

**SECRET SOCIETIES IN SINGAPORE: SURVIVAL STRATEGIES, 1930s TO  
1950s**

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## SUMMARY

The word “secret societies” will always bring to mind images of tattooed men involving in illegal activities or fighting to the death with rivals. It could also be the furtive ways members of triad groups used to avoid being detected and recognized. If not, it could be the secret hideouts where members meet to discuss their plans. It is always etched in the mindset that members of secret societies are involved in clandestine activities, are violent criminals with little regard for law and order and who would not hesitate to take up arms to protect their interests thus, disrupting the peace of the land.

Many authors chose to focus more on the criminal aspect of secret societies. However, according to Carl Trocki (which I concur), secret societies in Southeast Asia were rooted in economic partnerships and brotherhood traditions and hence, occupied a much more important place in the history of the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia than most would acknowledge. The recent works of historians are testament to the changing perceptions on the role of secret societies in overseas Chinese communities.

It was indeed amazing that secret societies could thrive even though they faced strong police action and mainstream institutions controlled the colony’s resources. In addition, they too faced economic hardships just like any ordinary Singaporean. The protection rackets and the operation of gambling activities were somewhat insufficient in bringing income to members, especially when membership was large. In addition, strong police action such as 1956 “Operation Dagger” and the 1957 “Operation *Pereksa*” (Examination) greatly disrupted the secret societies’ economic activities. Yet, they were

able to devise their own survival strategies. Keeping a low profile when the police were conducting operations against them, using front organizations, disbanding the group before re-forming a new one with a new name were some the strategies used. Developing networks with members of a higher socioeconomic class was also another method. The numerous networks of relationships secret societies had with the larger society were tapped and exploited by members of the business community and politicians in carrying out business transactions, securing labourers and election helpers during election campaigns. Thus, secret societies were indeed useful but such services carried a price. Certain favours and remuneration were expected from the businessmen and politicians.

Secret societies were always trying to source for various ways and means to survive in the urban underworld. This thesis examined the various survival methods deployed by the secret societies from the 1930s to the 1950s. These survival methods include alignment with political players, navigating among restrictions and the development of networks with business people and politicians despite the tough measures instituted by the British authorities against them.

## INTRODUCTION

The word “secret societies” will always bring to mind images of tattooed men (usually not women) involving in illegal activities or fighting to the death with rivals. Alternatively, it could be the furtive ways members of triad groups used to avoid recognition. If not, it could be the secret hideouts where members meet to discuss their plans. It is always etched in the mindset that members of secret societies are involved in clandestine activities, are violent criminals with little regard for law and order and who would not hesitate to take up arms to protect their interests thus, disrupting the peace of the land. Such an image could be the result of first-hand experience or reports read in the papers or books or articles in journals.

Due to various reasons, there has been a great interest in the history of Chinese secret societies at length. From Mervyn L. Wynne’s Triad and Tabut; Leon Comber’s Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya; Wilfred Blythe’s The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya; Mak Lau Fong’s The Sociology of Secret Societies to the more recent David Ownby and Mary Somers Heidhues’ (eds.) Secret Societies Reconsidered; Irene Lim’s Secret Societies in Singapore and Irene Lim’s (ed.) Chinese Triads,<sup>1</sup> these are part of the massive literature on Chinese secret societies in Malaya and Singapore. Books

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<sup>1</sup> Mervyn L. Wynne (1941), Triad and Tabut: A Survey of the Origin and Diffusion of Chinese and Mohamedan Secret Societies in the Malay Peninsula AD 1800-1935, Singapore: Government Printing Office; Leon Comber (1959), Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Survey of the Triad Society from 1800-1900, Locust Valley: J.J. Augustin Incorporated Publisher; Wilfred Blythe (1969), The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Historical Study, London: Oxford University Press; Mak Lau Fong (1981), The Sociology of Secret Societies: A Study of Chinese Secret Societies in Singapore and Peninsula Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press; David Ownby and Mary Somers Heidhues (eds.) (1993), Secret Societies Reconsidered: Perspectives on the Social History of Modern South China and Southeast Asia, Armonk: M.E. Sharpe; Irene Lim (1999), Secret Societies in Singapore: Featuring the William Stirling Collection, Singapore: National Heritage Board; Irene Lim (ed.) (2002), Chinese Triads: Perspectives on Histories, Identities and Spheres of Impact, Singapore: Singapore History Museum.

written by authors such as Wynne, Comber and Blythe focused more on the criminal activities of Chinese secret societies (understandable as they had worked in the British Administration); while the more recent authors such as David Ownby and the contributors to Ownby and Heidhues' joint effort (as above) believed that secret societies should be viewed as an expression of a broader range of social practices that played an important role in the non-elite world of early modern China and Chinese communities in Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup>

It is little wonder that the authors who focused more on the criminal activities committed by members of secret societies were mostly British, noted for placing great emphasis on the notion of law and order. However, according to Carl Trocki (which I concur), secret societies in Southeast Asia were rooted in economic partnerships and brotherhood traditions<sup>3</sup> and hence, occupied a much more important place in the history of the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia than most would acknowledge. The recent works of historians are testament to the changing perceptions on the role of secret societies in overseas Chinese communities.

The attempt to re-examine the role of secret societies in overseas Chinese communities is an excellent beginning but not an end in itself. There are not many works on Chinese secret societies after the institution of the 1890 Societies Ordinance in Singapore and Malaya. Initially, it was believed by the British administration that the 1890 Societies Ordinance, which declared all secret societies illegal in these British

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<sup>2</sup> David Ownby and Mary Somers Heidhues (eds.) (1993), *Secret Societies Reconsidered*, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Carl Trocki (1990), *Opium Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 12.

territories, was effective in freeing the Colony from the tyranny of triad groups, judging from the decrease in serious crime.<sup>4</sup> However, by 1948, it became more evident that not only did the 1890 Societies Ordinance not eradicate secret societies, it also drove them underground which was beyond the control of the British administration.<sup>5</sup> This made the work of policing triad groups extremely difficult. British administration had to depend on information provided by members of the public and informants before they could conduct any operation on secret societies. What compounded the situation was the lack of convictions by the law courts due to the lack of evidence or witnesses stepping forward to testify. Secret societies continued to thrive by dealing mainly in underground activities such as protection rackets, operating gambling and prostitution dens and other crimes of vice.

It was indeed amazing that secret societies could thrive even though the colony's resources were controlled by mainstream institutions. The protection rackets and the operation of gambling activities were somewhat insufficient in bringing income to members of triad groups, especially if the groups consisted of large numbers of members. In addition, strong police action such as the 1956 "Operation Dagger" and the 1957 "Operation *Pereksa*" (Examination) greatly disrupted the secret societies' economic activities. Yet, they were able to devise their own survival strategies in the midst of unfavourable conditions. When the police disrupted their gambling operations, members of secret societies would wait until the tension died down before continuing with the

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<sup>4</sup> Wilfred Blythe (1969), The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya, p. 244.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 418. Yet, there were police personnel who insisted that police operations such as "Operation Dagger" were not necessary as secret societies were under control. This is indeed a conundrum which the police could not resolve. See Nanyang Siang Pau, 13 Aug 1956.

operations. Alternatively, they might change the venue or use front organizations to hide their real intentions or disband the group before re-forming a new one with a new name. Like a chameleon, secret societies would undertake changes to their *modus operandi* in order to survive. In addition, like any other members of a society, members of secret societies were not immune to the difficult social and economic conditions that Singapore faced after the Second World War. Not only did they have to navigate through the restrictions imposed by the British authorities, they have to navigate through economic difficulties.

Another method of survival was securing support from members of a higher socioeconomic class. It is generally agreed that some members of the business community became community leaders with the help from secret societies. Some of these community leaders were headmen of secret societies and had used their secret fraternities as stepping stones to wealth and recognition. When they had gained a certain level of respectability in the larger society, they either disbanded or ceased all clandestine activities related to the triad groups. In most cases, community leaders maintained ties with the underworld as government agencies were regarded with frustration as they could not understand the Chinese way of doing things due to their foreign nature and the perceived inefficiency and ineptness. The numerous networks of relationships secret societies had with the larger society were tapped and exploited by members of the business community and politicians in carrying out business transactions, securing

labourers and as ‘mercenaries’<sup>6</sup> during election campaigns. Thus, secret societies were indeed useful for the advancement of self-interests but such services carried a price. Certain favours and remuneration were expected from the businessmen and politicians and such transactions are part of the numerous networks which were established and exploited by both “mainstream” and “underworld” societies.

### **Overview of Thesis**

This thesis examined the various survival methods deployed by the secret societies from 1930 to 1960. These survival methods include the alignment with political players, navigating through restrictions and economic conditions and the development of networks with the business community and politicians. Establishing close ties with members of higher socioeconomic class such as the business community and politicians is necessary in seeking new ways and means to improve their economic situation. The establishment of close ties with the various political players would also involve the willingness to be labeled as “traitors,” especially during the Japanese Occupation when members of secret societies became spies for the dreaded Kempeitai. Although secret societies were proactive in modifying their survival strategies, their work was aided with the continuation of sections of society seeking their help.

Chapter 1 is an elaboration of the different profiles given by historians to secret societies over the centuries. It begins with the original Chinese terms for these secret fraternities. Inevitably, it leads to a historiography of terms such as religious sects,

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<sup>6</sup> Although members of secret societies were willing to be ‘foot soldiers’ for politicians during elections, that is, running errands and putting up banners, they were remunerated and granted several favours. Hence, I would call them ‘mercenaries’ rather than ‘foot soldiers.’

brotherhoods, Tiandihui, triads, secret societies, '*kongsis*' and others. This chapter also included my definition of 'secret society' and the explanation for persisting with this term throughout this thesis.

Chapter 2 provides a background of secret society activities in Singapore from 1819 to 1929. This will provide the readers a context and account of the development of secret societies in Singapore from their spread of influence to their eventual proscription. As their proscription officially began in 1890, this chapter also delves into the early decades after the official prohibition of secret societies.

Chapter 3 challenges the view that the 1890 Societies Ordinance was successful in attempting to eradicate secret societies as sections of the larger society continued to include triad groups in community endeavours such as fund raising in anti-Japanese efforts from the late 1920s to 1930s. In addition, the Japanese rulers and local political parties such as the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) wooed secret societies to facilitate their efforts in winning mass support. This was an attempt by the political parties to co-opt secret societies to join their side. Such an alignment was not rejected by the secret fraternities as they could hide behind the power of these political players and carry on with their operations. The attempt to woo the support of secret societies proved that secret societies wielded a certain level of influence over the Chinese community and they remained active in community affairs even though they were officially proscribed.

