rioters shocked the Legislative Council into voting for more money to be allocated for the improvement of the Police force. Dunlop, the new Chief Commissioner, “who had already won high praise for his work in police appointments” started training the police in riot suppression.⁷⁹ The Police force of Penang which numbered no more than 200 in 1872 was increased every year hence. The size of the Singapore Police force was always maintained at slightly bigger than that in Penang.

In 1879, a commission was appointed to investigate the state of the Police in the Settlements with a view to its reorganisation. The Commissioners found that most of the men received no training for their work, the only initiation to the Police force being the reading out of the pertinent rules and ordinances to them. The most significant recommendation of the commissioners was that a Sikh contingent from India should be recruited to form the nucleus of the armed police. It was also recommended that the detective force be augmented and that half of this should be Chinese. The commission found that “the weight of evidence” was against the employing of Chinese in the constabulary as the secret societies were so strong that the Chinese constables would more likely abet them.⁸⁰

The Inspector-General in his annual report for 1881 expressed great joy that the morale of his force had been boosted by the implementation of

⁷⁷Ibid. p. 152

⁷⁸Ibid. p. 158

⁷⁹Ibid. p. 156 & 158

⁸⁰FPC

the recommendations of other Police Commission. A Sikh contingent comprising an assistant superintendent and 54 others was recruited from Punjab and a police school was established for their training. A European contingent of two inspectors and 21 constables also arrived from England to lift the sagging image of the European police personnel. The Detective Branch in Penang and Singapore were enlarged and Chinese interpreters were appointed to the most important police divisions in these two island.⁸¹

It was no coincidence that another committee was appointed 'to enquire into the Efficiency of the Police Force of the Straits Settlements' just prior to the suppression of the secret societies in 1890. The committee recommended that the number of police officers be increased to 2,138, an increase of almost 50% over the recommendation of the 1879 commission. Meanwhile, population had only increased by 25%. The Sikh contingent was singled out for the most substantial augmentation: from 105 to 200 in Singapore and 73 to 100 in Penang. The Committee also felt that the "time has come for the employment of Chinese in the Singapore Police Force, and that an experiment should be made of enrolling such a body."⁸² Such an experiment was indeed carried out but not with much success.

It is impossible to ascertain to what extent the decline of the secret societies in Penang and Singapore were due to suppression through legislature and the Police. As we have seen in earlier sections of this paper, there was an increasing unity of interest between the British administration and the most powerful secret society leaders. Pickering noted in his Annual Report of 1880 that even "the most remarkable, Choah Moh Choon, (who) was well-known to old residents (and) was much feared by the Chinese (had) for some years, ... found it his best policy to be on the side of the government; on several occasions, indeed, he was of great use in keeping peace, not only among the members of his own Hoey but also between the other societies and clans."⁸³ In 1885, Pickering registered credit to the headman of the Ghee Hok society who volunteered to send 500 labourers and skilled workmen under their own headmen within 12 days and 1,000 men within a month to work on the Suakim-Berber railway, a government project.⁸⁴ Hugh Low had felt compelled to disregard the non-payment of rent for the farms let to Chang Keng Kwee when the latter's financial enterprises ran aground because he was 'one of the staunchest supporters of the government.'

⁸¹Annual Report of the Police 1881 in SSPLC 1882, App. 1

⁸²RCPF

⁸³CPAR 1880

⁸⁴CPAR 1885

In noting the death of several influential secret society headmen of Singapore in 1880, the Protector of Chinese elaborated that "the successors in office to the deceased Headmen were generally of a very different stamp, and, while anxious to keep their Hoeys and especially themselves out of trouble, have very little influence over their disorderly members or in enforcing the payment of subscription."⁸⁵ In all likelihood, among the powerful old chiefs of the secret societies in Penang and Singapore those who died, died and those who did not, moved on to bigger and better things in the plantations and tin mines of the native states leaving the lesser chiefs to fight over the crumbs in the old citadels of secret society power. When the final act of suppression came in 1890, the Singapore societies were found to be poor and the balances, if any, after winding up were small. Things were slightly different in Penang where the Ghee Hin and Toh Pek Kong still retained vast amounts of property. This might be in part due to the proximity between the old headquarters and the new territories which were of greatest interest to the Penang leaders. The Toh Pek Kong caused considerable trouble when an order was issued for its dissolution but it finally succumbed, whether this was because yet another compromise had been struck is a matter of conjecture. It is also significant to note that, although the British administration pressured the governments of Kedah and Johore to assist in the formal suppression of the secret societies in Penang and Singapore by exerting similar vigilance in their states, no request of this nature was forwarded to the governments of Perak and Selangor where the stakes of the secret society leaders had become most substantial. Hence, the new loci of secret society control was left untouched.⁸⁶

The same degree of tolerance was not accorded to the smaller societies which had nothing to offer in terms of exclusive business deals. In 1885, the Teo-kun Ghee Hin and Ghee Sin societies of Singapore were suppressed because they had "yearly become more dangerous to public peace through disorganisation and the incompetence of their managers and office-bearers."⁸⁷ With the 'big guns' gone, many societies which had previously registered as 'friendly societies' began to come into prominence. Many of them were in fact infiltrated by members of the disbanded secret societies. The headmen of the Ghee Hok "attempted to keep alive the traditions" of the society by starting new gambling houses and collecting dues from the brothels. Gan Kam Lian, the President of the Hokkien Ghee Hin remained the head of a large illegal lottery set-up. These were to be the only arena of the secret societies henceforth: management of gambling houses

