

BRITISH PERCEPTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS:

BRITISH MALAYA AND THE RISE OF

CHINESE INFLUENCE

BY

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

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Abstract

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British experiences throughout their Empire, both as colonizers and as members of a massive global trading network, informed the ways in which they instituted colonial rule in Malaya. British colonial rule in Malaya was guided by their experience with colonial systems, which in turn provided the means to dominate Malaya both politically and economically while their preparation for dealing with native Malay populations resembled the imperial framework they employed in India. On the other hand, the emergence of a powerful Chinese community caused a considerable shift in both the overall population in Malaya and in the power structure of the Malay states. The British responded to the Chinese population in much different ways than they did the Malays. Their conceptions of the Chinese population, formed by interactions with the Chinese in China, led the British to believe that a new colonial framework for controlling this group was necessary. I argue that this new colonial framework focused on the Chinese to a much greater degree than the Malays, despite existing evidence that would suggest a shift in colonial policy was necessary to ensure the peace and security of British Malaya.

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Dedication

To Mark:

Without whom I would have given up long ago.

And to Tyler and Rian:

Who always remind me that I should do what makes me happy.

Chapter One

Introduction

In October 1872, a riot occurred in Singapore. The official report identified “Samsengs,” or Chinese “fighting men,” and the Chinese secret societies that employed them as riot instigators. It also brought the colonial government’s attention to the dangers of having no way to communicate with the Chinese population, given that the riot’s impetus was a miscommunication concerning a posted British proclamation.¹ The report, which consisted of forty-five pages in the colonial records, also noted that the riot lasted approximately five hours, and involved a group of Chinese who ran rampant through a small section of Singapore – five different roads and the “Green in front of the Station” – where they pelted the police station with rocks.² British officials saw the riot as extremely serious, evidenced by not only the report on the incident, but also the ensuing legislation that focused on the Chinese in the Straits Settlements. Over the next five years, British colonial officials in Malaya invoked the Chinese Riot of October 1872 to illustrate the necessity of legislating the Chinese. It was a watershed moment for the British who, up until this point, had largely neglected appointing British officials who could communicate with the Chinese in their own language. However, in the ensuing debates about how to best control the Chinese, the British began to recognize the necessity of working towards a policy that included officials who could specialize in Chinese affairs.

Three years later, in November of 1875, the first resident of Perak, Mr. J.W.W. Birch, was assassinated by a group of Malays. A Malay Sultan, who had been supported by the British, and a group of high-ranking Malay rajas, planned and implemented the assassination. The plot was one which colonial officials had heard of more than once – Birch was threatened directly,

¹ *Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Riots of October 1872*, CO 275/16 British Colonial Office, 1872 (London: National Archive, Kew), 233.

² *Ibid*, 234.

though no official took the threats seriously.³ In fact, Birch considered the Sultan to be “eminently silly and foolish... an errant coward.”⁴ The official report on the assassination assured colonial government officials that those involved – five men, including the Sultan and a raja – were caught and punished, the lowest ranking members of the assassination party were executed while the Sultan was sent into exile. Where the British had concluded that a riot in Singapore necessitated major changes in policy and legislation of the Chinese population in Malaya, they saw an assassination of one of their as an anomaly. British officials determined that policy changes in Perak were unnecessary; as such, they made no changes to the resident system, even though it was this system that made an attack on a British resident possible.

These two events reflect a larger trend in the establishment of British colonial rule in Malaya. While Malays outnumbered all other ethnic groups in the colony, and even engaged in the assassination of a British official, they appeared to be of lesser concern to the British. Conversely, the British saw the Chinese populations in Malaya – and specifically the Chinese secret societies to which many Chinese belonged – as a constant menace. While the riot in Singapore and other similar riots throughout Malaya resulted in no deaths and were generally hastily constructed, the British saw these instances of Chinese dissent as the prelude to a larger threat to their colonial authority and rule. I argue that the disparity between the British approach to populations living in Malaya grew out of British beliefs about the two ethnic groups – beliefs founded in the institution of colonial rule in India and a century of trading with Chinese in China.

³ Sir Frank Swettenham, the first resident general of the Federated Malay States, spoke at length about Birch’s assassination, as he was nearly present for its occurrence. Birch was posting proclamations stating that the administration of Perak would now be under the British colonial government, a proclamation rejected by some Malays who said that they “would not allow any white man to post these proclamations.” The Maharaja Lela threatened to kill Birch if he set foot in his Kampong, or village, though Swettenham stated that no threats were ever taken seriously. See Sir Frank Swettenham, *British Malaya* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1906), 202.

⁴ J.W.W. Birch, as quoted in Barbara Watson and Leonard Y. Andaya *A History of Malaysia, 2nd Edition*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001), 165.

The combined British experiences throughout their Empire both as colonizers and as members of a massive global trading network informed the ways in which they instituted colonial rule in Malaya. On one hand, the British came to Malaya with a practiced means to institute colonial rule, and the means to dominate Malaya both politically and economically. Their preparation for dealing with the native Malay populations resembled the imperial framework they employed in India. On the other hand, the emergence of a powerful Chinese community caused a considerable shift in both the overall population in Malaya and in the power structure of the Malay states. The British responded to the Chinese population in much different ways than they did the Malays. Their perceptions of the Chinese population, formed by interactions with the Chinese in China, led the British to believe that a new colonial framework for controlling this group was necessary. This new colonial framework focused on the Chinese to a much greater degree than the Malays, eventually leading to a complete reordering of Malayan society that had long-term implications for the country as a whole.

The British Empire spanned the world in the nineteenth century; it encompassed countries on every continent of the globe, save Antarctica. The global connections made through the process of colonizing these countries and the interactions with subject populations in each colony influenced other colonial ventures. This was particularly true in British Malaya, as this British colony included two disparate types of ethnic groups; the native Malays, who fit the colonial profile of a subservient ethnic group, and the Chinese, who had previously been seen as competitors and represented a different ethnic category. This thesis takes a unique perspective by analyzing the connections between the British colonial government and their interpretation of the Chinese in China and their application of this knowledge to the Chinese in Malaya. I argue that prior knowledge on the part of the British influenced their understandings, and subsequent

legislation, of subject populations in Malaya. This prior knowledge encouraged the British to be most concerned with those groups who had power enough not to need British support, those who were part of cohesive social groups capable of unified action, and those who controlled the economy. In Malaya, the British believed that the Chinese community encompassed all three while the Malay population represented none of these characteristics.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

This thesis intervenes in several different historiographies, including world history, modern British history, imperialism, and Southeast Asian history.⁵ Prior studies focus on issues of the Chinese in Malaya, the British in Malaya, and imperial practices in Malaya; none have looked at the connections that developed as a result of intersecting worlds, the importance of Anglo-Chinese relations in the context these intersections, or the ways in which these intersections shaped the formation of British Malaya. Anglo-Chinese relations, and especially those between the Chinese and British, quite literally encompassed the world, from China to Britain and numerous continents in between. This study will look at how these connections effected the development and legislation of a British imperial colony.

The historiography of imperialism is dominated by the British experience, with a special focus on studies of British India. The notions that the British had of their colonies were based largely on their experiences in India, Britain's largest and most lucrative colony. Britain considered India crown jewel. The British replicated the imperial framework they perfected there in colonies around the world, including Malaya. For that reason, an understanding of British involvement in India is central to this thesis, since the experience in India informed British understandings of all of their colonies and aided in the creation of legislative systems around the

⁵ Eventually, this study will serve as the foundation of a dissertation that focuses on the formation and transmission of memory in an imperial context.

world.⁶ This thesis explores this process in a colony much less well known to historians – Malaya – and the ways in which it was formed in the image of the British Empire.

The British relied on their experience in India when developing systems of rule in other colonies; these systems of rule tended to rely on the cooption of indigenous elites as “partners” in the development of the British colonial structure. Texts such as Lawrence James’ *Raj* illustrate the complexities of policy and interactions in British India.⁷ Lawrence pays deference to the multiple actors in British India, highlighting the role of Indians themselves – from Sepoys to princes – in the formation of the colony. James’ work is an excellent example of the kind of research that should be done when considering British colonies, with considerable attention paid to the interaction between colonized and colonizer. However, there has been little written on these aspects of British Malaya, though initial interactions between the British and their subject populations were similar. This thesis will begin to address these complexities in British Malaya, in much the same way that James did with British India.

The literature devoted to the British Empire in Southeast Asia is far more limited, with those studies devoted to Malaya being even narrower. Barbara Watson and Leonard Y. Andaya’s *A History of Malaysia* offers an overview of the country, in which imperial projects figure prominently.⁸ While not devoted to Southeast Asia or the British Empire specifically, the Andaya’s text is situated within imperial history because so much of this region’s past was shaped by outside forces. In many ways, the story of Malaysia and its experience during the era of high imperialism is reflective of other Southeast Asian countries. Speaking to this experience

⁶The six volume series *Britain in India, 1765-1905*, edited by John Marriott and Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, provides an in-depth analysis of British India through primary source documents and serves to situate British rule in an imperial setting and illustrate the systems they used to control such an extensive population. Those volumes used most extensively in this thesis are one, three, and four - *Justice, Law, Police, and Order, Education and Colonial Knowledge*, and *Cultural and Social Interactions* respectively. See John Marriott and Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay (Eds.), *Britain in India, 1765-1905* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006).

⁷ Lawrence James, *Raj* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998).

⁸ Andaya, Chapters 2 through 7.

is K.C. Tregonning's *The British in Malaya: The First Forty Years 1786-1826*. Tregonning's study intervenes in the narrative of British imperialism and seeks to explain the reasons for initial British interest in Malaya, and in fact much of Southeast Asia; he argues that the drive for British intervention in Malaya was competition with other European powers in a quest for trade with China. However, even with the addition of imperial competition and the drive for trade with China, Tregonning largely ignores the larger issue of the British Empire as a connected whole. Lastly, and in terms of British imperial policy within Malaya, is Wilfred Blythe's *The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya*.⁹ Blythe's central focus is the British legislative responses to the Chinese and secret societies in the colony, from the earliest Chinese settlers in Penang to secret society impact and involvement in Malaya post-World War II. Blythe provides significant information concerning British legislation of the Chinese in Malaya over the course of the nineteenth century, which he categorizes as moving from a policy of intervention to a policy of suppression.¹⁰ I situate Blythe's text within the broader historiography of British imperialism in Southeast Asia because of its centrality to understanding of how the British legislated their colonies in the region. As with the Andaya's text, Blythe's study speak to a broader historical framework in which the British sought to control one of the most profitable areas in the world. However, missing from Blythe's study is the interconnectedness of British knowledge of the Chinese based on perceptions gathered both within and outside of the colony. Rather, Blythe's study focuses on British responses to the Chinese as an entity within Malaya and disconnected from China.

⁹ Wilfred Blythe, *The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

¹⁰ Blythe states that the period of intervention, consisting largely of legislation passed in an effort to work with secret societies, was in effect in the 1860s and 1870s. He says that, once intervention largely failed to control the secret societies to the extent hoped for, the British moved into a policy of suppression in the 1880s. See Blythe, pp. 149-221.

Further, studies about the imperial structure of Malaya offer one of two narratives: the British experience in terms of building and controlling the colony, or the experience of subject populations in relation to British intervention. Nicholas Tarling's *British Policy in the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago, 1824 – 1871* and Richard Allen's *Malaysia, Prospect and Retrospect* follow the narrative of the former, providing detailed analysis of the ways in the British shaped Malaya under their rule.¹¹ Much of Tarling's analysis is dedicated to the political climate in Europe and the resulting friction in Malaya, and the centrality of trade to British interests in Malaya. Tarling argues that British policy in Malaya after 1824 is “the study of the reaction between local commercial considerations and broad strategic policies dictated by wider imperial interests.”¹² Tarling's text is decidedly Eurocentric, with little attention paid to the numerous in-colony issues that the British confronted.

Allen's work is dedicated to analysis of British investment – political and economic – in the colony as a whole. Like Tarling, Allen addresses Malaya from the perspective of British control and formation of the colony. Allen characterizes British intervention in the interior of Malaya as an “accident,” brought on by a threat to British trade in the region.¹³ While Allen acknowledges the role of both Malay and Chinese actors in the events that led to British intervention, he frames British involvement as an extension on their civilizing mission. In other words, the British had to become involved in an effort to civilize the savage populations in Malaya – Malay and Chinese alike – in an effort to secure British interests in the region. This narrative is recurring, whereby the political tensions between European powers are central to British movement in Malaya while trade and commerce drive each legislative decision made in

¹¹ Nicholas Tarling, *British Policy in the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago, 1824-1871* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1969) and Richard Allen, *Malaysia, Prospect and Retrospect: The impacts and aftermath of colonial rule* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

¹² Tarling, 17

¹³ Allen, 42.

the colony. These types of political and economic concerns have dominated the historiography of Malaya. However, this narrative fails to take into account the complexities inherent in a colony with an international population. While many monographs focus on British or European concerns and subsequent establishment of British Malaya, few speak to the diversity of the population and the resulting tensions that occurred because Malaya was home to so many ethnic groups. My thesis will intervene in this narrative, with more careful attention paid to the ways in which interactions between groups in Malaya affected the formation of the colony.

Where Tarling and Allen both negate the importance of internal interactions between the British and other groups in Malaya, other monographs focus on the impact and experience of one group in Malaya. These texts are dominated by narratives of the Chinese experience. Two such texts are *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, 1800-1911*, by Yen Ching-hwang, and *Opium and Empire, Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore 1800-1910* by Carl Trocki.¹⁴ Yen's argument focuses on the ways in which Chinese societies were established in the colony. Prior to 1867, many of their movements were unencumbered by British intervention, which allowed for the formation of strong social structures based on clan and dialect groups. After the British arrived in force, however, Yen illustrates the ways in which the Chinese were affected by an imposed colonial framework. Yen's focus, however, is on the Chinese community in Malaya as an isolated phenomenon rather than on a Chinese community in the context of a broader imperial framework. Neither work takes into account the varied populations already living in Malaya when both the British and Chinese began to arrive en masse. I argue that a singular focus on the Chinese in Malaya negates the importance of other ethnic groups in the country. In fact, the focus on the Chinese particularly was a constant practice of the British,

¹⁴ Yen Ching-hwang, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, 1800-1911* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986) and Carl A. Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

who managed to eliminate the native Malay population from the narrative of their own country through a series of legislative acts that isolated the Chinese. This thesis seeks to re-establish some element of the Malay narrative by showing how and why the British focused so intently on the Chinese population in the country.

The narrative of my thesis is driven by the theories and methodologies of world history. Southeast Asia has been largely neglected in the field of world history, with the exception of Craig Lockard's *Southeast Asia in World History*.¹⁵ In this text, Lockard takes a chronologically expansive view of the networks that make up Southeast Asia. He begins in Java 1.5 million years ago, and moves through the history of the region ending in modern times, inclusive of the 2005 tsunami in Indonesia. Lockard's study, as world historian Patrick Manning would put it, is one that focuses on linkages and comparisons; Lockard's focus shifts between Southeast Asian countries and regions, highlighting the similarities that resulted in the development of the region as a whole.¹⁶ My thesis, by comparison, includes the methodological frameworks that Patrick Manning describes as "concern for details that reveal historical connections" as well as a "readiness to shift perspective in assessing the past."¹⁷ My thesis will do both, first by illustrating the connections between British imperial systems and then by re-assessing the ways in which these connections shaped British Malaya. Where Lockard's work focuses on linkages and comparisons around Southeast Asia, I look for connections more broadly, specifically the British Empire. It is my contention that these connections, seen from a macro-level, informed both British interaction with the colonized subjects in British Malaya and the legislative practices they adopted at the micro-level. In addition, these connections shaped the identities of both the

¹⁵ Craig A. Lockard, *Southeast Asia in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁶ Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 325

¹⁷ Ibid.

colonizer and colonized, creating an imperial memory that was developed and transmitted throughout the Empire. My thesis sets the groundwork for this latter claim.

The interconnected nature of the British Empire in Southeast Asia is more often focused on the movement of people, as in Adam McKeown's *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders*. My conceptions of a connected Empire in Southeast Asia, theoretically based in world history, are informed by several works that deal with the movement of people and the transmission of both information and ideas. Though not focused on Southeast Asia exclusively, McKeown's text provides an excellent example of the ways in which world is connected and, in terms of imperialism, the ways in which imperial projects allowed for this movement. He argues that imperial projects around the globe allowed for an increased opportunity for people to migrate, which in turn led to a new framework of movement called "globalization."¹⁸ McKeown's study is ground-breaking for several reasons, but among the most important to my work is the idea that migrants bring with them the identities they have formed in their home countries; through connections with family, friends, employers, and the complex web of networks that result, people remain connected to their pasts. In addition, McKeown argues that migration is central to the formation of "economic and social development."¹⁹ This argument is similar to my own, though my focus is on the movement of ideas rather than people.

The movement of people is also a central theme in Sascha Auerbach's *Race, Law, and "The Chinese Puzzle" in Imperial Britain*. Though written about interactions removed from those I study – the British experience with Chinese immigrants in Britain during the twentieth century – Auerbach's study is important to understanding the ways in which perceived British knowledge shaped interactions with Chinese immigrants once the population in Britain began to

¹⁸ Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 11.

increase. Auerbach notes that Anglo-Chinese relations were “mutually constituted at local, national, and imperial levels” and that many of these relations were first established in the empire.²⁰ These relations were colored by British understandings of the Chinese, and the language Auerbach attributes to British in their descriptions of the Chinese in the twentieth century – “ambitious, hard-working, legalistic, conniving, degenerate, powerful” – is a reflection of the language used in the nineteenth century.²¹ In many ways, my thesis is a historical addendum to Auerbach’s work. Where Auerbach argues that multiple points of contact influenced British conceptions of the Chinese in the twentieth century, I provide a tangible example of this process in British interactions with Chinese in Malaya.

Further addressing the concept of the movement of ideas within the British Empire is Ulrike Hillemann’s *Asian Empire and British Knowledge: China and the Networks of British Imperial Expansion*.²² Hillemann’s study is essential to my understandings of the ways in which the British learned about the Chinese and the ways in which that knowledge was transmitted globally. Hillemann highlights “contact zones” – or areas in which the British came into contact with the Chinese, and synonymous to Auerbach’s points of contact – to better understand how the British perceived the Chinese.²³ It is Hillemann that argues British conceptions of the Chinese, learned in their interactions as traders along the China coast in the eighteenth century, moved with the British as they built an Empire in Southeast Asia. Hillemann characterizes British conceptions of the Chinese in Southeast Asia as equal parts industrious and untrustworthy, with these understandings shaped both by British involvement in China and their

²⁰ Sascha Auerbach, *Race, Law, and “The Chinese Puzzle” in Imperial Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4. For more on British descriptions of the Chinese in the nineteenth century, see chapter four herein.

²² Ulrike Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge: China and the Networks of British Imperial Expansion* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

interactions with Chinese in Java and Malaya.²⁴ While Hillemann uses Southeast Asia as a case study, her analysis is most concerned with the way that knowledge was shaped, not how it was used. Legislation passed by the British in Malaya was a direct result of these contact zones, most notably those in China but also those shaped by interactions with both Chinese immigrants and secret societies in the colony. As a connected whole, the British Empire helped to shape understandings that had long-lasting and wide-ranging effects upon both the British and their subject populations.

Chapter Outline

Malaya did not develop in the vacuum of the British Empire. Southeast Asia played a significant role in the trade between India and China, beginning as early as the first millennium CE.²⁵ The Malay archipelago was central to these trade routes, but not only as a stop between the vast and powerful Indians and Chinese empires. Even as early as the fifth century CE, tin extraction and exportation to India was a profitable venture in the region, while shells and other sea-life were commonly used in bartering and payment with Chinese merchants.²⁶ Trade also gave way to the development of “trading kingdoms” along the coast of Malaya, where well-ordered governments run by self-appointed kings and officers administered their separate states.²⁷ It is clear that Malays developed a rich cultural and social history long before British intervention. As such, chapter two provides a brief overview of the region, both in terms of Malaya’s history and the populations living within Malaya’s borders. This history includes a narrative describing Malayan civilization, as well as the confluence of British involvement and the increase in the presence of Chinese citizens in the region. Subsequent chapters go into far

²⁴ Ibid, 137.

²⁵ Andaya, 11.

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 12 and 14.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 23.

greater detail as to the ways in which the latter two groups – British and Chinese – interacted within Malaya, which was often dictated by the legislative practices of the British.

