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Johor, 1844-1916**

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**Abstract**

The paper examines the themes of continuity and connectedness in local history through the study of a 19th century Chinese secret society. However, the Ngee Heng Kongsi of Johor did not have a clandestine image and has instead been accorded a respectable place in the history of the Chinese in Johor. The paper describes the Ngee Heng's China origins and the Malayan background to its rise to prominence during the rule of Sultan Abu Bakar. Starting as a group of political dissidents under its first leader Tan Kee Soon, it gradually transformed itself into an organisation of towkays and revenue farmers under its second leader Major China Tan Hiok Nee. Although it was proscribed by British officials in 1916, the Ngee Heng Kongsi is remembered in the school it endowed and the temple it established. More important, it has left behind a legacy of traditions and customary practices which bind the Chinese community together in a spirit of cooperation and goodwill that is still visible today.

I was introduced to local history by local history buffs. Every locality has such enthusiasts who not only know every landmark in the local landscape — the buildings, bridges, roads, culverts, gate-posts, even the trees — but are also full of stories about their history and the people associated with them. Such local knowledge and common awareness contribute to the sense of community and its sense of heritage. By being able to relate the past to their own experience and knowledge, history becomes more real and meaningful. Local history therefore not merely provide us with local knowledge but has continuities to the past and a connectedness between the elements that make up that past. However, the value of local history does not lie in deepening the sense of heritage no matter how enriching it may be to the persons concerned, but in offering the possibility that by highlighting the particular, we may illuminate the whole and gain some insight which we cannot perceive from the more distant and broader perspective of the larger picture.

In some ways, this paper is a continuation of the paper entitled, "Past and Present Juxtaposed: The Chinese of Nineteenth Century Johor" (1998) which shows

how the preparation of a Master Plan for Johor Bahru brought the past and present together in a way that the city planners could not possibly foresee. While that paper deals with the continuities embedded in the physical landscape, this paper will focus on the continuities in the social landscape of Chinese associations and in the cultural landscape of religious practices and traditions. Woven into these continuities, is a connectedness between the Malays and the Chinese, an interaction and accommodation between the two communities that began when the Chinese first settled in this country.

One of the features in the local landscape discussed previously, is a road in Johor Bahru named after the Ngee Heng Kongsi (Yixing Gongsi), one of the many brotherhoods which used to flourish in nineteenth century Malaya and which were held responsible for much of the robbery and violence that occurred.<sup>1</sup> They are commonly referred to as secret societies, partly because of the secrecy in which their operations were shrouded and partly because they went underground after they were suppressed. However, in Johor, the Ngee Heng Kongsi did not have such a clandestine image but was instead given a legitimate place in society and although it was eventually proscribed in 1916, it has left behind a legacy that is still discernible today. A study of the Ngee Heng Kongsi therefore provides an opportunity for examining the two themes of continuity and connectedness in local history.

Before we move on to a discussion of the Ngee Heng, it is necessary to have an understanding of the nature of these secret societies which were called *hui* (also spelt *hoe*, *hoey*, *huey*, *wui*) and their origins in China. These secret societies were thrown up in times of hardship and weak administrative control when discontented and disgruntled men from the lowest strata of society were drawn together by a combination of mutual need and martial skill plus a rebellious resentment against the injustices of the ruling authority. Unfortunately, these gangs easily and often descended into criminal violence as the veneer of patriotic zeal covered a multitude of sins. Under the disintegrating Qing Dynasty, these secret societies found an environment ripe for disaffection while foreign rule by the Manchus provided them with a legitimate revolutionary cause. When the Chinese started migrating to Malaya in large numbers, they brought their social organisations with them including these *hui* which became a significant group within Chinese society and their history forms the underside of the history of the Chinese in Malaysia.

There is considerable literature on these secret societies but I shall only mention those that are most relevant in the context of this paper. Many of them were written by colonial officials who had to manage large numbers of immigrant population. Dr. W.C. Milne, Principal of the Anglo-Chinese College in Malacca, is generally credited with drawing serious attention to the Chinese secret societies by his article published in 1826. But the most thorough of the early works was the study by Gustave Schlegel (1866), Interpreter for the Chinese Language with the government of the Dutch East Indies. In 1877, W.A. Pickering was appointed Protector of Chinese<sup>2</sup> and the two papers he published in 1878-79 did not add to very much what was already known but did give a certain immediacy to the subject as he was said to be a member of the Ghee Hin and had participated in its ceremonies (Mak, 3). Schlegel's book was the authority for many years until the appearance of a massive three-volume joint work by J.S.M. Ward, Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute, and W. G. Stirling, Assistant Protector of Chinese (1925).<sup>3</sup> In the beginning, secret societies were not illegal and both Schlegel and Ward found many correlations with the secrecy and rituals of Freemasonry. Mervyn Wynne (1941), a former officer in the Federated Malay States followed much in the same vein but began to realise that secret societies were not merely a police problem but also a sociological one. Leonard Comber (1959), another retired officer in the Malayan Police, placed the history of the secret societies against the history of the Chinese in Malaya and their visible and not so visible hand in the events of Malayan history. That the secret societies was a continuing problem can be seen in the valuable book by Wilfred Blythe (1969), Secretary for Chinese Affairs, Federation of Malaya. Secret societies were also given prominence in well known books on the Chinese such as those by J.D. Vaughan (1879) and Victor Purcell (1967). Government officials tended to see secret societies as part of the "Chinese problem". They were concerned with understanding the nature of these *hui*, their history and organisation, and were fascinated by the exoticism of their symbolic language and elaborate rituals. Research by scholars such as sociologists Mak Lau Fong (1981) and David Ownby (1996) however, has examined the social conditions which produced these organisations and enabled them to flourish. More recently a volume edited by Ownby and Heidhues (1993) brought together a multi-disciplinary

collection of papers on the social and economic functions of secret societies as well as their better known criminal and political activities.

### **The China Origins**

It is generally known that such brotherhoods have always lurked in the background of Chinese history and that the harsh environment of the Qing Dynasty strengthened their appeal. These groups drew their inspiration from two traditions in popular culture, traditions that are still prevalent in present day Chinese society:

- The idea of sworn brotherhood derived from the well known tales from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in which the three heroes Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei swore brotherhood with each other. Since Guan Yu who has been deified as Guangong, the God of War, is regarded as the epitome of courage in war and loyalty in comradeship, it is no wonder that he is among other things, the tutelary deity of secret societies (Comber, 8).
- The higher loyalty of a fictive relationship as idealised in the stories translated as *Outlaws of the Marsh* or *The Water Margin* over the real relationship of kinship, lineage village and surname association of conventional society.

These age-old traditions form the backdrop to the practice of ritual brotherhood with its obligations of absolute and unquestioned loyalty reinforced by elaborate and frightening rituals and blood oaths which have been and still remain the cornerstone of the secret society organisation.

