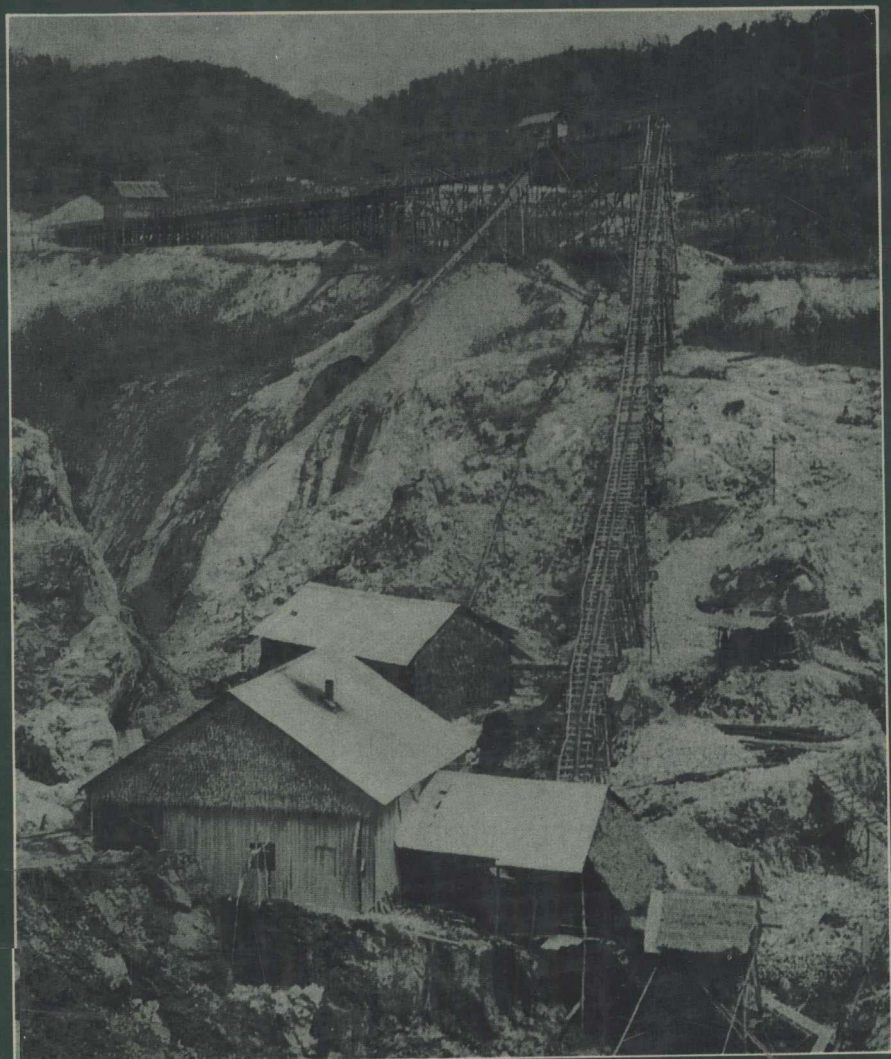


Francis Loh Kok Wah

BEYOND THE TIN MINES

Coolies, Squatters and New Villagers
in the Kinta Valley, Malaysia,
c.1880–1980



EAST ASIAN HISTORICAL MONOGRAPHS

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SINGAPORE
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
OXFORD NEW YORK
1988

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Petaling Jaya Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland
and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

Oxford is a trade mark of Oxford University Press

© Oxford University Press Pte. Ltd. 1988

Published in the United States by
Oxford University Press, Inc., New York

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ISBN 0 19 588903 7

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Loh, Francis Kok Wah, 1951—

*Beyond the tin mines: coolies, squatters
and new villagers in the Kinta Valley,
Malaysia, c.1880–1980.*—(*East Asian
historical monographs*).

1. Malaysia. Perak. Chinese communities.
Effects of economic change, 1880–1980

I. Title II. Series

305.8'951'05951

ISBN 0–19–588903–7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Loh, Francis Kok-Wah, 1951—

Beyond the tin mines.

(*East Asian historical monographs*)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Tin mines—Malaysia—Kinta (Perak)—History.
2. Labor and laboring classes—Malaysia—Kinta (Perak)—
History.
3. Chinese—Malaysia—Kinta (Perak)—History.
4. Kinta (Perak)—Economic conditions. I. Title.
II. Series.

HD8039.M72M45 1988 338.2'7453'095951 88–25370

ISBN 0–19–588903–7

Printed in Malaysia by Peter Chong Printers Sdn. Bhd.