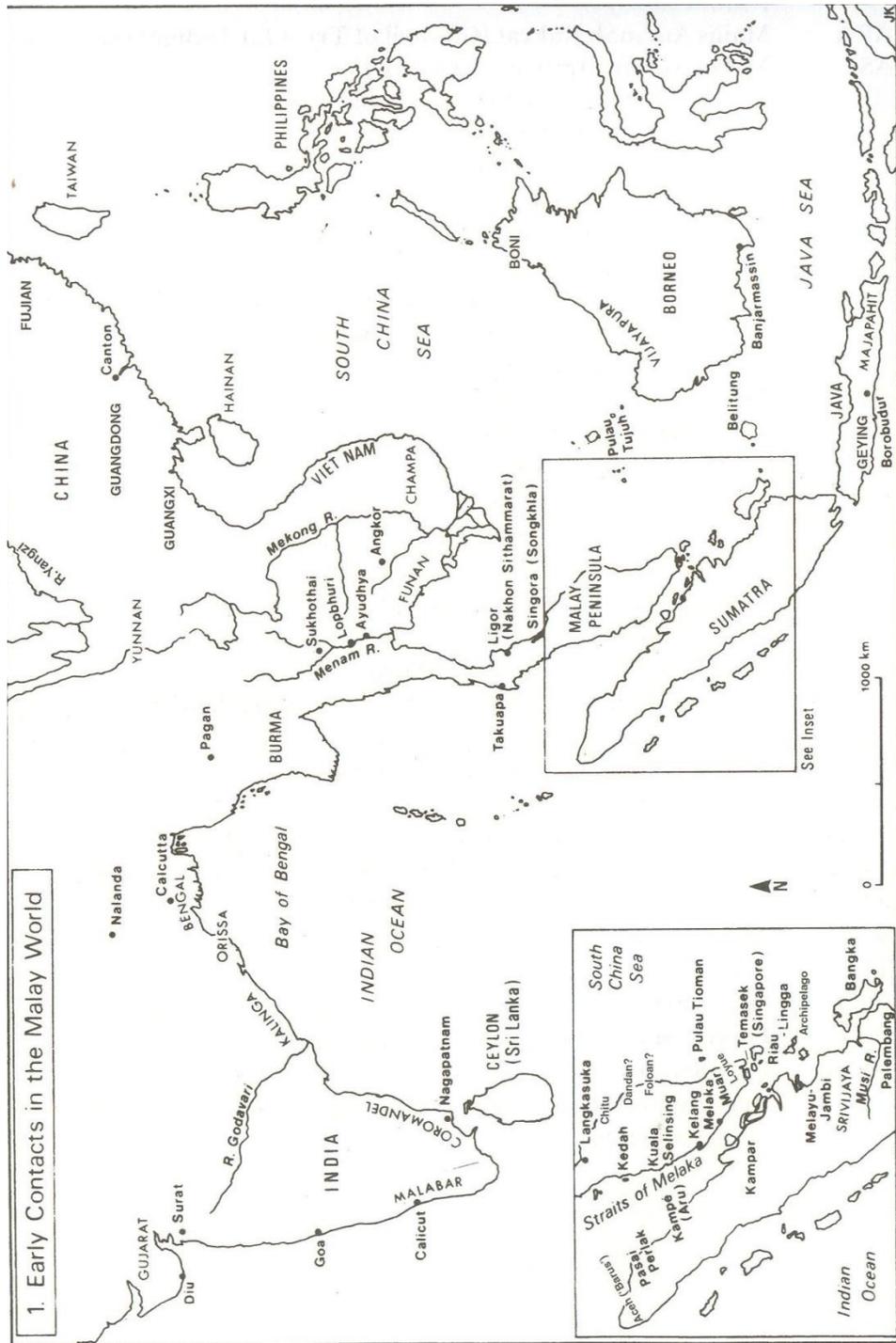
To understand the development of the British legislative practice in Malaya, it is first necessary to have an understanding of British colonial ventures in both India and China. In these two countries, the British gained foundational knowledge about colonialism and about different ethnic groups in Asia. In India, the British cultivated a colonial system unlike any other in the world. This system was transplanted to Malaya, where many practices were duplicated to ensure British hegemony. Part one of the third chapter, then, offers a brief introduction to the development of the British Empire in India.

Conversely, in China the British had their first interactions with the Chinese people. This relationship was unlike those with other ethnic groups in Asia, as the Chinese had the upper-hand in Sino-British interactions until well into the 1800s. For this reason, the British interpretation of the Chinese in Malaya was much different than that of other groups in the colony. As such, the second part of chapter three will focus on the background of British involvement in China and British conceptions of the Chinese. The chronology of this chapter, in particular, is unavoidably non-linear. In dealing with different British contact zones around the globe it is necessary to treat each region individually in terms of their importance within the larger story, rather than in a linear timeline of events.

British background in China has direct bearing on early implementation of colonial practices in Malaya because British understandings of the Chinese impacted both their approach to subject populations and administration of the colony. Chapter four, then, will focus on the ways in which the British applied their knowledge of both Empire-building in India and knowledge of the Chinese in China to their new colony in Malaya. Two case studies will also

be explored, as they are representative of the application of British knowledge to the Chinese and Malay populations who resided under the rule of the British Empire.

The final chapter analyzes the legislation developed by the British in answer to their concerns with the Chinese population in Malaya. Even with evidence that the Malay population was capable of severe disruption within the colony, the British continued to focus on the Chinese and their roles within Malaya. The Chinese Protectorate Act, passed in 1877, focused solely on controlling this ethnic group. No similar legislation was passed in an effort to control the native Malay population. This legislation demonstrates that the British were singularly focused on the Chinese in British Malaya, and that prior experiences in the Empire deeply impacted and influenced the development of British Malaya.



Map 2.1 Southeast Asia – Indian Ocean to the South China Sea¹

¹ Andaya, xviii



Map 2.2 Malay Peninsula²

² Andaya, xx

Chapter Two

Historical Movement in the Malay Peninsula

Malaya: A Brief Historical Overview

What we know of Malaya's history, at least that before the establishment of Malacca as a central port between India and China, is largely thanks to the copious records kept by Chinese traders and monks. This is significant for several reasons, but most telling in terms of this study are Malaya's connections to China, as well as China's centrality to Malayan trade networks from very early in its history. As early as 200 CE, "ambitious [Chinese] chiefdoms extended their influence into the northern Malay peninsula" as trade goods from Indian and Persian markets travelled overland through the northern sections of Malaya into China.³ Beginning in the fifth century CE sea travel became more prominent, giving rise to port cities along the Malayan coast and further situating Malaya as central to the Indian and Chinese trade routes.⁴

Srivijaya, the earliest recognized kingdom in the Malacca Straits, was founded in the late seventh century on the southeast coast of Sumatra. Srivijaya is important to the history of Malaya because of its connection to Chinese emperors, its centrality to trade in Southeast Asia, and its legacy of state-building in Malaya. The maharajas of Srivijaya paid tribute to Chinese emperors as their overlords and sent numerous envoys to China to cultivate a favorable relationship.⁵ This, in turn, provided Srivijaya with a positive commercial relationship with China and continued success in international trade. However, perhaps even more important to Malaya's history is the government systems that resulted from Srivijaya's existence. As trade increased in the archipelago, so too did the number of port cities along the coast. Local chiefs headed these small enclaves, and they paid their own allegiance to Srivijaya's maharajas in an effort to continue

³ Andaya, 18.

⁴ Ibid, 20.

⁵ Ibid, 25.

their involvement in trade. Thus, the administration of many of the cities, at least those connected to Srivijaya, was hierarchical, with the maharajas at the top.⁶ This type of social system continued for centuries, with Srivijaya as the center of political power in the archipelago, until the thirteenth century CE.⁷

Subsequent incarnations of similar systems followed Srivijaya's lead, with the center of Malayan power and prestige shifting to Malacca in the fifteenth century CE. However, with the rise of Malacca as the new center for trade and wealth also came a disintegration of the cohesive realm found under Srivijaya. While many port cities and some Malay states looked Malacca as the new overlord and saw themselves as dependents, many states moved to assert their independence and establish their own relationships with international traders.⁸ This new system of independence and governance proved critical as European imperial powers began to encroach into the lucrative trade networks in Southeast Asia.

International trade, however, did increase throughout the region, and Malacca became one of the most important trading ports in the world. The resulting populations in Malacca were equally international in scope with residents from all corners of the world, including Egypt, Persia, Ethiopia, Japan, India, and China.⁹ By the sixteenth century, Malacca had around 100,000 residents with small neighborhoods that housed foreign immigrants and traders.¹⁰ It was also in the sixteenth century that European traders, searching for trade routes to secure their dominance, first entered Southeast Asia. Portugal was arguably the richest European power in the fifteenth century, and their wealth provided opportunities to explore Asia with the goal of

⁶ Ibid, 27.

⁷ Ibid, 31.

⁸ Ibid, 53.

⁹ Lockard, 68.

¹⁰ Ibid, 73.

both dominating Asian trade and controlling the ports on which it relied.¹¹ With this goal in mind, the Portuguese captured Malacca in 1511 after a month-long siege that killed many in the city.¹² The result was not only Portuguese dominance of the Malacca Straits, but also the expulsion of the descendants of Malaccan rulers and their followers as well as all Muslims.¹³ These refugees moved out from Malacca into mainland areas of the peninsula and the coastal regions of Brunei.

Imperial pressure did not relent with a change in location. After the Portuguese came the Spanish, and then the Dutch in the form of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). The Dutch were particularly problematic for those Malays who relocated to Brunei, as the VOC instituted a ruthless campaign to control the Indonesian islands.¹⁴ The rise of multiple European powers in Southeast Asia also sparked a scramble for both political and economic position among Malay rulers. Separate independent states, among them Johor, Pahang, and Kelantan – all of which would survive into the twentieth century – clamored to assert their independence. As European interests continued to buttress Malayan land and Malaccan trade routes, Malayan rulers looked to both outside assistance in maintaining their autonomy and European powers to advance their economic position. In northern Malaya these needs resulted in a special relationship with the Thai government, who traded protection and relative independence for recognition as an overlordship and tributes from Malay rulers.¹⁵ However, in the southern Malay states, most notably Johor, interactions with the Dutch necessitated a different arrangement.

¹¹ Andaya, 60.

¹² Lockard, 77.

¹³ Andaya, 60.

¹⁴ Lockard, 86.

¹⁵ Andaya, 68-71.

Prior to Johor's special relationship with the Dutch, the Malay state had been subject to raids by both the Portuguese and the Aceh – a small kingdom on the northern tip of Sumatra.¹⁶ In the early seventeenth century, Johor negotiated treaties with the Dutch in an effort to both gain favor and increase their own power in the region. Johor bargained control of Malacca – which the Dutch took in 1641 – in exchange for control of smaller islands in the archipelago.¹⁷ Other Malayan states subsequently followed Johor's lead, and began to develop their own alliances with the Dutch. The rise in Dutch power thus led to increased interactions with all of the Malay states, while international trade began to affect Malaya even more prominently than it had in its early history thanks to Dutch intervention.

Continued increase in international trade throughout the seventeenth and into the eighteenth century led to further penetration of non-Malay groups in the Malay states. European involvement continued to increase Malaya's trade with China, and reflective of this relationship was the increase in Chinese immigration to the region. Chinese were the largest immigrant group in Malacca, totaling 2161 in 1750 (though a majority were not China-born), but they were largely isolated to their own settlements within the city.¹⁸ However, throughout the eighteenth century Chinese began to integrate into the economic structure of Malaya, and by the mid-eighteenth century were firmly enmeshed in both mining and agriculture – areas previously dominated by Malays.¹⁹

The eighteenth century was also a time of political upheaval in Malaya. By the late eighteenth century Malay relations with the VOC had soured, and the rulers of both Selangor and Johor wanted to end their involvement with the Dutch. Meanwhile, unacceptable demands from

¹⁶ Ibid, 72.

¹⁷ Ibid, 72.

¹⁸ Ibid, 97.

¹⁹ Ibid, 97.

the Thai royal court led the rulers of the northern Malay states to the brink of war with Siam. At this point, each state had some element of autonomy, governed by a maharaja who negotiated with other states and European powers for concessions tied to trade. However, in each aforementioned case this autonomy was being threatened by an outside force.

At the end of the eighteenth century Malaya was a country politically divided but inextricably linked. Considerable wealth from profitable international trade was a benefit to those Malay states that worked with both Europeans and other Asian countries, but these relationships came at a steep price. Autonomy was not something maharajas enjoyed, though a semi-autonomous relationship with European powers seemed preferable to one of subjugation to other Asian powers – specifically the government of Siam. Thus, when the British arrived in 1786 most Malay rulers saw a potential ally in their fight against oppressive powers. Maharajas in Johor, Selangor, Perak, and other Malay states hoped, erroneously, that British intervention might save them from a worse fate.

British Imperial Intervention

In the late nineteenth century, Malaya was at the crossroads of empire, with continued geographical significance because of its position between British India and lucrative Chinese markets. British interest in Malaya grew from their position of power in South Asia, and their notable success in India. The British recognized that in order to secure their domination of trade in the region in the face of Dutch and French competition, they would need to establish a permanent colony along these trade routes. The ports of Malacca and Singapore – both of which were controlled by the East India Trading Company – provided ideal locations from which to establish control in the region. British interest in Singapore resulted from the increasing attention on the Straits of Malacca by the French and Dutch; in an effort to secure domination in the

region, the British implemented formal rule over the Malay Peninsula. Formal British administration of Malaya began with the founding of Singapore in 1819.²⁰

Initially, formal British involvement in the region was isolated to Singapore, and soon after the Straits Settlements, which was comprised of the islands of Singapore and Penang and the port city of Malacca on the west coast of Malaya. In 1874, the British took an important first step toward controlling the interior of the mainland when they formally asserted control over Perak, also on the west coast of the peninsula. The British signed a treaty with the sultan of Johor, located on the mainland peninsula north of Singapore, in 1885; this treaty established both a formal relationship between the government of Johor and the British government, and gave the British control of foreign affairs.²¹ The British colonial government established The Federated Malay States (FMS) in 1895, and was comprised of Perak, Selangor (south of Perak), Negeri Sembilan (south of Selangor), and Pahang (adjacent to Selangor and Negeri Sembilan encompassing much of the interior and the remaining southeast coast north of Johor). By 1895, the British thus controlled the majority of the Malay Peninsula.

By the late 1800s, the British had significant experience in empire building. Success in India – which began with East India Trading company interests and occupation of port cities in the seventeenth century and progressed to formal control of the country as a Crown Colony in 1858 – had prepared the British for other colonial ventures, and many of the tactics used in India were replicated in other colonies.²² While the British often cited the civilizing mission as a central aspect of colonial rule in India, they were also extremely adept at using a “divide and conquer” strategy. The effect of British policy was the categorization of subject populations,

²⁰ It was at this time that the British returned control of Java to the Dutch. This arrangement would have left the British with a distinct disadvantage in the Malacca Straits without Singapore to secure their dominance in the region. See Andaya, 115.

²¹ Ibid, 173.

²² James, 182.

stratifying them in a social hierarchy with the British at the top. For the most part, the British relied on pre-established social hierarchies based on caste to determine jobs within the colonial government and British households.²³ However, British stratification of society in India was also based on the tenets of scientific racism and involved such practices as categorization based on skin tone and skull shape. An example of this practice is the creation of a “martial race;” the British recruited Punjabi Sikhs and others to serve in the British Indian Army because they were thought to be inherently better equipped to be soldiers.²⁴ Many of these sorts of colonial strategies were transplanted and replicated in Malaya.

But British actions in Malaya were also influenced by their preconceived notions about the Chinese. Until the acquisition of Malaya, British interaction with the Chinese had mainly been tied to trading relationships in China. Prior to the first Opium War in 1842, the relationships formed between the British and Chinese in China were based in Canton, the only treaty port in which the two groups interacted, and developed as a result of the Canton System.²⁵ Not only did the Canton System limit the British to one trading post prior to 1842, but they were also limited to trading with only the *Cohong* Chinese traders, businessmen specifically appointed by the Chinese government. The *Cohong* formed a trading monopoly, controlled by the government, which consistently left the British at a disadvantage in their trading relationship. The ways in which the Chinese constructed uneven trade agreements, coupled with the pervasiveness and homogeneity with which the agreements were applied throughout China, led

²³ Lawrence James discusses the use of Indian servants in British households, whose jobs were determined by their caste. *Khidmutgar* were of a higher class, and thus butlers, while *ayahs* and *doreah* were considered “Untouchables” and held the positions of nursemaid and dog keeper respectively. James, 159.

²⁴ Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, race, and masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

²⁵ The Canton System created a trade network that was exceptionally limited in terms of what the British could trade, and with whom. In addition, trade was dictated by the Chinese government under the Canton system; as a result British interests were almost never considered. Illegal trade, which included trade further into the country and opium smuggling, served to create additional tension between the British and Chinese. See Hillemann, 81.

to a British understanding of the Chinese as a homogenous group, with few differences between peoples, regardless of ethnicity or region of origin. Further, the British relied on Chinese cooperation to make trade successful prior to 1842 but that relationship was strained, in large part because of how the British understood the Chinese population. British interpretations of the Chinese population as a whole, based on these relationships, led to a tangible “root fear of the Chinese.”²⁶ In this context, the British interacted with Chinese from a position of implied understanding; they considered those Chinese with whom they worked to be shrewd and shady businessmen, while they interpreted the overall population as close-knit and unified.

The Opium War in 1842 changed the Sino-British relationship in China, but prior to this shift the British in China saw themselves as a cohesive settler group juxtaposed against a massive and interconnected Chinese population. The British were determined to “establish their equality with the Chinese,” especially in terms of the trading relationship dictated by the government and the authority of Chinese traders.²⁷ The British were successful in forcing concessions after the First Opium War, at which time Hong Kong became a British protectorate. Moreover, concessions included provisions that forced the Chinese to open five treaty ports, including Canton and Shanghai, to unrestricted British trade. After 1842, Britons who felt “humiliated by Chinese officials” prior to the war vowed that they would never again be put in a powerless position with the Chinese.²⁸ The British felt more powerful in the world of Anglo-Chinese relations after 1842, and thus more confident in applying their vision of the Chinese to the Chinese with whom they actually came into contact.²⁹ This vision took two forms; first, the

²⁶ Robert Bickers, *Britain in China* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 68.

²⁷ Hillemann suggests that the, leading up to the first Opium War, the British were increasingly enraged by both their weak trading position in China and the ways in which they were treated by the Chinese. See Hillemann, 84.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 188.

²⁹ Ulrike Hillemann argues that after 1842, the British “believed they could now define how the Chinese had to interact with European powers and that they could impose their image of China on them,” 189.

industrious Chinese worker within the British Empire, and second, the shady, unscrupulous businessman with whom the British had to deal prior to 1842. Fear of resurgence in Chinese power, coupled with a perception of Chinese as lacking the moral aptitude to deal fairly with the British, significantly colored British perceptions of the Chinese in Malaya. As formal rule continued to expand into the mainland, introducing a greater number of Chinese into the British colonial system, the Chinese in Malaya thus became central to British concerns.

Upon arriving in Malacca and Singapore – two of the three states that would encompass the Straits Settlements – the British were taken aback by the number of Chinese who inhabited the islands. In 1906, Sir Frank Swettenham, the first Resident of the Federated Malay States, called his readers' attention to "scores and scores of every eastern boat that swims... Chinese junks piled high with firewood or palm thatch and Chinese fishing boats, loaded with dark brown nets."³⁰ He went on to describe the clustered and dilapidated houses built by Chinese, situated all along the coast of Malacca and the "yellow men" located on land and sea in Singapore.³¹ Based on Swettenham's characterization of the Straits, it's clear that there was significant Chinese presence in the Straits, especially throughout the time of Swettenham's appointment in the mid- to late-1800s.

In addition to the large number of Chinese in the Straits Settlements, the British also discovered a well-established system of trade and communication between the Chinese in the Straits Settlements and mainland Chinese. With the British presence in Malaya, these networks began to expand rapidly. British colonization offered a more stable trading environment on both the peninsula and in the Straits themselves. Not only did the British provide military security through their naval presence, but they also standardized many trade practices in the region. In

³⁰ Swettenham, 3.

³¹ Ibid, 9.

addition, the internal structure created by the colonial government – such as reliable postal services – allowed for an increased interaction between Straits Chinese and their families in China. Singapore became central to trade, and with the benefit of protection by the British, Chinese began to immigrate to the colony en masse.³²

The British soon realized that Malaya was not only an excellent location from which to dominate Southeast Asian trade, but that it was also rich in natural resources. Tin mines, already established on the mainland and run by Chinese businessmen, could be utilized for significant profits, while the demand for rubber in the 1880s spurred a major effort to recruit indentured laborers from India to work the rubber plantations. The British, meanwhile, represented a tiny segment of the population. Once the administration of the Straits Settlements moved from the India Office to the Colonial Office in 1867, the British objective was to make the colony as profitable as possible.³³ This necessitated a tremendous increase in labor force. The British were unable to organize the importation of these laborers, and so they relied on Chinese businessmen who had numerous contacts in China; Chinese laborers were thus imported by Chinese businessmen to meet the labor needs in Malaya.

Because of the centrality of the Chinese to the importation of labor, the already-established Chinese systems of trade and importation of labor were incredibly advantageous to the British colonial government – especially given that the impetus for the occupation of Singapore was the location between British India and Chinese markets. These systems were largely controlled by Chinese secret societies. In China, secret societies were based on dialect and clan affiliation and largely existed to subvert and challenge Manchu rule. Transplanted from

³² See Blythe, Chapter 3: The Pioneers.

³³ Merchants in the Straits Settlements petitioned for the movement of colonial administration from the India Office to the Colonial Office in London in hopes that the Colonial Office would give greater attention to their needs and the needs of the colony. Eventually, the move allowed for a greater consolidation of administrative power on the part of the British officials in Malaya, who were then able to more efficiently govern the colony. See Tarling, 80.

China to Malaya, secret societies initially served as fraternities for incoming Chinese who could associate with their own dialect groups in Malaya through the societies. Because of the strong cultural and political connections inherent in the organization of the secret societies, they eventually developed into powerful political and commercial organizations run by Chinese businessmen in the mid-nineteenth century. Secret societies maintained a constant supply of laborers for mining and agriculture and established control mechanisms for incoming Chinese, which included housing, job placement, and regulations for their time in the colony. While the British maintained a tenuous relationship with secret societies, secret society control of the Chinese immigrant population made them increasingly important to British domination in the Straits.