Even though secret societies were courted by political parties and community leaders, there were sections in the population which supported the use of strong measures to stem the excesses committed by secret societies. This was a response to the rising crime rate which was linked to secret societies. Operations were conducted with suspects being frisked and arrested and hideouts destroyed. However, after a lull period, triad groups resumed their activities. The “guerilla” style *modus operandi*, coupled with the deployment of police personnel in dealing with the labour unrests and riots of the day, thus, diverting the attention away from the secret society activities, helped triad groups to a certain extent. Chapter 4 analyses the various ways used by secret societies in navigating among the restrictions imposed by the British authorities and the difficult social and economic conditions. This chapter also examines the reasons why such strong police action generally failed to achieve the desired results as the British administration failed to adopt a holistic approach in dealing with secret societies. While it was necessary and important for the use of strong police action, it was also important that education and legal economic opportunities should be provided as alternatives to the illegal economic activities secret societies were heavily involved. It was the failure to adopt a holistic approach that caused secret society activities to continue unabatedly, hence, prolonging their survival.

Chapter 5 examines, in detail, the process of developing networks between secret societies and other social groups such as the business community, politicians and the common people and the intricacies involved in these relations. In addition, Chapter 5 argues that through the close and continuous cooperation between the different players,

there is a very thin line between what is considered “mainstream” and “underworld.” This dissertation ends with the Conclusion which summarises the main arguments presented.

### *Methodology*

A general reading into the history of Singapore was first conducted before important facts about secret societies and their references were sieved. Concurrently, a search into the National Archives yielded a list of primary sources ranging from old photographs, Oral History interviews and press releases. A series of questions and several brainstorming sessions with the supervisor resulted in the title and focus of this thesis.

A tedious but rewarding time was next spent on reading old newspapers such as the Singapore Free Press and Political Intelligence Journals in the library. Although I would like to have read other newspapers such as those in Chinese, I could only read news reports about the “Operation Dagger” and “Operation *Pereksa*” from the Nanyang Siang Pau due to time constraint. However, a more satisfying reward came in the form of a large collection of Oral History interviews stored at the National Archives, which have been waiting for someone to exploit.

The use of the Oral History tapes was to combine oral history with written records, so as to give a macro and micro view of the history of secret societies. Sometimes, the over reliance on written records would lead to a rather biased view, considering that most of the written records written in English came from the British administration. Hence, by using the Oral History interviews, I could include the voices of the common people in my thesis.

One question that will be asked incessantly is this: Who were the interviewees? Some might proceed further, asking for their occupation and what were the criteria for selecting them. Many of these interviewees were plain simple hawkers, artisans, retired civil servants and businessmen. Hence, their background was diverse. Most of them could not speak in English and had to use Mandarin or other Chinese dialects. These people had experienced milestones of history first hand. They belonged to the silent majority who remained unheard for a long time. It was a golden opportunity for me to tap on this rich resource which not many were able to use. It did not matter if these interviewees were nobodies, although some skeptics might disagree. What matters most was that by using Oral History, it might inspire others not only to include Oral History in their theses but also to enhance its usage.

Unfortunately, I am not adept at all languages. The Oral History interviews used that were relevant to my topic were just a fraction of the number stored in the National Archives. The interviews that I had used were those that were conducted in English, Mandarin and Cantonese. Interviews conducted in other Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka and Hainanese and other non-Chinese languages such as Malay and Tamil had been given a miss as I do not understand them. Although transcripts were available, not all the interviews were completely transcribed and translated. I had to leave them out regretfully.

The lack of language skills and insufficient time in perusing Chinese newspapers were only some of the limitations. I came across several files stored at the National Archives which I believe could stretch my arguments further. However, the Registry of

Societies refused to grant me access to these files, despite a reference letter from the Head of History Department, National University of Singapore. The protracted process of the declassification of important primary sources is a situation that most historians come to grief.

This academic exercise has been an insightful experience for me into the history pertaining to the secret society scene in Singapore. Although it does not attempt to 'correct the ills of biased historiography,' it does provide a different perspective into the role of secret societies during the various political crises in Singapore and how they were able to adopt different strategies to ensure their survival.

## **CHAPTER ONE: THE PROFILING OF SECRET SOCIETIES**

The mention of ‘secret societies’ conjures an impression of Chinese mysticism. Such a perception was partly fostered by the clandestine nature and the use of secret rituals by members. Indeed, judging by the different versions of the myths and legends surrounding the founding of secret societies, it is not surprising that the mystic impression resulted. However, there is a rich history of secret societies for us to explore and this will inevitably lead us back to their origins in China. This chapter looks at the origins and the historiography of secret societies, which indirectly provided the different types of profile for them. Each of these profiles, however, does share a common argument, that is, secret societies have ideology in the form of brotherhood, mutual aid, oaths and rituals. The second purpose of this chapter is to explain the reason for persisting with the term ‘secret society’ and interchanging it with ‘triad.’ The third purpose of this chapter is to look at the individual components of ideology of secret societies and analyse how, through this ideology, the survival of secret societies was assured.

### **In the Beginning ...**

Prior to 1978, the access to Chinese historical sources was restricted due to the country’s closed-door policy. Things changed in 1978 when China opened its doors politically to the outside world which consequently resulted in the opening of the archival records of the Qing dynasty to the rest of the world. This proved to be a watershed for Chinese history pertaining to the Chinese secret societies as the records now available are not only government records or memorials which only give the perspective of the Chinese literati, but they also include records of sojourners, migrants, peddlers and religious

travellers who were instrumental in spreading the Chinese culture and ideas to all parts of China and overseas.<sup>1</sup>

From these records, secret societies were not called ‘secret societies’ in China but ‘*jiaomen*’ or ‘sects’ and ‘*huidang*’ or ‘lodges.’ In fact, Chinese history written by the literati does not contain the term ‘secret society.’<sup>2</sup> The term ‘secret society’ was applied only by Western and colonial historians who viewed them as ‘secret’ because of the secret rituals which were known only to members of the societies.<sup>3</sup> The discovery of the Chinese terms proved to be a revelation to historians who have been intrigued by the existence of secret societies and hence, sparked a flurry of research activities on the topic. What resulted was a historiography of terms used in place of ‘secret societies.’

### **A Historiography of Terms**

This section examines the various terms, definitions and arguments posed by historians regarding the secret societies in China and Singapore. This ranges from the familiar ‘religious sects’, ‘brotherhoods’ and ‘triads’ to the more unusual ‘Chinese ninjas.’

#### *Religious Sects*

The association of secret societies as religious sects came about during the Later Han dynasty.<sup>4</sup> Buddhism and Taoism were forced underground as they were persecuted

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<sup>1</sup> Dian Murray, Qin Baoqi (1994), The Origins of Tiandihui: The Chinese Triads in Legends and History, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Chesneaux (1972), ‘Secret Societies in China’s Historical Evolution,’ in Jean Chesneaux (ed.), Popular Movements and Secret Societies in China, 1840-1950, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Barbara E. Ward (1967), ‘Chinese Secret Societies,’ in Norman MacKenzie (ed.), Secret Societies, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, p. 216.

by the government. Hence, Buddhist and Taoist sects were known as ‘secret societies’ as they operated underground. As the rituals and ceremonies practised by the contemporary secret societies had elements of Buddhist and Taoist traditions, this association of secret societies as religious sects did not cease. Indeed, it was difficult to remove this association as religion was part and parcel of not only the Chinese culture but every culture.

Jean Chesneaux traced the roots of secret societies to the White Lotus Sect of the Sung dynasty, partly due to its stand against foreign aggression,<sup>5</sup> quite similar to the secret societies in the eighteenth century which was against the Manchu regime. The White Lotus Sect was a religious sect that combined the Maitreya Buddhist elements with Taoist ones.<sup>6</sup> It had been proscribed by the Qing court after it attempted to stage a bold coup in 1813 against the Imperial Palace in Peking in collaboration with the Eight Diagrams.<sup>7</sup>

At its proscription, the White Lotus Sect entered into the Qing annals as another ‘*xiejiao*’ or ‘vicious sects,’ ‘*yingjiao*’ or ‘obscene sects,’ ‘*weijiao*’ or ‘pseudo-religious sects,’ ‘*yaojiao*’ or ‘perverse sects’ and ‘*jiaofei*’ or ‘brigand members of sects.’<sup>8</sup> Although in China, secret societies were called ‘*huidangs*’ and ‘*jiaomen*,’ the authorities classified them as politically dissident and opposed to the authority of the emperor.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the teachings of these sects were contrary to State Confucianism for “they mixed Confucian

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<sup>5</sup> Jean Chesneaux (1971), *Secret Societies in China: In the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (translated by Gillian Nettle), London: Heinemann Educational Books, pp. 36-38.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Chesneaux (1971), *Secret Societies in China*, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* See also pp. 38-39. Chesneaux said that the Eight Diagrams was a branch of the White Lotus Sect but it had a stronger Taoist flavour as compared to a more Buddhist White Lotus Sect.

<sup>8</sup> Chesneaux (1971), *Secret Societies in China*, p. 55.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Booth (1999), *The Dragon Syndicates: The Global Phenomenon of the Triads*, New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, Inc., p. 18.

teachings with Buddhist, Taoist and pagan doctrines.”<sup>10</sup> Hence, the terms ‘pseudo-religious and perverse sects’ were used to describe the uncommon admixture of these elements.

David Ownby was of the opinion that the “religious elements were the core of the meanings members attached to the secret societies.”<sup>11</sup> As most members of secret societies were the marginalised members of society, these members would be attracted to the ‘invulnerability rituals’ and symbols in addition to the ideology of mutual aid and brotherhood.<sup>12</sup> It was the unnatural invulnerability beliefs of the members of secret societies that caused great suspicion and persecution from the Chinese government. Hence, in order to analyse the attraction that secret societies possessed and the reason for government persecution, in addition to the ideology and political dissension, the religious elements must not be neglected.

### *Triads/Tiandihui*

The authors mentioned above did agree that the unnatural religious elements, coupled with the political dissidence of the secret societies were sufficient reasons for their proscription. Apart from the term ‘religious sects,’ secret societies were also known as ‘triads’ and the name itself carried religious overtones.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> David Ownby (1996), Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China: The Formation of a Tradition, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 107.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*.