Published by Oxford University Press Pte. Ltd.,
Unit 221, Ubi Avenue 4, Singapore 1440

Is not history, the dialectic of time spans, in its own way an explanation of society in all its reality ? and thus of contemporary society ? And here its role would be to caution us against the event: do not think only of the short time span, do not believe that only actors which make the most noise are the most authentic - there are other, quieter ones too. As if anybody did not know that already.

(F. Braudel, **On History**, translated by S. Matthews, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson Ltd., 1980, p.38).

A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits. In practice, that is, hegemony can never be singular. Its internal structures are highly complex, as can readily be seen in any concrete analysis. Moreover (and this is crucial, reminding us of the necessary thrust of the concept), it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own. We have then to add to the concept of hegemony the concepts of counter-hegemony and alternative hegemony, which are real and persistent elements of practice.

The reality of any hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, is that, while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in society. We shall need to explore their conditions and their limits, but their active presence is decisive, not only because they have to be included in any historical (as distinct from epochal) analysis, but as forms which have had significant effect on the hegemonic process itself.

(R. Williams, **Marxism and Literature**, London, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 112-13).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THIS study is a revised version of a doctoral dissertation submitted to Cornell University in 1980. To its Southeast Asia Program, which supported me with various Fellowships through several years of graduate study, field research and writing, I am extremely grateful. To Universiti Sains Malaysia, which awarded a Short-Term Research Grant in 1983/84 thereby enabling me to conduct further research, I am also indebted.

Archival materials for this study were primarily gathered from the National Archives of Malaysia to whose staff I wish to record my thanks. For the use of library facilities I am grateful to Cornell University, the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, Monash University in Melbourne, Universiti Malaya and Universiti Sains Malaysia. To those who kindly granted me interviews and especially to the residents of four northern Kinta New Villages who allowed me to enter into their lives, my special appreciation for their help and co-operation.

My thanks also go to my USM colleagues, Cheah Boon Kheng, Paul Kratoska, Lim Teck Ghee and Tan Liok Ee who challenged me on with their criticisms of my study; to Yeap Jin Soo who helped to edit the manuscript; and to Chia Kwang Chye who arranged for the final version of the study to go into the word processor.

My greatest gratitude, however, is to three people from Cornell days. Through their classes, their own examples of scholarship, and supervision of my Ph.D. thesis, Professors Ben Anderson and George Kahin have been major influences on my own intellectual development. For this, and for their kind counsel and critical encouragement during my years in Ithaca, I shall always be indebted. They have helped to shape me in more ways than they probably realize. Sooi Beng, too, has always given me intellectual, but more particularly, emotional support. To her, my deepest feelings.

An earlier version of Chapter 7 was first published in my **The Politics of Chinese Unity in Malaysia**, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982, pp.27-52. Permission to use it here is gratefully acknowledged to the Institute.

Finally, I wish to dedicate this study to my mother and to the memory of my father.

Melbourne
April 1988

FRANCIS LOH KOK WAH

ABBREVIATIONS

References

| | |
|------------|---|
| ABFMS | Agricultural Bulletin of the Federated Malay States |
| AR | Annual Report |
| AR AD | Annual Report Agriculture Department |
| AR AFO | Annual Report of the Agricultural Field Officer |
| AR FMS | Annual Report Federated Malay States |
| AR Ipoh LO | Annual Report Ipoh Land Office |
| AR KLO | Annual Report Kinta Land Office |
| AS | Asian Survey |
| CO | Colonial Office |
| CSSH | Contemporary Studies in Society and History |
| DOG | (Sub) District Office Gopeng and Kampar (Files) |
| DOI | (Sub) District Office Ipoh (Files) |
| DOK | District Office Kinta (Files) |
| FCP | Federal Council Proceedings, Federated Malay States |
| FEER | Far Eastern Economic Review |
| FMS GG | Federated Malay States Government Gazette |
| JMBRAS | Journal of the Malayan (later Malaysian) Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society |
| JSEAH | Journal of Southeast Asian History |
| JSEAS | Journal of Southeast Asian Studies |
| JTG | Journal of Tropical Geography (earlier Malayan JTG) |
| KLO | Kinta Land Office (Files) |
| LCP | Legislative Council Proceedings, Federation of Malaya |
| LYK SP | Leong Yew Koh Special Papers |
| MAJ | Malayan (later Malaysian) Agricultural Journal |
| MAS | Modern Asian Studies |
| MER | Malayan Economic Review |
| MRCA | Monthly Review of Chinese Affairs |
| MM | Malay Mail |
| M. Mirror | Malayan Mirror |
| MT | Malayan Tribune |
| NST | New Straits Times |
| PA | Pacific Affairs |
| PCM | Perak Council Minutes |
| PGG | Perak Government Gazette |
| Pk. Sec. | Perak Secretariat (Files) |
| PT | Perak Times |
| RAGP | Report of the Auditor General on the Accounts of the State of Perak |
| S. Echo | Straits Echo |
| ST | Straits Times |
| Sel. Sec. | Selangor Secretariat (Files) |
| TCL SP | Tan Cheng Lock Special Papers |