British interests in immigrant populations in Malaya were tied to the economic conditions in the colony. In many cases, different ethnic groups came to the colony to work in a specific sector. Many of the most lucrative sectors were dominated by the Chinese.³⁴ The Chinese were extremely successful in the commercial agriculture sector of the Malay economy, excelling sugar, tapioca, pepper, and gambier production.³⁵ Chinese in Malaya dominated tin mining enterprises by securing the rights to access specific mining areas from Malay rulers. As the colonial government became more reliant on the revenue from tin, the Chinese became more central to this economic pursuit.³⁶ Chinese immigrants made up the majority of the laborers on both Chinese plantations and tin mines and were most often brought to the colony by Chinese brokers, on Chinese vessels, and in the interest of Chinese businesses. Meanwhile, the Malay population continued to lose economic footing in Malaya. British understandings of land rights

³⁴ Andaya, 181

³⁵ Ibid, 139.

³⁶ Donald M. Nonini, *British Colonial Rule and the Resistance of the Malay Peasantry, 1900-1957* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1992), 36.

differed significantly from those of the native Malays. Malay rajahs understood their territorial possessions to include any land rented to Chinese businessmen or British officials, but this authority only reached as far as their power could influence those who used the land.³⁷ With the emergence of the Chinese as a powerful community that dominated the tin mining industry and the administrative control of the British, the Malays were largely cut out of the economy.

CHINESE IN MALAYA

The Chinese population in the Straits Settlements predated British involvement in the area by centuries. China made major contributions to cultural and political systems throughout Southeast Asia, and exercised considerable control over peninsular settlements in Malaya during the “Golden Age” of Southeast Asian history between 800 and 1400 C.E.³⁸ The Chinese established relationships with the leaders of Vietnam and Siam in an effort to exercise economic control; this control then expanded as commercial interests facilitated an increase in Chinese movement throughout the region. Over the course of the next 400 years, Chinese traders, merchants, and artisans steadily populated regions in Southeast Asia. Through these states, Chinese settlers began to influence trade between China and other parts of the world, and in fact influenced the creation of a complex trading system that linked “China, Vietnam... and Siam in the east through Malaya and Indonesia... and then westward to Persia, Arabia, [and] Egypt.”³⁹ Thanks in part to this booming trade network, Malacca, on Malaya’s southwest coast, became one of the most important posts on the Asian trade route and central to the growing world economy.⁴⁰ The population of Malacca was decidedly international, and Chinese communities were common in Malaya during the sixteenth century. The social structures established by the

³⁷ Nonini, 36.

³⁸ Lockard, Chapters 2 and 3.

³⁹ Ibid, 63

⁴⁰ Ibid, 67

Chinese in Malacca and other Malayan trade posts mimicked those in their home country; they frequently possessed their own political frameworks to govern community residents.

Indeed, the social and political structures of Chinese populations in Malaya prior to British occupation were centered on established customs and traditions, transplanted from the areas from where most Chinese immigrated; in the case of Malaya this area was mainly the southern provinces of China. Chinese communities in Malaya formed around dialect groups, creating the first formal Chinese associations. The Chinese continued to practice customs, and worship deities, from their home provinces in China. As a result, Chinese immigrants were able to maintain a sense of connection to their homeland, and in fact many continued to send remittances back to their families still living there. Chinese adhered to separate religious customs in Malaya, which in turn led to the establishment of Chinese neighborhoods. Temples built in the Chinese tradition, where immigrants could gather and worship local deities, were found in predominantly Chinese areas of Singapore, Kuala Lumpur (which was itself founded by the Chinese), Malacca, and other cities in Malaya. The population of these settlements continued to grow throughout the 1730s and 1740s as Chinese migration was encouraged in an effort to meet the demand for labor in newly discovered tin mines and in the agricultural sector.⁴¹

Thanks to these ties to China, trade systems between Malaya and China were firmly established by the time the British arrived on the scene. Chinese businessmen in Malaya contracted with coolie (the colloquial term for Chinese immigrant laborers) brokers to import Chinese laborers from China. These laborers, and the businessmen who imported them, were fundamental to the integration of a global trade network which included Chinese goods, such as silk, tea, and porcelain as well as Malayan resources such as tin and gold.⁴² These systems of

⁴¹ Andaya, 97.

⁴² Lockard, 92 and 98.

trade and importation required a formal structure among Chinese businessmen, which was often achieved through ties with Chinese secret societies.

Secret societies were common in mainland China and Chinese in Malaya mimicked these structures in their adopted homeland. In China, secret societies began as organizations offering fraternal support, but as the political climate in China changed under Manchu rule, secret societies increasingly began acting in a political role.⁴³ In Malaya, these societies functioned first as a support network for immigrants to the colony. As Chinese immigration mushroomed in the mid-nineteenth century, secret societies “gained a dominant position in most areas where Chinese settled,” and were commonly run by the most powerful Chinese in the colony.⁴⁴ Secret societies were tied to dialect groups, clan affiliation, and syndicates within Malaya, and their primary role prior to British intervention was to control numerous private enterprises.⁴⁵ These included the importation of laborers, the control of their members, the facilitation of treaties with Malay leaders for mining, and the management of profitable activities such as opium tax farms, gambling, and prostitution.⁴⁶

The growth in the number of Chinese immigrants in Malaya, beginning in the 1700s and continuing into the 1890s, was directly attributable to the organization of Chinese secret societies. Beginning in 1727, emigration from China occurred only through illegal means, the product of restrictive legislation by the Chinese government. Restrictions on emigration continued until 1893, when the Chinese state repealed anti-emigration laws.⁴⁷ Regardless of the legality of emigration from China or immigration to Malaya, Chinese secret societies and coolie traders held a monopoly on immigrant importation. Coolie brokers easily procured Chinese

⁴³ Andaya, 145

⁴⁴ Ibid, 146

⁴⁵ Yen, 112-113.

⁴⁶ Andaya, 146.

⁴⁷ McKeown, 233.

laborers in China and were paid handsomely, at three dollars per head, upon arrival in the colony.⁴⁸ This system of immigration to Malaya was successful because brokers worked closely with secret societies; coolies were transported directly to businesses (run by powerful Chinese who headed secret societies in Malaya) where they would serve out their contract.⁴⁹ The sale of laborers assured income and laborers to the businessmen behind the secret societies.

Clearly, the Chinese thoroughly and successfully integrated themselves into the Malay Peninsula long before the British had even begun to single out the area as a potential colony. The trade network from Malaya to China made many Chinese businessmen in Malaya very wealthy. These networks prospered throughout the nineteenth century. Social structures in place in many of the Chinese communities thrived, and local customs and traditions marked both ties to the homeland and individuality amongst groups of Chinese in Malaya. Associations of dialect groups, and later organizations including secret societies, catered to these groups as both an extension of their homeland and as a unifying organization. By the time the British arrived, these structures defined Chinese communities in Malaya. The British, then, encountered a group of Chinese who belonged to an organized political structure. These Chinese operated apart from any other political system in Malaya, and represented an independent group responsible for large sectors of the Malay economy.⁵⁰ Given their interaction with the Chinese over the course of the nineteenth century – including the Opium Wars and the establishment of trading ports in Canton and Hong Kong, in addition to the reality on the ground in Malaya – the British interpreted the

⁴⁸ The coolie trade was at once profitable and horrific. Yen Ching-hwang speaks at length to the abuses in the coolie trade system. Yen Ching-hwang, *Coolies and Mandarins* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1985), 57.

⁴⁹ Ties between coolie traders and secret societies were well-established by the 1850s, and were successfully because of the “efficient distribution system” maintained by secret societies. See Yen, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya 1800-1911*, 7.

⁵⁰ Both Craig Lockard and Barbara and Leonard Andaya suggest that the Chinese began to replace the Malays in fields they had initially dominated, including agriculture, mining, exportation of resources, and domination of small business enterprises.

population of Chinese in Malaya as equal parts powerful and threatening. The British believed that the Chinese as a whole posed a significant threat to their imperial rule in Malaya.

As a result, most British legislation in Malaya from the 1870s forward was devoted to the Chinese population. The population of Chinese in the Straits Settlements had grown over the course of the nineteenth century, the product of a mass exodus from the southern provinces of China due to drought and the resulting political upheaval, as well as the need for—and importation of—cheap laborers in the colony. Chinese secret societies continued to be primarily responsible for Chinese immigration during this period, and laborers were often imported for the benefit of Chinese business. Millions of Chinese immigrated to Malaya. By 1931, Chinese comprised almost forty percent of the population of the Straits Settlements.⁵¹ In addition to the large numbers of Chinese, the British also faced the reality of Chinese secret societies. Both the large numbers of Chinese as well as the pre-existing political structure maintained by secret societies created an environment unlike those in other British colonies. The British, as a result, were forced to recognize the unique political role of the Chinese in Malaya and create a new system of control that integrated this community into the colonial framework.⁵² However, this process was influenced by both interactions the British had with Chinese in Malaya as well as knowledge accumulated from a half-century of interaction with Chinese on a world stage.

⁵¹ See Lockard, 99-100. Adam McKeown also provides examples of Chinese emigration to the Straits Settlements, and estimates that upwards to 8 million Chinese immigrated between 1881 and 1915. See McKeown, 46.

⁵² As an example, in 1872 the British began working on legislation to better control the movement of Chinese in the colony. This policy came to fruition under the auspices of protecting Chinese immigrants which resulted in the passing of the Chinese Protectorate Act in 1877.

Chapter Three

Building Blocks of Empire

In 1872, the year that the British formally asserted control over Perak – a mainland Malaya state – they had been perfecting their imperial rule for over a century in India. The British had occupied Singapore for over fifty years and had been the colonial masters of the Straits Settlements – which included Singapore, Malacca, and Penang – for nearly a decade. The British honed their mastery of imperialism through their conquests in India, which served as the most tangible framework for building a successful colony in Malaya. The importance of the Straits Settlements and Perak to British interests was born of lucrative trade between India and China. British interactions with the Chinese in China colored their perceptions of Chinese in all parts of the world, adding a second dimension to their understandings of the populations in Malaya.

This chapter will offer a general analysis of British involvement in India and China as a precursor to their interactions with populations within Malaya. I argue that the British went to Malaya with preconceived notions of both subject populations and the Chinese, which influenced the ways they administered the colony. While the reality on the ground necessitated a restructuring of that framework, the British continually fell back on their prior knowledge of these groups to make decisions about the legislation of the subject peoples under their rule.¹ British colonial pursuits in India bore striking resemblance to the eventual colonization of Malaya. In both India and Malaya, the East India Company opened the way for British colonial rule. The British settled and occupied the same regions first ruled by the EIC and proceeded to

¹ The case study in chapter three provides an in-depth analysis of the riots that preceded new legislation focused only on the Chinese. These riots seem somewhat trivial compared to other happenings in the colony at the time. See chapter three, page 62.

settle in similar patterns; in both Malaya and India, the initial settlement patterns were restricted to coastal areas, with slow but steady progress into the interior of the country.²

Rule in India and Malaya was also similar – at least in the early stages of indirect British rule. In India, indirect rule was a necessity in the earliest stages of colonial rule, thanks in large part to the size of India and the diversity of the population there. Likewise, in Malaya indirect rule was necessary not only because of the size of the peninsula and the diversity of the population, but also because of the state system that featured multiple rulers in multiple states throughout the region. Finally, many of the systems the British employed to stratify social classes in India were transplanted to Malaya; in India this system was largely already in place due to the caste system, though the British relied heavily on class to determine positions both in the government and in the private sector. In Malaya, where no caste system existed, the British relied on their understandings of class and race to determine group classification. This social stratification had much the same effect in India and Malaya; social classes were sharpened and solidified. The British differentiated between racial groups, with the Chinese often determined to be in a superior position to their Malay counterparts.

THE BRITISH IN INDIA

The British Invasion – Creating Systems of Rule

British domination of the Indian subcontinent was preceded by years of political struggle with France. British involvement in India was limited by the presence of French soldiers in the 1770s after France secured treaties with anti-British princes in the region.³ However, after the French Revolution began in 1789, which led to the steady decrease in both manpower and support for the French armies in India, British hegemony was all but secured. British domination

² Trevor Getz and Heather Streets-Salter, *Modern Imperialism and Colonialism: A Global Perspective* (Boston: Prentice Hall, 2011), 108.

³ James, p. 67.

of the subcontinent was further solidified by the presence of the East India Trading Company (EIC), which formed settlements in Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta in the early seventeenth century. British authority in each settlement was partially symbolic and partially institutional – the former thanks to complex treaties with “native powers” and the latter the result of support and financing from the “Crown and Parliament.”⁴ This authority, largely baseless at the turn of the eighteenth century, began to develop more formally after 1757 when the British developed governmental systems in Bengal in an effort to control land revenue. It was at this time that surpluses from the collection of land revenue taxes necessitated “protection by sound administration.”⁵ Over the course of the eighteenth century, these land revenues provided both a reason to remain in India and to increase British holdings on the subcontinent. The collection of land revenues was formalized by the first Governor-General of India, Warren Hastings, in 1772.⁶ One year later, the British government passed the Judicature Act of 1773, which “established a Supreme Court in Calcutta whose judges were English jurists.”⁷ The British also passed the Regulating Act in 1773, which made “absolutely clear the British government’s right to oversee and regulate the affairs of India.”⁸ These significant political maneuvers foreshadowed Britain’s increasing involvement in India, both for revenue and for greater control of the region.

The lucrative business that was India drove the British government to take a more serious look at the subcontinent; what had once been an area dominated by the EIC was now becoming more clearly controlled by the British government. The argument for formal British rule was

⁴ John Marriott and Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, *Britain in India, 1765 – 1905, Volume 5: Sovereignty and Governance* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), vii.

⁵ John Marriott and Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay. *Britain in India, 1765 – 1905, Volume 4: Cultural and Social Interventions* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), vi and 1.

⁶ *Ibid*, Volume 4, 1.

⁷ James, p. 51.

⁸ *Ibid*.

ties to the security and protection of British “lives, property, and trade.”⁹ Throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the British undertook several wars in India, fought under the auspices of security. British win meant more land and, more importantly, more land revenue for the British state. Between 1757 and 1818, the British gained territory at a phenomenal rate; by 1818 they occupied or controlled almost the entire Indian coastline, hundreds of miles of the interior, and the majority of the northern border of the state.

The amount of land that the British governed necessitated a new approach to controlling commerce, trade, and the populations who now lived under the auspices of British rule. In the 1770s the Governor-General of Bengal could coordinate and control tax revenues; this was no longer the case in 1818, as British influence extended thousands of miles into and around the Indian subcontinent. In an effort to build a more formal government structure, the British in India passed the Charter Act of 1813. This Act accomplished several objectives. First, it “abolished [the EIC’s] exclusive monopoly on India trade,” effectively opening the entirety of India, and its lucrative trade, to all British subjects.¹⁰ Second, the Act took measures to license any foreigners living outside of “presidency towns” who were “under the jurisdiction of the King’s Courts in India.”¹¹ Finally, the Act also provided for new tax laws and a system of collection that implemented preexisting Indian governmental structures.

This type of legislation illustrates the first examples of British indirect rule in India. However, the success of the British in India did not rely solely on the implementation of legislation. While British fiscal interests were at the forefront of legislative policy in Bengal, these policies were only as successful as the institutions that the British controlled. Control was something that the British strategically built and maintained with the help of local rulers through

⁹ James, p. 73.

¹⁰ Marriott, *Volume 5*, 91.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

“subsidiary alliance treaties.”¹² These treaties paved the way for the British to control everything from commerce and trade to people and production, and provided the basis for the successful implementation of indirect rule, especially in areas outside of Bengal, which was ruled directly.

The British favored alliance treaties because the economic control of India was central to their project. India held a wealth of lucrative natural resources, and what could not be found naturally was cultivated by Indians for British profit. These resources included opium, tea and spices as well as silk and other textiles. While the British utilized wealthy and powerful Indians as partners to control the larger Indian population, they also used Indians of lesser social status as laborers and inadvertently exalted some members of the Indian society through their land revenue systems. The British developed alliance through relationships with those in Indian society who the British deemed most powerful and trickled down to Indians of lesser status who were essentially controlled by those more powerful. In the case of the *bhadraloks* of Bengal, these “landed rent-receivers had come to exercise seigniorial authority over populations of tillers and laborers.”¹³ Thus the British, simply by virtue of their land-revenue system, created a new social system that benefited the *bhadraloks* over the farmers who traditionally worked in this region.

The architecture of British colonial rule often relied on the co-option of indigenous systems of government. As they used preexisting Mughal governmental systems to aid in tax collection in Bengal, so too did they use Indian social structures to control populations. British gathered understandings of Indian society through their relationships with “literate Brahmins and... the Brahmanised scribal and commercial populations” who represented both prominent

¹² Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 80.

¹³ *Ibid*, 199.

groups of Indians and those most likely to educate the British on Indian customs.¹⁴ These groups informed the British on all manner of Indian social systems; as such, they were those people most likely to work with and for the British. From the British perspective, the use of these groups would make it possible for the British to exercise significant legislative and economic control over India.

The British utilized a caste system which resulted in a society further stratified by class and race.¹⁵ The caste system in India prior to British intervention in the country was a complicated structure, one that served as a “multidimensional web of ordered ceremonial exchanges and transactions.”¹⁶ Many scholars argue that while the social hierarchy present in Indian Hindu society was presided over by the Brahman class, prior to British influence the caste system was far more porous and allowed for a multifaceted Indian society.¹⁷ However, changes to the caste system, most notably the solidification of roles based on class and race, began to occur after British trade became central to success in the colony and the British colonial government took a more active role in the colony. The British sought to preserve India’s aristocracy and “[persuade them] to become active partners” in the colony.¹⁸ Brahmans, and most notably those who lived in Bengal, were most often recruited to work for the colonial government. Conversely, British developed their Indian Army based on racial elements; the British believed positive qualities of a warrior were more inherent to Punjabi Sikhs. This sort of social ordering resulted from both British understandings of the world and their understandings of the particular peoples who comprised the Indian population. British control of India led to a

¹⁴ Bayly, 101.

¹⁵ Ibid, 138.

¹⁶ Ibid, 17.

¹⁷ Susan Bayly argues that Hindu society provided for a system of traditional interactions, but that these interactions were multidimensional in nature. She states that studying caste from a historical perspective offers a picture of the “plurality and multiplicity of Indian life and thought” which in turn allows historians to better understand that impact of British influence, 23.

¹⁸ James, 177.

solidification of these social and racial roles in Indian society – ones far more rigid than those present before British involvement.

British officials dealt with Indian “zamindars,” village headmen and landowners, in an effort to collect taxes in areas outside of major cities.¹⁹ In areas not directly controlled by the British – these included Travancore, Hyderabad, Baroda, Indore, and the Rajput states – alliance treaties called for cooperation between “native princes... and British officials;” the British officials took the form of residents in the outlying states who served to influence princely politics.²⁰ This practice was largely a disaster for several reasons. First, the sheer number of Indians ruled under these princely states was significant; those under British direct rule totaled around 23 million in 1857, while those in the aforementioned states totaled 181 million.²¹ Controlling this number of people by influence alone was unlikely. Second, other political pressures felt by the rulers of these states tended to supersede British interests. For example, in 1850 a group of Bengali Hindus rejected changes to local law on the part of the British, claiming that these changes were “‘odious’ to their beliefs”²² Despite the numerous reasons to dissolve alliance treaties to try to maintain an already tenuous hold on princely states, this practice continued until the twentieth century. The results were the levying of heavy taxes on the poorest citizens and lack of actual knowledge about the influential Indians with whom the British were working. In addition, “peasant riots and uprisings” occurred continuously under this system, as those under the ruling elite – the “bottom of the social and economic pile” – resorted to violent protests.²³

¹⁹ James, 202.

²⁰ Ibid, 182.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, 183.

²³ Ibid, 194.

The implementation of indirect rule made it possible for the British to exercise extensive controls over a huge area; these types of policies were transplanted in Malaya, though, like in India, their success is debatable. For instance, the British utilized a form of alliance treaties when dealing with native Malay populations in the Federated Malay States. In Perak, the British instituted a series of policies that allowed Malay rajas to control tin mining; rajas could rent use of the mines to whomever they chose, but the British levied a heavy tax on their land. The British heralded these economic concessions as a justification to influence policy. Also similar to India was the use of colonial advisors, or residents. In The Federated Malay States there were no large colonial settlements, though the British did maintain a formal presence through the use of advisors to the Malay rajas.

However, misunderstandings on the part of the British, including the negation of native customs and the reorganization of social systems that put corrupt Indian elites in charge of other Indians, continued to undermine British indirect rule in India, another similarity that would be seen in Malaya. In fact, British interest and intervention in what would become the Federated Malay States occurred because of British understandings of their economic worth and misunderstandings of native customs in the form of rights of succession where the rajas were concerned. British governors and residents found the tin-mining states of Perak and Selangor particularly attractive, but British officials also perceived the presence of conflict and outright war among powerful rajas in the region as destabilizing and dangerous.²⁴ The British thus employed a heavier hand towards the policies in these states, deposing some rightful rulers in favor of those more accepting of British policy.

²⁴ While “Her Majesty’s Government” saw little reason to become embroiled in the politics of small Malay states, the Colonial Office in Malaya worried that “increasing disorder in Perak and Selangor might lead to the intervention of other foreign powers” including the Dutch and French. See Tarling, 84-85.

The British tried to build colonial Malaya based on the principles it had honed and utilized in India. The British did their best to control native Malays using colonial mechanisms similar to those used in India. However, the presence of a large Chinese population created a rift in British policy on the Peninsula, as the Chinese did not fit a colonial mold with which the British were familiar. As such, the British were forced to develop a new system of control that could both compliment and strengthen their old systems of rule.

