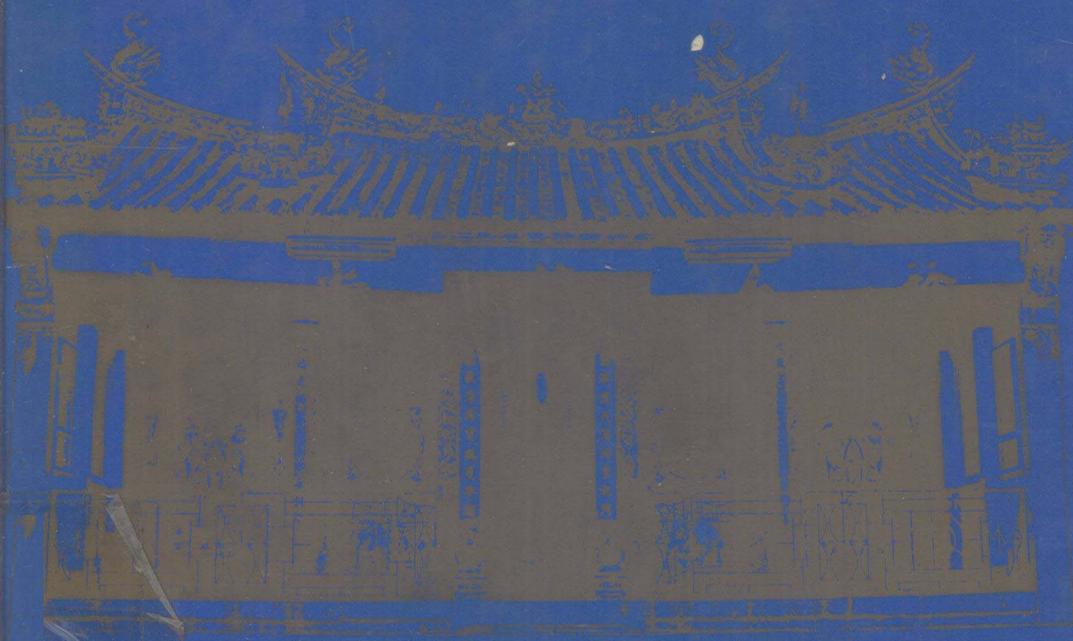


Yen Ching-hwang

A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya 1800-1911



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In memory of my father, Gan Cheong Choo
(Yen Chang-shu, 顏章枢 1912-1984)

Foreword

THE Chinese in South-East Asia have a reputation among colonial powers for being secretive. The most striking example of this is the tendency of early nineteenth century colonial officials to group most Chinese social organizations under the misleading label of 'secret societies', with unfortunate results. It has given the impression that most Chinese associations were sinister, and that they were fronts for criminal activities. There certainly were real secret societies organized in China to oppose the Manchu Ch'ing regime and used abroad to defend the interests of Chinese sojourners, even to the extent of protecting them from unjust and arbitrary local and colonial governments. And not a few of them were engaged in illegal activities on their own accord. But far more numerous among the Chinese overseas, were small organizations set up to look after the ignorant newcomer, the poor, the sick and the old, the lonely and lost, the bullied and exploited - and most of the thousands of single men who left China for South-East Asia after the 1840s belonged to one or more of these categories. These organizations not only offered protection and help for the Chinese immigrants against foreign authorities, but also protected the various minority groups of Chinese against the larger dominant clans and dialect group clusters.

Given the circumstances of newly expanding ports like Penang and Singapore, and the raw lands in the interior of the Malay States, the story of such organizations has rarely been recorded. It is understandable why small defensive groups like these did not publicize their activities. Indeed, given the nature of Chinese society, it was only natural for them to adopt a low profile. For they were originally private organizations, based mainly on familial, village and religious ties. They were sometimes also called on to settle business disputes among their members as well as between their members and those of other organizations. For each of them, the only publicity they needed was that their existence be known to those eligible to join and to those who had business dealings with their members. There was no call for any of them to be involved with alien administrations.