The Tiandihui became the dominant and most widespread of these brotherhoods in South China and was known by several names (Chesneaux 1971, 15):

Tiandihui or Heaven and Earth Society

Sanhehui or Society of the Three Unities

Sandianhui or Three Dots Society

Hungmenhui or Hung League

The first two names refers to the trinity of heaven, earth and man in Chinese cosmogony from which the anglicised name, the Triad Society, is derived. The Three Dots Society is one of the names drawn from its symbolic language and is derived from the three dots of the water radical which forms part of the character *hong*. The last is taken from the name Hongwu, reign title of the first Ming Emperor who is venerated for his success in freeing China from Mongol, and therefore from foreign, rule. He was moreover a man of humble origins who became a rebel and was therefore regarded as a man of the people. He was honoured as the symbolic founder, that is, as the First Ancestor of the society and the character *hong* was adopted as the “family name” of the brotherhood (Blythe, 20).<sup>4</sup>

According to its tradition, the founders of the Tiandihui belonged to the order of the famous fighting monks of the Shaolin Monastery in Fujian so frequently featured in *kongfu* movies. The monks had helped the Qing Emperor to defeat a rebel tribe of Xi Lu but after their victory, the Emperor became fearful of their military prowess and ordered the monastery to be destroyed. His troops set fire to the building at night and more than a hundred monks died in the flames (Schlegel, 12). Only five monks escaped with their lives and the survivors swore an oath to form a brotherhood to avenge the monks who died. They became the heads of its five principal lodges who then dispersed to various parts of southern China, home of most of the immigrants to Southeast Asia.

This foundation myth of the Tiandihui shows that its origins were deeply rooted in Chinese history and legend while its rituals, beliefs and symbolisms were based on Taoist and folk beliefs. The myth persists even though research has established that it was in fact founded in a Guanyin or Goddess of Mercy temple in Zhangzhou prefecture of Fujian province in 1761 or 1762 (Murray, 5). In the beginning, the Tiandihui was probably founded for economic reasons for forms of mutual aid but deteriorating social conditions and suppression led to resistance against the Manchus and it adopted the slogan “Fan Qing Fu Ming” which means “Resist the Qing and restore the Ming”. It soon spread rapidly or groups claiming to be affiliated to it sprang up spontaneously throughout Fujian and to neighbouring provinces through known migration routes. In the nineteenth century, one of the options which became available was migration to Southeast Asia and one such record of dispersal to

Malaya is dated 1813 (Ward and Stirling, i, 7). A clearer connection between suppression in China and dispersal to Malaya was the putting down of the Small Sword rebellion in Xiamen in November 1853 which led to the arrival of five Hokkien junks in Singapore in the succeeding months and a doubling of immigrant arrivals that junk season (Blythe, 75). There are therefore two push factors relating to the appearance of the brotherhoods' in Malaya, one as a natural consequence of immigration and the other as a result of Manchu persecution. Since the word *hui* is a generic term referring to all forms of Chinese associations, the term secret societies has usually been used in the literature. I have also used the term brotherhoods where applicable as ritual brotherhood is the common and most distinguishing feature of these organisations.

### **The Malayan Background**

Secret societies in Malaya were initially not illegal and the disturbances as they created were directed at each other rather than against the government. In the beginning, they promoted cooperation between members, controlled investment and labour recruitment, maintained law and order and acted as intermediaries between Malay and British authorities through the Kapitan China system. But as their activities against law and order increased, the scale of their operations drew the concern of the British authorities.

It should be mentioned from the outset that secret societies can be found also among other communities. There were the White Flag Society and the Red Flag Society in the Straits Settlements (Ward and Stirling, i, 137) whose members were Malays and Tamils and who were allies of the Ghi Hin and Hai San respectively in the affairs of Perak (Purcell, 108). These societies were also active in Singapore (Buckley, 723).

Even before Dr. W.C. Milne published his article in 1826, secret societies had become a serious problem of law and order. In 1825, Governor Fullerton discovered that they were in league with the Siamese who were at war with Kedah. What was more worrying was that they had considerable military resources under their command which posed a potential threat to Penang. Their forces comprised 300 boats, 15,000 Siamese, 1,000 Chinese and 8,000 Malays (Purcell, 156). Further investigation discovered the existence of four secret societies and that their members included

Malays, Indians and others (Vaughan, 95). These brotherhoods were already active not only in Malaya, but also in the Dutch East Indies and in Borneo. They showed certain characteristics:

- They originated from the Tiandihui, drew on the same traditions and beliefs, operated under the same secrecy and used the same kind of rites and blood oaths as the Tiandihui did in China.
- They had splintered into many groups under different names, some of the most prominent being the Ghi Hin, the Ghi Hok and the Hai San. According to Vaughan, the Ghi Hin for example, split into five parts comprising Ghi Hin Teochew, Ghi Hin Hokkien, Ghi Hin Macao (i.e. Cantonese), Ghi Hin Hailam and Ghi Hin Hakka while the Ghi Hok was itself a branch of the Ghi Hin (Vaughan, 113). Pickering too identified eleven branches of the brotherhood but they were names different from Vaughan's (Pickering 1879, 2). These and other splinter groups plus their divisions and re-formations together with varying pronunciations and romanisations from different Chinese dialects make for confusion.
- They tended to draw on men from the same dialect group or place of origin as can be seen from the above even though the Tiandihui itself made no distinction between different Chinese.
- Their leaders were made Kapitan Chinas to draw them into a system of indirect control.
- They were involved in the competition for the rich profits from the revenue farms.
- They were hostile to each other and frequently clashed with much ferocity and bloodshed so much so that much of the turbulence in the nineteenth century has been attributed to them. There is another view which characterises these disturbances as manifestations of the struggle between different economic systems and economic classes (Trocki 1993, 89).

Some of the major disturbances were:

- Malacca, 1848: Disturbances in Malacca between the Hai San and the Ghi Hin. The former had reached a powerful situation due to their control of the tin mines at Kesang.
- Singapore, 1854: The Singapore riots of 1854 raged for ten days in which 400 Chinese were killed. Opinion differs whether the riots was a clash between the rival secret societies, the Ghi Hin and the Ghi Hok, or whether it arose out of the long standing hostility between Hokkiens and Teochews in China (Lee, 8)
- Penang, 1867: Penang riots of 1867 involving some 30,000 Chinese and 4,000 Malays was a conflict between the Ghi Hin and their allies the White Flag Society, and the Toh Pek Kong and their allies the Red Flag Society.
- Their conflict is raised to a higher level of significance when they became involved in Malay politics as in the
  - Larut Wars of 1862-73 involved the Hai San on the side of Ngah Ibrahim and the Ghi Hin on the side of Raja Abdullah.
  - Selangor Wars of 1862-65 in which Yap Ah Loy, head of the Hai San, supported Raja Mahdi against Raja Abdullah.