THE BRITISH AND CHINA

Chinese Dominance – Creating Systems of Cooperation

While India served as a successful example of the development of a colony, not every system in place in India was directly applicable to Malaya. The presence of such a large population of Chinese in Malaya was one of the most prominent differences, and resulted in the British reevaluating the ways in which they were to control the colony as a whole. This reevaluation was directly attributable to the ways in which the British viewed the Chinese. A century of interaction with the Chinese people in China had created an area of contact in which the British created powerful perceptions of the Chinese people which were then transferred to the population of Chinese living in Malaya.

The interactions between Britain and China took shape over the course of a century. In the beginning, the British were at the losing end of an uneven partnership in which China was the primary benefactor. China's loss of the first Opium War in 1842, however, resulted in a shift of power, with Britain occupying Hong Kong and having unprecedented access to Chinese ports for the purpose of trade. Over the course of this relationship, the British continually looked for ways to make their position in China more powerful and more lucrative.²⁵ The Chinese government

²⁵ Knowledge of China became central to British pursuits in the country, as they believed that a "knowledge of Chinese customs, laws, and language would give them more agency in their dealings with the Chinese." Thus,

controlled British access to the interior of the country, while Chinese businessmen controlled trade in major ports. From the British perspective, the problem with China was the lack of an imperial presence within the country; initially, at least, and in many cases even after 1842, the Chinese held the upper hand in aspects of the Sino-British relationship.²⁶ This complicated relationship served as an anomaly in Britain's growing Empire, yet it provided an incredibly important source of British information about the Chinese. This information colored British perceptions of the Chinese in Malaya; as such, the relationship between the British and Chinese in Malaya was equally complicated, and significantly influenced the development of British Malaya.

The initial trade relationship between China and Britain was decidedly one-sided, as the British East India Trading Company (EIC) had primary interest in Chinese tea. In the 1780s the EIC imported almost six million pounds of tea from China into England. That number grew to over 30 million pounds by the 1830s.²⁷ Conversely, the Chinese were interested in very few British goods, which made for a tremendously uneven trade relationship. In addition, until the Opium War in 1842, trade was based on the Canton system, established by the Chinese government in an effort to minimize foreign influence in the country. Under the Canton system, the only port open to European trade was Canton, and the only interactions Europeans were allowed to have at this port was with "Hong" merchants. These merchants were designated to engage in trade with Europeans by the Chinese government, but as the only designated traders

several embassies were sent to Beijing in the late 1700s, hoping to establish better relations for this purpose. See Hillemann, 34.

²⁶ In Robert Bickers *Britain in China*, Bickers argues that China was "never subject to power relations and domination on the mainstream colonial pattern." He goes on to say that while the process of "informal imperialism," the box into which most imperial scholars place Sino-British relations, is inaccurate because their relationship was based more on collaboration than control. See Robert Bickers, *Britain in China* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 9.

²⁷ Hillemann, 4.

they formed a monopoly organization, called the Cohong.²⁸ In addition, the Qing government restricted European residence at Canton to the trading season only, and the rest of the year – October through March – traders had to live on Macao.²⁹ These kinds of trade arrangements were necessary if the British wished to continue trade in China, though it was never a situation with which the British were pleased. The British were reliant on Hong merchants for trade with the interior of China because they recognized that they were an “absolute minority” in terms of trade and power. Moreover, they believed that Chinese policy was often irrational and corrupt – especially if these policies went against British interests.³⁰

Yet the British worked towards maintaining good relations with the Chinese government in an effort to win more favorable trade agreements. To meet this end, the British sent Lord Macartney, a high-ranking British ambassador, to China with a small embassy in 1792. Their goals were to gain knowledge about the Chinese, to study them scientifically and culturally, and use this information to negotiate more effectively for British trade concessions. The embassy was largely a disaster, brought on by cultural misunderstandings such as Macartney’s refusal to kowtow to the emperor – a ritual of significant importance to the Chinese - preconceived notions on the part of the British, and an inability to communicate with one another in either Chinese or English.³¹ The use of interpreters – a necessity given that no British spoke Chinese – solidified British beliefs that the Chinese were “unreliable or weak, [with] a tendency to lie.” These types of pre-conceived notions informed British interactions with the Chinese, and further colored Macartney’s conception of the emperor and his court, which in turn led to failed diplomatic

²⁸ Ibid, p. 4.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 46.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 50.

³¹ Hillemann argues that while many historians have focused on the Macartney Embassy in terms of the emergence of a “radical Eurocentrism,” other world events should be taken into consideration – specifically Russian expansion in Asia and “British ideas on India.” As such, the relative failure of the embassy cannot be boiled down to one event or experience, but rather a larger British understanding of their place in the world relative to China and Chinese power. See Hillemann, p. 37.

negotiations.³² The resulting information gleaned by the British served to solidify British conceptions of the Chinese; they reported on Chinese interpreters who could not be trusted because they were “corrupted by [their] government,” referred to the Chinese as “false, suspicious, and immutable,” and characterized the Chinese as “objects of study” which moved them from a position of equals to the definitive Other.³³

These sorts of misunderstandings continued to plague the British in their interactions with the Chinese. The Macartney embassy served to solidify British understandings of the Chinese, established long before the embassy, rather than gain new or useful knowledge about China. In turn, information spread throughout the British colonies, and Britain itself, replicated the characteristics of the Chinese in terms of their Otherness.³⁴ The sense that the Chinese were not to be trusted, and were of a different mettle than Europeans, seeped into the fabric of British interactions with this ethnic group.³⁵ The kinds of knowledge prevalent among the British were then transported to other colonies where interactions with the Chinese dominated trade relationships; this was especially true in British Malaya.

A shift in British power in India in the late 1700s, at which time the British took formal control of Bengal in India, coincided with Macartney’s embassy and a general shift in understandings of the Chinese. This shift was characterized by a newfound position of power on the part of the British and the insistence that the Chinese begin to cooperate more fully with British demands in terms of trade.³⁶ Control of Bengal, and with it a monopoly on Indian trade,

³² Ibid, 40 and 42.

³³ Ibid, 42-44.

³⁴ Robert Bickers calls these types of failed missions created “self-fulfilling prophecies” in which the Chinese characteristics “observed” by the British became the dominant image of the Chinese. This, in turn, led to a significant distancing between British and Chinese, and to long-lasting stereotypes that colored Sino-British relations for generations. See Bickers, pp 58-59.

³⁵ The British used language specific to the Chinese in numerous legislative documents related to administering the colony. See chapter 4 page 68 for additional representations of this language and the resulting implications.

³⁶ Hillemann, 47.

provided control of the lucrative Indian opium market. Where the Chinese had little interest in British goods, Indian opium was another story entirely; as such, opium proved to be the turning point in both trade and diplomatic relations between Britain and China.

The EIC originally dominated opium trade. However, the British did not want to be officially linked to its importation into China as it was prohibited by the Chinese government.³⁷ Consequently, Southeast Asia became key to controlling the opium trade in China. Sir Thomas Raffles established a free trading post at Singapore in 1819, where opium was not taxed as a “wholesale commodity for export.”³⁸ From Singapore, smugglers and Hong merchants imported opium into China through the Canton port. When the EIC monopoly in India was dissolved, British traders took up the opium trade to China. This represented a major shift in trade relations, with opium accounting for the majority of British revenue in the early 1800s, and most revenue coming from opium’s importation to China.

The illicit trade of opium into China led to outright war between the British and Chinese. Initially, the British believed that their attempts at negotiation with the Chinese would lead to an eventual legalization of opium importation; another in a long line of misinterpretations on the part of the British. The Chinese, however, had different plans altogether, and in 1839 sent Commissioner Lin Tse-hsu to “enforce anti-opium legislation and to end the opium trade.”³⁹ In large part because of British understandings of Chinese government, the Chief of the Trade Commission in China, Charles Elliott, did not believe the Chinese would follow through on their threats. In May 1839, Commissioner Lin seized and destroyed over 2 million pounds of opium.

³⁷ Hillemann, 4

³⁸ Singapore’s centrality to British domination in Southeast Asia is explored in Carl A Trocki’s *Opium and Empire*. Though his focus is opium’s impact on colonial Singapore, Singapore itself cannot be separated from the larger trade networks between India and China; it was absolutely essential in the ability to move opium into China. See Trocki, 2.

³⁹ Hillemann, 100.

The British were outraged at the destruction of so much profitable opium, but the true distress came from the potential loss of China in British trade. Elliot characterized the Chinese people on the coast as supportive of British rule; even if they could not be trusted the Chinese Hong traders profited heavily from the opium trade and thus wanted the British and their opium to remain in China. Conversely, Elliott characterized the Chinese government as jealous and repressive, and only responsive to a significant threat of force.⁴⁰ Eventually the British launched an offensive against China and won the Opium War in 1842. The resulting Treaty of Nanking made Hong Kong a British possession and opened multiple ports to British trade.

After 1842, the British had significantly greater access to the Chinese people, though contact continued to be largely between British and Chinese traders. Moreover, publications about the Chinese became more common in Britain and throughout the British Empire. The characterizations of the Chinese as a people who could not be trusted largely reflected the conceptions that the British had before the Opium War, though an additional narrative included the Chinese traders who wished for increased British trade. While additional ports were opened to the British under the Nanking Treaty in 1842, British access to the interior of the country was still limited. For this reason, the British still had to rely to a great extent on the Chinese traders with whom they dealt on the coast.

Publications based on interactions with the Chinese reflected broader cultural perceptions of the Chinese. Arthur H. Smith, a missionary in China who spent considerable time in Canton, wrote extensively of his interactions with the Chinese and his interpretations of them in his book titled *Chinese Characteristics*. Among the characteristics most notable in Smith's text are those

⁴⁰ Hillemann argues that British conceptions of the Chinese changed as their position of trade and power changed in China. During the Opium War, a conception of the Chinese people as oppressed by their government aided in the justification of war, whereas previously they were seen as conning and devious as any Chinese government official. See Hillemann, 99-101.

concerned with the pride of the Chinese, which Smith suggests can be seen in Chinese distaste for European fashion, their belief that they are inherently more intelligent than other races, and their “talent for indirection,” especially in terms of business.⁴¹ These types of characterizations of the Chinese were consistent over the course of the nineteenth century; moreover, they were foundational to British understandings of those Chinese in Malaya.

James Dyer Ball, a civil servant in British-controlled Hong Kong, also wrote extensively on the Chinese during the course of his service. Within the civil service, Ball was considered something of a Chinese specialist, with publications that included *How to Speak Cantonese*, *How to Write Chinese*, and *Hakka Made Easy*. In 1906, he published *Things Chinese: or notes connected to China*.⁴² Ball’s account of the Chinese is somewhat different than Smith’s, though both speak to the pride with which the Chinese carried themselves. Ball begins his text with an anecdote concerning a Chinese accountant using an abacus – which Ball equates to a piece of board and colored balls much like what the British use to “teach their children to count” – and the simplicity of the both the actions and the necessity for such an instrument’s use.⁴³ Ball goes on to state that “not even the simplest arithmetic will be known to [the Chinese]... as he learns as much or as little as it is absolutely necessary for him to know as a part of his business training.”⁴⁴ He equates the knowledge of the Chinese to be similar to that of “an English youngster of six or eight years old,” so simple as to be “utterly helpless.”⁴⁵ This simplicity, to Ball, reflects the simple and backwards characteristic of the Chinese, with the rest of the book supporting this initial claim.

⁴¹ Smith’s chapters alone are telling of his attitude towards the Chinese, with titles such as “Intellectual Turbidity,” “Contempt for Foreigners,” and “The Absence of Sympathy.” In many of these chapters, he highlights the ways in which the Chinese utilize these characteristics to European’s detriments. See Arthur H. Smith, *Chinese Characteristics* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1894), 65, 90, 98.

⁴² James Dyer Ball, *Things Chinese: or notes connected to China* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons 1906).

⁴³ Ball, 2

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ball, 2-3

Ball calls 11 million Chinese residents who lived in Yunnan “cultivated savages,” and referred to their agricultural economy and “primitive.”⁴⁶ While some Chinese are educated, as is evidenced by a few examinations that Ball includes in his analysis, the majority simply follow blindly.⁴⁷ This theme, of a small but powerful Chinese contingency that leads the simpler Chinese majority, is recurring in British colonial government documents from Malaya. Again, Ball’s accounts are similar to those found in reports from the British in the early nineteenth century, and serve to prove the longevity of the images cultivated by the British about the Chinese.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The British had protracted imperial experience in India before they began their colonial venture in Malaya. Thus, British understandings of their imperial project in India helped to shape their understandings of Malaya. Likewise, the tenuous experience with the Chinese in China left the British skeptical of Chinese influence in Malaya once their colonial venture in that country had begun. These two relationships shaped British perceptions of Malaya and its citizens more than any other, and resulted in colonial legislation that sought to curb a perceived problem before it could start.

In chapter four, I argue that the Chinese became increasingly important to the British in their continued control of Malaya. On one hand relationships with Chinese in Malaya mirrored that of British relationships with powerful Indian princes or *bhadraloks*; the British saw a benefit to working with Chinese businessmen who could, for example, help to facilitate lucrative trade with China. On the other hand, the British remained cynical of Chinese influence in Malaya and

⁴⁶ Ball, 6 and 17.

⁴⁷ Ball is clear that those Chinese, who take part in business that puts them in direct contact with Westerners, such as tradesmen or businessmen, are to be considered apart from the majority of the population.

⁴⁸ These characterizations are more closely considered in chapter 4, page 68.

moved to block much of this control on the peninsula. As legislation of the Chinese increased, and the Chinese continued to control large sectors of the Malayan economy, the native Malay population took a back seat to both British interest and the economy. As legislation of the colony reflected interest in the Chinese, so too did it reflect a growing disinterest in the native Malay population. Issues of interest and disinterest are presented through the case study of two separate occurrences, one dealing with the Chinese and the other with native Malays. As can be seen through these studies, the British framed a much different understanding of the Chinese and Malay populations in the early years of their colonial rule.

British legislation in Malaya reflected these divergent attitudes towards the Chinese, but tended towards control more than partnership. Thus, in chapter five, I focus on analysis of key pieces of British legislation that focused on the Chinese population. It is through these pieces of legislation that a coherent view of the Chinese on the part of the British can be constructed. The British used legislation to continually shape the role that the Chinese played on the peninsula. In shaping this role, the British succeeded in solidifying their control of Malaya but also succeeded in restructuring the social roles of both Chinese and Malays.

Chapter Four

Knowledge and its Application

British colonial administration was a practiced art form by the time the British asserted formal control over Malaya. This took the shape of a system of rule similar to that used in India to control the native populations in the colony. The British instituted indirect rule in an effort to control the native populations in Malaya; they co-opted the indigenous ruling elites, called rajas, who controlled many of the rural, mainland areas of Malaya and instituted the resident system in these states in an effort to better control the rajas. Likewise, the British had prolonged exposure to the Chinese through their trade with China; for this reason, many of their interactions with the Chinese in China were duplicated in Malaya. In China, trade with the interior of the country was made possible through the relationships made with Chinese traders in the port cities. This process was replicated in Malaya, where, initially, the British sought relationships with powerful Chinese businessmen in an effort to better control trade in the colony. However, the relative strength of the Chinese community in Malaya necessitated a new colonial policy to deal with this population which in turn took the shape of colonial legislation.¹

The differences that the British encountered in Malaya came in the form of the secret societies that largely controlled Chinese business interests in the colony, as well as the huge Chinese immigrant population in the colony. While the *Cohong* in China had monopolized trade in China, the Chinese government was always a constant presence that influenced the *Cohong's* actions. In Malaya, the secret societies ran their own form of government, with Chinese

¹ In a petition to the House of Commons from the European residents of the Straits Settlements, the residents state that there were “many circumstances in which the Straits Settlements differ so widely from Continental India,” though the “Supreme Government has almost invariably treated them from an exclusively Indian point of view.” This petition resulted in the transition of Straits Settlement administration from the Government of India to the Colonial Office, which in turn resulted in new colonial officials being appointed. One of the six “unofficial” officers was a member representing the Chinese community, which marks one of the biggest differences between Indian and Colonial Office administration. Petition to the House of Commons, 1858. As cited in Blythe, 127.

businesses supporting their organization and actions. While the British may have had little interaction with secret societies, they considered themselves exceptionally literate in terms of the Chinese personality. For this reason, the British faced the situation with secret societies in much the same way as they would have with the Chinese in China; they moved to enforce legislation that was in the best interest of British trade while they encouraged the most powerful businessmen to work with them. However, the independence and anonymity of the secret societies fueled British concern over the necessity to control them.

In Malaya, the British encountered two separate colonial populations that, according to British estimation, needed to be dealt with in very different ways. The two separate experiences of administering a large colony in India and trading with the Chinese in China influenced British understandings and perceptions of the Malayan colony and its residents. In this chapter, I argue that the British formed vastly different opinions of the residents of Malaya, opinions solidified prior to their assertion of formal control over the colony. However, in the case of the Chinese, these perceptions and opinions were continually adapted as specific situations on the ground necessitated change; this could not be said of opinions of the native Malay population nor of the policies implemented in relation to this ethnic group. For instance, the British made no changes to their resident system, even though its existence and implementation in the Federated Malay States elicited the assassination of a colonial official. Conversely, colonial policy continually focused on the Chinese population, based on such issues as small riots which were more often than not organized poorly and resulted in no deaths. These opinions and perceptions also culminated in two very different colonial experiences in Malaya, as evidenced by the vastly different reactions of the British to the Chinese, on one hand, and to the native Malays on the other. The British were continually concerned with Chinese movements and actions, not only

because of their relative strength within Malaya but also because of the ways in which the British perceived the Chinese “character.” Conversely, the British were virtually unconcerned with the Malay population. Even amidst threats of murder and uprisings, the British believed the Malays to be inherently lazy and in need of guidance, and thus no threat to British authority or rule. These divergent policies led legislative practices within the colony that focused primarily on the Chinese in Malaya and, as a result, significantly altered the social structure of the colony.

In this chapter, I argue that the British applied their knowledge of empire and their understandings of the supposedly fundamental nature of the Malays and Chinese to inform their dealings with subject populations under their control in Malaya. They utilized their perceptions of both the Malay and Chinese populations to enact legislation and policy concerning these two groups. Concerning the Malay population, the British continued with their policy of indirect rule and the resident system, despite evidence that this policy was not effective. My research shows that this policy was based on British perceptions of the Malay population rather than on the evidence they encountered while in Malaya. Even after the assassination of the British resident in Perak, the British saw the Malays as a simple race, easily be controlled by a resident appointed to influence their leaders. Policies concerning the native Malay population continued after this assassination, but officials found that no other policy would be as great a benefit as the resident system. Further, it is clear that the Chinese were absolutely central to British policy not only because of their involvement in the Malay economy, but also because they were perceived as a race of people who could become dangerous to the effective administration of the colony. British policy continually focused on the Chinese, even when their movements could have been perceived as mundane or trivial. Where policies concerning the Malay population were stagnant,

the British continually reevaluated their policy toward the Chinese in an effort to better control this group.

Worlds Collide – Creating Malaya

In the mid-1700s, the British moved to solidify a formal presence in the Straits of Malacca in an effort to secure a position in the lucrative trading route from India to China. Prior to this time, the Portuguese and Dutch dominated sea trade in the Straits; first the Portuguese and then the Dutch controlled Malacca, while the closest British holding was at Bencoolen, on the east coast of Sumatra.² In 1786, the Dutch attacked and secured Rhio – a small island in the Straits of Malacca – which had been a possession of the Portuguese. Because of their previous and continued occupation of Sumatra, the Dutch now controlled both sides of the Straits.³ In answer, the EIC set up a formal trading post in Penang, on the west coast of Malaya, the same year. A relatively small island, dominated by jungle, Penang was not the most opportune trading post, nor the most easily defensible position for the EIC. However, it was a place from which to land and trade between India and China, and remained the most important British post in Southeast Asia until 1819.

It was in 1819 that the first formal British presence in Malaya was established with the establishment of a free trading post on the substantial island of Singapore, colonized and governed by Sir Stamford Raffles. In 1811, Raffles landed an army in Batavia, an Indonesian island held by Dutch forces. Having just occupied the Dutch East Indies, and under the direction of Raffles, the British proceeded to assert their dominance in the archipelago, Raffles was “convinced of the need to establish a British entrepôt somewhere in the region which could

² British control and possession of key areas in the Straits of Malacca were considered in detail in Sir Frank Swettenham’s account of British influence in Malaya. His opinion was that Bencoolen, founded by the EIC in 1684, was only notable for its collection of pepper and its position as a look-out for other areas that the British could utilize to “shut out Dutch exclusiveness” in China trade. See Swettenham, 31-34.

³ Tregonning, 37.

become another staging post along the maritime route to China.”⁴ As previously discussed, this trading post became fundamental to successful trade between British India and the Chinese market. Singapore, located on the southernmost tip of Malaya, offered the British a strategic location from which to control the trade route between India and China. With British influence in Singapore also came a significant influx of immigrants who sought to both trade with the British and become part of the growing trade promised with the British presence. When Raffles first arrived, the population was thought to be between 200 and 300 people, at least one-third of which were Chinese, and the rest native Malays; four months later, Raffles reported that the population was exceeding 5,000, many of whom were Chinese immigrants from Malacca.⁵

With this population increase came an increase in the amount of trade. Between 1821 and 1857, the number of junks – trading vessels from China – docking in Singapore increased from four a year to 143.⁶ Trade continued to increase with the formal addition of Malacca and Penang, which came under sole British authority with the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824. Together, the three posts comprised the Straits Settlements, and with the strength of British trade and wealth, Britain became the dominant power in Southeast Asian trade.