It has, therefore, been difficult for anyone to write a social history of the overseas Chinese before the twentieth century. What

materials we have about the communities before this time have largely come from colonial reports and observations. Although these have often been rich, invaluable sources of information, they largely express the point of view of outsiders trying to look in. The story from the inside has been very difficult to write, mostly due to the fact that much of the Chinese social life hinged on their organizations, and most of these organizations did not divulge much about themselves. The only public events they joined in were Chinese and other festivals, religious occasions, acts of charity, whether locally or in China and, later on, responsibility for the education of the young. Thus, social histories of the Chinese tend to be limited to these public activities and few historians, prior to the efforts of modern social anthropologists, have attempted to penetrate beyond such manifestations.

It is, therefore, all the more admirable that Dr Yen Ching-hwang, already well known for his prolific writings on various aspects of Overseas Chinese history, has now ventured to write a social history of the Chinese from the inside by drawing largely on the records, contemporary and retrospective, of the activities of their basic social organizations. He has been frustrated by the fact that, for most of the associations established in the nineteenth century, their minutes of meetings and other records have been long lost or were destroyed during the Japanese Occupation. He has had to depend very much on the elders of these various associations to recall their origins and their earliest activities in recent publications, and to supplement these recollections with inscriptions from temples and cemeteries, British documents and some contemporary newspapers. The task which he undertook, to collect the publications of the Chinese associations in Singapore and Malaya, was a mammoth one, and his efforts to use the associations' views of themselves in order to illuminate all aspects of their social history, deserves the warmest praise. The story remains fragmentary, even at times anecdotal, but his pioneering work should encourage others to pursue the subject further.

This is a work of thorough scholarship which I commend to all who are interested in the history of South-East Asia. Dr Yen has confined himself to what used to be called British Malaya, but I hope that his work will now inspire similar studies of Chinese society elsewhere in the region. There is a need for comparative studies because

it is far from clear that all overseas Chinese communities were the same. In fact, a subject of major interest would be the extent to which these overseas communities differed from their Chinese counterparts at home in southern China.

For example, one of Dr Yen's comparative comments is worth noting here. He suggests that, in Singapore and Malaya, Chinese society consisted of three classes: the shang (merchants), the shih (educated elite) and the kung (workers, also artisans). I have written elsewhere to argue that there had only been shang and kung and that the shih did not exist in South-East Asia until very modern times, and even then only in the form of modern professional classes quite different from the concept of shih. There is probably a problem of definition here. Anyone, however literate, placed socially below the shang and who either worked for the shang as secretaries or clerks, or were employed in some kind of yamen service by a colonial government, cannot really be called shih. The shih class in China formed the ruling class, the socially superior class. It provided the mandarins for the imperial government, as well as the local community leaders in towns and villages throughout China, and shih were respected as scholars even when they were less successful. In South-East Asia, however, the few literate Chinese were closer to being superior artisans with special skills useful to the shang or to the colonial authorities. Their position was lowly and their only hope of improving their social status was to turn to trade and make money or educate their children in a modern profession along Western lines (medicine and the law were the earliest to attract the Chinese). Neither trade nor modern professionalism made them a class of shih.

Nevertheless, Dr Yen has opened up an issue of importance here and I believe that it calls for more comparative study. Perhaps a detailed comparison with society in China may show that it is not only shih which did not exist among the overseas Chinese; even traditional concepts like shang and kung need to be re-defined to some extent when applied outside China. Also, comparisons of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya with those elsewhere in South-East Asia may show that social developments in Singapore were very different from those in Manila, or those in Batavia or those in Bangkok. The shih class which Dr Yen discerns in Singapore may represent an earlier emergence there of a modern professional class. It would be interesting to see if similar

developments in other cities were as rapid and followed the same pattern.

