The Chinese in Modern Malaya

VICTOR PURCELL

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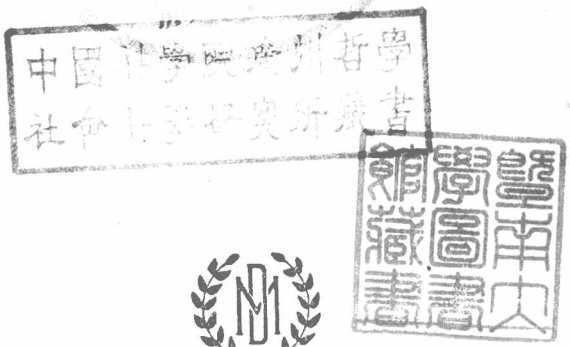

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PREFACE

I have given this little book the title, *The Chinese in Modern Malaya,* not only to distinguish it from my study, *The Chinese in Malaya,* published in 1948, but also to emphasize that it is not merely a summary of that work but includes other material and brings the story of the Chinese community in Malaya right up to date.

For permission to use material contained in *The Chinese in Malaya* and in *Chinese in Southeast Asia* (2nd Edition, 1952), I am indebted to the Royal Institute of International Affairs which sponsored both these works and to the Oxford University Press which published them.

VICTOR PURCELL,
Cambridge, 1955.

CONTENTS.

PART I

FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES TO 1941

At the present time the total population of Southeast Asia—namely Burma, Siam (or Thailand), Indochina, Malaya, British Borneo, Indonesia, and the Philippines — is in the neighbourhood of one hundred and seventy million, and of these something like twelve million regard themselves as being of Chinese race. The only reliable recent figures are those for Malaya and those for the other countries are largely conjectural, but the present distribution of the twelve million is about three million in Malaya and British Borneo, three to four million in Siam, a quarter of a million in Burma, two million in Indochina, and a quarter of a million in the Philippines. That is to say that one person to every fourteen or fifteen in Southeast Asia is a Chinese.

The Chinese have been coming down from China into Southeast Asia from remote times and they had conquered a large portion of Annam before the Christian era, but they did not, generally speaking, approach the region by sea until after the Arab navigators had shown the way in the ninth century onwards. Under the Mongols, in 1292, Kublai Khan sent a military expedition against Java (without, however, establishing any lasting control over the island). Then, in the early fifteenth century, during the Ming dynasty, there was a period of great maritime expansion on the part of China. Between 1405 and 1431, Admiral Cheng Ho and his colleagues got as far as the Persian Gulf and other Chinese navigators reached Africa. It was at this time that many of the princes of Southeast Asia acknowledged the overlordship of China. This short outburst of activity at sea, however, suddenly ceased and was not renewed.

The first permanent Chinese settlements seem to have been made in the fourteenth century at Palembang in Sumatra and at Tumasik, or 'Old Singapore'. But the number of Chinese who ventured abroad was comparatively few, and it was their ambition to return home as soon as possible. Ancestor wor-

ship was a strong force in discouraging the Chinese from emigrating, since those who left the spirits of their ancestors without sacrificial offerings were guilty of unfilial conduct. Moreover, the Emperors of the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties (especially the latter) set their face against their subjects going abroad. They took the view that people were 'capital' and that a loss of subjects was not one to be compensated for by any trade advantages. The Manchus added to this a fear that revolutionaries might go overseas in order to plot against the dynasty and they thus punished illegal emigration (when the culprits returned or could be apprehended) with death.

It was not until the Europeans (the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the English) had formed settlements that the numbers of Chinese who found it worth while to go abroad became considerable, for the Europeans not only increased the trade but established conditions of security. But while the Chinese were protected against the oppression or exactions of native princes, fear and trade jealousy sometimes brought them into conflict with the European colonists. Thus in 1603 and again in 1639 there was a great massacre of Chinese at Manila by the Spaniards and in the next century, in 1740, many thousands of them were killed at Batavia by the Dutch. But before the latter half of the nineteenth century the Chinese in the whole region amounted only to a few tens of thousands and it was only early in the present century that their emigration increased to a flood.