In the Straits Settlements, the British encountered a complicated system of local rule; the rule of individual maharajas complicated by a tributary system that allied some states and not others left no central governmental structure and a web of complex internal politics. While the native Malays had their own system of rule, the immigrant Chinese tended to police themselves. This was made possible, to some extent, by their segregation when Raffles first established Singapore as a free port. Upon his undertaking the island Raffles called for a series of work

⁴ Andaya, 114

⁵ Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (Singapore: University Malaya Press, 1967), 6-7.

⁶ Andaya, 136.

projects, in particular the building of a bridge across a major river in the tip of Singapore that connected the “cantonments – temporary districts where separate ethnic groups lived – with the intended Chinese and Malay towns.”⁷ Where on the Malay side there was a political structure organized and led by Raffles, the Sultan and Temenggong – Malay royalty – the Chinese side did not have a structured government.⁸ This role was filled by Chinese secret societies.

The earliest reference to the formal organization of secret societies in Malaya was an account of an initiation ceremony for the Triad society, as witnessed by Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, a Malay scribe and translator who had worked for Raffles. This account, said to have taken place in the jungles in the interior of Singapore in 1824, relayed that up to 600 Chinese society members took part in the ceremony, where they “assembled in three huts smoking opium and drinking wine.”⁹ Abdullah also reported that the Chinese involved in the initiation boasted of their ties to other secret society members in Malacca and Penang.¹⁰ While the exact number of society members in Malaya at this time cannot be said definitively, it is safe to assume that as an organization they wielded significant control over their members and were in a position to cause “outrages” in Singapore.¹¹

The power of secret societies only increased as a result of powerful Chinese businessmen facilitating the immigration of large numbers of Chinese, beginning in the mid-1800s. These businessmen were, more often than not, affiliated with a secret society in their homeland; the immigrants they imported were often members of the same society. Initially, Chinese immigrants tended to settle in their section of Singapore based on clan affiliation, a precursor to the more

⁷ Siang, 8.

⁸ Ibid, 9.

⁹ From Munshi Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir’s autobiography “Hikyat Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi.” Translated by Dr. A.H. Hill. Cited by L.F. Comber, *Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya* (New York: J.J. Augusten Inc., 1959), 55.

¹⁰ Ibid, 54

¹¹ Ibid, 58.

formal secret society structure. This tendency was reported by Raffles and his staff in 1819; they noted that “disturbances take place between [Chinese] of different provinces” within Singapore’s Chinese kampong – or district.¹² As the immigrant population continued to grow over the course of 1819 to 1829, clan affiliation was largely displaced by more formal secret society organization, whereby Chinese became formal members and paid dues to the society, rather than just claim affiliation. Secret societies facilitated this shift in order to have a system of control over the Chinese immigrant laborers – or coolies.¹³ Initially, coolie brokers organized under two main powerful Chinese societies, the Hee Kee and the Yeong Seng Wat, forming syndicates for the importation of laborers. The syndicates worked to charter ships to transport coolies, and then established depots into which the coolies were funneled and then sold to the highest bidder.¹⁴

Soon, societies began to focus on controlling immigration; they worked to facilitate continued trade relationships between Malaya and China. However, as the Chinese population continued to grow, secret societies became akin to fraternal organizations on which Chinese in the colony relied. These societies began to fill multiple roles, such as political organizations, job placement agencies, money lenders, immigration specialists, tax collectors, protectorates, and advocates for the Chinese population in a British colony.

The relative power of secret societies and of Chinese in general also increased as a result of their involvement in revenue farms in Malaya. The system of farming – “selling the right to retail opium, or to run a gambling house” – had been used “extensively by indigenous rulers [in

¹² Siang argues that Raffles was cognizant of the differing clan affiliations between Chinese, and as such the provinces were divided based on these affiliations. He also identified those Chinese that seemed better equipped to deal with the British – the Amoy – to whom he believed the British government should afford the “utmost accommodation.” See Siang, 12.

¹³ Before more formal means of control, coolie importation was a dicey business, at best. There were no dedicated means to import coolies – charters were hard to secure and coolie sale was unorganized – and the price per coolie was uneven. Secret societies not only organized importation, but also stabilized prices and facilitated communication between Malaya and China, where coolies were procured. See Yen, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya 1800-1910*, 112.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 113.

Malaya] before the Portuguese first came.”¹⁵ One of the first recorded instances of Chinese involvement in revenue farms in Malaya were applications to run a gambling hall and several opium houses in Singapore; these were rejected by colonial administrator Francis Light in 1787, who believed that it was too soon to implement farms.¹⁶ In 1791 Light’s policy changed, and farms for both opium and gambling were instituted. In 1820, the resident of Singapore, Major William Farquhar, in an attempt to augment government funds and to assist in the reorganization of the police force, brought licensing of gambling establishments under government control.¹⁷ In 1826, legalized gambling houses accounted for over \$30,000 in colonial revenue.¹⁸ Under Farquhar, the government brought the sale of opium and liquor under their control. The colonial government held a monopoly on raw opium, a product first imported from India; they then “leased the rights of preparing and distributing the cooked opium to wealthy Chinese.”¹⁹ The British colonial government then collected rent from the opium farmers which became a main source of revenue.²⁰ The Chinese also managed to secure a monopoly on opium selling; “instead of competing against one another [and thus increasing] the price to be paid to the government, Chinese [societies] elected one businessman to tender low” and the profits were then shared within the society.²¹ Both gambling and opium farms became synonymous with secret societies, as only the most wealthy Chinese could afford to establish these businesses and pay the British for licenses or product; as with the coolie trade, the wealthiest Chinese businessmen were most

¹⁵ Tregonning also argues that the system of revenue farms were used by the British in India, by the Dutch in Java, as well as in some places in Europe. See Tregonning, 61.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁷ Comber, 55

¹⁸ Siang, 17.

¹⁹ Yen, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya 1800-1910*, 226.

²⁰ Yen reports that in 1886, the revenue collected from opium farmers in Penang accounted for 48% of the total revenue. *Ibid.*, 261 n. 30.

²¹ Tregonning, 69.

often top-ranking society members. These businesses – coolie importation, opium, and gambling – were not only beneficial to Chinese secret societies but also the British colonial government.

Chinese businessmen were also established in the Malaya states, where they had worked with Malay rulers in a number of different capacities long before the British arrived on the scene. For instance, the importation of coolie laborers began to increase significantly in the 1820s, as labor was needed for the growing tin mining market in the Malay states – especially Perak, Selangor, and Negri Sembilan. In these states, Chinese secret societies contracted with Malay district chiefs to organize Chinese labor. In Johor, secret societies imported Chinese coolies to work on gambier plantations, though they ran opium and spirit farms directly; all of these enterprises resulted in significant revenue for the Malay nobility and Chinese businessmen in Johor.²² By the 1840s, the Chinese began to dominate many aspects of important and lucrative business enterprises throughout Malaya, and to make up a significant portion of the population in the process, making them indispensable to the British colonial government and Malay rulers alike.²³ In fact, the prevalence of Chinese around the colony and their importance to the Malayan economy resulted in their being called the “industrial backbone of these Settlements” in official colonial documents.²⁴

In response to powerful of Chinese secret societies and the prevalence of Chinese in the Straits Settlements, the British colonial government instituted a policy of cooperation with Chinese Kapitans beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Kapitans – powerful Chinese from various dialect organizations – were appointed by the British government and were expected to

²² Ibid, 22-23.

²³ The relationship between Chinese business and local Malay rulers was beneficial to both parties, as Chinese businessmen usually rented mines from Malay rulers. The Malay rulers received revenue from rent, while the Chinese received revenue from tin. This arrangement was especially convenient as Malay rulers hadn't the manpower to support tin mining, and secret societies had access to a huge pool of laborers. See Nonini, 22.

²⁴ Report of the Committee to Consider and Take Evidence upon the Condition of Chinese Labourers. Laid before the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements 3 November 1876. Cited in Blythe, 200.

maintain law and order within their dialect community. The Kapitan system was one used by both the Portuguese and Dutch in their interactions with the Chinese in both Malacca and the Dutch East Indies, respectively, where the Chinese population necessitated a system of indirect rule to ensure the maintenance of imperial control.²⁵ The British, utilizing a system that had worked for other imperial powers, sought to co-opt support by working with Kapitans as well. Prior to 1889, when secret societies were banned outright in Malaya, Kapitans also had considerable association with secret societies. In fact, much of a Kapitan's authority came from his secret society connections, and many Kapitans – such as Yap Ah Loy in Kuala Lumpur or Chang Keng Khee of Perak – were also the leaders of their respective societies.²⁶

To the British, Kapitans were invaluable to the colonial government system. They served as “effective intermediaries... between the Chinese community on one hand and the British- and Malay-dominated bureaucracy and government on the other,” and held a significant amount of political power within this system of government.²⁷ Kapitans received special assistance from the colonial government and were often given special consideration in terms of licensing and registration of such business enterprises as opium, liquor, and gambling farms.²⁸ As a result, within the Chinese community Kapitans gained considerable respect and privilege. A Kapitan was expected to lobby for their communities in an effort to “provide jobs, expand economic opportunities, and acquire more rights and privileges from the [British] Government.”²⁹

²⁵ See Eric Tagliacozzo, *Trade Secrets and Porous Borders* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 139. See also Andaya, 124.

²⁶ Yen Ching-hwang discusses the multiple relationships between Kapitans and secret societies, with special attention to the dual roles Kapitans often played. See Yen, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya 1800-1910*, 124-126.

²⁷ Heng Pek Koon suggests that the Chinese Kapitan system laid the foundation for contemporary government structures in Malaysia. The role of intermediary is central to his argument. See Heng Pek Koon, *Chinese Politics in Malaysia* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5.

²⁸ Yen, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya 1800-1910*, 126.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 125.

Early relationships between the British and Chinese, as evidenced by the Kapitan system, were quite different from those that developed between the British and Malays. Prior to movements by the British to more formally control the Chinese in the 1860s and 70s, Kapitans were appointed by the British to act as intermediaries, largely leaving Chinese policy to be arbitrated by the Chinese. Conversely, the British appointed British residents to serve in the communities of Malay rulers, first in the Straits Settlements and then in all major areas within the Federated Malay States. Officially, residents were to act as advisors to Malay rulers and assist in matters of governance of the peasantry. Unofficially, residents co-opted much of the power held by Malay rulers by insisting that their policies fall in line with British interests.³⁰

While the British worked to maintain relationships with powerful Chinese, their attitude towards the general Chinese population was much different. In fact, as the Chinese population continued to grow – in a fifty year period, from the 1830s to the 1880s Malacca's Chinese population grew to four times larger, in Penang it grew six times larger, and in Singapore it grew eight times larger – the British became increasingly wary of Chinese power and influence.³¹ The major concern was that the British colonial government simply did not know enough about the Chinese and their societies. They saw each immigrant as a potential secret society member; the Committee appointed to consider the condition of Chinese laborers found that “soon after his arrival, the immigrant becomes, in all probability, a member of a Secret Society – supposing him not to have been a member already.”³² The British feared that this relationship between immigrant

³⁰ Donald Nonini states that the resident system was one of the first instances of the supplantation of non-European rule in Malaya, which laid the groundwork for the implementation of a new, British bureaucratic system of governance. See Nonini, 48.

³¹ See Comber, 45, 36, and 50 respectively.

³² Report of the Committee to Consider and Take Evidence upon the Condition of Chinese Labourers. Laid before the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements 3 November 1876. Cited in Blythe, 200.

and secret society would only serve to strengthen these groups while minimizing the influence of the colonial government.³³

These sorts of attitudes only served to further encourage the British colonial government to take a different tack in dealing with the Chinese. Control of immigrant Chinese was seen as essential if the British were to control the larger Chinese population, especially since each immigrant was believed to be a part of a secret society. However, because of Chinese domination of so many economic institutions, and the significant amount of revenue they brought into Malaya, cooperation was very much in the British colonial government's interest. Further, prior to the transfer of the colony from the Government of India to the Colonial Office, government officials believed that Chinese societies could provide a positive outlet for incoming immigrants. The resulting policies sought to balance these two divergent goals. Conversely, the British almost immediately exercised a policy of indirect control over the Malay population. To some extent the treatment of the Malays were very much in line with British policy in India, in which the most powerful Indians were appointed to help control the general population but the British always maintained control of the rulers.³⁴ British reaction to each of these groups was based on the ways in which the colonial government envisioned them. With the Chinese a policy of consistent and focused supervision and legislation was enacted. Policies in regards to the Malays were largely inert; regardless of Malay movement the colonial government maintained a firm, if neglectful, policy of control.

Case Studies

³³ In the official report, the Committee members believed that immigrants would seek out "the Secretary of his Society" if they were to ever get into trouble. Further, the Committee worried that, if the secret society did help the immigrant, the most likely next course of action would be to appeal to an influential Chinese businessman. The Committee believed that it would "never enter his head" to seek help from the Colonial Government. Ibid, p. 200.

³⁴ These systems of rule were discussed in greater detail in chapter 1, pages 5 and 6.

British conceptions of both the Malay and Chinese populations are seen most clearly in British accounts of each ethnic group's movements within the colony. Instances of Malay and Chinese dissension were compiled in reports written by British colonial officials in Malaya, though reports on the Chinese far out-stripped the number written about the Malays. The scope of these reports ran the gamut, and included such mundane facts as the number of arrests for unlawful brothel ownership to accounts of riots and even assassinations. The first set of reports under consideration in this chapter deal with British interpretation of Chinese activities throughout Malaya. These reports focus solely on Chinese movement in the colony, and are representative of the types of colonial documents generated that concern the Chinese specifically. The second report considered here is a summation of the events that culminated in the assassination of British colonial official J.W.W. Birch, the first resident general of Perak, in 1875. In this report, the British succinctly narrated the events leading up to, and resulting in Birch's assassination. While they determined that the assassination was the result of rajas angered by British interference in the administration of the state, the raja's actions were largely seen as extraordinary. Both of these studies present a clear picture of British conceptions of subject populations in Malaya, specifically the native Malays and the Chinese. Further, these types of perceptions allowed the British to move forward with wide-sweeping legislation that focused not on the largest population in the colony – Malays – but instead on the Chinese.

Chinese Riots in Malaya

Chinese dissension towards the colonial government and conflicts between clans or societies were a common occurrence in British Malaya. In fact, conflicts between clans, specifically, were not unlike those seen in the Malay states between ruling elites. One of the earliest documented conflicts was in 1846, when a funeral procession resulted in a fight between

the Ghee Hin society and the funeral's police escort. The conflict began when one society, the Kwan Tec Hoey, petitioned the British police force to redirect the funeral procession away from their area of Singapore under the auspice of ensuring the safety of their members. The British police agreed, and diverted the Ghee Hin funeral procession from its origin directly to the grave site. This move was seen as a "great public loss of face" to the Ghee Hin society, as a Chinese funeral procession was an occasion of significant cultural importance.³⁵ The Ghee Hin society members, angered by this slight, attacked the police. To make matters worse, the British employed a member of the rival society to act as a translator to interpret their orders.³⁶ While only the rival society translator and one police officer were injured, the event encouraged British officials to petition the colonial government to "put down" secret societies altogether.³⁷ At the time, the role of the British in this encounter was ignored, and blame was placed solely on the shoulders of Chinese society members.

In the 1840s and 50s, it was British citizens in the colony most concerned with the Chinese presence – rather than the Government of India or colonial officials – and it was this group that lobbied the colonial government to intervene in Chinese affairs. "Presentments" – published accounts of colonial concerns that served as a precursor to more formal Legislative Councils in the Straits Settlements – were often focused on the influence of secret societies as well as the problem of a growing Chinese immigrant population.³⁸ The content of these presentments ran the gamut; they suggested that secret societies threatened representatives of the

³⁵ Funeral procession not only allowed for the public remembrance of important Chinese citizens, but also allowed the secret societies to flaunt their relative power in terms of membership and wealth. The "arrogance" of these events often led to fights between secret societies. See Blythe, 67-68.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 67.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 69.

³⁸ Presentments were written by a group of British colonial officials, comprised of the Magistrate, Recorders (as judges were known) and a "Grand Jury" of leading citizens in the colony. These documents were frequently presented to the Governors and the Government of India, who oversaw administration of Malaya, in an effort to make known the most pressing issues of the time. See Blythe, 68.

Roman Catholic Church and Christian Chinese in Singapore, that the societies were smuggling weapons into the colony, and that, generally, secret societies “endeavored to foment disturbances.”³⁹ Initially the colonial government refused to become involved in legislating the Chinese population; while they recognized the “problem” of the Chinese in Malaya, they also saw the societies as “valuable channels of communication between the Government and the masses.”⁴⁰

However, presentments to the Government of India continued as the Chinese population continued to increase. With an increase in Chinese immigrants came a more pressing need to control the secret societies that were also growing in membership; British officials believed that each immigrant was a potential society member. As such, membership reaching into the tens of thousands threatened to destabilize the colony. The urgency felt by British citizens and officials in the Straits Settlements in terms of the growing influence of Chinese secret societies, and the Government of India’s refusal to take action, prompted a more serious discussion of the transfer of administration from the Government of India to the Colonial Office. The centrality of the Chinese to this discussion should not be minimized; while financial concerns were important, petitions to the House of Commons by Straits residents in 1858 called attention to the “the many circumstances in which the Straits Settlements differ so widely from Continental India,” particularly with regard to the Chinese population.⁴¹ For these reasons, the administration of the

³⁹ Blythe, 69-74.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 72.

⁴¹ In a report to the Legislative Council, the residents suggest that “Acts most detrimental to the interests of the Settlements” were passed with little regard to the wishes of the inhabitants. Governor’s Despatch 196. 16 September 1869, para. 42. As cited in Blythe, 126-127. For instance, in 1860 the Governor of the Straits Settlements had hoped to minimize Chinese secret society influence by situating their meetings under the heading of “illegal assemblage” thus eliminating their ability to hold formal meetings. However, the Government of India considered this proposal illegal, and allowed the Chinese to continue meeting for “any lawful purpose.” The Government of India further argued that the meetings of Chinese secret societies “in many instances... [could become] the instrument of incalculable benefit to the poorer classes of their fellow countrymen.” As cited in Blythe, 112-113.

Straits Settlements was transferred to the Colonial Office in April 1867, at which point it became a Crown Colony under the jurisdiction of a new governor, replete with an Executive and Legislative Council. The importance of this transfer would soon be seen in the laws passed, especially those dealing with the Chinese population in the colony.

In August of 1867, the Legislative Council passed “An Act for the Better Preservation of the Peace” which included numerous provisions aimed at increasing the power of the colonial vis a vis the Chinese community. Among the most notable provisions were the ability of the colonial police to swear in special constables, including secret society headmen, “whenever it appeared... that any tumult or riot had taken place or might be reasonably apprehended,” as well as the ability of the Governor to “remove any person, not being a natural born subject of Her Majesty, from the colony.”⁴² While these provisions proved temporary, with the passing of legislative policy that could more completely deal with the Chinese population this Act gave wide-sweeping power to the colonial government if, and when, riots occurred in the Straits Settlements again. This Act also provides an excellent example of the significant change in colonial policy that occurred as a result of the transfer of administration from the Government of India to the Colonial Office. The Government of India had been hesitant to move on policies that could hinder Chinese trade and business. The Government of India had implemented policies from afar, with little interest or knowledge of the actual conditions in Malaya. Further, they believed the Chinese to be central to both the economic and political stability of the colony and were thus unwilling to jeopardize any relationships that could serve these purposes. Conversely, the Colonial Office was ready and willing to promote a policy of containment where it concerned potentially dangerous Chinese factions because they were intimately aware of the ways in which the secret societies operated in Malaya; those who administered the colony were now present in

⁴² Ibid, 129.

the colony. While the Colonial Office also saw the Chinese as central to the Malayan economy, they were also aware of these societies' extralegal activities within the colony.

Leading up to the creation and passing of the Chinese Protectorate Act in 1877, the colonial government continued to enact policies and legislation in an effort to control Chinese secret societies and the Chinese immigrant population. In 1869, the colonial government passed Ordinance XIX, "An Ordinance for the Suppression of Dangerous Societies." This Ordinance required all Chinese secret societies to register with the Commissioner of the Police. The resulting report was given to the Governor who could request further information if the nature of the society was considered dangerous or if the society was believed to be formed illegally.⁴³ In addition, the Ordinance provided for secret societies to be held accountable for any riots or disturbances of the peace in which their members were involved, with "fines levied against the property of the manager, office-bearers, and members... in compensation for injury to person or property."⁴⁴ While the Ordinance aimed to significantly increase the power of the colonial government in terms of their control of secret societies, the only provision the Ordinance exacted was the registration of secret societies. The Ordinance was difficult to enforce in its entirety for two reasons. First, the police force was unable to carry out the more rigorous measures put forth by the Ordinance, namely the exacting of fines on societies for the activities of their members. Second, the police were unable to regulate the societies adequately; there simply were not enough members of the police force to continually and effectively police each secret society and their members. For this reason, some British officials proposed additional legislation in an effort to reorganize the police force.