Officials in the Straits Settlements had long pressed for some measures to be taken for controlling the secret societies but the Government of Bengal was not convinced that legislation rather than police action was the appropriate step to take. The Dangerous Societies Suppression Ordinance was passed in 1869 following the Penang riots but it did not have enough teeth to be effective and final control only came with the Societies Ordinance of 1889. This was followed by similar legislation in the Malay states although not in Johor until 1916 which brings us to the Ngee Heng Kongsi of Johor.

### **The Ngee Heng Kongsi in Johor**

What we know of secret societies in Malaya in the is based on studies of their activities in the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States but information on the Ngee Heng Kongsi of Johor is to be found in works of economic history. The growth and

development of pepper and gambier agriculture in the history of Johor is known through the work of Carl Trocki (1979). The influence of the Ngee Heng which stretched from Riau to Singapore and Johor, was based on the large numbers of Chinese engaged in the cultivation of pepper and gambier who formed the pepper and gambier society described by Lee Poh Ping (1978). Trocki argues that the Ngee Heng Kongsi of Singapore, from which the Ngee Heng Kongsi of Johor was derived, was an economic entity which first co-existed with colonial authority but was subsequently marginalised, criminalised and eventually suppressed (Trocki 1993, 89).

Before we proceed further into the discussion, the term *kongsi* also needs some explanation. It is interesting to note that an article by Huang Jian Cheng (1988) uses the term *huidang* or political party when writing about the Ngee Heng's earlier period, and the term *kongsi* when writing about its later period. The term *kongsi* has a multiplicity of meanings as Wang Tai Peng has pointed out (Wang, 1). It is generally used to refer to any firm or partnership, and has also been used to refer to any group or society in a very broad sense. Wang himself is more precise: "my definition of kongsi is that it was a form of open government, based on an enlarged partnership and brotherhood". This synthesis of partnership and sworn brotherhood, he says, was uniquely Chinese, and partnership (in the sense of membership) together with sworn brotherhood was certainly applicable to the Ngee Heng in Johor.

Ngee Heng is the Teochew name for the Ghi Hin, its name in Hokkien, which has been mentioned earlier. The name already identifies it as the Teochew offshoot of the Tiandihui.<sup>5</sup> The history of the Ngee Heng Kongsi in Johor is an integral part of the history of the Chinese in Johor which in turn is an integral part of the economic history of Johor. It is well known that when Temenggong Daing Ibrahim wished to develop Johor, he had few resources at his disposal. However, he had observed the success of pepper and gambier cultivation in Riau from where his father Temenggong Abdul Rahman had brought the first Chinese planters and started pepper and gambier planting in Singapore. The Chinese cultivators were predominantly Teochew and when the Temenggong opened Johor to the Chinese, the Ngee Heng gained a dominant position among the Chinese there. Johor then consisted of vast tracts of dense jungle and rivers were the only means of access into the interior. The Temenggong therefore devised a system by which the agricultural pioneer, called *kangchu* (master of the river), was

given a grant called *surat sungai* (river document) which permitted him to cultivate land on the banks of rivers and tributaries. The *kangchu*'s settlement became known as the *kangkar* (foot of the river). This system of land management which became known as the *kangchu* system has been well documented (Trocki 1979) but what this paper will attempt to do is to trace the role of the Ngee Heng in this development. Johor and Singapore formed one economic and social unit in the 19th century and pepper and gambier production and trade was an important part of this connection and through them, so were the secret societies.

It is usually assumed that secret societies came to Malaya in the wake of Chinese migration and certainly by 1824, only five years after Singapore was founded, the Tiandihui was already well established if we were to go by the account in the *Hikayat Abdullah* (180). According to Munshi Abdullah who managed to witness one of their secret initiation ceremonies, it numbered several thousand men, the majority of whom lived by robbery and piracy. By 1830, it had become the strongest and most dangerous of the three brotherhoods active in Singapore with a "fine lodge" at Rochore, large enough to hold members of the nine branches when they gathered for meetings and feasts.

The drift towards Johor was a natural consequence of its proximity to Singapore but in the 1840s, a clearer move northwards can be seen as a result of various factors (Lim 1998, 118). The chief of them was the growing shortage of land and when the Singapore authorities introduced a system of land registration, the cultivators objected to paying the quit rent. The upshot was that in 1846, Tan Tek Hye, calling himself "Keeper of the Quinquangular Seal",<sup>6</sup> published a letter in the *Singapore Free Press* informing the public that the Ngee Heng had commanded 4,000 members of its members to relocate in Johor in protest (Trocki 1979, 101). This forms the first record of a substantial migration of Chinese to Johor.

Chinese sources however, put a more political complexion on the move. According to an article by Lee Xing (1950) published in a collected volume on the Teochews in Malaya (Pan 1950), the secret organisation of the Hungmenhui survived the defeat of the Taiping Rebellion, went underground and re-emerged as the Yixing. Its members fled, first to Taiwan and then to the Dutch and British colonies. This ties in with what we know of the Ghi Hin/Ngee Heng that it was first in Riau and then

moved to Singapore (Trocki 1990, 26). We also know that their bitter rival, the Hokkien Ghi Hok or Kwan Tec Hoe was also in Riau and that the conflict between the two brotherhoods was one of the chief causes of violence wherever and whenever they collided. However, only the Ngee Heng had appeared in Johor because Sultan Abu Bakar only permitted one secret society to function in Johor.<sup>7</sup> As to why he did so, Lee Xing appears to have some answers.

He tells us that the Ngee Heng first enjoyed freedom of action in Singapore but that later the government began to curb their activities. He was no doubt referring to the rising tide of public opinion against the armed robberies and crimes of violence committed by secret society gangs. At a public meeting held in Singapore in 1843, resolutions were passed and recommendations were submitted through the Acting Governor to the Government in Bengal, urging the suppression of the societies (Blythe, 64). A bill for this purpose was drafted and although it did not receive the approval of the Bengal Government, circumstances must have impressed the leaders of Ngee Heng that Singapore was no longer hospitable and that it was time to move. As a matter of fact, Lee Xing's sense of dating is in error because the Taiping Rebellion took place in 1850-64 and the Ngee Heng was in Johor by 1844. Nevertheless, he has connected the Ngee Heng's arrival in Malaya to Manchu suppression in China, and its move to Johor by linking it to changing British policy to the secret societies — in other words, he has highlighted the Ngee Heng factor in the migration of the Chinese to Johor (Lim 1998, 122). The Ngee Heng did not follow the Chinese to Johor but led them there.