Tumasik (above-mentioned) was the first Chinese settlement in Malaya and an account of it is given as early as 1349 by a Chinese merchant named Wang Ta-Ycan. The Chinese who came to the Malay kingdom of Malacca (established c. 1400) were mostly merchants who remained there only during the trading season and it does not seem that they made any permanent settlement there until after the Portuguese had conquered the kingdom in 1511. Even so, the total number of Chinese residing there when the Dutch captured Malacca from the Portuguese in 1641 was only about four hundred. Nor did they greatly multiply under the Dutch and their maximum number was 2,500 in 1750. Most of them came from the region of Amoy.

THE CHINESE IN MALAYA UNDER THE BRITISH (1786-1874)

During the eighteenth century, when the British were frequently at war with the French, the East India Company found the need for a station where its ships could refit during the period of the northeast monsoon in the Bay of Bengal and eventually, in 1786, obtained through Captain Francis Light a lease from the Sultan of Kedah in perpetuity of the island of Penang. A strip of the mainland, Province Wellesley, was added in 1800. After the foundation of Penang the immigration of Chinese into Malaya greatly increased. In a letter dated 1st October 1786, Captain Light said, 'Our inhabitants increase very fast. Chooliahs (Tamils), Chinese, and Christians; they are already disputing about the ground, everyone building as fast as he can', and in another letter he adds, 'Did not the Dutch keep a strict watch over the Chinese, most of them would leave Malacca.' In the year of his death (1794) he wrote an official report to his superiors in which he said, 'The Chinese constitute the most valuable part of our inhabitants: they are men, women, and children, about 3,000; they possess the different trades of carpenters, masons, and smiths, are traders, shopkeepers, and planters: they employ small vessels and prows and send adventurers to the surrounding countries. They are the only people from whom a revenue may be raised without expense and extraordinary effort of government. They are a valuable acquisition, but speaking a language which no other people understand, they are able to form parties and combinations in a most secret manner against any regulations of Government they disapprove, and were they brave as intelligent they would be dangerous subjects, but want of courage will make them bear many impositions before they rebel.' (Like many other Europeans before and after him, Light mistook Chinese amenity to control as a sign of a lack of courage instead of what it was, namely a long-established social tradition.)

In addition to trading, the Chinese immigrants cultivated in Penang and Province Wellesley pepper, gambier, coconuts, tobacco (in small quantities) and *sireh* (a leaf for chewing with betel-nut). But their principal crop was sugar of which between 1800 and 1840 they had the monopoly.

Penang, however, proved to be only a limited success as a settlement and it was not until after the foundation of Singapore by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819 that the Chinese became really well established in Malaya. On 11 June, 1819, Raffles wrote to the Duchess of Somerset, 'My new colony thrives most rapidly. We have not been established four months, and it has received an accession of population exceeding 5,000—principally Chinese, and this number is daily increasing.'* Raffles directed that all Chinese should leave the northern side of the river where they had located themselves and form a new village from a bridge down to the river on the site of the present Boat Quay. By 1821, there were 3,374 yards of road, 15 yards wide in Chinatown. Raffles considered that the first in importance among the immigrant peoples was 'beyond doubt the Chinese'. 'From the number of Chinese already settled, and the peculiar attraction of the place for that industrious race,' he added, 'it may be presumed that they will always form the largest part of the community.' (Raffles was certainly right, for in 1955, of a total population of about 1,200,000, the Chinese accounted for 85 per cent.)

Problems of Government: the Secret Societies

The Chinese who migrated to Singapore and Penang were of different tribes — Hokkiens, Cantonese, Hakkas etc. — and they did not form a social unit as they did in China where they lived side by side in settled districts. There was thus room for friction between the several unamalgamated tribes. Nor were they exclusively composed of enterprising merchants and industrious artisans and workmen: they had brought with them some of the worst characters for whom China itself had no room. There were frequent robberies, even in broad daylight, and for the first years of Singapore's history most of these went unpunished. Moreover, there was only a handful of police (Indians from Bengal and Madras) and as yet no code of laws under which criminals could be punished.

In the early days, both in Penang and Malacca as well as in Singapore, the British left the Chinese very much to themselves. They governed them through headmen appointed by themselves. Only when robbery increased did the Chinese realize the necessity of contributing towards their own protection and of subscribing to the Night Watch Fund.

* T. Braddell, however, in his more careful examination shows that in 1823 the total population of Singapore was 10,683 of which the Chinese were only 3,317.