⁴³ Straits Settlement Government Gazette, 1869. As cited in Blythe, 152.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

In 1872, debate began surrounding the reorganization of the police; this debate was almost entirely centered on the inclusion of Chinese citizens as police officers. Several members argued that the Chinese made up the vast majority of the population, that “the bulk of our criminals are Chinese” and that the continued rates of crime in the colony was a result of the police having “no knowledge of the Chinese secret societies.”⁴⁵ The Honorable J.J. Greenshields went on to argue that “if the Chinese were incapable, impracticable aborigines, one would not be surprised by their omission from the police force... [but] in fact, the Chinese swarm.”⁴⁶ Greenshields also considered the Chinese as central to the Malay economy, and stated that they were “the most energetic” members of the Malayan society.⁴⁷ J.W.W. Birch, then the Colonial Secretary, agreed with Greenshields on some parts of this argument, but was much more concerned with an “understanding of Chinese language and custom,” which he argued was central to the success of the police force in Hong Kong.⁴⁸ The Governor, and in fact the Chinese member of the Council, echoed Birch’s concerns. He argued that the language barrier impeded the efficient control of the Chinese population in Malaya. In addition, the Governor cited a document written by a prominent Chinese businessman; the contents of the documents suggested that only the most depraved Chinese would agree to become constables working for the British police force, as the pay was so little and the possibility of bribery among the Chinese was so great.⁴⁹

There was no immediate resolution in the matter of Chinese in the police force. Yet, the subject of employing officials who could communicate with the Chinese in their own language

⁴⁵ *Acts, Ordinances, and Proclamations from the Colonies: Straits Settlements Acts*, CO 275/15, 20 June 1872, (London: National Archive, Kew), 17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁹ The Chinese man whom the Governor cites actually suggests that “a Chinaman must take bribes ten times more than any other class” and that “respectable men” of the class that would take jobs as constables would prove to be “very stupid.” *Ibid.*, 21.

became increasingly important to British officials. In October 1872, another riot broke out in Singapore. A special commission appointed to inquire into the various points of the riot further increased colonial attention on the communication barrier between the colonial government and the Chinese population in the Straits Settlements. The riot began in answer to the posting of official proclamations by the colonial government; the “notice... was prepared by the Inspector-General of Police... [and] approved by the Government, to whom it was sent to be translated into Chinese, and printed for circulation.”⁵⁰ The Commission found that the notice was not, as it should have been, translated properly, nor the information within disseminated according to the protocol of the Police Force. The communication issue was further complicated by the involvement of Samsengs – Chinese “fighting men” who were seen as the worst Chinese elements of the Straits – who the Commission determined “took advantage of dissatisfaction” amongst the Chinese population effected by the Proclamation in an effort to disturb the peace.⁵¹ The Commission concluded that if the notice had been communicated effectively from the beginning, the Samsengs would have been able to organize a riot in the first place.

The recommendation of the Commission to avoid future riots included three points. First, the Chief of Police suggested that his office work with the “heads of the [Chinese]” in an effort to make the people aware of “what was going on, and be prepared, beforehand.”⁵² The importance of the “headmen” of secret societies was highlighted by the Chief of Police, who stated that if the headmen “know that you are working for them... they will give you every information.”⁵³ The second recommendation involved the registration of immigrant Chinese into the colony; the Commission argued that the influx of Chinese immigrants brought with it an

⁵⁰ Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into the Riots of October 1872. CO 275/16, p. 232.

⁵¹ Ibid, 233.

⁵² Ibid, 235.

⁵³ Ibid.

increased likelihood of secret society membership and an “increasing number of Samsengs and rowdies.”⁵⁴ The Commission suggested that registration include providing each Chinese coolie with a registration number, and the recording of that coolie’s employer and terms of employment. The third recommendation addressed the issue of working with, and within, the Chinese community. The Commission recommended that the colonial government appoint “a Chinese headman... who should be responsible to the Government for the order of his district and the movements of the Chinese in it.”⁵⁵ The final recommendation of the Commission was meant to address the lack of effective communication between British officials and the Chinese community. However, its premise was seen as fundamentally flawed by many in the colonial government. Similar to the debates regarding the inclusion of Chinese into the police force, the appointment of Chinese as heads of their own community – who would then be beholden to the British colonial government – elicited strong dissension based on the general character of the Chinese. And yet, the centrality of the Chinese to British policy and legislation in the colony could not be denied. The British realized that in order to control the Chinese, they would have to work with that community in its own language. Where earlier rule of the colony called for the elimination of secret societies altogether, in the 1870s the importance of the Chinese, and the ways in which the secret societies functioned, necessitated a change in policy and practice.⁵⁶

These events are representative of the ways in which the British responded to the Chinese population in Malaya. Clashes between secret societies, British misunderstandings of the Chinese in general, and the resulting opposition of Chinese to the British colonial government

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 236.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ In the 1890s the British would return to a policy that sought to eliminate secret societies outright. This policy included legislation to end Chinese immigration into Malaya, as well as Ordinances that not only served to suppress the power of secret societies, but which were also aimed at deporting the most powerful members. See Blythe, 241-248.

can all be said to be significant causes of Sino-British conflicts in Malaya. However, British understandings of the Chinese population in general provided the foundation for the latter two issues. The British perceived the Chinese and their secret societies as powerful forces within Malaya. As such, the British were concerned that the influence of Chinese secret societies, specifically, would undermine their control of the colony. However, the relative importance of the Chinese to the economic success of the colony also played a significant role in the ways in which the British confronted the Chinese. For these reasons, the colonial government moved to better legislate the Chinese, culminating in the establishment of a Protector of the Chinese in 1877. The role of this official and the office he represented – to be discussed in more depth in the next chapter – was to eliminate many of the misunderstandings that plagued Sino-British interactions in Malaya, as well as to minimize the influence of secret societies.

The Assassination of J.W.W. Birch

British involvement in Malay affairs began even before the establishment of Singapore as a British Settlement. In 1819, Sir Stamford Raffles landed on Singapore and proceeded to negotiate a treaty for the island with a Malay chief of Johor with the understanding that the Sultan of Johor would have to ratify the treaty to ensure its legality. At this time, the Sultan position was held – illegally, according to the Raffles – by the younger of two brothers whose father had recently died; while the elder brother preferred the British, the younger was known to have “Dutch sympathies.”⁵⁷ As such, Raffles sent for the elder brother, and as soon as he landed in Singapore proclaimed him to be the rightful Sultan of Johor. The treaty, negotiated between the new Sultan of Johor and the British government, established Singapore as a British Settlement.

⁵⁷ Swettenham, 67.

These types of intrigues were not uncommon in Malaya, though one such instance in 1870s Perak was to prove atypical. Considerable in-fighting between Malay rulers in Perak had led to a serious issue of succession for the Sultanate. On one hand, powerful Malay rajas of the state had voted for Bendahara Raja Ismail, who was considered less powerful than other rajas but was also more popular amongst the ruling class.⁵⁸ Sultan Ismail was technically appointed through a vote of his fellow rajas in 1871. However, in 1872, Raja Muda Abdullah “openly assumed the title of sultan,” which gave him the power to control the state’s resources; he was presumed to be the rightful choice for successor given his elevated status and title and the rights of succession that were customary in Malaya. It was the direct involvement of the British colonial government that made this succession battle atypical. This conflict, initially presumed by many in the colonial government to be of no interest to the British Crown, became an issue when rights of succession looked like they might interrupt lucrative tin mining and trading pursuits, important to the Straits government’s bottom line.⁵⁹ For this reason, in 1873, the new governor of the Straits, Andrew Clarke, sought to broker a peace between the two Sultans; his goal was not only to end the Sultanate disagreement but also settle disputes between Chinese secret societies so that production in Perak could resume.⁶⁰

In 1874, Clarke negotiated the Pangkor Treaty, or Engagement, which officially recognized Abdullah as the Sultan of Perak. The British believed that it would be preferable for Sultan Abdullah to rule; the British believed that Abdullah ruled “in an English fashion,” where

⁵⁸ Andaya, 154.

⁵⁹ Two developments preceded this attitude. First was Abdullah’s campaign to become the rightful sultan, which sought to involve not only Malay rajas but powerful Chinese businessmen in Perak. Second was the Third Larut War, a dispute between two factions of Chinese miners. Abdullah managed to insert himself into the War by pledging support to one Chinese faction in an effort to expel the other on the condition of support for his Sultanate. See P.L. Burns (ed.) *The Journals of J.W.W. Birch: First British Resident to Perak, 1874-1875* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976), 16.

⁶⁰ Andaya, 158.

Ismail “was dismissed as an ‘impracticable Malay of the old school.’”⁶¹ Two other provisions, deemed “most important” to British officials at the time, were clauses six and ten.⁶² Clause six called for the Sultan to “receive and provide for a British officer, to be called resident, who shall be accredited to his court, and whose advice must be asked and acted upon in all questions other than those touching Malay religion and custom.”⁶³ Clause ten provided that “the collection and control of all revenues and the general administration of the Country be regulated under the advice of these Residents.”⁶⁴ The position of first resident general was to be filled by J.W.W. Birch. While the Treaty was meant to eliminate problems, it only instigated more issues within Malay society in Perak while embroiling the British in Malay affairs. It also resulted in the assassination of Birch.

The arguments leading up to the Pangkor Treaty made its implementation complex, but further complicating issues were British perceptions of the Malays with whom they were meant to work. Swettenham, with the benefit of hindsight, suggested that “advis[ing] those whose minds are crooked to follow the straight path and never deviate” was a “difficult condition.”⁶⁵ Both Swettenham and Birch were unimpressed with the general attitudes and dispositions of the Malays. Swettenham found Malays to be “shy and reserved,” as well as “disinclined to work” and “inherent[ly] lazy.”⁶⁶ Birch found Malays, and more specifically the rajas and Sultan with whom he came into close contact, to be highly suspicious and untrusting. Birch felt it necessary to explain to Sultan Abdullah “what a White man’s word and honour meant,” as the Sultan was

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Sir Frank Swettenham was one such official at the time, and was involved in the implementation of the Treaty. See Swettenham, 177.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 178.

⁶⁶ Swettenham devotes an entire chapter of this analysis of Malaya to “The Malay: His Customs, Prejudices, Arts, Language, and Literature.” See 133, 136, and 137.

disinclined to understand such things.⁶⁷ Swettenham mirrored this sentiment, blaming the suspicious Malay mind on “centuries of Malay mis-government.”⁶⁸

These perceptions aided in the British understanding of their role in Malaya, and more specifically Perak, after the signing of the Pangkor Treaty. At the time of the Treaty and the year that followed, the British were quite pleased with their action and activity in Perak as it served to prove the invaluable interference of British custom and culture. Swettenham spoke to the initial hesitancy of Malays to utilize British hospitals – preferring “a witch or wizard” to facilitate healing – but that they were eventually persuaded as British hospitals continued to be established and the instances of smallpox and other diseases subsided. In April of 1874, Birch himself was impressed with the ways in which Malays had been “cowed” by implementation of British policy in Perak, while Swettenham suggested that the eventual subservience of Malays to British rule was inevitable.⁶⁹ For any instances of lawlessness, Governor Clarke sent British officers to investigate and then advise the rajas of what course to take in terms of punishment. A shooting in Perak elicited the intervention of W.A. Pickering – he would become the first Protector of Chinese – and the eventual disposition of one chief for his rival.⁷⁰ The British believed all of these ‘advancements’ to be advantageous to both the native Malay population and the British colonial government.

However, while the British were busy assuming that their courses were infallible and that the Malays would submit to British rule because of their natural affinity for loyalty, there was considerable movement in Perak to end British interference. It would be inaccurate to say that

⁶⁷ Burns, 95.

⁶⁸ Swettenham believed that the Malays were not disinclined to effectively manage their own affairs. He, and other British officials, continually spoke to the simplicity of the Malay mind, which was predisposed to follow, not lead. See Swettenham, 143.

⁶⁹ See Swettenham, 140 and Burns, 45.

⁷⁰ Swettenham, 189.

the British were unaware of these movements; rather, evidence suggests that they simply did not take threats made by the Malays seriously. These threats began almost as soon as Birch was appointed resident, and continued until after his death. Regardless of these threats, British officials in charge of Perak were assured of their own success not only because of the ways in which the Treaty cemented their control, but also because of their understandings of Malays. British authority was clearly eroding within a year of the Pangkor Treaty, as evidenced by the continued strain on Birch's relationship with Sultan Abdullah as well as with Ismail. Ismail, the deposed Sultan, and his cohorts despised Birch on principle, as he represented the end of Ismail's rule as Sultan. Ismail was willing to work with the British, but would only communicate with Governor Clarke. In correspondence dated 13 September 1875, Ismail offered his own terms to working with the British government; these terms called for the British to follow Ismail's government and to carry out his laws.⁷¹ In addition, Birch began exacting policies that he believed would benefit and modernize Perak, the most prominent of which was his policy to end debt-slavery. Given the prevalence of this practice among the elite members of the Malay population, this policy gained Birch no other friends. Sultan Abdullah was against this policy as he was "amongst one of the worst offenders in this respect."⁷² Birch managed to further alienate himself from Sultan Abdullah by superseding his power; Birch instituted a policy in which Malays under Abdullah's rule could talk to Birch about issues concerning the State, after telling the Sultan that he "could not [be trusted]."⁷³

Even in light of these developments with both Abdullah and Ismail, Birch continued to work towards increasing and collecting revenue from Perak rajas, chiefs, and Sultan Abdullah

⁷¹ Ismail's letter also rejected all of the terms of the Pangkor Treaty "on any account" and charged that the Treaty was illegal. Burns, 323.

⁷² Ibid, 196.

⁷³ Burns, 167.

himself. In late 1875 threats to Birch's life became common knowledge amongst British officials. On 16 September 1875, Birch spoke specifically of the "reports on all sides that they wanted to kill me... [hoping for] a new man" who would be at their mercy as they would be less familiar with Perak.⁷⁴ In his account of Birch's assassination, Swettenham recalls that a raja in Pasir Salak called for Birch to be killed "if he attempted to post any notices there."⁷⁵ Birch ignored such threats, stating that he did "not believe they would ever" attempt to kill him.⁷⁶ He was, of course, wrong. On 1 November 1875, Birch landed in Pasir Salak to post official British proclamations. Swettenham reports that "seventy armed men" gathered, and that Birch was killed in a "floating bath-house by the river bank." His body was recovered four days later.⁷⁷ The British government ruled that Sultan Abdullah had conspired in the assassination of Birch; the raja who ordered the killing in Pasir Salak and two of his conspirators in the town were executed. Sultan Abdullah was sent into exile with his family.

It is unlikely that Birch's death could have been avoided. The British could have avoided the intrigue and in-fighting of the Malay rulers, or they could have taken the threats against Birch's life more seriously. However, the evidence suggests that the British never believed in a policy of isolationism in the Malay states; their presence was simply too important to the modernization of the people and state of Perak, as well as the continued collection of revenue for the benefit of the Crown. Conversely, they believed that an uprising of any sort – let alone an assassination of a British official – was an impossibility. Further, British resident policies did not change after Birch's death. In fact, Swettenham suggested that it was only the conditions present in Perak – these included the presence of two Sultans and the lack of modern conveniences such

⁷⁴ Burns, 322.

⁷⁵ Swettenham, 205.

⁷⁶ Burns, 322.

⁷⁷ Swettenham, 205 – 206.

as roads – that doomed Birch to failure.⁷⁸ In 1876, after a review of Birch’s assassination, Lord Carnarvon in the Colonial Office issued “detailed instructions... in regard to the functions of British Residents.”⁷⁹ In his decree, Carnarvon stated that there was no proof to suggest the resident system failed.⁸⁰

The British colonial government’s response to the assassination of a British resident was minimal compared to their relative involvement and interest in less severe Chinese activities in the colony. At no point did the Chinese carry out a complex assassination plan against their British counterparts, yet the British continued to view the Chinese as a larger threat than the Malays. The British moved to implement a policy of deportation of Chinese immigrants if they were assumed to be a part of a riot, even one in which no harm to person or property; conversely, the raja that instigated the murder of a British citizen was allowed to stay in Malaya under the protection of another raja. Further, while policies concerning the Chinese continued to change based on British understandings of Chinese power and influence, not only did the resident policy in the Malay states not change, but it was found to be the best course of action even after murder of a resident. These discrepancies in British policy can be tied directly to their perceptions of the subjects under their rule; the Malays continued to be viewed as backwards savages, while the Chinese were seen as powerful threats to British rule.

⁷⁸ Swettenham speaks at great length to the inevitability of Birch’s failure; he states that Perak was a land where “every man was law unto himself” and that it was only through “force of arms” that peace in Perak was secured. See Swettenham, 214-215.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 216.

⁸⁰ Carnarvon also stated that any other course would be “open to graver risk, larger expenditure, and more doubtful results.” He did suggest that future residents “not interfere more frequently or to greater extent than is necessary with the minor details” and outlined the same objects of advisement that Birch was asked to follow: maintenance of law and the system of taxation, as well as the collection of revenue. Ibid, 216-217.

Conclusion

The official reports written by the British and under consideration in this chapter speak volumes as to the British state of mind in the 1860s and 70s. It is in these reports that we can see the ways in which the British imagined their colonial subjects, even if evidence suggested a different narrative. On the one hand, the British envisioned the Malays as “incapable, impracticable aborigines,” who could be easily led and controlled while the success of the raja’s assassination plot was seen as an anomaly.⁸¹ Even though the evidence pointed to a resident system that was broken and ineffective, the British continued with this policy. The government was so sure of the success of the resident system that they believed instituting any other policy would leave the colony “open to graver risk.”⁸²

The British perception of the Chinese is also clear within the pages of these colonial documents. Beginning in 1846 and continuing until well after the Chinese Protectorate Act of 1877, the British were continually concerned with the Chinese, who they considered equal parts problematic to rule and central to success; the British believed the population almost impossible to control, but also vital to “European enterprise” in the colony.⁸³ These attitudes and perceptions continued to shape British policy towards the Chinese, with the addition of numerous legislative acts and official proclamations.

In comparison to British reactions to the Chinese population in Malaya, British response to the administration of an entire Malay state and the subsequent assassination of a British official seems derisory. As evidenced by the sheer number of instances in which the British

⁸¹ *Acts, Ordinances, and Proclamations from the Colonies: Straits Settlements Act*, Legislative Council 23 June 1872, CO 275/15 (London: National Archive, Kew), 17.

⁸² Blythe, 216

⁸³ In an address to the Legislative Council, a British un-official spoke of the lawlessness of secret societies and the inability of the colonial government to control them. In the same paper, in fact only four sentence later, the same official said that “European enterprise would have little here except for the aid of Chinese energy.” Legislative Council 23 June 1872, CO 275/15, 17.

considered Chinese involvement in the colony versus those that involved Malays, the latter group played almost no role in the development of colonial policy in Malaya. The British at once feared and needed the Chinese population; the same can simply not be said of their relationship with the native Malay population. Where Chinese were seen as cunning and powerful, the Malays were seen as childlike and in need of direction.

For these reasons the British advanced a barrage of legislative initiatives that sought to control and minimize the impact of Chinese in Malaya. Thus, the fifth chapter analyzes one of the key pieces of this legislation, the institution of the Chinese Protectorate Act of 1872. Among other things, this piece of legislation created the position of the Protector of the Chinese, a British official whose sole function was to work with the Chinese in Malaya in an effort to catalog their movements and activities. While the relative importance of the Chinese could be seen throughout British involvement in Malaya, it was with this Act that the British officially recognized the centrality of the Chinese to British Malaya.

Chapter Five

Legislating a Colony

The Chinese population in Malaya presented the British with a complicated and unprecedented problem. On one hand, the British needed the Chinese for a number of reasons – to control Chinese populations within the colony, to continue heading lucrative business enterprises, and to continue importing laborers, among other functions – all of which were tied to the economic success of the colony. On the other hand, the Chinese, and specifically secret societies, presented a potential threat to British rule because of their organization, their independence, and the sheer number of Chinese in the colony. In an effort to minimize the perceived threat of the Chinese in Malaya while simultaneously working with this population for the benefit of the colony, the British undertook a series of legislative acts that dealt specifically with this ethnic group.

This chapter will analyze two key pieces of British legislative policy. First, I examine the Chinese Immigrant Ordinance of 1877 – otherwise known as the CIO. The official purpose of the CIO provided assistance and a government structure of control for the massive Chinese immigrant population. Unofficially, the CIO controlled most actions, movements, and businesses of the Chinese within Malaya, immigrant and settler alike. Second, I look at a policy extension of the CIO – the Annual Report of the Chinese Protector. This report detailed British advancement in implementing the terms of the CIO and provided tangible evidence of its success. It also outlined the movements of the Chinese within Malaya, with a concentration on the segments of that population that required more attention based on British perceptions of their relative power in the colony. Together, these policies present a picture of how the British interpreted their role and the role of the Chinese in the colony. While the British wanted to

institute a policy of control that could ensure their superiority in relation to the Chinese, they also wanted to ensure that the Chinese, and secret societies, would be able to continue to help develop the economic stability of Malaya. Likewise, this legislation negated the Malay population from the ‘protection’ of the British colonial government; as the British conceived of their role as administrator and protector and the Chinese role as in need of control but central to the economy, the role of Malays was virtually annulled. There was no piece of legislation enacted by the British that treated the Malay in a similar manner as the CIO provided for the Chinese. These roles were influenced and formulated by British conceptions of the Chinese and Malays, dealings with the Chinese in China, and interactions within the colony.

While interactions between the British and Chinese have been analyzed in the past, this chapter seeks to address the lack of scholarship that deals with the motivation for, and purpose of, British legislation in colonial Malaya. British legislation in this region is telling of the Sino-British relationship in British Malaya, as well as British perceptions of the Chinese both within and outside of the colony.¹ As previously noted, the British spent a great deal of time and attention to their administration of the Chinese population in Malaya. The legislation under consideration in this chapter further evidences how central the Chinese were to British policy in the colony. Conversely, the lack of legislation concerning the native Malay population is also telling of the British relationship and perceptions of that ethnic group.² Malays did not prove to be the tranquil, subservient natives as characterized by the British; this evidence did not, however, encourage the British to institute wide-sweeping legislation in an effort to control

¹ The most comprehensive study of British perceptions of the Chinese is Hillemann’s *Asian Empire and British Knowledge: China and the Networks of British Imperial Expansion*. Hillemann argues that the British and Chinese met in isolated spheres, in which the British developed a constructed understanding of the Chinese. Southeast Asia is one such sphere that Hillemann analyzes at length.