The name ‘triad’ came from the tripartite relationship of Heaven (‘*tian*’), Earth (‘*di*’) and Society (‘*hui*.’) To the Chinese, these three were the fundamental elements of life. ‘Heaven’ or the home of celestial beings, symbolised the mandate to rule, to live or the types of sufferings one was predestined to undergo. ‘Earth,’ which was represented by the five basic elements of water, fire, wood, earth and gold, symbolised the elements which the people needed for sustenance. ‘Society’ referred to relationships with the family, clan, village, guild, friends and the authorities. It was probable that a secret society, Tiandihui, derived its name from the tripartite relationship.

In a collaboration with Qin Baoqi, Dian Murray traced the origins of secret societies to one source, that is, the Tiandihui. The Tiandihui originated in Zhangzhou prefecture in the southern province of Fujian. Zhangzhou was located on the coastal region and therefore, depended heavily on its maritime trade. The Qing policy of coastal evacuation between the years 1660-1685 to expel rebels from the region and forced migration caused severe economic and social dislocation for the people. In order to protect themselves and their economic interests, residents of Zhangzhou prefecture formed societies and Tiandihui was but one of the sects that sprang up.<sup>13</sup> Political loyalism to the Ming dynasty was not the *raison d’être* for its formation.

Although Murray and Qin wrote extensively about the formation and spread of the Tiandihui and how it became the precursor to the contemporary secret societies, they did not fully explain how it got its name. Murray and Qin argued that ‘Triad’ had come into widespread usage among Westerners as a “generic term for the Tiandihui and its

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<sup>13</sup> For more details, please refer to Dian Murray and Qin Baoqi (1994), The Origins of Tiandihui, pp. 5-12.

offshoots.”<sup>14</sup> This paper believed that it was most probable that the name ‘Tiandihui’ was given by the locals because the rituals that they practised displayed the interplay of the tripartite relationship of Heaven, Earth and Society or ‘triad.’ Therefore, triads were actually mutual aid associations whose formations were linked to the socio-economic circumstances and demographic patterns of their time.<sup>15</sup>

Some historians believed that although triads were founded due to economic and social pressures, they soon deteriorated into criminal groups.<sup>16</sup> They were “ruthless outlaws who robbed, pillaged, killed, kidnapped and extorted” the rich for their own coffers or those of their leaders.<sup>17</sup> Even though they claimed that they were robbing the rich to give to the poor, some triads pillaged the poor. Yet, to many poor peasants, these triads were their heroes. Though triads were the bane of the rich, some of the rich connived with the triads by investing in their activities and providing arms or safe houses as ways of increasing their personal wealth.<sup>18</sup> This participation in triad activities by the wealthy became an important factor in the development of the economic structure in China by 1890.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Murray and Qin (1994), The Origins of Tiandihui, p. 91.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Craig (2002), ‘The Chinese Underworld: Historical Secret Society Antecedents and the Contemporary Period,’ in Irene Lim (ed.), Chinese Triads: Perspectives on Histories, Identities and Spheres of Impact, Singapore: Singapore History Museum, p. 63.

<sup>16</sup> Booth (1999), The Dragon Syndicates, pp. 17-21. See also Chesneaux (1971). Secret Societies in China, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Booth (1999), The Dragon Syndicates, pp. 18-19.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

*Kongsis/Tongs/ Huis/Brotherhoods*

Participation by the rich in triad activities was never confined to China Proper. Overseas Chinese communities continued with such practices. Such a partnership was called a '*kongsi*.' Wang Tai Peng defined the *kongsi* as a form of open government, based on an enlarged partnership and brotherhood and its purpose was to protect economic gains as well as to resist outside powers.<sup>20</sup> It took on the role of government because the colonial authorities did not extend their rule over the Chinese who were considered to be a transient group in their territories. Wang added that this form of *kongsi* government was essentially a synthesis of extended partnership and sworn brotherhood which was uniquely Chinese.<sup>21</sup>

Carl Trocki said that the *kongsi* was a "generic Chinese term for a range of social and economic configurations that included everything from business partnerships to clan and regional associations to secret triad societies."<sup>22</sup> Those who joined the *kongsis* pooled their resources and thus received a share in the enterprise.<sup>23</sup> These collaborators swore oaths of brotherhood and some of these *kongsis* were also characterised by some form of triad ritual. Hence, these *kongsis* could be classified as secret societies.<sup>24</sup> Agreeing with Wang Tai Peng, Trocki said that the Chinese *kongsis* that emerged in Southeast Asia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were different from the secret societies of China as the former were rooted in economic partnership and brotherhood traditions rather than the anti-Manchu slogan

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<sup>20</sup> Wang Tai Peng (1994), *The Origins of Chinese Kongsis*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, p.4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Carl Trocki (1990), *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

that the latter group carried.<sup>25</sup> Hence, when colonial literature linked the triads of China with the *kongsis* of Southeast Asia, it paved the way for the portrayal of these *kongsis* as criminal organisations “with no proper role or legitimacy in territories under the ‘enlightened’ direction of European powers.”<sup>26</sup> The downplay of the economic functions was deliberate as the Europeans saw the *kongsis* as a threat to their authority and needed some form of justification to remove this threat.<sup>27</sup>

David Ownby said that brotherhoods in Southeast Asia were called *kongsis* but in North America, they were called ‘*tongs*,’ meaning ‘meeting places.’<sup>28</sup> ‘*Tongs*’ and ‘*kongsis*’ were alternative lexicons of brotherhood practices.<sup>29</sup> Ownby distinguished those simple brotherhoods with secret societies. Simple brotherhoods or ‘*huis*’ such as the ‘*Fumuhui*’ or Father and Mother Society were banded together for the purpose of mutual aid.<sup>30</sup> Those *huis* who employed rituals and symbols with political connotations were secret societies. However, Ownby admitted that the distinction between brotherhoods and secret societies was a fine one as both types employed blood oaths to create a bond of fictive kinship, offered mutual assistance and protection and employed rituals and symbols.<sup>31</sup>

Brotherhoods were illegal in China; hence, it was associated with secret societies as the latter were illegal organisations. Robert Anthony explained why the Qing

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22

<sup>28</sup> David Ownby (1996), Brotherhoods and Secret Societies, p. 2. See also Ward (1967), ‘Chinese Secret Societies’, p. 240.

<sup>29</sup> David Ownby (1996), Brotherhoods and Secret Societies, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

authorities frowned on brotherhoods. The Qing State Confucian orthodoxy recognised the older brother-to-younger brother-type (*xiongdi*) deference as the natural relationship. However, the sworn brotherhoods espoused the younger brother-to-older brother-type (*dixiong*) relationship.<sup>32</sup> From this perspective, brotherhoods and secret societies had perverted relationships between unrelated people that were contrary to the natural order of things.<sup>33</sup>

Although they had been proscribed, brotherhoods were the non-elite institutions of China and the overseas Chinese communities.<sup>34</sup> These social institutions were based on customs, ideology and symbolism which facilitated a wide range of activities such as mutual aid, rebellion, banditry and economic undertakings.<sup>35</sup> These activities were some of the survival strategies of the common people.

### *Survival Strategists*

Many historians did not discuss about nor analyse the survival strategies undertaken by the secret societies.<sup>36</sup> Conceivably, one of the reasons that accounted for the longevity of secret societies was the adoption of various survival strategies. This was all the more important for those triad groups in Southeast Asia as they were living in a foreign land and in hostile environment. Secret societies in Singapore congregated in

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<sup>32</sup>Robert J. Anthony (1993), 'Brotherhoods, Secret Societies, and the Law in Qing-Dynasty China,' in David Ownby and Mary Somers Heidhues (eds.), Secret Societies Reconsidered: Perspectives on the Social History of Modern South China and Southeast Asia, Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, p. 206.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* See also Chesneau (1972), 'Secret Societies in China's Historical Evolution,' p. 6. The 'natural order of things' or the 'natural conditions of man' according to State Confucianism refers to the family, clan, village and guild. The sworn blood brotherhoods were 'unnatural' because there were no real blood ties involved. See page 26 of this chapter for the concept, institution and ideology of sworn brotherhoods.

<sup>34</sup> Ownby and Heidhues (eds.) (1993), Secret Societies Reconsidered, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16-21.

<sup>36</sup> Hence, the formulation of this thesis.

jungle areas before they moved into urban areas.<sup>37</sup> This was due to the presence of plantations which held many workers who were potential secret society members. Government authority could not reach these jungle areas and this enabled secret societies to be the de facto rulers of 'rural' Singapore and thus augmented their power.

Survival strategies include alignment with politicians, establishing networks with the business community and banditry. It was not uncommon for members of secret societies to venture into town areas to rob the rich and should any of their friends meet with any trouble, they would not hesitate to help them and even protect them from the authorities.<sup>38</sup> As secret societies spread to the urban areas, they continued with these survival strategies.

Mak Lau Fong described the emergence of secret societies in Singapore and Malaya as a result of inadequate legal protection rather than political deprivation of Chinese immigrants.<sup>39</sup> As the British authorities ruled the colony and the immigrants were only interested in economic opportunities, political aspirations took a backseat. Secret societies were the means to protect their economic interests during the nineteenth century and the British did not interfere with such arrangements unless large scale riots took place. It was then quite common for members of secret societies and their associates to meet regularly to discuss or plan their activities.

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<sup>37</sup> More will be discussed in the next chapter.

<sup>38</sup> Please see Munshi Abdullah (1852), 'Concerning the Tan Tae Hoey in Singapore,' Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia, Vol. 6, pp. 551-553.

<sup>39</sup> Mak Lau Fong (1981), The Sociology of Secret Societies: A Study of Chinese Secret Societies in Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, p. 4.

The survival instincts of the Chinese remained strong in the face of foreign aggression, especially during the Second Sino-Japanese War from 1937 to 1945. It was during this period that members of secret societies demonstrated their patriotism and disloyalty towards their country.