Political Parties, Organizations, etc.

| | |
|---------|---|
| ADO | Assistant District Office(r) |
| ARO | Assistant Resettlement Officer |
| BMA | British Military Administration |
| CAO | Chinese Affairs Officer |
| DO | District Office(r) |
| EMR | Entry in the Mukim Register |
| FMS | Federated Malay States |
| FOM | Federation of Malaya |
| Gerakan | Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (People's Movement of Malaysia) |
| HC | High Commission(er) |
| KMT | Kuomintang |
| LC | Local Council |
| MCA | Malayan (later Malaysian) Chinese Association |
| MCP | Malayan Communist Party |
| MIC | Malayan (later Malaysian) Indian Congress |
| MPAJA | Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army |
| MU | Malayan Union |
| NV | New Village |
| PCCC | Perak Chinese Chamber of Commerce |
| PCMA | Perak Chinese Mining Association |
| PPP | People's Progressive Party |
| SF | Socialist Front |
| SS | Straits Settlements |
| TOL | Temporary Occupation License |
| UMNO | United Malays National Organization |

GLOSSARY

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| attap | thatch made from the leaves of the nipah palm |
| bagan | villages on stilt |
| bendang | wet rice field |
| belukar | elephant grass |
| Bumiputra | term used in reference to Malays and the other indigenous Malaysian people (literally, "son of the soil") |
| cangkul | a broad and deep hoe used for digging |
| cin-cia | chain-pump of Chinese origin used in the tin mines |
| dhall | Indian pulse (split peas or lentils) |
| dulang | round and shallow wooden tray used for "washing" tin |
| ground sluicing | method of extracting ore by bringing a stream of water to it and concentrating the ore without lifting the containing rock |
| hun man | tribute coolies who shared profits |
| kampong | village |
| karang | payable tin-bearing earth under the "over-burden" |
| kongsi | communal-style living quarters |
| kungsi kung | wage coolies employed in raising ore |
| ladang | farm or clearing |
| lalang | tall coarse grass |
| lampan | ground-sluicing mines |
| lancut | box used for concentrating tin-ore |
| lombong | open-cast mine |
| Menteri Besar | Chief Minister |
| monitor | a large squirt |
| mukim | subdivision of District consisting of several villages |
| nai chang | contract coolies employed in stripping earth |
| over-burden | unpayable land over the payable tin-bearing earth |
| padi | unhusked rice |
| palong | sluice box used in tin mine |
| ragi | South Indian staple food grain used as yeast |
| sinkhek | new arrival from China |
| Tan Sri | honorific title |
| tin ore | tin dioxide. Cassiterite |
| Tun | honorific title |
| towkay | wealthy Chinese businessman and/or employer |

NOTES

Monetary System

Monetary sums are given in Straits or Malayan (later Malaysian) dollars, except where otherwise stated. Before 1906, the sterling value of the Straits or Malayan dollar varied. Thereafter until the 1960s, it was equal to 2s. 4d. sterling. By the early 1980s, however, a Malaysian dollar was the equivalent of roughly 0.32 sterling or US \$0.42.

Weights and Measures

The equivalents of the local weights and measures used in the book are as follows:

| | | |
|------------|---|---|
| 1 kati | = | 1 1/3 pounds |
| 100 kati | = | 1 pikul |
| 1 pikul | = | 133 1/3 pounds |
| 16.8 pikul | = | 1 ton (long) |
| 1 gantang | = | 1 British gallon (approx. 8 pounds of rice) |

EAST ASIAN HISTORICAL MONOGRAPHS

General Editor: WANG GUNGWU

The East Asian Historical Monographs series has, since its inception in the late 1960s, earned a reputation for the publication of works of innovative historical scholarship. It encouraged a generation of scholars of Asian history to go beyond Western activities in Asia seen from Western points of view. Their books included a wider range of Asian viewpoints and also reflected a stronger awareness of economic and socio-cultural factors in Asia which lay behind political events.

During its second decade the series has broadened to reflect the interest among historians in studying and reassessing Chinese history, and now includes important works on China and Hong Kong.

It is the hope of the publishers that, as the series moves into its third decade, it will continue to meet the need and demand for historical writings on the region and that the fruits of the scholarship of new generations of historians will reach a wider reading public.

Other titles in this series are listed at the end of the book.