This is but one example of what comparative studies of the social history of Chinese in different parts of South-East Asia might produce. Dr Yen has, as usual, set high standards in writing this social history for the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya. All of us who wish to see more work of such quality done on this subject for the rest of the region are greatly in his debt.

Wang Gungwu

Canberra

April 1986

Preface

THIS book is primarily concerned with the social structure and functions of the Chinese community in Singapore and Malaya from 1800 to 1911. It is intended to look at the Chinese community from within, to examine how the Chinese organized themselves, how they treated each other, and what problems were faced by the community as a whole. Of course, the Chinese community could not have existed in isolation, it was influenced by British Colonial policy and cultural and political sentiments generated in China. However, no special attempt is made to examine in detail British relations with local Chinese, nor is there any attempt to examine the activity of the China-oriented political movement in the Chinese community which was studied in great detail in my previous work entitled The Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution: With Special Reference to Singapore and Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1976.

Much of the history of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya in the nineteenth century is still hazy. British official information about the Chinese community during this period was fragmentary, except with regard to the secret societies. Newspaper reports about the Chinese community were patchy as well. Many of the Chinese community records pertaining to the life and activities of the Chinese in the nineteenth century were lost during the Japanese Occupation between 1941 and 1945.

Collection for the writing of this book began in 1971 when I spent about two months in Singapore and Malaya. I began collecting souvenir magazines published by various dialect and kinship organizations together with other written records. But the bulk of source materials for this book was collected during my one-year sabbatical leave in Singapore and Malaya in 1974. I had the opportunity to tour extensively in the Malay Peninsula and Singapore, interviewing people and collecting materials. I returned once again to the region for two months in early 1979. The result of this effort was the collection of more than 100 copies of souvenir magazines and 200 pamphlets of different types. In the course of collecting materials, there were frustrations and surprises. For instance, my discovery of the old records of the famous Penang Chinese Town Hall (Pin P'ing-chang kung-kuan) constitutes a most

valuable addition to my materials for the study of the Chinese community in Singapore and Malaya.

The writing of this book began in early 1981, and its first draft was completed in early 1983. But after three short periods of study leave in 1983-4, which provided me with the opportunity to explore more deeply into government records deposited mainly in the National Library in Singapore and the National Archives (Arkib Negara) in Kuala Lumpur, I was able to revise the first draft with a more balanced use of both Chinese and English materials.

I appreciate the co-operation given to me by various institutions: the Barr Smith Library of the University of Adelaide; the National Library of Australia, Canberra; the Menzies Library of the Australian National University, Canberra; the Library of Sydney University; the National Library of Singapore and the Library of the National University of Singapore; the Singapore National Archives; the Library of the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur; the National Archives of Malaysia (Arkib Negara), Kuala Lumpur; and the Library of the University Science of Malaysia, Penang.

I wish to thank Professor Wang Qungwu of the Australian National University for his encouragement and the foreword for this book. My thanks are also due to Messrs Lim How Seng, Wu Hua, and Chang Ching Chiang of Singapore, Professor Khoo Kay Kim, Dr Stephen Leong, Dr Tan Chee Beng and Mr Lee Yip Lim of Kuala Lumpur, and Mr. Tan Kim Hong of Penang. I am indebted to my colleagues, Dr Robert Dare, Dr Stephen Large and Mr A. Denholm, for their efforts in improving the manuscript. My thanks are also due to Bev Arnold, Sonia Zabolocki, Marion Pearce, Marilyn Denholm and Jill Stevens of the History Department, and Tina Woods of the Politics Department, University of Adelaide, for preparing the manuscript. Finally, my wife, Kwee Ying, deserves special thanks for her encouragement and support. All my children, Pei Fen, Kuo Liang, Kuo Wei and Kuo Kang have given me their moral support.