*Patriots/Traitors/'Ninjas'*

The portrayal of members of secret societies as patriots was due to the political needs of Sun Yat Sen.<sup>40</sup> The attempt by Sun in garnering support for his revolution from members of secret societies have been well-documented.<sup>41</sup> Sun himself joined local secret societies because he wanted to court the members to carry out his plans for his anti-Manchu revolution. Members of secret societies were essential to the mobilisation of resources of the local and overseas communities,<sup>42</sup> hence, Sun in putting an argument for their co-optation, declared that secret societies had a history of anti-Manchu sentiments. While it was true that the symbols and slogans of secret societies did suggest such sentiments, the importance and original rationale of mutual benefit were conveniently downplayed to suit Sun's purpose.<sup>43</sup>

The depiction of secret societies as patriots was cemented during the Second Sino-Japanese War and this was noted by the Japanese when they were occupying China. The Japanese had experienced the level of patriotism when they were fighting against their

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<sup>40</sup> David Ownby (1996), Brotherhoods and Secret Societies, p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> See Lilia Borokh, 'Notes on the Early Role of Secret Societies in Sun Yat-sen's Republican Movement'; Winston Hsieh, 'Triads, Salt Smugglers, and Local Uprisings: Observations on the Social and Economic Background of the Waichow Revolution of 1911'; John Lust, 'Secret Societies, Popular Movements, and the 1911 Revolution,' in Chesneaux (ed.) (1972), Popular Movements and Secret Societies, pp. 135-200. See also S.Y. Teng, 'Dr. Sun Yat-sen and Chinese Secret Societies,' Studies on Asia, Vol. IV, 1963, pp. 81-100.

<sup>42</sup> Ward (1967), 'Chinese Secret Societies, p. 233.

<sup>43</sup> David Ownby (1996), Brotherhoods and Secret Societies, p. 8.

Chinese counterpart. However, they were aware that secret societies could also be persuaded to serve the Japanese Imperial Army given the right inducement.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, in their pursuit of territorial conquest of Southeast Asia, they would release members of secret societies who had been imprisoned by the colonial authorities<sup>45</sup> so as to gain their goodwill and making it difficult to reject the opportunity to serve the Japanese Empire. Many of them became spies for the Kempeitai and those who refused were either tortured or put to death.<sup>46</sup> Those who aided the Japanese were labelled ‘traitors’ and faced a backlash from other Chinese after the capitulation of the Japanese at the end of the Pacific War.

The bipolar classification was reinforced during the Civil War in China. The contest between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Communists (CCP) for political supremacy spread to other regions and there was a sharp division among the overseas Chinese communities. They had to support either the KMT or the Communists. Members of secret societies were also induced to support either party but some remained neutral as firstly, they might not have strong political inclinations and secondly, they did not wish to share power over the Chinese with these political parties.

The exploits of secret societies were notorious. When David Ownby was a guest lecturer in the American Midwest, he was asked by a member of the floor regarding

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<sup>44</sup> Wilfred Blythe (1969), The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Historical Study, London: Oxford University Press, p. 327. More will be discussed in Chapter Three.

<sup>45</sup> This was true for Singapore. Please see CO 537/4863, Chinese Secret Societies: Present Day Activities and Methods of Dealing with Them, p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> Blythe (1969), The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies, pp. 327-328.

‘Chinese ninjas.’<sup>47</sup> The modern image of ‘Chinese ninja’ came about when Chinese migrated to the “kingdoms and colonies of the region.”<sup>48</sup> Brotherhood associations began to flourish as important socio-political mechanisms for these migrants and their exploits such as their rituals, involvement with crime and role against the state using violent methods earned them the image of ‘Chinese ninjas.’<sup>49</sup> However, this term for members of secret societies was hardly used by historians.

One term that was most commonly used by historians was ‘secret society.’ Lately, historians had been most uncomfortable with this term as secret societies were not ‘secret’ in the sense that people know who the members were. In addition, the original Chinese terms did not regard them as such. Hence, the generic term ‘triads’ was preferred by historians.

### *Secret Societies*

As mentioned earlier, Chinese history written by the literati did not use the term ‘secret society’ but ‘*jiaomen*’ or ‘sects’ and ‘*huidang*’ or ‘lodges.’ It was the Westerners who first applied the term ‘secret societies’ to these organisations. The Chinese translation of ‘secret society’ as ‘*mimi shehui*’ and ‘*mimi xiehui*’ came literally from the Western usage.<sup>50</sup> The literal translation was first introduced into Chinese by Hirayama

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<sup>47</sup> David Ownby (1996), Brotherhoods and Secret Societies, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4-6.

<sup>50</sup> Murray and Qin (1994), The Origins of the Tiandihui, p. 89.

Shū, a Japanese activist who had participated in the 1911 Revolution.<sup>51</sup> It was the Western coined term which became too well established to discard.

Wilfred Blythe described secret societies as a type of ritualistic societies based on a combination of self-protection and spiritual satisfaction which often deteriorate into criminal gangs through easy profits of power and tyrannical groups of bullies and extortionists batten on the weaknesses of the public, yet retaining an aura of chivalry as the poor man's protector and champion.<sup>52</sup> These societies were 'secret' in two ways: their clandestine nature with the identities of leaders and members carefully concealed or they be 'open' in the sense that their identities were known but they adopted secret rituals and took oaths of secrecy, binding the members not to reveal the affairs of their societies.<sup>53</sup> A secret society could therefore be secret in both ways.

Mak Lau Fong explained why he persisted with the term 'secret society.' He said that the existence, goals, rituals and structure of secret societies, whether open or close to the police or public, were not the reasons why secret societies were termed this way. Rather, it was the "dynamic aspect such as the activities that were related directly to the organisational goals, the particular time and place for performing the rituals and the occupants of the various hierarchical positions"<sup>54</sup> that made secret societies 'secret.' In other words, it was not the organisation itself that made secret societies 'secret' but the activities they were involved and the ever changing ways they were organised that made

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Blythe (1969), The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies, p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Mak (1981), The Sociology of Secret Societies, p. 7-8.

them secret because secret societies kept adapting and modifying their *modus operandi*. He therefore defined a secret society as “a group which has a set of well-defined norms, secret rituals and an oath that are intended subjectively to bind the members to secrecy regarding the group’s affairs.”<sup>55</sup>

Mak seemed to make a conceptual distinction between triads and secret societies. He said that triads originated from China and they were initially politically motivated to overthrow the Manchu dynasty and revive the Ming dynasty. When the triads were brought overseas due to immigration, they became secret societies which were part of the alternative system of a functional inadequacy in the larger social system.<sup>56</sup> However, secret societies did use the triad symbols of Heaven, Earth and Society in their rituals. Hence, they could also be known as triad societies. In addition, although Mak said that the initial goal of the triads was political, he did not elaborate on their subsequent goals. His explanation was rather inadequate in explaining the distinction.

I define a secret society as a dynamic group with a common ideology and achieve solidarity among its members through binding oaths and secret rituals of mutual aid and secrecy in order to protect their economic gains and resist outside powers. Therefore, throughout this academic exercise, I will be using the term ‘secret society’ and interchange it with ‘triads’ as firstly, ‘secret society’ is too well established a term to discard and secondly, since I am outside their sphere of influence and I do not understand the rituals and the symbols or the significance behind them, they remain ‘secret’ to me.

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6-7.

‘Triads’ is just a term to describe the tripartite relationship between Heaven, Earth and Society which represent the fundamental elements of life. In addition, the triads in Southeast Asia took a different form from their counterparts in China. Some triads in China might have taken a political stance against Manchu rule, yet some were more interested in mutual aid, just like those from Southeast Asia. In addition, there were some secret societies in Southeast Asia which aided Sun Yat Sen in his revolution. Hence, it was difficult to establish a line of differentiation between triads and secret societies. Although the use of ‘secret societies’ persisted throughout this exercise, I do not agree with the colonialist argument, in true Orientalist fashion, that the ‘spirit of secret organisation was congenial to the Chinese mind.’<sup>57</sup>

### **Ideology of Secret Societies**

The term ‘ideology’ means a set of beliefs and values that shapes the way an individual or a group thinks, acts and understands the world. Ideology is needed to unite a group of people for a common cause in order to achieve certain aims. Secret societies have ideology which bound the members to a common cause. Brotherhood, mutual aid, rituals and oaths are some of the aspects of secret society ideology.

The concept of sworn brotherhood was the magnet that drew different people from all walks of life together. There is a historical background to this concept and it is found in the famous Chinese epics Sanguo Yanyi or Romance of the Three Kingdoms and

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<sup>57</sup> Straits Settlements Annual Report (SSAR), 1856-1857, p. 3.

*Shuihuzhuan* or *Outlaws of the Marsh*.<sup>58</sup> In the first tale, Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei made their mythic oath of sworn brotherhood (*jiebai xiongdi*) at the Peach Garden.<sup>59</sup> The one hundred and eight ‘heroes’ in the second tale also took the oath of sworn brotherhood.<sup>60</sup> This oath bound the oath-takers, forming a covenantal relationship with each other to come to each others aid in times of trouble.

The institution of ‘sworn brotherhood’ is significant in two ways. Firstly, it established the drinking of blood mixed with wine before patron gods as a seal of the oath. That is why in initiation ceremonies for new members in any secret society, the drinking of the mixture becomes customary. Secondly, since the heroes in both tales were not related to each other, thus did not have the same surname, sworn brotherhood became an inspiration for people from all walks of life to share with each other in both good times and bad. This binding oath creates a fictive kinship bond.

The idea of sworn brotherhood was and is very appealing, especially to the displaced and the marginalised members of society.<sup>61</sup> It thus formed an informal institution catering to the needs of marginal, often young, men.<sup>62</sup> Some historians saw this brotherhood institution as a form of egalitarianism as it was a rule to help any brother in

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<sup>58</sup> Murray and Qin (1994), *The Origins of the Tiandihui*, p. 12. *Outlaws of the Marsh* is also known as *Water Margin*.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* These ‘heroes’ were actually fugitives who had committed petty crimes. They earned the respect from the common people for their bravery and some of the outlaws even robbed the rich to give to the poor.

<sup>61</sup> Murray and Qin (1994), *The Origins of the Tiandihui*, p. 12.

<sup>62</sup> David Ownby (1993), ‘Chinese *Hui* and the Early Modern Social Order: Evidence from Eighteenth-Century Southeast China,’ in Ownby and Heidhues (eds.), *Secret Societies Reconsidered*, p. 36.

trouble.<sup>63</sup> I disagree with this view that secret societies espoused egalitarianism as it would imply that they disregarded the ‘proper’ position of an individual within the society. In addition, to be truly egalitarian means that they were anti-Confucian in their orientation.<sup>64</sup> The hierarchical tendency of Confucianism such as the titles “elder brother” and “second elder” was reinforced even among members of secret societies to maintain discipline and facilitate common action.<sup>65</sup>

In Singapore, the brotherhood ideology was used more as a tool through which managers could manipulate workers.<sup>66</sup> It integrated the “young, single, migrant workers into an unfamiliar environment and playing a role in the actual organisation of work.”<sup>67</sup> In addition, some of the economic activities such as opium distribution and excise farms attained a certain level of organisation through the secret societies.<sup>68</sup> Thus, to a certain extent, Singapore owed its success to this brotherhood ideology as it facilitated economic undertakings of considerable magnitude.