The Ngee Heng had established itself in Johor but it was not yet recognised by the Johor government. Other brotherhoods, especially their rivals the Ghi Hok, were not far behind, constantly snapping at their heels and not beyond using violence in their attempts to gain a foothold in the rivers. But none of them were recognised as Thomas Church, the Resident Councillor of Singapore, had warned Temenggong Daing Ibrahim about the dangers they posed. In a letter to Colonel Cavenagh, Governor of the Straits Settlements, the Temenggong wrote:

*Being fully aware of the evils resulting from these societies, and the great hindrance they offer to the due administration of justice and the proper government of Countries in which they are allowed to exist, I did*

*every thing in my power to carry out the suggestions of Mr. Church; but not withstanding all the means adopted by me I found that endeavours were constantly and often successfully made by the heads of Secret Societies in Singapore to establish branches in Johore.*<sup>8</sup>

He would, he added, continue to prevent the establishment of secret societies in Johor which had been found to exert such a pernicious influence upon the communities in which they were permitted to exist.

In 1859 when this letter was written, some thirty *surat sungai* had been issued and by the time of his death in January 1862, the number had increased only by nine. Sultan Abu Bakar obviously had different ideas. He was an energetic young man of twenty-eight when he succeeded his father and was impatient to open up more jungle for development. However, increasing the number of pepper and gambier concessions would bring more Chinese into the state and aggravate the problem of control. He was no doubt aware that secret societies had been involved in the politics of other Malay states and in the uneasy relationship with Sultan Ali, the last thing he needed was for the brotherhoods to enter the equation on the other side. At the same time, it would be immensely helpful if he were able to augment his military resources. Lee Xing explains:

*After some years when Muar disobeyed the Sultan, Tan Kee Soon raised an army and went to pacify Muar. Thus the Sultan came to love and trust him. And he was commissioned by the Johor government to be responsible for the police force. Since he was the leader of the Ngee Heng, the government specifically permitted their open activities. This is the reason why the Ngee Heng of Johor was different from that of Singapore. (Trocki 1979: 104).*

Lee Xing's statement reveals something about the relationship between the Sultan Abu Bakar and the Ngee Heng. The suggestion that the Ngee Heng gained the sole permission to function in Johor because that the latter had provided security and military assistance to Sultan Abu Bakar at a critical time in Johor's history is quite plausible on two counts if we examine the Johor rulers' endeavours to build a state in the context of their relations with Sultan Ali.

The first relates to their jurisdiction over Johor. Temenggong Daing Ibrahim held traditional rights over the territory but prior to 1855, the sovereignty rested with

Sultan Ali.<sup>9</sup> In this ambiguous situation, both sides competed for the riches of the jungles of Johor which at that time comprised the extraction of jungle produce, mainly gutta percha which enjoyed a ready international market. When pepper and gambier cultivation was introduced, it became clear to Sultan Abu Bakar, although apparently not to his father, that the Chinese population of the rivers should come under his control through Chinese loyal to him, not merely for the revenues they produced but also to prevent unwanted Chinese from entering Johor. A brotherhood like the Ngee Heng with its combination of muscle and moral authority was the best barrier against infiltration and the best means of ensuring that the scattered Chinese population remained loyal to him.<sup>10</sup> The second relates to the troubled situation in Muar which was not included in the 1855 treaty as a result of which it went through an uneasy period before it was eventually incorporated into Johor territory in 1877. During this uneasy period and continuing some time after, there were clashes between the two sides including the Jementah War of 1879 (Md Salleh, 89), when Sultan Abu Bakar would have been glad to have experienced fighters on his side. Although we have no evidence to support this supposition, I have argued that Chinese could very likely have given him military support (Lim 1989, 122).<sup>11</sup>

Recognition came in 1865 because there are documents in the Johor Archives which refer to an Edict of 1282 A.H. (i.e. 1865 A.D.). Although this edict has not been traced, the context of the files clearly indicates that the government forbids the formation of secret societies other than the Ngee Heng. These are case records of attempts at starting a secret society and this edict was invoked to sentence the persons arrested to various terms of imprisonment and the ring-leaders to banishment.<sup>12</sup> Tan Kee Soon therefore did not live to see the Ngee Heng officially recognised for he died about 1864 although it is possible that he could have had some kind of tacit understanding with the Sultan or even with the Temenggong. After his death, the character of the Ngee Heng changed under the new leadership of Tan Hiok Nee. From a quasi-military revolutionary brotherhood based in the rural settlement of Kangkar Tebrau, it became an organisation of *kapitans* and *kangchus* and revenue farmers based in the state capital of Johor Bahru. The expansion of pepper and gambier planting continued steadily as the cultivators pushed deeper and deeper into the jungle and plantations were established on more and more rivers. In time, these settlements

spread all over Johor as can be seen by the map appended. Since the Sultan required all Chinese to be members of the Ngee Heng, its influence spread all through the state wherever such settlements were formed, which at the same time, became a means by which the Sultan's authority was carried to remote areas in Johor. In this way, the Sultan brought all Chinese under one system of political and economic control and extended his authority over his state.

The history of the Ngee Heng after this is the history of pepper and gambier cultivation and the growth and development of the *kangchu* system which has been thoroughly described elsewhere. It only need be mentioned that the *kangchus* were initially agricultural pioneers who held the grants to their rivers but around 1860, there was a reorganisation of the system and the *surat sungai* was increasingly issued to merchants who became known as *tuan sungai* (owner of the river). The *kangchu* was instead issued with a *surat tauliah* (letter of authority) to work the river on behalf of the owner (Trocki 1979, 124). The Sultan's intention was to draw in more investment but the effect on the Ngee Heng was to subordinate the *kangchu* to the merchant. The *kangchu* system was important not merely for their agricultural produce but even more important for the revenues they generated as part of what are called the *kangchu* rights. These rights include not only the rights to cultivate land but also to operate certain monopolies which were the sale of opium, spirit and pork, and the operation of gambling and pawning shops. Chinese sources write of the *kangchus* in somewhat awe-struck terms as "kings of the river" and tend to overlook the exploitation and the profiteering from human misery that lay on the underside. Revenue farmers who were more often than not, the leaders of the Ngee Heng, were granted "kangchu rights" and there was keen competition to "farm" any urban area wherever there was a sizeable Chinese population. Johor Bahru for example, had three revenue farms and casinos were part of the town's tourist attractions as an "Asiatic Monte Carlo". Economic advance in Johor, as also in other places, up to early twentieth century rode on the back of revenues raised from human failings, namely gambling and opium.<sup>13</sup>

The Ngee Heng Kongsis' process of change can also be seen by looking at its leadership.

*Tan Kee Soon (d. circa 1864)*

Tan Kee Soon was one of the leaders of the Ngee Heng in Singapore (Huang 1988, 132) who, even before Tan Teck Hye issued his order to the brotherhood, had already settled in Johor having obtained a *surat sungai* for Sungai Tebrau in 1844 (Trocki 1979, 102). He established a pepper and gambier settlement at Tan Chukang at Kangkar Tebrau which is the oldest known Chinese settlement in Johor. However, Chinese sources do not describe him as a planter or agricultural entrepreneur but instead as a *yishi*, a righteous man who resisted the Manchus (Ke, 70). Certainly, he was no entrepreneur since he did not bother to obtain more than the one grant whereas other Ngee Heng leaders held multiple concessions. In fact, the site of Tan Chukang, located deep in the jungle, suggests that it was selected as a place of refuge reminiscent of the bandits' marshy lair in the stories of the *Water Margin*. In other words, he was what we would now call a political dissident against the Qing government and as such he would have been in command of military resources which would have been an asset to Sultan Abu Bakar during the crucial period when he was still in the process of establishing his authority over Johor.