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FIGURE

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| 1 | Map of Kinta District |
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6

INTRODUCTION

THIS is a study of the "Chinese working people" in the Kinta District, which forms a part of the state of Perak on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia. It traces over a period of some one hundred years how the lives and livelihoods of these people have been affected by various structural processes - socio-economic and political - and how they in turn have adjusted themselves to these changing situations so as to improve their general well-being.

The term "Chinese working people" is deliberately used in this study in order to highlight three important considerations. Firstly, while the focus of our attention is clearly the lower class which is economically deprived and insecure, not all of them have always sold their labour power. In fact, this study is, in part, an account of how a large number of Chinese coolies retrenched from the tin mines successfully became independent farmers, i.e. petty commodity producers of food and other cash crops.

Secondly, the use of the term "people" allows us to highlight non-material factors, which are also important considerations in this study, in influencing social and political actions. In particular, it draws attention to the relative powerlessness of the coolies, squatters and New Villagers as "ordinary people" in their relationship with the "power bloc" who control the state and dominate civil society. Insofar as the state is not "the executive committee of the bourgeoisie", and politics is not simply "determined" by economic factors, the distinction between the people and the power bloc must be emphasized.

Finally, the term "people" is preferred in order to proclaim a central premise of this study, namely, that regardless of their location and plight in the structures of society and economy, people possess an intrinsic humanity. As **human** beings, people possess universal norms and notions of justice and freedom, reciprocity and compassion, and so on. Hence, people need, not only to feed, clothe, house and reproduce themselves but also to uphold certain values they hold dear. Consequently, they establish communities. It is in pursuit of both material as well as ideational goals, therefore, that people engage in kinship, village or religious community relationships, pursue patron-client ties, participate in class-based activities, imagine the nation, or, as is so often the case in Malaysia, rally to the call for ethnic group unity.

The use of the term "Chinese working people", therefore, allows us to consider the economic interest, social identity and political action of the coolies, squatters and New Villagers as class, as Chinese, as people, or combinations of these latter categories. For indeed, the cross currents that social structures pose to everyday life are complex, involving different and often diffuse interests and identities, which serve as the basis for varying social and political actions and solidarities.

At the start of our period in the early 1880s, shortly after the

formal British take-over of Perak in 1874, only an estimated 4,000 Chinese people lived in the District. With the discovery of tin deposits, however, the Chinese population rapidly increased to some 45,000 people by 1889, the vast majority of whom were single male sojourners. Almost to a man, they were employed in the tin mining industry which was rapidly growing. At this time, tin production was largely under the control of petty Chinese capitalists who operated small open-cast mines which were extremely labour-intensive. The coolies who developed the industry were generally housed in *kongsis* (communal-style living quarters) located in the vicinity of the mines. Although the industry was increasingly brought under the control of the colonial state, nonetheless the everyday lives of these coolies remained to a great extent beyond its reach.

This is not to suggest that the coolies led completely independent lives, for in fact their involvement in the mining industry increasingly tied them to economic processes of a global nature. As will appear in what follows, in spite of their physical isolation and the initial limited reach of the colonial state, their livelihoods depended on how the industry was transformed and how the industry fared in the world market. In fact, as the Kinta economy increasingly specialized in tin production, and as it developed into the world's most productive alluvial tin mining region, the livelihoods of the Chinese working population in the District became increasingly subjected to the fluctuations of the global economy.

By the end of our period in the early 1980s, many changes had occurred. For instance, the number of Chinese in the District had increased to some 340,000, made up of equal numbers of males and females. These individuals were organized as family units with young children permanently settled in Malaysia. Approximately 44 per cent of them, or some 150,000, lived as separate households in the so-called "New Villages", created during the early years of the Emergency, a euphemism used to describe the armed revolt of the Malayan Communist Party against the British colonial authorities which lasted from 1948 to 1960.

By the 1980s, too, the vast majority of the Chinese working people in Kinta were no longer dependent on the mining industry for their livelihood. The industry was essentially run on a corporate basis, its scale of operations generally large, and the use of dredges, gravel-pumps and other machinery commonplace. Because it was now heavily mechanized, it was therefore able to absorb only some 17,000 people, approximately one-sixth of the number it used to employ in the 1910s. In fact, the industry had been in decline since the late 1920s. Accordingly, Kinta's economy in the 1980s was characterized by a multiplicity of occupations of which food and cash crop production were the most important in the New Villages.

Moreover, almost all the Chinese working people in Kinta, including the New Village cash-croppers, were also tied into a global cash economy and incorporated into a national political system, the latter of which was characterized by a modern state with an extensive bureaucratic apparatus, political parties, regular elections, etc. This political system had been introduced with the passing of colonialism and the achievement of Independence in 1957. Much had changed therefore in Kinta. There was little in the everyday life of the working population that had not been affected by external socio-economic and political forces.

How such socio-economic and political transformations occurred, how