If one were to look at the oaths that members of secret societies had to swear and abide, one would not miss that these oaths were oaths of mutual aid.<sup>69</sup> Mutual aid could be in the form of financial or organisational help. The fictive kinship bond ensured commitment to the cause and sometimes it led to collective violence as a response to

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<sup>63</sup> Sharon A. Carstens (1993), ‘Chinese Culture and Polity on Nineteenth-Century Malaya: The Case of Yap Ah Loy,’ in Ownby and Heidhues (eds.), Secret Societies Reconsidered, p. 138.

<sup>64</sup> Ownby and Heidhues (eds.), Secret Societies Reconsidered, p. 16.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18-19.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19. A lot of revenue had been obtained from these opium and excise farms which were not illegal in Singapore until the late nineteenth century.

<sup>69</sup> For the translated version of these oaths, please see Murray and Qin (1994), The Origins of the Tiandihui, pp. 239-246.

provocation, especially when the interests of the collective group were at risk or members were threatened. In Singapore, many clashes among the various secret societies resulted from the attempts to encroach upon other secret societies' territories and economic interests.<sup>70</sup>

Apart from those secret societies which were founded either on the political ideology of "overthrow the Qing and revive the Ming" or the protection of economic interests, some of them were self-help groups. One example was the Father-Mother Society (*Fumuhui*) whose members contributed whatever they had to care for or to bury elderly parents.<sup>71</sup> These groups undertook the blood oath to bind the members to this cause.<sup>72</sup>

The blood oath was the seal of all oaths that members of secret societies had to undertake. It sealed the bond between members and commitment to the cause that each individual secret society subject. The oath taking was part of the ritual that members had to observe when they were first initiated into the secret society. Rituals were performed regularly and not only during initiation ceremonies.<sup>73</sup> It was a basis for forging a legitimacy of the hegemony of triad groups.<sup>74</sup> Hence, they could implement the death penalty on errant members.

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<sup>70</sup> See Blythe (1969), The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies, chapters 4, 8 and 10.

<sup>71</sup> Murray and Qin (1994), The Origins of the Tiandihui, p. 15. The display of filial piety is revered in the Chinese culture and children were expected to perform the last rites after the demise of their parents. The failure to do so is tantamount to betrayal of one's parents. Hence, self-help groups such as the *Fumuhui* whose objective was to aid the poor to fulfil their obligations were actually not outside the natural conditions of man. However, they were proscribed by the Qing court on the reason that blood oaths were involved.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Jean DeBernardi (1993), 'Epilogue: Ritual Process Reconsidered,' in Ownby and Heidhues (eds.), Secret Societies Reconsidered, p. 213.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

Rituals demonstrated that triad groups were not anti-Confucian or anti-hierarchy. The Chinese term translated as ‘ritual’ (*li*) also means ‘etiquette’ or ‘propriety.’ Employing rituals was to exact deference and obedience from the members.<sup>75</sup> It guaranteed the legitimacy of the leaders to lead and their demands for allegiance. It also controlled the ideology of the group so as to limit the space for deviancy.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, colonial authorities had problems dealing with the secret societies in their territories. The initial policy of control over the Chinese was to rule them through the secret societies.<sup>77</sup> However, upon realisation that this was an *imperium in imperio*, thus challenging their supremacy, the tolerant policy had to make way for a formal prohibition of secret societies.<sup>78</sup>

### **Profile of a Secret Society Member**

Historians were of the opinion that secret societies appealed to the young and marginalised male members of society. That may apply to the situation in China but in Singapore due to a more tolerant attitude of the British,<sup>79</sup> even merchants and plantation owners were involved in secret society activities through the *kongsis*,<sup>80</sup> considering the economic benefits they would gain. It was only when secret societies were criminalised by the British authorities that they gradually lost their social standing.

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, p. 217.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, p. 219.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p. 223.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, p. 228.

<sup>79</sup> This was the period before 1890. After 1890 when the British implemented the Societies Ordinance, secret societies were proscribed.

<sup>80</sup> Trocki (1990) *Opium and Empire*, pp. 11-28.

It was during the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945) that member profiling was first recorded. Men with tattoo marks, according to the Japanese, were all members of secret societies and hence, categorised as undesirables.<sup>81</sup> These men, whether they were members or otherwise, were either tortured or executed. The more tattoos they had, the more precarious their position. Some went into hiding; some joined the resistance forces. After the War, members of secret societies regrouped and resumed their activities. It resulted in numerous and serious gang clashes and the crime rate involving members of secret societies increased drastically. The British then undertook stringent measures against the secret society menace and implemented “Operation Dagger” (1956) and “Operation *Pereksa*” or “Examination” (1957). Following the example of the Japanese, the British adopted the same screening strategies in weeding out the undesirables.<sup>82</sup> Men with tattoos were hauled up for questioning and hundreds were arrested and crime rates subsequently diminished. However, secret societies lay low during this period and when the police failed to sustain the momentum of the operations, they regrouped and resumed their activities. Wilfred Blythe commented that even after their suppression and constant vigilance of the police over their activities, it was virtually impossible to eradicate secret societies through legislation because of the depth of their “historical, traditional, ritualistic background.”<sup>83</sup>

The development of secret societies in Singapore took a different course compared to their counterparts in China. They had operated as a *kongsi*, hence, it would be more

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<sup>81</sup> Yoji Akashi (1970), ‘Japanese Policy Towards the Malayan Chinese, 1941-1945,’ Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 1, Sept, p. 68.

<sup>82</sup> Blythe (1969), The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies, pp. 497-502.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 7-11.

appropriate to see them as networks which ensured not only the protection of their economic gains but also their survival in society. The next chapter will examine the spread of secret societies in Singapore before 1930 as a launching pad to the study of the dynamic relationships the secret societies had with the rest of society.

## **CHAPTER TWO: A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF SECRET SOCIETIES IN SINGAPORE, 1819-1929**

### **Foundation of Singapore**

The foundation of Singapore had been discussed extensively by historians.<sup>1</sup> The British needed a port-of-call for their vessels to rest and repair in their China trade. In addition, they were unwilling to withdraw totally from the rich spice-producing areas in the East Indies, which had been dominated by the Dutch. Yet, it was the personal ambition and concern to boost British trade of an official from the English East India Company, a certain Stamford Raffles, that led to the foundation of Singapore, as a launching pad to compete with the Dutch in the area.

Soon after its foundation, Chinese immigrants began arriving in increasing numbers; forming an important section of the population. Wynne recorded that in 1819, there were only one hundred and twenty Malays and thirty Chinese in Singapore.<sup>2</sup> By 1824, there were already three thousand, three hundred and seventeen Chinese out of a total population of ten thousand, six hundred and eighty-three.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of the foundation of Singapore, please see C. M. Turnbull (1977), A History of Singapore: 1819-1975, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, pp. 6-18. See also K.G. Tregonning (1965), The British in Malaya: The First Forty Years, 1786-1826, Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, pp. 147-153; N.J. Ryan (1969), The Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore: A History from Earliest Times to 1966, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, pp. 88-96; H.F. Pearson (1985), Singapore: A Popular History, Singapore: Times Books International, pp. 1-12; Jim Baker (1999), Crossroads: A Popular History of Malaysia and Singapore, Singapore: Times Books International, pp. 87-92.

<sup>2</sup> Mervyn L. Wynne (1941), Triad and Tabut: A Survey of the Origin and Diffusion of Chinese and Mohamedan Secret Societies in the Malay Peninsula AD 1800-1935, Singapore: Government Printing Office, p. 79. The figures given are in round numbers. However, Turnbull was of the opinion that the population of Singapore in January 1819 numbered perhaps one thousand, including the seafaring people such as the Orang Kallang (about five hundred of them), the Orang Seletar (two hundred) and the Orang Gelam (one hundred and fifty). See Turnbull (1977), A History of Singapore, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Wynne (1941), Triad and Tabut, p. 79.

The Chinese immigrants were primarily male because women, by tradition were prohibited from emigrating.<sup>4</sup> Women were expected to fulfil their duties and obligations in looking after their family in China and men were expected to shoulder the financial burden of the family and since there were overseas economic opportunities for them to pursue, many left their families behind in China, leaving their wives to take care of them. Undoubtedly, most of the emigrants could not afford to take their families overseas. Victor Purcell believed that the authorities in China took great precautions in keeping the women in China so that the men would return to China after a certain period of time; thus, ensuring that China would not lose any of its people.<sup>5</sup>

There were at least two patterns of Chinese immigration: one was based on kinship and the other based on the credit ticket system.<sup>6</sup> Due to the rapid development of Singapore's economy, a shortage of labour was felt and in order to meet this need, the employer would return to his home village and start a recruitment campaign among his relatives and kinsmen. This was the preferred way of procuring labour as the employer would like trustworthy staff and those who belonged to the same dialect group. The workers' passage and their needs would be borne by the employer when they were in Singapore. With the right skills and right amount of savings, some of these workers would start their own businesses after a few years. When that happened, they in turn would need workers and the cycle was repeated. Thus, a chain of kinship immigration was established.

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<sup>4</sup> Yen Ching Hwang (1986), A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, 1800-1911, Singapore: Oxford University Press, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Victor Purcell (1965), The Chinese in Southeast Asia (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), London: Oxford University Press, p. 254.

<sup>6</sup> Yen (1986), A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, p. 4. The following description of the kinship immigration system and the credit ticket system was taken from pp. 4-5.

The credit ticket system was one based on exploitation by labour brokers, although it did offer an opportunity for the poor in China to find work in Singapore and in the region. The poor and the sponsor-less would therefore, submit themselves to the credit ticket system. Passage money was advanced by labour brokers or “*kheh-taus*”, who were usually owners of Chinese junks. Upon arrival, the credit ticket immigrants were disposed to employers. These employers were mostly plantation owners who needed large numbers of workers either to clear the land or work as plantation workers. The employers would pay the *kheh-taus* the passage money and made the credit ticket immigrants sign written contracts for the repayment of their debts.<sup>7</sup> After fulfilling their contracts, credit ticket immigrants were freed from their obligations and were given the choice to either continue with their present work or look for other areas of employment. However, in some cases, employers used underhand tactics such as opium and gambling to keep their workers in their service after the expiry of the contracts<sup>8</sup> as this helped employers save the trouble of training and the money spent on procuring new workers.<sup>9</sup> Evidently and very often, the actual terms of the contract might not be strictly adhered. The absence of a watchdog made such manipulation possible.