The quotation from Lee Xing mentions the Sultan Abu Bakar's trust in Tan Kee Soon while other Chinese sources refer to his "devotion and loyalty to the palace" (Huang 1988, 132). Hence, we can conclude that he had a personal relationship with the Sultan and that loyalty combined with martial organisation and skills were powerful attributes important in the early period of his reign. In the lack of a properly constituted police force, they were also necessary. Since Tan Chukang pre-dated the treaty of 1855, in the period prior to the signing of the treaty and the founding of Johor Bahru, Tan Kee Soon through his powers as *kangchu* and as Kapitan China was the only authority among the Chinese so that Tan Chukang was to all intents and purposes, the centre of local government. Johor in 1856 was estimated to have a population of 30,000.<sup>14</sup>

While police functions were needed in frontier conditions, by 1858, Md Salleh bin Perang, better known as Dato Bentara Luar, was appointed head clerk to the Resident of Johor Bahru, Raja Kecil Ahmad, and put in charge of supervising the pepper and gambier plantations and the collection of revenue (Md Salleh, 85). Well before Chinese speaking British officials like William Pickering and William Stirling appeared on the scene, Md Salleh had learnt to read and write Chinese and was able to

communicate directly with the cultivators in Teochew. Subsequently, he was appointed Chief of Police and became the chief Johor official dealing with the Chinese. In 1866 when the government moved over from Singapore to Johor, the foundations of administration were gradually set in place. The Ngee Heng was still needed since the Chinese population continued to increase but the death of Tan Kee Soon started the process of transformation within the Kongsì.

*Tan Hiok Nee (1827-1902)*

Although Tan Kee Soon was succeeded by his adopted son Tan Cheng Hung as *kangchu* and Kapitan China in Tebrau, he was succeeded by Tan Hiok Nee as the next leader of the Ngee Heng.<sup>15</sup> From surviving records, we know that he was already in Johor as a young man of twenty-six when he obtained his first *surat sungai* in 1853 and that this was to form the beginning of a vast holding of nine such grants which made him the largest holder of *kangchu* concessions (Trocki 1975, 22). Song Ong Siang (335) tells us that he started life as a cloth merchant who gained the friendship of Sultan Abu Bakar and his family while they were still living in Singapore where he had established himself as a prosperous pepper and gambier trader by 1866. A map of Johor Bahru drawn in 1887 shows him as the owner of several lots of land in the centre of Johor Bahru where he started a market and also owned many shops and houses.

In about 1870, Tan Hiok Nee was appointed Major China of Johor (Song, 335), an office that was listed in the *Straits Calendar and Directory 1874* when a Johor section was included for the first time. He is shown as being assisted by an assistant treasurer, a head clerk and a head inspector. There is also a reference by Sultan Abu Bakar to “our subordinate Tan Yeok Nee”, all of which suggest that the office of Major China was seen as a part of government.<sup>16</sup> The directory also names him as one of the two Chinese members of Council. As far as can be ascertained he was the only Chinese appointed to the office of Major China in Malaya and since Johor already had two *kapitans*, Kapitan Tan Cheng Hung in Tebrau and Kapitan Seah Tee Heng in Johor Bahru, it is very likely that he was appointed to a higher position over them (Lim 1989, 128).

Like Tan Kee Soon, Tan Hiok Nee was also a Teochew and a man whom Sultan Abu Bakar trusted. He was a trader and a man of business and his commercial and diplomatic skills were more suited to the continued development and prosperity of Johor. By then, Md Salleh bin Perang had been appointed Chief of Police and the policing responsibilities that Tan Kee Soon had enjoyed were carried out by Johor officials. The Ngee Heng was now more like an organisation of *towkays* who financed the plantations and operated the profitable revenue farms. Tan Hiok Nee was himself the most important revenue farmer in Johor. He held the opium and spirit farm for Johor for various periods but in 1870-79, he joined with Tan Seng Poh and Cheang Hong Lim to form the Great Opium Syndicate which managed to gain control of the opium and spirit farm not only of Johor, but also the vastly lucrative revenue farms of Singapore, Malacca, and Riau (Trocki 1990, 119). Since his various enterprises made Tan Hiok Nee one of the wealthiest men in Johor if not the very wealthiest, it is even possible to deduce that Tan Hiok Nee was one of Sultan Abu Bakar's financiers (Lim 1998, 127).

With his position as Major China, as head of the Ngee Heng, and as partner in the Great Opium Syndicate, Tan Hiok Nee held all the levers of wealth and power available to a Chinese in his hands. Then, inexplicably, "he gave up entirely his connection with Johor" (Song, 335) and retired to Singapore where he built himself a magnificent mansion in 1885 (Huang 133).<sup>17</sup> Eventually, he returned to China to become one of the few migrants who made good overseas and returned to end his days in his native village.

#### *Lim Ah Siang (1853-1917)*

Tan Hiok Nee was succeeded by another Teochew, Lim Ah Siang. In Chinese sources, he is referred to as the Second Brother, that is, the second most senior in rank within the Johor Ngee Heng (Pan, 102) which is the equivalent of vice-president in the secret society hierarchy (Ward and Stirling, i, 15). Why he was the second and not the foremost in rank could be due to the fact that Tan Hiok Nee was still towering presence in nearby Singapore. He had retired as Major China, but, I suspect, one does not retire from a brotherhood. Tan Kee Soon and Tan Hiok Nee had personal relationships with the Sultan but Lim Ah Siang is only described as a friend of the

Mentri Besar. If Tan Hiok Nee did retire around 1885, Lim Ah Siang was by no means the most prominent Teochew in Johor at the time. Although Kapitan Tan Cheng Hung had dropped out of sight after selling off his concessions, Kapitan Seah Tee Heng had died in 1884 and no new Kapitan had been appointed (Trocki 1979, 106 & 178), the latter's son Seah Ling Chai had taken over his father's *kangchu* concessions, pepper and gambier business and revenue farms. In addition, he held shares in eight rivers in his own right and was the manager of the Pepper and Gambier Society. Seah Ling Chai was therefore the most prominent *towkay* in Johor but the Ngee Heng passed him over for an unknown young man. The mostly likely reason was that Tan Hiok Nee was still running the Kongsu from Singapore and only needed an assistant but not a business rival in charge. From the available documents, we see that Lim Ah Siang only began to rise to prominence in the 1890s, after he became head of the Ngee Heng.