The Chinese Secret Societies had undoubtedly been imported with the first immigrants, but it was not until 1831 that there is any mention of their existence in Singapore. In that year a riot broke out and rumours placed the responsibility for it at their door. Even so, it was twenty years before another such riot occurred. Then from 1851 to 1854 a series of incidents took place which culminated in the great riot of the latter year when some 400 Chinese were killed. (As early as 1799 Secret Society disturbances were reported in Penang and between 1846 and 1885 there were a series of outbreaks in Penang and Malacca as well as in Singapore.) Chinese Secret Societies were generally believed to be all offshoots of the *Thian Ti Hui* (Heaven and Earth League), known as the *Hung* (Food) *League* or *Triad Society.** Originally religious or self-help associations, they had assumed an anti-dynastic character at the time of the Manchu conquest of China and later on they degenerated into criminal associations. Europeans have made a distinction between the benevolent *kongsis*, or district and clan associations, and the malevolent *huis*, but this is not historically justifiable. In their early days in Malaya the *huis* (which at that time included the *kongsis*) did indisputably useful work among the Chinese community in the matter of welfare, but when the 'reformed' *kongsis* were recognized by the Government while the *huis* became illegal as 'unregistered societies' (in 1889), this came to be a distinction with a difference.

Effective action to suppress the Chinese Secret Societies called for a knowledge of their organization and *modus operandi*, but for nearly a century after Light landed at Penang the British administration was completely in the dark not only as regards the Secret Societies but as regards the social organization of the Chinese community in general. In 1857 (says N. Oliphant) there were 70,000 Chinese in Singapore but not a single European who understood their language. It was not until the publication of the epoch-making work, *Thian Ti Hui*, the *Hung League* or *Heaven-Earth League*, by the Dutchman, Gustav Schlegel, in 1866, that anything definite was known about the Secret Societies.

*But the late Mr. Mervyn Wynne of the Malayan Police, in an important work on the subject, *Triad, and Tabut*, advanced a theory of the independent origin of rival societies from the *Thian Ti Hui* and the *Hung League* respectively.

In 1877, the Chinese Protectorate was established under the direction of Mr. W. Pickering, a member of the Civil Service who had qualified in the Chinese language. This new department was intended to deal not only with the problem of the Secret Societies but also with those of Chinese labour and immigration and with the traffic in women and girls for the purpose of prostitution which had grown into a very profitable business owing to the preponderance of males over females among the immigrants from China.

But these social shortcomings were, comparatively speaking, minor, and the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang, and Malacca) flourished in spite of the piracy that was a menace to trade in these waters until the 1830's. 'Piracy', however, needs redefining in the light of the researches of Mr. P. N. Tarling. It often meant the collection by the Malay princes of their traditional dues. And the Chinese community both contributed to their success and flourished with them.

THE CHINESE IN THE MALAY STATES AND BRITISH INTERVENTION

The immigrant Chinese had not confined their attention to the Straits Settlements but many of them had penetrated to the Malay States in search of a fortune. In 1827, an Englishman named Gray who visited Pahang mentions a tin-mine about to be opened at Lepar for 800 Malays, as well as a number of Chinese, to work on. In 1838, Raffles' *munshi* (teacher), Abdullah, on his way to Kelantan sailed up the Pahang River to Kampong China (Pekan Baharu). There he found hundreds of Malays and Chinese, armed to the teeth, awaiting him on the bank. The Bendahara, with the Chinese headmen, was away at the time at the goldmines at Jelai. The Chinese at Kampong China were Hakkas and they intermarried with Malay women or with Balinese slaves (slavery was common in the Malay States at this time).

It was the demand for pepper and gambier that brought the Chinese squatter to Johore. Those who could satisfy the Malay authorities as to the sufficiency of their means were allowed to form settlements up some named river and the titles they received from the Sultan were called *Surat Sungei*, or 'river documents'. The system was called the *Kangchu* system (literally 'master. or owner, of a river').

In Sungei Ujong (a State since absorbed into the modern Negri Sembilan), Captain Newbold in 1832 found four hundred Chinese employed on the tin-mines. (It is worth noting that at this time the wages of Chinese miners were 5-8 dollars a month as compared with the 3-5 dollars earned by Malay miners.) Already at Lukut in 1824, Anderson speaks of two hundred Chinese tin-miners. By 1874, there were about 10,000 Chinese miners working there. Into Selangor there was an influx of Chinese miners after the 'fifties, and in 1871 there were 12,000 altogether in Selangor (Lukut at that time being part of Selangor).