⁸⁵CPAR 1880

⁸⁶CO 273/167

⁸⁷CPAR 1885

and lotteries, imposing subscriptions on brothel keepers and extortion of workers and petty traders.⁸⁸

A typical example of this new breed of secret societies might be the Tong Beng society which was originally registered as a friendly society in 1885. After the suppression of the secret societies, however, several hundred ex-members of the Hok Heng society joined its ranks. The Tong Beng then came under the control of several ex-Hok Heng headmen who proceeded to exert control over the Chinese residents in the Kampung Glam, Rochore and Bencoolen districts in Singapore. Tan Bi who was in charge of recruiting new members moved from one part of the town to another, renting a house for a month or so to be used as his anchor point from which to enlist new members. In this house, too, lodged the *samsengs* who assisted him. He always opened his recruiting house near rickshaw shops⁸⁹ or large coolie houses. No rickshaw shopkeeper or coolie house keeper could keep their premises open for business unless they let their coolies join the Tong Beng. Many hawkers in the Bencoolen districts were also forced to join the society because otherwise its members would eat up the food of the hawkers without paying. Another trick that was devised was to steal the licence plates of the rickshaws, the coolies could only redeem them by joining the society, i.e. paying up the subscriptions. The government, however, no longer had any reservations about coming down hard on these societies when they proved too much of a menace. The principal headmen of the Tong Beng were banished in 1892.⁹⁰

CONCLUSION

In order that this phenomenon, viz the secret societies' role in nineteenth century Straits Settlements, does not become dismissed as a peculiar accident of history, it might be useful to situate it within the general context of capitalist transformation in these colonies. The penetration of the market compelled the delineation of property rights. In the gambier and pepper plantations of Singapore and the spices plantations of Penang where the British property laws did not yet apply, an alternative juridical system had to be implemented. Within the cultural experience of the Chinese populations, the secret societies promised to be the most efficacious. It combined the elements of a judiciary which could co-exist with the formal state and an armed force to quell internal dissension and external incursion (challenge from rival secret societies).

⁸⁸CO 273/167

⁸⁹The rickshaw shopkeepers rented out the vehicles and the licences to the coolies for a fixed rate or a commission on the day's earnings.

⁹⁰CO 273/174

Many of the immigrants must have only been too familiar with the workings of the secret societies in China if they had not in fact been part of them. This is because during this same period secret societies were proliferating in Kwangtung Province from which the bulk of the Nanyang Chinese were drawn. Hence, it is hardly surprising that the local secret societies adopted some of the functions of their counterparts in China where they were

“a perfect organisational tool for gambling operations, the control of prostitution, extortion and even the kidnapping of peasants for the “pigtrade” that sent hapless Chinese to California, Latin America and Southeast Asia.”⁹¹

Indeed, they were often times business partners!

In the Straits Settlements, however, they acquired an additional role of liaising between the workers and the governing authorities. This was especially true when British administration was not yet adequately formed to control the local population. As also noted before, a symbiotic relationship was established between the heads of the secret societies and the earlier British commercial interests. As the concerns of the pioneering Europeans were largely mercantile, no competition over the acquisition of labourers and land existed. Indeed, the Chinese social structure was instrumental in facilitating the supply and supervision of labourers in the European plantations.

This relationship was drastically altered, however, with the changing economic interests of the Europeans, particularly the British. The decline in power of the secret societies can be attributed to two main factors. As the capitalist mode was more firmly established, and over a larger physical sphere, the system of organisation afforded by the secret societies became less tenable. As the efficiency of the secret societies took a downturn so did their prestige and bargaining power. In this context, they were increasingly at a loss in resisting the British onslaught.

Prior accumulation and a headstart notwithstanding, the secret society headmen were unable to restrain the encroachment of the new capitalists - the strongest being the British corporations which often received the effective backing of the state apparatus. Frequently they were one and the same, the most graphic example being the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company where members of the legislative and executive councils owned the bulk of the stocks.⁹² As British concerns acquired a larger and larger share in all the major industries, from sugar to coffee, rubber and tin, the secret society

⁹¹Wakeman, F. “The Secret Societies of Kwangtung”, p. 30

⁹²CO 273/165

headmen found the grounds on which they had planted themselves rapidly eroding.

The capitalist system, resting as it does on free labour, it is not surprising that the most intense onslaught of British legislature on the secret societies was in the realm of labour recruitment and distribution. As the British corporations became more entrenched in labour intensive enterprises, they could no longer afford to allow the dictation of the cost and supply of labour by the secret societies. Hence, there was active agitation for the taking over of the labour brokerage trade and the depots by the government. This culminated in the abolition of contract labour in 1910.

The British assault on the economic pipeline of the secret societies was then complete. Henceforth, the secret societies "degenerated" into nothing much more than conglomerates for organised or petty crime.

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