Yen Ching-hwang
Department of History,
University of Adelaide,
November 1985

Abbreviations

<u>J.I.A.</u>	<u>Journal of Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia</u>
<u>JMBRAS</u>	<u>Journal of Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society</u>
<u>JSBRAS</u>	<u>Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society</u>
<u>JSEAH</u>	<u>Journal of Southeast Asian History</u>
<u>S.S.A.D.R.</u>	<u>Straits Settlements Annual Departmental Reports</u>
<u>S.S.L.C.P.</u>	<u>Straits Settlements Legislative Council Proceedings</u>

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1

Formation of the Chinese Community

IMMIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT

Causes of Immigration

The forces that compelled Chinese to leave their homeland to seek a livelihood overseas must have been overwhelming. Given the fact that Chinese generally were against the idea of emigration because of Confucian tradition,¹ those who broke through the social bonds must have had a great deal of courage. What made them go against their tradition was a powerful economic force. Most of them had a strong desire for economic advancement when they decided to go overseas. Over-population constituted a major part of this powerful force. A modern study reveals a dramatic growth in China's population from 150,000,000 around 1700 AD to about 430,000,000 in 1850, almost threefolds increase in one and a half centuries.² The economic implications of this over-population were land shortage and inflation. The lack of corresponding increase in cultivable land meant a reduction in the land-population ratio,³ and reduced many people to the status of farm labourers and rural unemployed. Over-population also created an imbalance in the demand and supply of daily necessities, and the shortage of the basic food staple - rice - gave rise to serious inflation.⁴

The problem of over-population was aggravated by natural calamities and war. China was a disaster-ridden country, for the entire period of 267 years of Manchu rule, Hupei province, for instance, experienced 440 droughts and 1,036 floods, an average of 5.5 natural disasters per year.⁵ With the increasing ineptitude of the Ch'ing Government, millions of people who were affected by natural calamities were left unaided. One of the worst droughts in modern China, which took place in 1877-8, struck north and east China. About 5,000,000 to 6,000,000 people were made homeless, and many died of starvation.⁶

Social upheavals also took their toll among the rural population. The Taiping Rebellion, which plagued the southern and central provinces for more than a decade, greatly dislocated agricultural production and drove tens of thousands off the land.⁷

In addition to over-population, natural calamities and war, Chinese peasants suffered exploitation by landlords, usurers and mandarins. Natural calamities and the lack of good credit facilities in rural communities destroyed many small independent farming families, and reduced them to tenant peasants. The result of this was the concentration of scarce land in the hands of big landlords.⁸ The exploitation of tenant peasants by landlords took the form of high rent. The rental was usually paid in kind; 50 percent of the crop was paid to the landlord as rent, while in some areas 60 percent as rental was not uncommon.⁹ As population increased and land got scarcer, the tenant peasants lost all their bargaining power and were forced to accept the exorbitant rental. Usury was another form of exploitation. As their income was meagre, many peasant families were vulnerable when they encountered financial difficulties. They fell quickly into debt and paid high interest rates for the money they borrowed. The lack of government control over interest rates made usury the most profitable form of investment and the most ruthless form of exploitation of the peasant masses in vast rural China. Many of these usurers were local landlords,¹⁰ and the control of land and finance made them the most powerful figures in rural communities.

Along with landlords and usurers came taxmen. The main tax collected in rural areas was land tax, and in the second half of the nineteenth century, land tax was combined with head tax to become land-head tax (Ti-ting). The tax rate varied from province to province. In the collection of provincial taxes, local officials usually consulted powerful members of the gentry before working out the rate.¹¹ With their influence, many gentry families (landlords) received preferential treatment and were able to shift the main burden of the taxes onto the peasants. The pressure of taxes on the peasants increased towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century as the result of China's defeats at the hands of foreign Powers and the payment of huge indemnities. The collection of the Boxer indemnity, for instance, fell squarely on provincial governments, which had to find their ways and means to meet the allocated quotas. The Imperial

Government in Peking did not care how the taxes were collected as long as they were collected. The result of this was deepening exploitation of peasants in the form of land tax surcharges.¹²