² Secondary sources that analyze British legislation most often focus on that legislation that sought to control Chinese and secret societies within the colony. The most in-depth of these is Blythe’s *The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya*. Blythe’s work focuses primarily on the legislation and policies enacted by the British as lens through which to analyze these societies impact on the colony.

them.³ The intricacies of British relationships with the Chinese, juxtaposed to their interactions with the native Malay population, provide a new narrative of British imperialism – one that explores British perceptions and conceptions and their application in British colonies. British perceptions of the subject populations in the colony proved as influential, if not more so, than evidence on the ground; these perception shaped the British conception of the colony, and allowed for the Chinese population to become singularly important within the Malay economy.

COOPERATION AND INTERVENTION

Legislative Necessity

Initially, the British recognized the necessity of creating a special association with the Chinese in Malaya; a necessity born of both large numbers of Chinese in the Straits Settlements as well as the pre-existing political structure created in the country by secret societies.⁴ In Malaya, this often meant Chinese businessmen, who played a role in both trade and business, and Chinese coolie traders, who were central to the importation of labor. These circumstances were not new to the British; the same types of political controls were exercised by the Chinese in China, with whom the British had extensive experience because of the century they had spent trading in China.⁵ Both the system of governance established by close-knit societies, led by powerful Chinese businessmen and the lucrative trade system established by coolie traders were familiar institutions. This only served to further spur British insistence on controlling the

³ John Scott has several volumes dedicated to the “weapons of the weak” – or tactics used by segments of the population who have little to no power within their government structure. He has used many examples of these weapons within the context of Malaysia. Some of the tactics used by Malays to supersede British power have included work slowdowns, the purposeful destruction of property, and evasion of government laws and regulations. See John Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) and John Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

⁴ These systems have been covered in more depth in chapter 2, see pp. 6-12.

⁵ The Chinese government was tremendously stringent in their allowance of British trade in China. Certain Chinese businessmen, specifically Hong merchants, were allowed to trade with the British, but no others. The British were used to dealing with only these powerful Chinese businessmen, who more or less controlled trade in China. See Bickers, 9.

Chinese. For decades the British had been made to play by the rules of the Chinese in China; the British had no intention of repeating this relationship in British Malaya.⁶ On the other hand, the British knew that utilizing Chinese groups as they broadened their influence in Malaya was essential to success.

At the beginning of their intervention in Malaya, between 1819 and 1829 especially, the British co-opted Chinese support; they relied on prominent Chinese businessmen – called Kapitans – to manage Chinese populations in both rural areas and Chinese-dominated enclaves in the Straits Settlements.⁷ This relationship did not, however, expand to include secret societies. While the British were willing to work with powerful businessmen, they labeled secret societies as “dangerous societies,” and almost immediately began to seek ways to control these groups.⁸ However, Chinese secret societies counted both the most powerful businessmen and immigrants as members, and thus played a major role in organizing and controlling the general Chinese population. Additionally, secret societies ran the businesses taxed by the British. These businesses, which included opium, gambling, and spirit farms, brought significant revenue to the colonial government. The coolie trade was also fundamental to the stability of Malayan economy, especially in terms of the lucrative mining and agricultural markets. Coolie traders relied on powerful secret societies to both organize and fund coolie importation to the colony, giving secret societies tremendous influence in these areas of the economy. In these ways, secret societies were also beneficial to British Malaya; thus, while they sought to control secret societies, the British were also aware of their centrality to the Malayan economy.

⁶ Bickers argues that the British in China were seen as a settler society, juxtaposed to the powerful Chinese influence who controlled most British movement. These “settlers,” who Bickers suggests made up the majority of all British in China, had significant influence on trade agreements and were constantly working towards a “foreign-controlled society” who could advance their position in treaty ports. Controlling trade in Malaya was equally important, especially in the face of Chinese business interests and trade. See Bickers, 67.

⁷ This system was replicated by the Dutch in Chinese-controlled enclaves of Batavia. See Tagliacozzo, 139.

⁸ Blythe, 5.

In the late 1860s and early 1870s, British attitudes towards the Chinese began to shift dramatically. Not only was the number of immigrants entering the country every year increasing exponentially, but Chinese secret societies were also causing far more disturbances within the colony. In Malacca, the number of Chinese increased twofold from 1827 to 1852, from five thousand to almost eleven thousand, and comprised twenty percent of the overall population.⁹ In Singapore during roughly the same period, the Chinese population ballooned from almost fourteen thousand to over fifty thousand, to account for over half of the population.¹⁰ The statistics were even more startling in Perak, which the British took under formal control in 1874. In Larut alone – a major tin mining district in Perak – there were twenty thousand Chinese to only three thousand Malays. More alarming still was the number of those Chinese in Larut who were affiliated with a secret society; thirteen thousand Chinese in Larut belonged to either the Hai San or Toh Peh Kong societies.¹¹ Disturbances among and within the secret societies were also on the rise.

Where Raffles had noted small disturbances in the Chinese area of Singapore only forty years before, by the 1860s secret societies were engaged in major riots that caused significant upheaval within the colony. In Penang in 1867, a major riot erupted between the Hokkiens and the Cantonese, two major dialect groups with strong ties to the Toh Peh Kong and the Ghee Hin respectively.¹² These riots involved over thirty-five thousand Chinese in street fights and lasted ten days.¹³ While the Penang Riot was among the most severe, riots between secret society factions were common in all of the Malay states.

⁹ Comber, 45.

¹⁰ Ibid, 50.

¹¹ Ibid, 157.

¹² Yen, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, 1800-1911*, 201.

¹³ Ibid, 198.

Because of the nature of societies and, more importantly, their perceived power and potential ability to cause violent disruptions in the colony, officials began to note more urgently the necessity to control, or abolish, secret societies in Malaya. Initially, the British colonial government granted additional powers to the British police force in an effort to better control the Chinese secret societies.¹⁴ However, the police force faced numerous issues, the most significant of which was an inability to communicate with Chinese communities. The police force was run by the British, and British officers comprised the top posts of Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent, Inspectors, and sub-Inspectors. As in India, native populations were also appointed to the police force, making up the majority of force in the Straits Settlements; in 1878, the police force included 45 Europeans, 540 Klings (Hindu immigrants), 630 Malays, and 5 Chinese.¹⁵ The negation of Chinese from the ranks of the police force was due, in large part, because of the British government's distrust of the Chinese in general. Government officials argued that the Chinese would not be loyal to the British, and would instead support and advocate for their respective secret societies or dialect groups.¹⁶ Despite significant language barriers, the police were called on to suppress violent outbursts and were expected to eliminate potential threats before they began.

To accomplish this goal, the police first focused on the movement of secret societies within and between, Malayan states. "Lawless factions" of secret societies in the Straits Settlements made a business of transporting Chinese immigrants between Malayan states.¹⁷ For this reason, the colonial government focused on limiting Chinese movement between the states.

¹⁴ Blythe, 197.

¹⁵ *Straits Settlements Government Gazettes: Report of the Inspector General of Police for the Year 1878*. British Colonial Office 22 February 1878, CO 275/23, (London: National Archive, Kew), 51.

¹⁶ There were two main arguments regarding the suitability of including the Chinese in the police force. The first was that only Chinese could effectively communicate with one another, and as such would be best suited to work with that community. On the other hand, many officials cited not only loyalty issues, but also that the Chinese were prone to corruption, uneducated, and their lack of interest in serving the colonial government. See Comber, 152.

¹⁷ Blythe, 63.

This was especially true of emigration from Singapore, where the majority of immigrants landed and from whence the majority of secret societies based their operations. Colonial officials believed this would help eliminate disturbances between separate society factions. However, while the limitation of emigration from Singapore to other Malayan states was largely supported, British colonial officials favored “absolute freedom of immigration” to the colony.¹⁸ In both instances British goals were unrealistic, especially when the job of containment fell to the British police forces. Not only was it impossible to locate secret societies and their members, but with open immigration laws the potential pool of members was unending. For these reasons, control of secret societies became central to British legislative concerns, rather than that of the police force.

Legislation of both the Chinese, and more specifically Chinese secret societies, began in earnest in November of 1869. It was at this time that the British Council passed “Ordinance XIX of 1869,” better known as the “Suppression of Dangerous Societies Act” which “provided... for the registration and control of all societies.”¹⁹ However, the purpose of the Act was not necessarily to register every Chinese secret society; this goal would have been impossible to achieve because of the secretive nature of the societies. Rather, government officials hoped that the Act would “impress upon the Chinese that the Government was now armed with far greater powers” in terms of controlling their actions.²⁰ In truth, the British wished to have the legislative means to place pressure on only those secret societies that they found to be potentially dangerous. Many secret societies readily worked with the British as it was in the best interest of

¹⁸ Bythe, 197.

¹⁹ Blythe, 151.

²⁰ Blythe quotes the Governor of the Straits Settlements, from British legislative documents GD (Government Dispatch) 267, 20 December 1869, paras 8-11. See Blythe, 152.

both groups.²¹ For this reason, the British wished to keep good relations with those secret societies with whom they worked. In most Acts, the British wished to “obtain the confidence and cooperation of the responsible portion of the Chinese community” in an effort to avoid conflict with the Chinese community and to decrease the “influence of the secret societies.”²² Those secret societies that worked with the British did so because of benefits including safer trade, increased protection in the colony, and oftentimes prestige within the Chinese community. In fact, there was no way the British had the resources to do what the Chinese secret societies did with labor, which is one significant reason for tolerating them. However, working with the British was not synonymous with working for the British. Thus many of these Chinese societies maintained significant autonomy.

While registration of all secret societies was not feasible, the colonial government believed strongly that consistent registration would give the government the upper hand in interactions with Chinese secret societies.²³ Along with registration of societies, the Suppression of Dangerous Societies Act noted the businesses in which each society was involved. Knowledge of these businesses allowed the British government to keep track of and collect all taxable income from these societies. While imperfect, this was the first instance of the British recording this type of information, and the practice would continue well into the late nineteenth century. However, because not all societies worked openly within the colony, knowledge of all of their practices was not possible. This led to a necessity to control not merely

²¹ For the Chinese, the British provided a safe trading environment, and largely supported Chinese businesses including opium and spirit farms and the coolie trade. For the British, secret societies supplied a method of controlling a massive Chinese population and provided a significant and stable revenue stream to the colonial government. See Yen, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, 1800-1911*, 110-116.

²² Blythe, 201.

²³ The registration of Chinese secret societies was seen proof of British government success in control of secret societies. It was not until after the establishment of the Chinese Protectorate nearly a decade later that the failures of the earlier system and registration act were seen. Pickering speaks to these ideas in his reports of both 1877 and 1878. See *Straits Settlements Government Gazettes*, British Colonial Office 22 February 1878, CO 275/4 (London: National Archive, Kew), 90.

societies, but also the businesses in which they were most often involved. While opium and spirit farms were primarily run by the Chinese, and prostitution and gambling were largely controlled by secret societies, the element on which all Chinese secret societies relied was Chinese immigrants. Not only did immigrants join secret societies en masse, they also made up the majority of paid laborers and paying customers to Chinese businesses.

For this reason, beginning in the 1870s most British legislative advances targeted Chinese immigrants. The Chinese immigrant population was already troublesome to the British, as that segment of the population began to explode in the during this time period. Multitudes of Chinese began arriving from the southern provinces of China to escape the harsh conditions caused by a crackdown by the Manchu and a drought that killed thousands of people; other Chinese simply sought to profit from the rich trade opportunities presented by the free ports in Malaya.²⁴ Among other roles, the British saw themselves as the purveyors of safety for those within their colony; thousands of Chinese immigrants going to unknown locations, working in unknown jobs – or none at all – and potentially suffering under the harsh treatment of corrupt Chinese businessmen was a constant concern.²⁵ Moreover, in the eyes of the British, the legislation of Chinese immigrants was synonymous with the legislation of the institutions that brought them to the colony. The majority of Chinese immigrants were brought to Malaya by coolie traders, who worked with Chinese businessmen. These businessmen, in turn, were almost always related to secret societies. In addition, most Chinese immigrants would join secret

²⁴ Manchu rule was especially harsh in the southern provinces of China, leading to a wave of political refugees entering Malaya. However, economic prosperity was also a central motivator to immigrate, and many Chinese entered the colony in an effort work, prosper, and return to China wealthy men. See Yen, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, 1800-1911*, 111. See also Comber, 25 and 29. Once the Chinese government lifted restriction on emigration in the 1840s, the “credit ticket system” and familial sponsorships also began to account for a large number of immigrants. See Andaya, 178.

²⁵ In the 1860s and 70s, Chinese immigrants were arriving at such a rate that their entrance to the country was virtually uncontrollable. Each week in November and December of 1873, between 7,000 and 8,000 Chinese immigrants entered Singapore. See Comber, 149.

societies in the states where they eventually landed, causing a significant increase in the number of society members with whom the British would have to deal.²⁶ However, the legislation of Chinese immigration needed to be done in such a way as to continue to allow significant immigration to the colony, since Chinese laborers were so central to the growth and stability of the Malay economy.

Chinese Immigrant Ordinance, 1877

By the 1870s, the British had realized their domination of the major ports in Malaya, and were in the process of expanding colonial influence into the mainland. While the process of formally asserting control over the Chinese populations had begun much earlier, the annexation of Perak as a colonial holding in 1874 spurred British legislative action to manage this ethnic group.²⁷ The number of immigrant laborers that Perak housed made stipulations for their control – and protection – more pressing to colonial legislators. The passing of the Chinese Immigrant Ordinance (CIO) of 1877 paved the way for considerable control of the Chinese on the part of the British. An Act of only fourteen stipulations, consisting of only three pages in the archival record of British legislation of Colonial Malaya, the CIO was a deceptively powerful weapon in the British arsenal of colonial control.

Officially, the British government in Malaya passed the CIO in an effort to provide support for the numerous Chinese immigrants who entered British Malaya. For instance, depots for the reception of immigrants were established under the fourth provision, while the sixth provision called for a British official to explain, in detail, all aspects of the contract under which

²⁶ The British colonial government believed that many of the immigrants that entered Malaya, and certainly those that entered en masse, “fell into the hands of,” and were largely controlled by, secret societies. See Comber, p. 149. In addition, the growing demand for labor resulted in the influx of thousands of immigrants at the hands of secret societies and coolie traders. See Yen, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, 1800-1911*, 5.

²⁷ The majority of the population of Perak was Chinese. Tin mining in this state was dominated by Chinese businessmen, and as tin became more profitable the demand for labor increased exponentially. As previously cited, the population in Larut, one of the main tin mining districts, was 20,000 Chinese to only 3,000 Malays. See Comber, 157.

the immigrants worked. While many provisions looked to be directed solely at Chinese immigrants, certain provisions provided for extralegal controls. Specifically, the first provision of the CIO provided for a British official to be appointed as the “Protector of the Chinese.” The Protector was charged with ensuring that provisions of the CIO were upheld and that Chinese immigrants were, in fact, protected. To the British, part of that protection was the limiting the interaction between immigrants and secret societies.²⁸ Moreover, once appointed, the Protector’s duties were expanded to include the registration of all secret societies in the colony. As such, unofficially, the British sought to exert additional influence over the most powerful Chinese factions who were central to the importation of Chinese immigrants.

Chinese Immigrant Ordinance, 1877 – Provision One

The first provision of the CIO was the creation of the “Protector of Chinese Immigrants,” a British official who would essentially oversee all Chinese in his state who was appointed by the Governor “at each or any of the Settlements.”²⁹ Any number of Assistant Protectors and other Officers were then appointed by the primary Protector in an effort to “carry out the provisions of [the] ordinance.”³⁰ All of the appointed Protectors and Assistant Protectors were pulled from a pool of British officials in both Malaya and British colonial settlements in India and China. In theory, this piece of the CIO gave the British colonial government authority over all of the Chinese in Malaya, and gave the Protector of the Chinese the ability to appoint help in an effort to deal with the Chinese populations in the colony. Protectors were established in all of the British-occupied Malaya states, beginning with Singapore, Malacca, Penang, and Perak.

²⁸ In his Annual Report, Pickering highlighted that, after the establishments of depots and increased interaction with British officials, the number of Chinese immigrants who joined secret societies fell dramatically. See *Straits Settlements Government Gazettes: Annual Report of the Protector of the Chinese for the year 1878*. British Colonial Office, 22 February 1878, CO 275/23 (London: National Archive, Kew), 38.

²⁹ *Acts, Ordinances, and Proclamations from the Colonies: Straits Settlements Acts*. British Colonial Office, 1877, CO 274/3 (London: National Archive, Kew), 583/5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Headquarters were located “in each capital city of the states, [with] branch offices in districts where the Chinese were numerous.”³¹

The first Protector appointed was W.A. Pickering, an obvious choice as he had considerable experience with Chinese populations; he was a member of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service and spent eight years in China, and had a firm command of the Chinese language.³² Prior to Pickering’s appointment, many of those best suited to communicate with the Chinese were the Chinese themselves; the British refused to appoint Chinese to either the police force or colonial positions, leading to a lack of officials who could communicate with the Chinese.³³ As a result, the Chinese Protectorate sought British officials who had a thorough understanding of both Chinese language and culture. With Pickering, the British had a solid and “thoroughly trustworthy” official, who fit both bills and could thus accurately communicate important information to the Chinese.³⁴

In September 1877, after the passing of the CIO and Pickering’s appointment as Protector of Chinese, the registration process of “Dangerous societies” was moved to the Chinese Protectorate.³⁵ Pickering became a Registrar of Societies, an additional designation seen as an extension of his protection duties.³⁶ Pickering’s first move under this heading was to re-register all secret society headmen in each district, so that “a member could always be found through his headmen.”³⁷ This duty had previously been the sole responsibility of the Police, but with its

³¹ Yen, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, 1800-1911*, 149.

³² Blythe, 158.

³³ The arguments for Chinese in the police force had specifically to do with their ability to communicate with their compatriots. The arguments against this practice held that Chinese appointed not be trusted because of their allegiance, and also that appoints could lead to “the danger of Chinese clan and tribal jealousies” which might in turn lead to backlash against the British colonial government. See Blythe, 159.

³⁴ Blythe, 199.

³⁵ *Straits Settlements Government Gazettes*. British Colonial Office, 22 February 1878, CO 275/4 (London: National Archive, Kew), 90.

³⁶ Blythe, 205.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

move a cooperative agreement between the Police and the Chinese Protectorate was reached. The work of registering secret societies and their headmen was, in Pickering's estimation, a great success. He said as much in his Annual Report of 1877, in which he reported on a disruption in Malacca caused by two factions of Chinese secret societies. Pickering stated that registration of headmen, in particular, enabled the colonial government to have "full information... to enforce the attendance of 100 headmen from three different societies."³⁸ The result was a mediation which allowed for the end of the disturbance before it became a more serious problem.

In addition, Pickering instituted a policy of deportation for members of a secret society who supported, or engaged in, disturbances in the colony. The Dangerous Societies Act, passed in 1873, called for the headmen of secret societies to be held responsible for the actions of its members. Pickering took this stipulation one step further and threatened to deport headmen who did not do their part to control their members. He stated that this policy ensured that the Chinese would consider more carefully the actions of their members, lest they be considered traitors of their own societies, as the "Government would not hesitate to deport any Chief or number of Chiefs."³⁹ This policy, however, only extended to Chinese-born society members. As a result, Pickering suggested that the government consider alternatives to deal with Straits-born Chinese.

Chinese Immigrant Ordinance, 1877 – Provisions Two, Three and Four

Where the first provision called for a handful of British officials who would oversee all Chinese immigrants in their states, the provisions that followed instituted a series of policies that dictated how British rule of Chinese immigrants would function. In many cases, the success of these provisions relied on the participations of the Chinese community. For that reason, British officials desperately needed and actively sought Chinese help. The second, third, and fourth

³⁸ *Straits Settlements Government Gazettes*, 275/4, 90.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

provisions of the CIO covered the logistics of legally admitting thousands of Chinese immigrants into Malaya. These provisions designated where Chinese immigrants could enter the colony and established depots where they would be received upon entry.

The second provision designated three ports at which vessels carrying Chinese immigrants could land, with penalties enacted in provision ten for any landing of Chinese immigrants contrary to the second provision. The limitation of ports of landing for Chinese immigrants was important because the remainder of the CIO depended on immigrant accessibility. For instance, provision three required the inspection of both the immigrant ship and the immigrants on board by “the Protector of Chinese or his agent.”⁴⁰ The Protector was to be notified of any immigrant ship’s arrival, and no immigrants could land until they were inspected.

Once inspection of the ship and cargo was completed, there remained the issue of where the Chinese immigrants would be taken for further examination. As such, the fourth provision called for the establishment of “depôts for the reception of Chinese immigrants.”⁴¹ These depôts served as not only “reception” areas for Chinese immigrants, but also holding tanks if the processing of a Chinese immigrant was not in order. In addition, the requirement that all immigrants enter the colony through a British-controlled depot gave the British an opportunity to both interview and register all incoming immigrants, a process accounted for in provision six. As immigrants were only legally allowed to enter Malaya at designated ports, these depots became indispensable to the success of the CIO. However, up until this time the only facilities equipped to handle an influx of Chinese immigrants were those maintained by secret societies in

⁴⁰ *Acts, Ordinances, and Proclamations from the Colonies: Straits Settlements Acts*, CO 274/3, 583/5

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

the colony.⁴² The British did not have the resources or the man-power to establish residences that could accommodate the thousands of potential immigrants that entered the colony on any given week. The issue of manpower was resolved by allowing Chinese businessmen to apply for a license, issued by the colonial government, to maintain depots in these ports.⁴³ This proved a success for two reasons. First, the British could control most aspects of immigrant movement by defining when and where they could enter the colony. Second, with the licensing of depots, the British could keep new Chinese immigrants away from the immediate influence of secret societies.