Most of these Chinese immigrants came from the southern maritime provinces of Fujian and Guangdong and were therefore, divided into various dialect groups such as

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<sup>7</sup> Since many of these immigrants were illiterate, handprints were used instead of signatures.

<sup>8</sup> Yen (1986), *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya*, p. 5. We do not know the length of the contracts.

<sup>9</sup> The price paid by employers for one credit ticket immigrant covered the passage money as well as the *kheh-taus*' profit. If the demand was high, the *kheh-taus* would increase the price; thus, increase the burden of the employers.

Teochew, Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese.<sup>10</sup> These Chinese dialects were mutually unintelligible and many conflicts arose due to the breakdown in communication. When these immigrants first arrived in Singapore, they were known as “*sinkhehs*” meaning “new guests.” They tended to congregate among those who shared the same dialect and place of origin. On this basis, dialect and clan associations were formed. These dialect and clan associations were replicas of the village kinship structure in China.<sup>11</sup> Under the village kinship structure, when a person required assistance, he could turn to members of his larger kin group for aid. Hence, the formation of dialect and clan associations for the overseas Chinese communities became a substitute for this clan and village organisation or quasi-family units for the immigrants and this was critical in meeting the needs of immigrants so far away from home.

Many of the *sinkhehs*, especially those on the credit ticket system, became easy targets for the Chinese secret societies’ recruitment campaigns.<sup>12</sup> After being ‘bought’ by employers, these immigrants had to spend long periods of time in remote areas of Singapore Island. These areas were beyond the reach of the dialect and clan associations and therefore, immigrants found them inaccessible. Many often felt lost and afraid. In

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<sup>10</sup> The Teochews hailed from Guangdong through the port in Swatow. Sometimes, they were known as ‘Swatow men.’ The Hokkiens came from the port of Amoy in Fujian province. Hence, they were called ‘Amoy men.’ The Cantonese were from the city of Canton and the Hainanese from Hainan Island. The Hakkas came from Fujian and Guangdong. See Edwin Lee (1991), The British as Rulers: Governing Multiracial Singapore, 1867-1914, Singapore: Singapore University Press, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> Yen (1986), A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, p. 73. Clan and dialect associations were examples of quasi-family units for the Chinese immigrants in place of the village structure in China. Secret societies were also quasi-family units for the Chinese immigrants but they were largely confined to the interior of the island of Singapore. More details will be explained in the later part of this chapter.

<sup>12</sup> Like the dialect and clan associations, secret societies were also demarcated on dialect line. See Wynne (1941), Triad and Tabut, p. 90 and Leon Comber (1959), Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Survey of the Triad Society from 1800-1900, Locust Valley: J.J. Augustin Incorporated Publisher, p. 58.

addition, many secret societies had their hideouts in the jungles of Singapore.<sup>13</sup> Members of secret societies were quick to befriend these new and lonely arrivals and many *sinkhehs* became members as a result. Some were even forced to become members after threats were issued.<sup>14</sup> Thus, secret societies, rather than dialect and clan associations became quasi-family units for those Chinese living in the interior of Singapore. As the frontier setting was dominated by the influence and coercive power of Chinese secret societies, inevitably the dialect and clan associations were not able to penetrate the almost inaccessible parts of the island. These secret society type of quasi-family units became the basic framework for the survival of the members and the family's essential laws, which included caring for those in need, were tightened and consolidated within the interior of the great traditional family-as-alliance.<sup>15</sup> According to 'outsiders,' the laws that governed these secret societies were harsh due to their ability to mete out severe punishment on offenders.

### **Early Secret Society History**

The first mention of secret societies in Singapore came from the first-hand account of Munshi Abdullah, a native of Malacca, who came to Singapore to teach Malay to the British administrators.<sup>16</sup> He had witnessed an initiation ceremony of a secret society in the interior of Singapore in 1824 when he managed to persuade a Chinese friend, who was an important office bearer of the society, to take him to see the camp.

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<sup>13</sup> Munshi Abdullah (1852), 'Concerning the Tan Tae Hoey in Singapore,' Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia, Vol. 6, p. 545.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Paul Rabinow (ed.) (1984), The Foucault Reader, New York: Pantheon, p. 280.

<sup>16</sup> Munshi Abdullah (1797-1854) was a one-time Malay teacher of Raffles and other prominent British administrators. He wrote an autobiography "Hikayat Abdullah" in which he described his experiences in Singapore. For a summary of his life and work, please refer to Charles B. Buckley (1965), An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, pp. 28-29.

The journey into the interior of the island was difficult as they had to wade across swamps and cross over stumps of trees. When they reached the camp, Abdullah was brought to a chamber at the side of the camp where he could peep through a hole. This was what he saw:

... the chief then spoke ...:-- "Who are you, and from whence come you? Who are your father and mother? Are they still alive or are they dead?" These questions... were answered as follows: "I am such a one, of such a country, and my father and mother are both dead," even if his father and mother were alive, he would be obliged to say they were dead, because no one whose father and mother are alive can be admitted into the society, as the existence of all those is as if they were dead to the world and its ties.

The chief then said something to which the following answer was made:-- "I promise not to divulge the secrets of this society to any one under penalty of death.".... A vessel was then brought, containing arrack and a little blood from each of the society, and, with a knife, was placed in front of the idol. The candidate then taking up the knife, made a slight cut in his finger, from which he allowed some blood to fall into the cup. The chief then said "drink in presence of Datu Peking." The candidate then drank a small cupful, on which the chief, and all the confederates, drank a little, each in his turn.<sup>17</sup>

Abdullah went on to say that one man who refused to join the society was badly beaten and was ordered by the chief to be put to death the next morning.<sup>18</sup> It is not certain whether this was carried out, however, because Abdullah had left the camp before dawn without witnessing the actual execution; he assumed that it would be carried out.

The exact date of the establishment of secret societies in Singapore is disputable. Writers such as Wilfred Blythe and Leon Comber, due to the first-hand account of Munshi Abdullah, were of the opinion that by 1824, secret societies were already active.<sup>19</sup> Comber even said that by 1824, secret societies had already caused many outrages in

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<sup>17</sup> Munshi Abdullah (1852), 'Concerning the Tan Tae Hoey,' p. 549-550. 'Datu Peking' is a patron god of territory, also known as Toa Pek Kong to the Hokkiens.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 550.

<sup>19</sup> Wilfred Blythe (1969), The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Historical Study, London: Oxford University Press, p. 47.

society.<sup>20</sup> However, Charles Burton Buckley said that secret societies were first mentioned in 1830.<sup>21</sup> Buckley based his opinion on a letter written in 1830 from the Resident Councillor's office to the Superintendent of Police with a list of questions on the subject of secret societies.<sup>22</sup> It was from here that Buckley inferred that the first mention of secret societies was in 1830. It is impossible to verify this due to the lack of written documentation by secret societies: partly due to the illiteracy of the members and partly, due to the destruction of written documents by members in order to escape punishment. In addition, it was also possible that Buckley disregarded the translated account of Munshi Abdullah's account (probably due to his reliance on colonial written records) although it was available to him.

Although the secret societies were largely confined to the interior of the island, with occasional forays into the town to rob, their presence in the urban areas became more evident due to the rise of the coolie trade. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the immigrant trade, whether based on the kinship system or the credit ticket system, was the major force of Chinese emigration to Southeast Asia. By 1842, the nature of the immigrant trade was transformed into the "coolie trade."<sup>23</sup> Edwin Lee, however, made no distinction between the immigrant trade and the coolie trade;<sup>24</sup> although he did differentiate between "free coolies" and "credit coolies." "Free coolies" were free to choose the type of employment they would like to be in; hence, had the power to negotiate the terms of employment. "Credit ticket coolies," on the other hand, were kept in coolie

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<sup>20</sup> Comber (1959), *Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya*, p. 58.

<sup>21</sup> Charles B. Buckley (1965), *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*, p. 213.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Yen (1986), *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Lee (1991), *The British as Rulers*, p. 27.

houses until an employer was found. Unlike the “free coolies”, “credit ticket coolies” did not have the control over the negotiations of the type and the terms of employment.<sup>25</sup>

According to Yen, the increase in the number of ports for Western powers to trade after the conclusion of the Treaty of Nanking (1842) and the British abolition of the slave trade in 1834 in the New World caused the transformation of the immigrant trade to the coolie trade.<sup>26</sup> Due to the formal abolition of the slave trade in British colonies, the need for labour had to be met from other sources. Yen said that the operation of the coolie trade was larger in scale and assumed an international character as the European merchants became deeply involved in the trade.<sup>27</sup>

The emerging coolie trade was mainly in the hands of Western merchants due to the amount of capital, the use of steamships and the organisational skills they possessed.<sup>28</sup> Many Chinese immigrant traders were ousted from the business but those who survived had to reorganise by purchasing modern ships to replace their traditional Chinese junks. As competition was stiff, Chinese coolie traders required an effective system of control which would ‘cover supply, transportation and the distribution of coolies’ so as to obtain maximum profits.<sup>29</sup> To this end, they cooperated with the secret societies in the Treaty ports as well as those in Singapore and elsewhere as secret societies had the ability to

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Yen (1986), *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya*, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

coerce and forced the coolies into submission through terror and intimidation.<sup>30</sup> Some of these coolie traders were leaders of secret societies, having the ability in using their own members to keep the coolies under complete control.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the stiff competition from the coolie trade provided more opportunities for secret societies to operate freely and boldly in the urban areas.

With their power, influence and importance greatly increased, secret societies often clashed with each other at the slightest provocation as each had their own agenda and economic interests to protect. Where the rule of law was concerned, they posed a challenge to the British colonial rule in Singapore as they recognised only the laws that governed their society, not British laws which were alien to them. What compounded the situation was that although Singapore was a British colony and governed by British law in principle, in practice, the British adopted a laissez-faire attitude towards the Chinese, allowing them to handle their own affairs. Such an ambiguity resulted in dire consequences for the colony.

### **Order and Disorder**

Like the clan and dialect associations, secret societies were demarcated on linguistic lines.<sup>32</sup> One of the largest societies, the Ghee Hin Society, had Hokkien, Hakka,

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<sup>30</sup> It was uncertain whether the secret societies in China had branches in Singapore. Although the possibility existed, it was also possible that Chinese coolie merchants employed different secret societies in the Treaty ports and in Singapore.