Newbold mentions that in 1828 the number of Chinese miners in Sungei Ujong was nearly a thousand, divided into nine *kongsis*, chiefly of the *Thian Ti Hui*. Jealous of their fast-increasing power, or the commission of some alleged offence, but more probably by a desire on the part of the Malays to obtain, a share of the treasure amassed by the brotherhood of the *Triad* (whose property was held by members in common) led in 1828 to the massacre of the Malays on a considerable scale. But by 1830 the mines were being worked again by some four hundred Chinese who continued there until the disasters of 1833, when many returned to Malacca.

We see, then, that wherever the Chinese went they took their Secret Societies with them. These, indeed, were practically the only social organization they had. In Perak, Chinese miners appeared in Larut from Penang whence they also had brought their Secret Societies, namely the rival *Ghee Hin* and *Hai San.*

Then it happened that about 1850 Che Long Ja'afar discovered a patch of rich mining land at Klian Pauh, the site of the present Taiping gaol, and soon Chinese miners from Penang were flocking to Larut. Further discoveries of tin land in the area followed soon after this. Before long the influx of Chinese into Larut and its neighbourhood was so great that it was beyond the capacity of the Malays to keep order, and the Chinese, free from any control from above, began faction fights among themselves.

These disorders continued for years. The rival Chinese Secret Societies repeatedly petitioned the Governor of the Straits Settlements to help one or the other against its rival, but he declined to interfere. Chinese merchants having trade dealings

with the Malay States, who also sought British help, were told that they must accept the risks as well as the profits of their enterprise. Later on these Chinese faction fights became mixed up with the question of the succession to the throne of Perak. Rival candidates for the throne, which had become vacant by the death of Sultan Ali in 1871, appealed for the support of one or other of the Chinese Societies (the members of the *Ghee Hin* were mostly Cantonese and of the *Hai San* mostly Hakkas, but this was not the invariable rule).

It was at this juncture that British policy towards the Malay States changed. These States had been falling more and more into decay for several decades, but hitherto the British had declined to interfere in their affairs. But the new Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Andrew Clarke, was instructed by the Secretary of State for the Colonies to 'bring about limited interference in the affairs of the Malay States . . . to rescue, if possible, those fruitful and productive countries from the ruin which must befall them if the present disorders continue unchecked.'

The result of this intervention was that the Malay Sultans, one by one, accepted treaties with the British whereby they agreed 'to ask for, and to act upon, British advice in all matters except those touching the Mohammedan religion and Malay custom.' This formula proved to be the foundation of the 'Protectorate system' which was still adhered to in the Federal Constitution of 1948.

GROWTH OF THE CHINESE POPULATION IN MALAYA

In the years following the Perak War (which was fought by the British in order to enforce adherence to the treaty of Pangkor), there was great influx of Chinese into the State. By 1882, the number of Chinese miners had increased from about 9,000 in 1871 to nearly 50,000. In 1888, the total population of Pahang consisted of about 50,000 Malays and a few hundred Chinese (located mostly at Bentong), but when the British intervened in that State in that year, the Chinese began to flow in to take advantage of the consequent opening-up of the State. By 1891, the population of Perak was estimated at 215,000 of

whom 100,000 were Malays and 90,000 Chinese. The story of population growth is similar for Selangor and Negri Sembilan.

The result of British intervention in the Malay States was that order was established and the country became ripe for development. But the lack of an adequate labour force delayed the investment of British capital. Tin-mining remained largely in Chinese hands until the first British mining company was floated in the 'eighties, and as late as 1920 the Chinese still owned two-thirds of the tin-mines. But the introduction of modern methods of mining, especially by dredges which called for large capitalization and special technical skills, resulted in the British and Chinese changing places and within a few years the British share of the mining was two-thirds and the Chinese one-third. At the turn of the century the output of tin was greatly increased to meet the expanding world demand and Chinese flocked in to provide labour for the mines.