Chinese Immigrant Ordinance, 1877 – Provisions Five, Six, Seven and Eight

Once in the colony and received at the depots, Chinese immigrants had to go through a series of colonial checks to ensure their safety upon entering the country. Among the issues addressed in these provisions were the payment of passage monies, employment, and the health of the immigrant which all needed to be verified before immigrants could be released into Malaya.⁴⁴ The first check, defined by provision five, called for the examination of Chinese immigrants “as to the payment of their passage money.”⁴⁵ Often, coolie brokers would pay for passage and then be reimbursed by the employer for whom the immigrant would work. The immigrant would, essentially, be placed in the position of an indentured servant, having to work for the employer until the cost of passage was paid in full. While the British were concerned with the wellbeing of Chinese immigrants and wanted to ensure that they had a means of paying

⁴² Before the colonial government intervened, depots were commonly used as a place to house the coolie laborers imported by coolie traders and secret societies. These depots were more often than not “sheds not suitable for human habitation,” and guarded by secret society members who would torture those coolies who tried to escape. See Yen, p. 8.

⁴³ *Straits Settlements Government Gazettes*, CO 275/4, 88.

⁴⁴ *Acts, Ordinances, and Proclamations from the Colonies: Straits Settlements Acts*. British Colonial Office, 1877, CO 274/3 (London: National Archive, Kew), 583/6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

their passage, this provision of the CIO also gave the British considerable information about who was importing Chinese immigrants and where the immigrants would be working.

Officially, the sixth, seventh, and eighth provisions of the CIO described the conditions under which a Chinese immigrant could be released into the colony. Unofficially, these provisions were also fundamental in advancing a policy of involvement and integration of Chinese immigrants into the British colonial structure. Provision six allowed for the release of Chinese immigrants to the businessman for whom they would work, but only after the British Protectorate had an opportunity to “explain the terms of any agreement to labour entered into or proposed to be entered into.”⁴⁶ This provision allowed for Chinese immigrants to have greater access to information to which they might not otherwise be privy and to better understand their contractual obligations. The necessity of this provision was born of the terms under which some coolie laborers entered the colony. At best, cases existed in which coolie laborers were deceived as to their employment; at worst, laborers were kidnapped, tortured, or taken to other ports – such as Deli – where traders would get a higher price.⁴⁷

In his 1877 Annual Report, W.A. Pickering spoke at length about the effect of this provision on the well-being of Chinese immigrants. He illustrated his point by referring to a situation in which “one of the least respectable Licensed Recruiters” of Chinese immigrant laborers sought to nullify the terms of the contract signed by the immigrants before their arrival in Singapore.⁴⁸ These immigrants had, at first, been promised \$28 dollars upon their arrival in the colony, to be paid back with their earnings from employment, a deal negated by the recruiter before landing at Singapore. Pickering stated that, because of the provision that each immigrant must meet with a colonial official before entering the country and being turned over to their

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ See Yen, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, 1800-1911*, 8 and 9.

⁴⁸ *Straits Settlements Government Gazettes*. CO 275/4, 89.

place of employment, their “rights had been protected” and each immigrant was thereafter fairly remunerated.⁴⁹

Another result of this provision was the ability of the British colonial government to interview incoming immigrants before their release into the colony. Pickering, though seemingly concerned with worker’s rights, also stated that all Chinese immigrants who came before the Protectors were told “there was no need to join any Secret Society for the sake of protection, but that the government is ready at all times to listen to them and to protect them in any lawful employment.”⁵⁰ Situations mediated between unscrupulous recruiters and the immigrants they imported only strengthened the constructed image of the British as Protector of the Chinese, which the British sought to promote as they discouraged secret society membership among the Chinese immigrant population.

Provision seven dictated the holding of Chinese immigrants whose passage had not been paid for, “till arrangements for are made for the payment of his passage money and for his agreement to labour,” but for no longer than ten days against their will.⁵¹ Finally, provision eight required the registration of all immigrants entering the colony, including but not limited to the “place of business... [or] estate” to which the immigrant laborer would work.⁵² This provision also gave the Governor the ability to stipulate any other particulars that needed to be registered before an immigrant was released, with punishments for any person or business not registering according to the Governor’s procedures. Because of the sweeping legality of these provisions, the British were in the position to control almost all aspects of immigrant movement in the country as well as the ability of the Chinese to enter the country in the first place. This situated

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ *Acts, Ordinances, and Proclamations from the Colonies: Straits Settlements Acts*. CO 274/3, 583/6.

⁵² Ibid.

the British in a position to levy significant control over one of the biggest populations in Malaya, as well as to dictate terms concerning immigrant movement to those who imported laborers in the first place; namely, secret societies.

However, the British were mindful of the influence of powerful Chinese in Malaya, and as with the other British colonies, social distinctions dictated many actions of the colonial government. Provision nine reflects this knowledge by carefully defining who would be affected by the CIO, specifically “Chinese brought to the colony from China in any immigrant ship, not being first or second-class cabin passengers.”⁵³ This provision is telling not only of British class-consciousness, but also the significant influence that rich Chinese had in the colony.

The tenth through fourteenth provisions simply stated penalties for not complying with the CIO, and provided for changes that might be necessary in the future. Though, in their entirety these provisions acted as buffers for the British to institute further legislation regarding the Chinese. As is evident, the CIO of 1877 was truly a sweeping piece of legislation on the part of the British. Its impetus, though seemingly the protection of Chinese immigrants, was to allow for much greater control of the Chinese population in Malaya as a whole and the limitation of secret society power within the colony.

If there were no other stipulations presented in the CIO, the establishment of the Protector of the Chinese alone would have provided the British colonial government unprecedented power over the Chinese population in Malaya. Not only did it establish additional means to provide legal support for Chinese immigrants, but it also had a significant impact on the movements and activities of secret societies.⁵⁴ While the British colonial government

⁵³ *Acts, Ordinances, and Proclamations from the Colonies: Straits Settlements Acts*. CO 274/3, 583/6.

⁵⁴ The general consensus amongst British officials was that the registration of secret societies provided for a “lessening of tensions [between Chinese and the government] and a decrease of incidents.” While some disturbances still occurred, these disturbances were often put down quickly thanks to greater interaction between the

thought their system of governance provided significant protection for all Malayan residents – Malays, Indians, and Chinese alike were allowed to take advantage of the colonial judicial system and were protected by the police force – the implementation of the Chinese Protectorate provided even greater access to these services for Chinese immigrants.⁵⁵ Additionally, it provided for increased involvement on the part of the British into the lives of the Chinese in Malaya.

Annual Reports of the Protector of the Chinese

After the Chinese Ordinance of 1877 was passed into law, annual reports regarding the Chinese were put forth to the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements on a yearly basis. The first such report was filed with the Colonial Secretary's Office in February of 1878 by W.A. Pickering. As already noted, these reports centered on the activity of Chinese in Malaya with special attention paid to the success of the Chinese Immigrant Ordinance of 1877 and the work of the Protectors of the Chinese. However, the accompanying tables and data collected by the Chinese Protectorate focused extensively on Chinese secret societies in terms of the registration of immigrant affiliations, society location, and society business activity in British Malaya.

After the CIO was passed, the job of licensing and opening depots to hold Chinese immigrants began. Between September and December 1877, twenty-one such depots were registered and licensed by the Chinese Protectorate. As Table A in Pickering's Annual Report reflects, all twenty-one depots were run by Chinese, and they could accommodate anywhere from 20 to 145 immigrants at a time.⁵⁶ In addition, the registration and licensing of depots

Chinese and the Protector of the Chinese, who also worked more closely with the police. In addition, the Chinese Protectorate provided a foundation for the British colonial government to institute even more stringent laws to limit society influence, which they did in the 1880s and 90s. See Blythe, 209-210.

⁵⁵ Sir Frank Swettenham, first resident of the Federated Malay States, spoke at length about the benefits of a European style of governance in Malaya, and the extent to which it was welcomed by residents of the country. See Swettenham, 228.

⁵⁶ *Straits Settlements Government Gazettes*. CO 275/4, 92.

helped to uphold the “Crimping Ordinance,” also passed in 1877, which made it illegal to solicit workers into contracts by “fraud, deceit, intimidation or false pretences.”⁵⁷ Depots aided in ensuring this fate did not befall Chinese immigrants by limiting coolie broker access to immigrants who entered the country without prearranged employment.

In its first months the Chinese Protectorate had visible success in their registration of incoming immigrants. Tables B and C of the Annual Report specify the number of Chinese immigrants who arrived in Singapore from 30 September until 31 December 1877. In total, 16,668 immigrants arrived from three different prefectures in China – Hong Kong, Swatow, and Amoy.⁵⁸ Of these immigrants, 9,776 stayed in Singapore and the rest proceeded to other ports; those who moved on to Penang (6,737) and Malacca (112) would have been received and cataloged by the Chinese Protectorate there, and the remaining 43 who went to Australia would have been received by a newly established Protectorate in that country.⁵⁹ Of those Chinese immigrants that stayed in Singapore, 2,653 did not have their passage paid and thus were taken to the depots where they could be held until arrangements could be made for their employment. Prior to the CIO, these immigrants would have entered the country with no prospect of employment. With the establishment of the depots, not only were they offered a safe place to stay but also the chance of being recruited by legitimate businesses. As far as the British were concerned, holding these immigrants until work could be found minimized the potential for them to immediately join a secret society in an effort to find work.

Table C concentrated on those immigrants who were examined by colonial officials before they could be released. Table C also cataloged the clan affiliation of these immigrants, with seven tribes recognized in the report; Hokkien, Tay Chew, Macao, Kheh, Hailam, Boyan,

⁵⁷ Blythe, 205.

⁵⁸ *Straits Settlements Government Gazettes*. CO 275/4, 93.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

and Kling.⁶⁰ One of the most affluent secret societies in Singapore, the Ghee Hin, had three separate clan affiliations – Hokkien, Tay Chew, and Hailam – and was thus catalogued as three separate secret societies.⁶¹ As previously noted, many secret societies began as groups of Chinese who gathered based on clan affiliation, and these affiliations then shaped membership in secret societies. As previously noted was the role of clan affiliation in conflicts, riots, and violence between secret societies, which was continually problematic to the maintenance of the peace within the colony. Knowing the affiliation of the immigrants who landed in Singapore served to help colonial officials or police locate these immigrants, as they would most likely affiliate with the secret society that represented their clan.

Table C reflects two goals of the British colonial government that in turn reflect the image that the Protectorate wished to portray. First, and speaking to the image of the colonial government, Table C sought to reflect a government taking exceptional care of its incoming Chinese immigrants, and practicing due diligence to keep its residents safe. If nothing else, Pickering was conscious of the ways in which the Protectorate was perceived, both on the ground in relation to the Chinese residents in Malaya and overseas in terms of the funding of the Protectorate by the Colonial Office. However, this evidence also speaks to the focus on policing both Chinese immigrants and, more importantly, the secret societies to which they belonged. According to the Protectorate, knowledge of immigrants' whereabouts was extremely important to the continued security of the colony; as such, the British colonial government took the identification and tracking of immigrants very seriously. The registration of secret societies and clan affiliation further supported the goal of controlling the Chinese population at large. In addition, registration provided a means to track immigrants over time; knowing an immigrant's

⁶⁰ *Straits Settlements Government Gazettes*. CO 275/4, 93.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 94.

affiliation to both clan and secret society was believed to be a key indicator of how the immigrant would behave while in the colony. Lastly, this process would be a key feature in British policy in an effort to better control the Chinese for decades.

Finally, the Chinese Protectorate devoted considerable time and attention to registering and recording information concerning Chinese secret societies in the colony. This preoccupation is evident in Table D of Pickering's annual report. On this table ten secret societies are listed as registered with the Chinese Protectorate; registration included each society's "Kong-si" address, or meeting house, the name of the President of the Society, the President's occupation, and his residential address.⁶² In addition, the number of office-holders, number of members as registered in dated colonial materials, and the newest count of members were included in the report – the number of *registered* Chinese who belonged to one secret society or another was around 16,000.⁶³ Based on numbers alone, the necessity of governmental oversight of Chinese secret societies is clear; however, British interest was not only based on members of the secret society. The registration of business affiliation for each secret society was also of considerable importance to the British. At least five of the secret societies registered in Table D were involved in businesses that brought significant amounts of revenue to the colonial government; these included opium shopkeepers, gamblers, and coolie brokers.⁶⁴ Also important was the ability of the Chinese Protectorate to keep tabs on the business pursuits of secret societies who they believed to have a "highly objectionable influence" on both the importation of prostitutes

⁶² Ibid, 94.

⁶³ Ibid, 94. While there was no census report in 1877, the Chinese population in Singapore fluctuated between 50,000 and 86,000 between 1860 and 1881, respectively. During that same period, the total population in Singapore grew from approximately 80,000 to 140,000. Given this census data, it would be safe to assess that the percentage of Chinese who belonged to a secret society in 1878 was no less than 20%, especially given the number of unregistered members presumed to be present in the colony at this time. See Comber, 50.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 94.

and the management of brothels.⁶⁵ Registering the businesses of secret societies helped the colonial government to both monitor these issues and take action if necessary.

Where the Annual Report of 1877 had only a few months on which to report, the Annual Report of 1878 reflected the first full year of business for the Chinese Protectorate. As with other instances of dealing with the Chinese, Pickering cites secret society headmen as “very useful in assisting the Government to deal with the lower classes of the Chinese.”⁶⁶ While not an unusual sentiment in and of itself, this public, published statement by Pickering reflects the optimism towards the success of the Chinese Protectorate, especially given how infrequently optimism on the part of secret societies was heretofore expressed. Otherwise, much of the report reflected the ongoing registration of incoming Chinese immigrants, with continued attention to their tribal affiliation and means of employment.

One of the major differences between the 1877 report and 1878 report was Pickering’s explicit examination of the importation of women for the purpose of prostitution. This addition is of note for two reasons. First, as previously discussed, the British believed that the importation of prostitutes was something in which many secret societies were involved. While he did not explicitly indict Chinese secret societies for the illegal *importation* of these women, he was clear that their importation and subsequent sale was supported by Chinese business in Malaya.⁶⁷ These businesses, which included brothel owners and “samsengs” who served as a type of bodyguard for brothel owners, were often affiliated with secret societies, and their owners were most often prominent members.⁶⁸ The importance of prostitution in this context lies in the fact that prostitution in and of itself was not illegal in Malaya – it was a business that

⁶⁵ Blythe, 204.

⁶⁶ *Straits Settlements Government Gazettes*, British Colonial Office 22 February 1878, CO 275/23 (London: National Archive, Kew), 38.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Blythe, 204.

was taxed heavily by the British colonial government and encouraged as an outlet for the thousands of men in the colony who had no wife or family. The point was the secret societies were illegally importing women to Malaya, without the knowledge of the government, which in turn significantly reduced taxable income for the colony.

In addition, and most likely the point of order for Pickering, was the ability of the colonial government to examine any women entering the colony for the purpose of prostitution. The British made mandatory the process of ensuring the health of women used for prostitution with the Contagious Disease Acts, passed in 1869. Pickering cited numerous instances of vessels carrying women for the purpose of prostitution who were listed falsely as “amahs, servants, or caregivers” and enticed to lie to colonial officials when asked why they were entering the country.⁶⁹ This was cause of concern to the Chinese Protectorate not only for the health and safety of the men and women in the colony, but also for the colonial government’s pocketbook. At this time, the British had legalized prostitution through the farming of brothel revenues; if women entered the colony to work in one of the many brothels in Singapore, for instance, that would represent a potential loss of taxable revenue for the British.⁷⁰

In many instances, the Annual Reports acted as propaganda to support the establishment of the Chinese Protectorate and its officers. In both reports Pickering speaks of the great success that the Protectorate had in the quelling of riots and outbreaks in the Chinese community after its inception. However, the number of members did not seem to subside, despite the Protectorate’s work to sway Chinese immigrants from this track. In 1878, almost 4,000 immigrants registered as secret society members.⁷¹ It seems as though, rather than the existence of a Protectorate, the true success of the British in terms of relations with the Chinese was their continued and

⁶⁹ *Straits Settlements Government Gazettes*. CO 275/23, 39.

⁷⁰ See Comber, 95.

⁷¹ *Straits Settlements Government Gazettes*. CO 275/23, 37.

consistent focus on working with this community in Malaya. Cooperation with the Chinese became a common occurrence between the Chinese and British, from quelling riots and placement of immigrant laborers to taxing businesses and trade relationships. While the Protectorate did succeed in keeping significantly better track of the Chinese that entered Malaya, the legislation of Chinese on the ground was truly a cooperative measure between powerful Chinese and British colonial officials.

Conclusion

The Chinese as a Singular Entity

The singular focus on all things Chinese on the part of the British speaks volumes about their attitude in terms of important populations in Malaya. While residents were appointed to each Malay state as intermediaries between the British government and Malay rajas, their real purpose was to ensure that rajas followed British mandates and continued to be agreeable to British interests. In the case of residents, the superiority of the British was never questioned, and the lack of legislative acts concerning Malays suggests that the British were not worried about uprisings from this population. In terms of the Indian population in Malaya, not only was there no substantial legislation that focused on this population, but reports from Malaya rarely addressed their presence. In the entirety of the “Report of the Inspector-General of Police for the Year 1878,” there was not a single mention of any person of Indian nationality.⁷² In Sir Frank Swettenham’s monograph concerning his time as a resident in the country, *British Malaya*, the

⁷² *Paper Laid Before the Legislative Council by Command of His Excellency the Administrator*, British Colonial Office 24 July 1879, CO 275/23 (London: National Archive, Kew), 54-59.

only mention of Indians were in terms of the government in India, not those who lived or worked in Malaya.⁷³

Conversely, the British appointed teams of colonial officials in an effort to better control, deal with, or facilitate cooperation with the Chinese in Malaya. For a significant period of time while in the colony, the British had no idea how to deal with the Chinese. This is evidenced not only by the lack of a Chinese-speaking colonial official until well into the 1870s, but also the multiple incarnations of legislative acts aimed at controlling the Chinese. Many of these first acts met with failure or, at the least, ineffectuality. Confusion was not only caused by misunderstandings as a result of significant language barriers, but also because the British were convinced of the centrality of the Chinese to the financial well-being of the colony. The British had no interest in completely eliminating Chinese influence in terms of trade or taxable businesses.

In addition, Chinese secret societies became a preoccupation to the British once a Chinese Protectorate was established; this was in part because of their power in the colony and in part because of their separation from British authority. Pickering became convinced that registration of these societies was central to controlling them – keeping in mind that the Dangerous Societies Act called for this registration beginning in 1869 – though the evidence suggests that it was the cooperative nature of the Chinese Protectorate that facilitated fewer uprisings. This did not stop the Protectorate from working towards both limiting memberships and convincing immigrants that secret societies were unnecessary.

A singular focus on the Chinese helped to create a colonial system that situated the British and the Chinese on substantially more equal footing than the British and other ethnic groups in Malaya. In many instances the British worked towards controlling the Chinese, with

⁷³ Swettenham, 228.

specific attention to secret societies, but this hardly ended their activities. In response, people like Pickering spoke openly about working with societies and headmen, rather than controlling their actions. This alone was a serious departure from British interaction with native Malay rulers, who they controlled through residents in their districts.

Immediately, this created a financial system in Malaya that was dominated by the Chinese. Importation of labor became a primarily Chinese pursuit, both because of access to laborers in China and because many Chinese businesses required labor to be successful. Trade also became associated with the Chinese. Not only did the British rely on the Chinese for trade with China, but the Chinese also began to rely on the British to facilitate safe trade routes to China. The symbiotic relationship led to a codependence on both sides. Malays, on the other hand, were largely absent from these dealings. Chinese paid rajas for use of land or to rent tin mines, while the British taxed Malay trade along the rivers within the country. However, there were few instances in which Malays controlled mines, agriculture, or trade within their own country.

The power of the Chinese in Malaya was tied directly to the ways in which the British situated this ethnic group in Malayan society. While there is no report that specifically lists the Chinese as the most important players in the continued success of the Malayan economy, documents suggest that British officials were aware of the relative worth of Chinese in the colony. In addition, the singular focus on the Chinese on the part of the British speaks to their understanding of this group as central to the colony's economic health. The ways in which the British approached these two groups – Malays and Chinese – indicates the seriousness with which the British confronted the Chinese, while the Malays were seen as tangential. Further, legislative acts implemented by the British speak to their preoccupation with the Chinese, while

the lack of evidence that addresses the native Malay population is equally telling of British negation of this ethnic group in administration of the colony.

In many ways, British influence in Malaya only helped in reordering the social structure of the country. The British saw the Chinese as inherently powerful, if cunning and untrustworthy, and capable of existing apart from British authority. In turn, the British paid considerable attention to this ethnic group – evidenced by the relationships cultivated and legislation enacted. By doing so, the British situated the Chinese in a significant position of power, especially in terms of the economy, over the native Malays in Malaya. The Chinese became, and would remain, central to the economy, even after end of British colonial rule.

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