<sup>31</sup> Yen (1986), *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya*, p. 112-113.

<sup>32</sup> Wynne (1941), *Triad and Tabut*, p. 90.

Cantonese and Teochew branches, each operating independently of each other.<sup>33</sup> By 1860, membership of the various secret societies was estimated as:

Hokkien Ghee Hin	15, 000
Hai San (Hokkien and Teochew)	6, 000
Macao (Cantonese) Ghee Hin	4, 000
Teochew Ghee Hin	3, 500
Hainanese Ghee Hin	2, 500
Ghee Kee (Hakka and Teochew)	1, 500
Ghee Sin (Teochew)	1, 500
Ghee Soon (Hokkien and Hainanese)	1, 500
Tsung Peh Society (Hokkien and Hakka)	1, 000 <sup>34</sup>

The total Chinese population of Singapore in 1860 was 50, 043.<sup>35</sup> Based on the figures above, this means that 72% of the Chinese population were members of secret societies!<sup>36</sup> The dialect differences, the increasing power of the secret societies, coupled with the ‘clannishness’ of the Chinese were the ingredients for conflicts and disorder among the Chinese communities. This underlying tension was manifested in a series of

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Irene Lim (1999), Secret Societies in Singapore: Featuring the William Stirling Collection, Singapore: National Heritage Board, p. 21. The figures provided only feature some of the secret societies in Singapore during the period.

<sup>35</sup> Lee Poh Ping (1978), Chinese Society in Nineteenth Century Singapore: Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, p. 38. Purcell gave the male/female ration in 1860 as 14:1. See Victor Purcell (1965), The Chinese in Southeast Asia (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), London: Oxford University Press, p. 234.

<sup>36</sup> This does not include those who were under the influence of triad groups.

riots in 1846, 1851, 1854 and 1876.<sup>37</sup> These riots had deep economic roots in them but the British authorities chose to view them as Chinese disregard for British law.<sup>38</sup> The relationship between the Chinese and the British was therefore, defined by these riots which saw the British, with their colonial-style emphasis on law and order on one side and the various secret societies, with their own notion of law and order, on the other.

The riots were significant in two areas. Firstly, they demonstrated that the British had underestimated the underlying tensions within the Chinese society and these tensions were results of demanding economic competition. As secret societies were used as protective agencies over their economic interests, any foray into each other's economic monopoly would trigger unhappiness and the strong arm of the protective agencies would be marshalled. What inflamed the situation most was when British authorities were perceived to have taken sides in conflicts or perceived to be overtly friendly to competitors, even though there was no hint of truth in them.<sup>39</sup> The deep-seated animosity was exacerbated by the transportation of tensions among secret societies in Johor and Riau to Singapore due to the constant state of flux and fluidity of immigration within the region. In addition, there had been confirmed reports that secret societies had branches in

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<sup>37</sup> The riots of 1851, 1854 and 1876 were serious in terms of casualties and damages incurred. Hence, these riots are analysed thoroughly by historians.

<sup>38</sup> See Carl Trocki (1990), Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 107-116 for an in depth analysis of the underlying economic problems of the 1851 and 1854 riots. See also Wilfred Blythe (1969), The Impact of the Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Historical Study, London: Oxford University Press, pp. 201-207 for the economic reasons of the 1876 riots.

<sup>39</sup> The 1846 Chinese Funeral Procession Riots was a case in point when British police were using the headman of the Quan Tek Hui secret society in a bid to control the funeral procession of the death of a Ghee Hin secret society headman. Members of Ghee Hin, who were in mourning, were greatly incensed at the 'perceived' closeness of the British police with the Quan Tek Hui leader and a fight resulted. Please refer to Trocki (1990), Opium and Empire, pp. 89-91.

the region<sup>40</sup> and once trouble arose in an area, it would spread quickly to other areas. The British remained largely apathetic of such developments.

Secondly, the riots also demonstrated that the British were not in control of the colony's security situation as they needed the assistance of Chinese community leaders to settle the differences between the various factions involved. Edwin Lee felt that the British did not have very much real power in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Singapore.<sup>41</sup> He believed that

[t]he Chinese were the real power ... [as it] was augmented by waves of coolies and *samsengs*<sup>42</sup> arriving from China. Chinese riots were trials of strength, conducted with impunity as if the government did not exist, as well as contests of will with the government, underlined by attacks on government targets.<sup>43</sup>

The secret societies in Singapore represented an *imperium in imperio* and this was evident in the setting up of their own tribunals to try their members before deciding the type of punishment and redressing the wrongs done to victims. To the British, this constituted an obstruction to the course of British justice which challenged their judiciary powers.<sup>44</sup>

Despite such negative views, the British were well aware of the consequences should they outlaw the secret societies. Wilfred Blythe, a former British Civil servant from the Chinese Affairs Department, writing in the nineteen sixties, gave the best description of the conundrum that the British authorities faced:

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 88.

<sup>41</sup> Lee (1991), *The British as Rulers*, p. 47.

<sup>42</sup> 'Samsengs' were thugs and fighters of secret societies to keep trouble at bay.

<sup>43</sup> Lee (1991), *The British as Rulers*, p. 47.

<sup>44</sup> *Straits Settlements Annual Reports*, 1858-1859, p. 53.

... the *Hoey*s had been permitted to exist from the earliest days of the Settlement, they embraced a very large section of the Chinese population, including a high admixture of criminals, and to interfere with them might bring a hornets' nest about the ears of the Government, for the forces at its command might very easily be overcome. Moreover, the *Hoey*s served a very useful purpose as friendly societies for their members, and, above all, were the most valuable channels of communication between the Government and the masses.

Apart from the English-language press, the only channel of public opinion was the Grand Jury, and both the press and the jury reflected in the main the views of the European traders, not of the Chinese masses.

That was why there had been the 'singular system of coquetting with them'. There was also the added difficulty of trying to find any equitable principle on which to base a law which would prohibit societies such as the *Hoey*s which engaged in nefarious activities, and yet would permit other societies such as the district or clan associations and the Free-masons (to which many of the leading European citizens belonged) to function without restraint.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, when the social disorder became too disruptive, the British government decided to review the policy of 'tolerance.' In 1867, the Dangerous Societies Ordinance was passed.<sup>46</sup> Under this Ordinance, all societies with ten or more members had to be registered. This did not mean that secret societies were outlawed but recognition of their legal status. When this Ordinance failed to check on the growth of secret societies, the British had to re-evaluate their policy.

The establishment of the Chinese Protectorate in 1877 was the evidence of this re-evaluation which could be interpreted as an attempt to control the secret societies.<sup>47</sup> William A. Pickering was appointed the first Protector of Chinese as he could speak several Chinese dialects and write in Chinese as well.<sup>48</sup> He had to

... deal with every matter connected with the Chinese life and custom and to make the Chinese – especially the new arrivals – realise that there was a government officer whose special duty was to protect them and to be their friend.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Blythe (1969), *The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya*, p. 72.

<sup>46</sup> Ng Siew Yoong (1961), 'The Chinese Protectorate in Singapore, 1877-1900,' *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, March, p. 78.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

Thus, through the Chinese Protectorate the British were engaged in penetrating into the micropolitics of Chinese political and economic institutions. The social upheavals in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Singapore was a contest for the right to exercise political, economic and social control in Singapore. The battle for this power and control reached new heights with the establishment of the Chinese Protectorate in 1877 where British intention to control every sphere of public life was made more certain and plain. This battle for power resulted in the attempt by the British to regulate the leisure activities, such as gambling, of the Chinese. The conflict between the Chinese secret societies and the British authorities was thus, not confined to the political sphere but also intruded into the socio-economic life of the Chinese as well.

### **The Gambling Controversy**

Since the foundation of the colony, there was a constant wrangle between the prohibitionists and the anti-prohibitionists of revenue collection from gambling farms. The prohibitionists argued that Singapore must be “intimately connected with the moral and political state of the [Malay] Archipelago”<sup>50</sup> and its success as a moral political state rested on how the problem of gambling was resolved. Otherwise, Singapore would be “disgraced in the eyes of the civilised world.”<sup>51</sup>

This moral discourse was challenged by the proponents of the economic discourse. The anti-prohibition faction argued that it was impossible to prohibit gambling because it

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<sup>50</sup> George Windsor Earl [1837] (1971), *The Eastern Seas* (Reprint), Singapore: Oxford University Press, p. 343. Words in italics mine.

<sup>51</sup> Buckley (1965), *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*, p. 691.

would be “at variance with the habits and manners of the inhabitants.”<sup>52</sup> Moreover, spirits and opium farms, which were equally disgraceful, were allowed to operate.<sup>53</sup> In addition, the revenue collected from gambling from 1820-1826 was staggering:

<b>Year:</b>	<b>Opium (\$):</b>	<b>Gambling (\$):</b>
1820	7, 345	5, 275
1821	9, 420	7, 335
1822	14, 200	9, 500
1823	22, 830	15, 076
1824	24, 000	25, 630
1825	24, 030	33, 657
1826	24, 600	30, 390 <sup>54</sup>

Debates between the prohibitionists and the anti-prohibitionists were so intense that the Court of Directors from the British East India Company had to intervene. Despite the amount of revenue gambling brought, the Court of Directors abolished all forms of public gambling in 1829.<sup>55</sup>

Gambling was driven underground as a result of this suppression policy and went beyond the power and control of the British administration.<sup>56</sup> Secret societies began to exert control over underground gambling. The power and influence of these secret

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p. 142.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p. 143.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p. 144.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p. 145.

<sup>56</sup> John Cameron [1865] (1965), Our Tropical Possessions in Malayan India (Reprint), Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, p. 219.

societies were used to maintain and consolidate the monopoly of gambling farms.<sup>57</sup> Secret societies were hired regularly to protect the monopoly rights of gambling farms and the success of these farms was dependent largely upon the power of the secret societies in keeping trouble-makers at bay, collecting debts and as watchmen over police movements. Although there were some farmers who did not engage the direct services of the secret societies, they had to pay protection money to maintain their businesses.<sup>58</sup>

As gambling was a lucrative source of income, many secret societies were attracted to running gambling houses themselves rather than being hired to protect them.<sup>59</sup> Disputes over the rights to operate and control gambling houses<sup>60</sup> often led to unrest which “threatened the peace and order of the settlement.”<sup>61</sup> This increased the authorities’ burden of keeping law and order.