The reason why Chinese were prepared to leave does not in itself explain adequately why Chinese emigrated to Singapore and Malaya. In fact, the large Chinese community in Singapore and Malaya in the period under study might not have come into existence had there been no European expansion in Asia. The large-scale Chinese immigration into Singapore and Malaya was, to a great extent, the direct result of European expansion in South-East Asia, particularly British advancement in the region. The founding of the British settlements in Penang (1786) and Singapore (1819), together with the take-over of Malacca (1824) from the Dutch, provided excellent opportunities for Chinese traders, artisans and labourers.¹³ The Chinese found British policies conducive to their business activities, with opportunities to accumulate wealth. With capital accumulated in the Straits Settlements, successful and enterprising Chinese merchants extended their activities to the neighbouring states in the Malay Peninsula. Chinese miners, planters and coolies followed the capital into the hinterland, and opened up Lukut, Sungei Ujong, Kuala Lumpur, Larut, Johore Bahru and Muar.¹⁴ The desire of vast members of Chinese peasants for economic improvement overseas was met by the employment opportunities created in the Straits Settlements and the adjacent Malay States. Substantial numbers of Chinese immigrants flocked to the region in quest of wealth. In 1828, for instance, a European observer noted that, due to the famine in China, more than 4,000 male Chinese had arrived in Singapore in that year.¹⁵

The rapid development of tin and cash crop industries in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in the Malay Peninsula as a result of British intervention in the Malay States¹⁶ signifies the maturity of a colonial economy. But the continuing supply of raw materials to feed the world capitalist system required a continuing supply of cheap labour. Thousands upon thousands of Chinese immigrants (indentured coolies and free labourers) who were attracted to the Straits were to service this growing colonial economy.¹⁷ To the British, Chinese immigrants provided a useful source of cheap labour, and Chinese merchants were to serve as middlemen in the functioning of a colonial economy: to help collect raw materials and to distribute British manufactured products. To the Chinese, the British had created a useful

political and economic system under which they could make rapid economic advancement. In this context, the creation of a large Chinese community in Singapore and Malaya was closely related to the process of the creation and development of the British colonial economy in the region.

Process and patterns of immigration

At least two patterns co-existed in the Chinese immigration into Singapore and Malaya: one was kinship based and the other developed around the credit ticket system. The desire of immigrants to establish themselves in business met with many difficulties, one of which was a shortage of trustworthy staff. In an environment where quick money was to be made, honesty and loyalty to employers were not readily given.¹⁸ Under such circumstances, kinship ties were important to someone in the course of establishing a business. Assuming a Chinese immigrant started a small business after successfully accumulating a sum of capital, he needed helping hands in his shop as his business grew. Due to dialect differences and the nature of the immigrant community, he probably had difficulty finding trustworthy staff to man his shop. Partly with this intention in mind, he returned to his home village to recruit staff from among his relatives or kinsmen. News of his arrival and his modest economic success overseas soon spread and attracted ambitious youngsters. He thus paid for their passage and brought them back to Singapore and Malaya to work in his shop. His relatives or kinsmen worked as assistants or apprentices,¹⁹ and after a few years some of them would start their own small businesses after having learnt the necessary skills, as well as saving some capital. Again, some of these successful small businessmen would go back to China to recruit relatives or kinsmen if they needed labour. Thus, a chain of kinship immigration was established that promoted Chinese immigration into the region.

The credit ticket system was the other pattern of Chinese emigration. Impoverished and destitute, many prospective Chinese immigrants could not afford to pay their passage overseas. Passage money was advanced by Kheh-taus (labour brokers),²⁰ captains of junks, or labour agencies. After arriving in Singapore or Penang, the credit ticket immigrants were disposed of to employers who needed labourers to develop plantation estates or mines on the islands or adjacent Malay States.²¹ The employers paid the labour brokers the passage money that the immigrants owed, and had a verbal or written contract with the