In 1896, he obtained timber concessions for east Johor and for Endau. By then, he was also a revenue farmer for Kota Tinggi and in his concessions, he was granted the *kangchu* rights mentioned before. In Johor Bahru, he is best remembered for opening up a kampong at Stulang in the eastern part of the city called Kampong Ah Siang and old-timers can still remember the gambling house he built on stilts over the sea.<sup>18</sup>

Tan Hiok Nee chose his timing well for he withdrew at a time when Johor was standing at the peak of its progress under the rule of Sultan Abu Bakar. In 1885, the latter achieved the much desired royal status with the attainment of the title of Sultan by treaty with Britain, a treaty which was to define Johor's relations with Britain for his son. The economy was in a healthy state with good prices for pepper and gambier and production continued increasing to meet rising demand in Europe and North America. Plantations continued to be opened up pushing further and further eastward towards Sedili but good prices also attracted other states to open up plantations and reduced Johor's share of the market.

However, for the Ngee Heng, it was the beginning of the slide downhill. The administrative structure of government was well established and was managed by a core of able and experienced officers led by the much respected Dato Jaafar bin Mohamed as Mentri Besar. Secret societies flourish where there is inadequate legal

protection for ordinary people and inadequate mechanisms for the resolution of conflicts (Mak, 4). When the Johor government was able to provide adequate police protection and its judicial system was able to mediate in disputes, the power of the Ngee Heng was automatically reduced. The office of Major China no longer had the same significance and Tan Hiok Nee's position was never replaced. Besides, the fate of the Ngee Heng which was so closely tied to pepper and gambier cultivation, began to decline as the Chinese role in commercial agriculture gradually diminished with attempts to diversify the economy. Coffee was introduced in 1881 and enjoyed some initial success. But the significance of coffee planting was that it marked the entry of European plantations into Johor. The rise of rubber planting in the early twentieth century was accompanied by drastic falls in the prices of pepper and gambier so that rubber was to become the main commercial crop. The end of pepper and gambier planting finally came with the abolition of the *kangchu* system with the passing of the Kangchu Rights (Abolition) Enactment in 1917.

### **The Suppression**

Ever since the early efforts at curbing and controlling the secret societies which had so perturbed the Ngee Heng leadership in the 1840s, British officials had continued to push for legislation to suppress these brotherhoods. In 1869, they succeeded in enacting the Dangerous Society Ordinance but it was limited in its effectiveness as it only gave the government powers to register but not to suppress the secret societies. Possibly the attempt on Pickering's life in his own office in the Chinese Protectorate, by a Teochew carpenter instigated by the Ghi Hok finally shook the government to action. As a start, the 1869 Ordinance was amended in 1882 to give it more bite by allowing the Registrar to refuse to register a society. However, it was only in 1890 that suppression came at last with the enactment of the Societies Ordinance after which similar legislation was adopted in the Malay states — except in Johor (Blythe, 7). When Governor Sir Cecil Clementi Smith asked Sultan Abu Bakar to follow suit, his reply in 1891 was a defence of the Ngee Heng and of his policy (Khoo 1997). The Ngee Heng, he said, was “a recognised institution established under his patronage”. It was permitted to function on the conditions that:

- It was the only Chinese society allowed to be established in Johor.
- It was to be a friendly society.
- It would be responsible for the behavior of its members individually and collectively.
- All Chinese should be eligible as members.
- All Kapitan Chinas and *kangchus* must become members.

We can see here the Sultan's wisdom in making use of the Ngee Heng as a means of controlling a large immigrant population. Although the Ngee Heng was a Teochew organisation, it was required to accept all Chinese into its membership and he thus found a means of integrating all Chinese into one system of control and brought all Chinese under his patronage as mentioned before. The Ngee Heng, he told Sir Cecil, was under the direct control of the government and under his protection, and one that had been of "vast use and benefit to my Chinese population." The result is that Johor has been free from inter-ethnic conflict and its history has been remarkable for the peace between Chinese and Chinese and between Chinese and Malay. The Sultan therefore resisted suppression and told the Governor, "I do not agree with you that it is always to the advantage of a State to suppress them".

Sir Cecil tried again in 1892, this time conveying two resolutions passed by the Chinese Advisory Board in Singapore, one of which pertained to the suppression of secret societies. In reply, the Sultan wrote, "I am still of opinion that the existence of this Society in its present form is a guarantee of the peace and good behavior of the greater bulk of the Chinese population of my country".<sup>19</sup>

However, Sultan Abu Bakar was able to delay but not prevent the inevitable. He died in 1895 and his son Sultan Ibrahim was prevailed upon to accept a General Adviser in 1910. British officials were anxious to bring Johor in line with British policy in other states. By 1914, a Chinese Protectorate had been set up and D.G. Campbell, the General Adviser, stated in the *Johore Annual Report 1914* (10) that secret societies had been the cause of much disturbance and crime and that in the absence of an officer expert in Chinese language and custom, the government was frequently obliged to seek the assistance of the Ngee Heng for suppression of other secret societies and for the detection of crime and the arrest of criminals. He added,

“The time has however now come when the Government should attempt to deal with these societies directly and not through an unofficial Chinese organisation, and I hope that during the current year a new policy may be initiated”.

The new policy was not long in coming. The *Johore Annual Report 1916* (7) carried a brief statement: “The largest Chinese Society, the Ngi Hin, was dissolved during the year without trouble.”

Lim Ah Siang’s final duty for the Ngee Heng was to sign a bond for \$30,000 for the winding up of the Kongsí which was required for the settlement of Ngee Heng’s liabilities and the disposal of its properties in the legalities of winding up.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Legacy**

Even though the Ngee Heng Kongsí first took root in Tebrau, Johor Bahru is better remembered as the base of its operations; and even though the Kongsí had spread to all parts of Johor, it is in Johor Bahru where its legacy is most visible.

Tan Hiok Nee, Lim Ah Siang, the *kapitan* and the *kangchus* were leaders of the community in the traditional mold — they were wealthy men who held positions of influence. As expected of men in this traditional position, they took the lead in providing for the welfare of the community; they built schools and temples, maintained cemeteries, provided for the sick and indigent and so on, and donated generously for these purposes. In the same way, the Ngee Heng Kongsí functioned like a traditional social organisation and were active in providing for the social and religious needs of the Chinese. The first building the Ngee Heng constructed or helped to construct, was a temple to provide for the religious needs of the immigrants. This is the Ancient Temple of Johor (Roufu Gumiao) built in the 1860s just as Johor Bahru was being opened up. They also established a cemetery on the land around their lodge and which is popularly referred to as Kongsí Shan (Kongsí Cemetery). In 1913, its leaders joined with other Chinese to found the Foon Yew School with Wong Ah Fook as manager and Lim Ah Siang as his deputy (Wong, 9).<sup>21</sup> Some of the institutions the Ngee Heng founded are still in existence today.