Although the official reason for the suppression of gambling was that it led to destitution and misery, there was a fear among the British that gambling would lead to more riots, which once broken out, the British would not be able to control. The evidence for this claim could be found in the different treatment for opium and spirits farming. Opium and spirits, like gambling, had undesirable effects on addicts, but they were not suppressed but treated like any other business opportunity. Opium addicts were unlikely to create any disturbance because of the sedative effects of the drug. Although

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<sup>57</sup> Yen (1986), A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, p. 117.

<sup>58</sup> Mak Lau Fong (1981), The Sociology of Secret Societies: A Study of Chinese Secret Societies in Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, p. 82.

<sup>59</sup> Yen (1986), A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, p. 244.

<sup>60</sup> Mak (1981), A Sociology of Secret Societies, p. 52.

<sup>61</sup> Yen (1986), A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, p. 244.

drunkenness could lead to disturbances, it was easier to control inebriated men and it was rather unlikely that it would lead to large scale riots. Gambling, however, ran according to emotions, which once left unchecked, would lead to dissatisfaction, anger and fights. The potential for a full scale riot would increase as a result. The likely consequences would be the loss of lives, breakdown of law and order and the destruction of private property, so dear to the British rulers. Moreover, with the involvement of secret societies in gambling farms, British political control would be in great jeopardy.

Apart from the threat to public order gambling posed, another problem which the British faced was the corruption of police. In 1846 a former police constable, Charles Cashin, was found guilty of receiving bribes from gambling den keepers to “connive at the existence of gambling dens.”<sup>62</sup> Cashin then retorted that all the constables, who were mainly Europeans, had been guilty of receiving bribes for conniving at the system. As the investigation progressed, it was discovered that the former Superintendent of Police, Major Low, had indeed issued an order, commanding the constables not to put down the gambling dens. Previously, in order to motivate the police to do their duty and to counteract the effect of corruption, the police had been promised half of whatever money was found on the gaming table. The police went to work accordingly, but they became so engrossed by the monetary rewards that they neglected other duties. Under the circumstances Major Low found it necessary to annul the order to clean out gambling in Singapore. Rather than seeing the police neglect their duties or follow the policy of

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<sup>62</sup> Singapore Free Press, 7 May 1846.

suppression which would inevitably lead to corruption,<sup>63</sup> the best way was to turn a blind eye to gambling.

By contrast, there were police officers who waged a war on gambling. In 1847 Constable Simonides was awarded a Gold Medal for suppressing one hundred and eleven gambling houses within a space of ten months.<sup>64</sup> Unfortunately, such an act was rare for it was more common for police to accept bribes to leave gambling houses alone than to wage war on them.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, with members of secret societies controlling the dens, it would have been more difficult to suppress them as these members of secret societies would not hesitate to use violence to resist arrest.<sup>66</sup> Few policemen would be prepared to take such risks so as to carry out their duties.

The rampant corruption of police was an indication that the British agents of law and order were under the payroll of the secret societies since the clandestine and lucrative gambling farms were largely controlled by the secret fraternities. What had begun as a wrangle among the British between the moralists and the economists turned into a contest of political control over the Chinese in the name of British law and order. Thus, the British had the justification to intrude into the leisure time and activity of the Chinese,<sup>67</sup> which constituted the private space of all Chinese. Such an intrusion was actively

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<sup>63</sup> C. M. Turnbull (1972), The Straits Settlements 1826-1867: Indian Presidency to Crown Colony, London: The Athlone Press, p. 93.

<sup>64</sup> The Overland Singapore Free Press, 3 May 1847.

<sup>65</sup> Turnbull (1972), The Straits Settlements 1826-1867, p. 93.

<sup>66</sup> Turnbull (1972), The Straits Settlements 1826-1867, p. 94.

<sup>67</sup> See Yen (1986), A Social History of the Chinese, pp. 147-242 for his argument that gambling was a form of leisure activity for the Chinese in Singapore in early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

resisted. Chinese continued to run the gambling dens and gambled. Hence, in order to break this 'resistance', it became a necessity to suppress the secret societies.

The straw that broke the camel's back came in the form of an assassination attempt on William Pickering's (the Protector of the Chinese) life.<sup>68</sup> He was pressing for more stringent laws against gambling and some members of the Ghee Hok Society decided to assassinate him so as to protect their interests. Although Pickering survived the attack, he was unable to recover fully from his injury and had to retire.<sup>69</sup>

This attack was sufficient to prove the 'treachery' of secret societies and attempts were made to suppress them.<sup>70</sup> In 1890 the Societies Ordinance Bill, which outlawed all Chinese secret societies, was passed, driving the secret societies underground. Indeed, the proscription of secret societies came at the time when the British could no longer tolerate the *imperium in imperio* and whatever justification they had in suppressing these secret fraternities served only to "destroy a useful formal means of contact with many of the Chinese population."<sup>71</sup> In addition, this legislation did not obliterate the existence of secret societies; it merely drove them underground.

When the Societies Ordinance was implemented, the Singapore Ghee Hin (which was organised as a system of branches or affiliates with a central temple at Rochore<sup>72</sup>) organised a ceremony whereby all diplomas of membership to each branch entitling the

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<sup>68</sup> Lee (1991), *The British as Rulers*, p. 130.

<sup>69</sup> R. N. Jackson (1965), *Pickering: Protector of Chinese*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, p. 111.

<sup>70</sup> For the full account, please refer to Comber (1959), *Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya*, pp. 255-266.

<sup>71</sup> Jackson (1965), *Pickering: Protector of Chinese*, p. 101.

<sup>72</sup> Blythe (1969), *The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies*, p. 237.

use of the facilities of the temple were destroyed.<sup>73</sup> This was a formal renunciation of the headmen that they could no longer be held accountable for the actions of those who had been members. This renunciation meant that the British government could no longer call on the headmen to intervene when trouble arose.

Despite this renunciation, it did not hinder former members of the Singapore Ghee Hok Society from forming new secret societies. Gang fights between rival secret societies were still frequent. In the early 1900s, the Tung Meng Hui (an anti-Manchu revolutionary group and precursor to the Kuomintang) set up a branch in Singapore and gave protection to triad members who participated in anti-Manchu riots in 1908 and deported to Singapore.<sup>74</sup> These people proved to be a nuisance to Singapore as they became involved in local triad activities. In addition, the revolutionaries clashed with the supporters of the reform movement led by Kang Yu-wei.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, when Emperor Kuang Hsu died in 1908, the reformists, suspecting that the revolutionaries would create trouble on the day of ‘national mourning’ in Singapore, employed members of secret societies to deal with those revolutionaries who planned to sabotage that day.<sup>76</sup> This allowed the secret societies to create further trouble for the British authorities.

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>75</sup> Kang Yu-wei was the main figure behind the Hundred Days’ Reform of 1898 who fled China after the failure of the reform movement. He came to Singapore to garner support for his reform movement by launching the Emperor Protection Society. He was a conservative Confucian scholar who believed that the way to reform China was to return absolute power to the Emperor and not through revolution. For a detailed account of the reformist movement, please refer to Yen Ching Hwang (1978), Overseas Chinese Nationalism in Singapore and Malaya, 1877-1912, Adelaide: Centre for Asian Studies, pp. 19-26. For a detailed account of the conflict between the revolutionaries and the reformists, please refer to Yen Ching Hwang (1976), The Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution: With Special Reference to Singapore and Malaya, London: Oxford University Press, Chapter IV.

<sup>76</sup> Yen (1976), The Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution, p. 167. The reformists, unlike the revolutionaries, never had the intention of working with secret societies. However, they were so determined

In the early 1920s, depression in trade due to the sharp fall in the prices of rubber and tin, causing serious unemployment, resulted in the sharp increase in crime.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, as arms were easily obtained in those days, it was of little surprise that secret society activities increased.<sup>78</sup> This occurred despite the increase in penalties for offences under the Arms and Explosives Bill in 1922.<sup>79</sup>

Singapore was not insulated from the market fluctuations. When trade was depressed, labourers from the region would come to Singapore in search of work. Hence, not only did they have to contend with the lack of employment, they had to contend with social pressures arose from increased immigration. The lack of employment caused many to join local gangs and turned to crime to meet their daily needs. In addition, the political merger between the KMT and the Communists in China (1924-1927) saw the domination of the KMT left-wing by the Communists in the branches here in Singapore.<sup>80</sup> Communist teachers and cadres were most successful among young Hainanese students. Simultaneously, secret societies recruited many new Hainanese immigrants and battered on the left-wing political movement.<sup>81</sup> To counter the growing influence of secret societies in the left-wing politics of the KMT, the British amended the 1890 Societies

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to make the national day of mourning a success that they would not hesitate in resorting to violence by working with the secret societies.

<sup>77</sup> Blythe (1969), The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies, p. 296.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, p. 297.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 299-300.

<sup>80</sup> C.M Turnbull (1989), A History of Singapore 1819-1988 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Singapore: Oxford University Press, p. 131.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*.

Ordinance in 1924 by stiffening the penalties against secret society gangsters and exerting greater pressure on the KMT.<sup>82</sup>

The 1920s were considered a decade of lawlessness despite the ban on secret societies thirty years ago. Secret societies, despite their illegal status, caused great strife in society and proved to be a thorn to the British administration. Although there were severe punishment meted out to offenders, secret societies never lost their impetus or their stranglehold over the Chinese society in Singapore. The British largely had no idea how to deal with them. It became more problematic for the British to deal effectively with the secret societies now that they had been driven underground. Moreover, the tightening of restrictions on brothel-keepers and the subsequent closure of brothels in 1930 drove them underground and they became money-making tools for the secret societies.<sup>83</sup> Hence, secret societies were able to survive economically.

The fortune of secret societies did not end at the 1890 Societies Ordinance. Their existence was strongly felt throughout the history of Singapore. Secret societies had operated not as organisations but as networks of relationships which enabled them to survive even though they were proscribed. The following chapters demonstrate the continuation of the relationships between the secret societies with the British as well as the Chinese society in general, with specific reference to the prevalent concerns of the period from 1930 to 1960.

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* The KMT was subsequently banned in 1929 due to its stance on Chinese loyalty and the numerous clashes with the Communists. Both were contrary to the British wishes.

<sup>83</sup> Turnbull (1989), *A History of Singapore*, p. 133. It was indeed ironic that the rationale for the closure of brothels was not only to keep undesirable and immoral practices at bay, but also to break the financial strength of secret societies.