The theory behind the treaties of protection with the Malay Rulers was that the Malay States belonged exclusively to the Malays. But in spite of this theory, immigration remained completely unrestricted until the Great Slump of 1929-32. The consequence of this was a complete revolution in the racial pattern of Malaya. This will become clear from the following statement of population.

Between 1911 and 1941 the population of Malaya (Straits Settlements and Malay States together) more than doubled, increasing from 2,673,000 in the former year to 5,511,000 in the latter. In 1911, the Malays (including other Malaysians from Java, Sumatra, etc.) accounted for 49.2 per cent of the total, the Chinese for 35 per cent, and the Indians for 14 per cent: in 1941, the respective percentages were 41 per cent, 43 per cent, and 14 per cent (the last figure, it will be noticed, unchanged). Malaya, in fact, had become a 'plural society' with the main communities living side by side without intermarrying and with quite different methods and standards of life and sentimental ties.

As the British were, by and large, interested mainly in the immigrants to Malaya as traders, artisans, and labourers, they were not at all concerned with their social behaviour so long as they did not interfere with their authority or with the other communities. They appointed headmen for the Chinese, Indians, Bugis, etc. and farmed out the collection of taxes to the highest bidder. The communities were only too pleased to accept this arrangement since it guaranteed them the maximum freedom to lead their own lives while securing the advantages of British protection. But as time went on, the shortcomings of the several native social systems (which, it must be remembered, were divorced from their original setting) manifested themselves, injustice was caused by the rapacity of criminal elements, and in the interests of the people as a whole the administration found itself obliged more and more to intervene.

The history of the government of the Chinese by the British in Malaya may be described therefore as a transition from direct to indirect rule. This is made clear in the legal history of the Straits Settlements. The process was from rule by Chinese custom administered by Chinese headmen (called 'captains' or 'Kapitan'), to the rule by English criminal law side by side with Chinese custom administered by British judges, and, then, as the law was interpreted, to rule by the law of England taking account of Chinese custom. The interpretation of the law meant progressive restriction of the operation of the custom of the Chinese. At the same time, a body of statute law was growing up in the Colony which was further to restrict Chinese custom.

An instance of Chinese custom being followed and not English law occurred in 1843, when it was decided that the adopted children of a Chinese were entitled to joint administration of his estate in prefence to his nephew. Polygamy was held to be a Chinese institution in a number of cases (the leading one, well known as the 'Six Widows Case', was in 1908) and in 1867 it was decided that a secondary wife was entitled to a share in an intestate's property. On the other hand, Chinese custom was departed from in a number of legal decisions.

A Chinese Marriage Committee was appointed in 1926 by the Governor of the Straits Settlements (consisting of Chinese members presided over by the Secretary for Chinese Affairs) to report on the customs, rites, and ceremonies relating to Chinese marriage in the Colony. The committee, however, found it impossible to submit proposals for legislation as to what forms or ceremonies should constitute a marriage because there were no essentials for the Chinese marriage in the Old Style common to all the districts of South China. The evidence taken revealed a practically unanimous opposition among the Chinese in the Straits Settlements born in China to any divorce legislation.

In the Straits Settlements the Chinese 'Captains' disappeared early as direct rule was substituted for indirect; in the Federated Malay States, in a less developed state of society, they were retained, though with diminishing powers, until a decade or so before World War I.

The intermediary between the Government and the Chinese people of Malaya was the Chinese Protectorate. This was a unique institution with no near counterpart elsewhere in the world. It was staffed by Chinese-speaking British officers of the Malayan Civil Service to deal with specifically Chinese questions such as the suppression of the Secret Societies and the protection of Chinese immigrants, and with the protection of women and girls of all races. More and more, in the exercise of these functions, the Protectorate became the medium of contact between the Chinese and the people of the country. The common people readily adopted the Department and accorded to the Protector the title reserved in China for the Mandarin, namely *Tai Jin* (Hokkien) or *Tai Yan* (Cantonese), meaning literally 'The Great Man'.

Taking them all in all, the relations between the British and the Chinese were singularly felicitous: it was only when in the 1930's the British theory of Malaya as a purely Malay country derived from their interpretation of the treaties was more and more seen as denying rights to those Chinese whose families had been domiciled in Malaya for generations that differences of opinion and political friction between the two began to arise. As regards the relations between the China-born Chinese and the British, this was complicated by the rise of Chinese Nationalism which is dealt with later on in this book.