Lim Ah Siang died soon after executing the bond and it was his successor Lin Jin He who had to manage the disposal of Ngee Heng’s assets (Wu, 5).<sup>22</sup> A sum of \$5,000 was spent on building a tomb on a site not far from their lodge into which the

leaders of Ngee Heng deposited all their ritual and sacred objects including their ancestral tablets. The tombstone carries only two characters, “Ming Mu”, meaning Ming Tomb. The “ancestors” and the words on the tombstone are a throw-back to the Tiandihui’s founding myth, to the monks who died in the burning of the Shaolin Temple and to the survivors’ aim of restoring the Ming. The remaining balance of \$30,000 was donated to Foon Yew School to establish an endowment fund, a substantial sum in those days and a windfall for the struggling school. A condition of the donation was that the school would perform the annual rituals of ancestor worship at the Ming Tomb during the two festivals of remembrance which are Qingming and Chongyang. A contemporary account of this event has been written by Wong Yee Chor, the first secretary of the School Committee, as part of the history of the school (Wong, 9).<sup>23</sup> Foon Yew is the only Chinese school in Johor Bahru which has grown to comprise five campuses catering to an enrolment of several thousand. Generations of students who have passed through the school would be familiar with this part of the school’s history and carry with them a memory of the Ngee Heng.

Ever since then, these rituals of remembrance have been faithfully carried out. Twice a year for more than eighty years, senior members of the Chinese community have gathered at this symbolic tomb to honour a promise made when a secret society was proscribed. I was with Carl Trocki in 1985 when he observed and subsequently described one of these occasions (Trocki 1990, 9). He had written about the rutted tracks which led to the grave located in this “forlorn spot” among the overgrown lalang. I had the opportunity to attend the Qingming ceremony at the Ming Tomb again this year and found the place much changed. A paved road has been constructed and the surroundings landscaped and attractively planted with trees and shrubs. There are plans to improve the landscaping and extend the park. The attendance this time was even more impressive than that in 1985. It included the chairman and members of the Foon Yew School Committee and its headmaster as well as the president of the Chinese Association of Johor Bahru and the presidents of the five *bang* associations, that is, the leaders of the key traditional organisations of the Chinese community in Johor Bahru in the present day.

The Chinese Association of Johor Bahru was the organisation which the Chinese founded after the Ngee Heng was suppressed. Contrary to the British

attitude, the Ngee Heng was perceived by the Chinese to be the leading Chinese organisation representing the interests of the community and its demise left a gap which needed to be filled (Roufouzhou, 61). In 1922, Lin Jin He, the last head of Ngee Heng, led other Chinese in founding the Chinese Association of Johor Bahru to take its place.<sup>24</sup> Wong Shee Fun was one of the founders and after the World War II, he revived the Association and emerged as its new leader.<sup>25</sup> One of his first tasks was to organise the purchase of land and the construction of its present building. He was a leader who was active at both the national as well as state level and led the Association to a larger view of its responsibilities. For example, it was active in urging Chinese to apply for citizenship when Malaya achieved Independence. At present, it performs both a traditional role in areas of Chinese education, religion and culture as well as a modern role in keeping with the needs of modern society such as support for the recent “Love Malaysia” campaign.

The term *bang* refers to sub-ethnic identity among the Chinese and the five *bang* associations in Johor Bahru referred to, cater to the five main sub-ethnic groups. There are a few other traditional social organisations but they do not have the same weight in the social life of the community. The five associations are:

- Guangzhao Huiguan (f. 1878) for the Cantonese.
- Qiangzhou Huiguan (f. 1883) for the Hainanese.
- Fujian Huiguan (f. 1920) for the Hokkien.
- Tongyuan She (f. 1927) for the Hakka.
- Teochew Eight Districts Association (f. 1934) for the Teochew.

The Chinese Association of Johor Bahru is not a federal entity and each of the above associations are independent organisations. It draws its leadership from the *bang* associations and there is a healthy movement of people between the Chinese Association and the *bang* associations. They cooperate closely with each other and appear to have a good understanding of what falls within their respective jurisdictions. The *bang* associations are proud of their closely knit relationship which is referred to as the “wu bang jingsheng” or the spirit of the five *bang* which allows them to assist and support each other but still retain their separate identities. This spirit of

cooperation between the various *bangs* is another legacy that can be traced back to the Ngee Heng.

The Johor Bahru Ancient Temple is located not far from where Tan Hiok Nee's house used to be. It stands on Jalan Trus which joins up with Jalan Ngee Heng which used to lead directly to the Ngee Heng lodge. Despite recent renovations, the temple is a small modest structure. Although Johor Chinese population in the nineteenth century was predominantly Teochew, it is a tribute to the wisdom of Tan Hiok Nee and other Teochew leaders that the Ancient Temple was deliberately made open and welcome to all Chinese. It does so by honouring five deities; the patron deities of the five *bangs*, each of whom has a place within and hence it has been and remains the centre of worship of the whole community. Johor Chinese have avoided the pitfalls of other Chinese communities such as those in Penang and Singapore where the various *bangs* went to different schools, worshipped at different temples and were buried in different cemeteries. By bringing the various groups together, the leaders of the Ngee Heng can be said to have initiated and fostered "the spirit of the five *bangs*".

This spirit is most evident during the Ancient Temple procession which is held every year as part of the Chinese New Year celebrations. It is a three day affair which is both a carnival and a deeply religious event. On the first day, the five deities are taken from the Ancient Temple to temporary accommodation at the Kongsu Shan where altars are set up and temporary stages are built for performing operas to entertain the gods while numerous food stalls cater to the more mundane needs of the crowd. On the second day, the deities are taken in procession round the city starting at about 7 o'clock in the evening and lasting till the early hours of the morning. The participants include all kinds of cultural bodies and commercial and industrial establishments. The deities return to the Kongsu Shan after the procession and on the morning of the third day, they return to the Ancient Temple in a shorter procession, each escorted by his own lion or dragon dance troupe and the attendant drum and percussion group. Arriving back at the Ancient Temple, there are more ceremonials after which the deities are restored to their respective places. The order in which the gods travel in the three days is fixed by long established tradition.

I was informed that the procession has been going on annually for more than a hundred years so that it must have started in the days of the Ngee Heng. It is managed

by the Ancient Temple committee which is a committee of the Chinese Association, and is assisted by the *bang* associations each of which is responsible for its respective section of the procession. All participants are required to come under the auspices of one of the *bang* associations and there is great keenness to participate to win the favour of the gods. The procession is very orderly and the mood is very relaxed and convivial with family, friends and devotees walking along with the participants. It has the atmosphere of a family picnic and is definitely a community affair by which the young is socialised into the traditions and beliefs of the community.

## CONCLUSION

The Ngee Heng Kongsu lives on in the public awareness through the public spaces in Johor Bahru which carry its name or the names of its leaders. They are:

Jalan Ngee Heng  
Kampong Ngee Heng  
Ngee Heng School  
Jalan Tan Hiok Nee  
Jalan Lim Ah Siang  
Kampong Ah Siang  
Kongsu Shan

With the exception of the last which is an unofficial name used only among the Chinese, the other names can be seen in contemporary maps of the city. The Ngee Heng School was founded in 1928 as the second English school in Johor Bahru soon after H.A.R. Cheesemen arrived in Johor to take up the post of Superintendent of Education. It was so named probably because it was situated in Kampong Ngee Heng but the adoption of the name also shows that the Kongsu had by that time, achieved a respectable image in official circles.

The Ngee Heng also lives on in the cultural awareness, not only in the school that it helped to nurture, in the temple it built, and in the successor association its leaders founded, but more importantly, in the traditions it laid down and in the

goodwill between the various groups of Chinese it fostered so that the Ngee Heng can be said to have laid the foundations of the cultural identity of the Johor Chinese. In having been given a legitimate place in society, it responded by acting with a sense of responsibility so that it has been possible for the Chinese to remember the Kongsis and its leaders as deserving of respect. Every community wishes to have a past that it can recall with pride and the pioneering spirit and rugged determination needed in opening up the jungle and transforming it to productive use is perceived to have qualities deserving admiration. The Ngee Heng organisation — the Major China, the *kapitans*, the *kangchus* down to the cultivators — has become an integral part of history of the Chinese in Johor. The pioneering planters who braved the dangers of a hostile environment to establish pepper and gambier settlement deep in the jungle fastness have become what we may call the founding myth of the Johor Chinese.

The history of the Ngee Heng under its three leaders corresponds to the history of the Chinese under Johor's first three rulers. During the period when Temenggong Daing Ibrahim was struggling to carve a kingdom out of the jungles, the frontier conditions suited the martial capabilities of Tan Kee Soon on the one hand and the agricultural system of the early cultivators on the other. Under Sultan Abu Bakar when Johor reached the height of its political achievement and prosperity, large numbers of Chinese arrived to form a settled community based on the pepper and gambier economy. The Malay bureaucracy found ways of managing the Chinese through the office of Major China and gave the Ngee Heng a role in governing the Chinese. In the reign of Sultan Ibrahim, Johor was finally drawn into the British system of indirect rule and the Ngee Heng, already weakened by the decline of pepper and gambier planting, was proscribed by British officials.

When suppression came, the Ngee Heng gave in quietly, "without trouble" as Campbell reported with satisfaction. The Ngee Heng leaders had foreseen that a brotherhood like the Ngee Heng was no longer an appropriate organisation to represent the interests of the Chinese and buried the connections to a past that were no longer relevant. It is also questionable whether as merchants, they were really comfortable with the brotherhood's martial spirit, secret rituals and blood oaths. They preferred to replace it with the Chinese Association of Johor Bahru which is a modern style organisation with elected office-bearers governed by an approved constitution.

What the Ming Tomb has done is to localise the past and to transfer the memory of the past from China to Johor. An active Ngee Heng recalled the Tiandihui whose origins went back to Chinese history but a buried Ngee Heng recalls the history of the Chinese in Johor. The ceremonies at the Ming Tomb as well as the Chinese New Year procession, confirm a commitment to local traditions and a localised sense of community.

Local history seen through the history of the Ngee Heng in Johor Bahru has provided a strong sense of continuity not only because of the legacy that the Ngee Heng has left behind but also because the early planters are perceived by the Chinese to have contributed to making Johor what it is today. It shows the evolution of the Chinese from an immigrant society to a settled community. Running through this narrative is the theme of connectedness, of different kinds of connectedness, between past and present, between rural and centre, between Chinese and Chinese, and last but not least, between Chinese and Malay. The story of the Ngee Heng is also the story of the Johor rulers' relations with the Chinese in which the guiding hand of the ruler, of Sultan Abu Bakar in particular, has provided the moving force in shaping developments. Chinese sources recount relations with Malay officials while the memoirs of Dato Mohamed Salleh bin Perang and Dato Mohamed Ibrahim Munshi reveal another point of view but they all show that there was negotiation and accommodation on both sides. Local history provides a useful means of studying Malay-Chinese relations, and investigating local particularities would reveal the multiplicity and variation in this complex topic and add to the rich texture of Malaysian history.

With one notable exception, the history of Johor has been noted for the peaceful relations between its various communities.<sup>26</sup> During the May 13 riots of 1969 for instance, it was one of the few states where no violence occurred. This is surely no small legacy from the past.

## NOTES

1. I have used the Hanyu-pinyin system of spelling for Chinese characters except for local terms and proper names for which the accepted spelling is preferred.

2. Pickering joined the Straits government service in 1872 but his appointment at the time was that of Chinese Interpreter to the Straits government (R.N. Jackson, 16).
3. Stirling's collection of secret society materials has been acquired by the Singapore History Museum in 1996. A colour catalogue of the collection has been published as *Secret Societies in Singapore: Featuring the William Stirling Collection*, by Irene Lim (1999).
4. The character *hong* is spelt *hung* according to the Wade-Giles system. The significance of the adoptive surname can be seen in the fact that this character is printed in the centre of many secret society documents. Seals comprising the character *hong* were carried by the Masters of the Lodge who used them as a sign of approval when they validated membership certificates (Irene Lim, 62).
5. I shall refer to the Johor brotherhood as the Ngee Heng using the Teochew form of name by which is known locally, and to the brotherhoods in other parts of Malaya as the Ghi Hin using the Hokkien form of name by which it is usually referred.
6. This office is not listed among Schlegel's ( 47) or Ward and Stirling's (i, 15) lists of officers of the Tiandihui but the number five has certain symbolic meanings and is particularly pertinent in that it is the number representing Tian or Heaven. There are also its Five Founders and Five Lodges which lead to many symbolic references to this number within its rituals (Ward and Stirling, ii, 77).
7. When Sultan Abu Bakar succeeded his father, he was known by the title Temenggong Sri Maharaja which was not a royal title. In 1868, he adopted the title Maharaja and in 1885, he attained the title of Sultan through a treaty negotiated with Britain. To avoid confusion, I have referred to him as Sultan Abu Bakar throughout.
8. Daing Ibrahim to Cavenagh, 4 Oct. 1859, in Letterbook of H.H. Maharajah of Johore, 1855-65.
9. Sultan Ali was the son of Sultan Hussein, signatory to the treaty founding Singapore. Under the treaty of 1855, he attained the title of Sultan but the sovereignty of Johor was transferred to Temenggong Daing Ibrahim.

10. There are two aspects to the authority they exercised. On the one hand, the brotherhoods did operate under a certain moral code. Absolute loyalty was of course the cardinal virtue but respect for each other's women, for example, was another. On the other hand, fear was probably a more significant controlling factor as brutality was never far from the surface.
11. For example, Comber (211) has pointed out that Yap Ah Loy is not mentioned in the accounts of the Selangor War by Winstedt, Wilkinson and Linehan.
12. G.A. 275/1913, 276/1913, 278/1913, and 555/1914. Clearly, official recognition of the Ngee Heng did not discourage other brotherhoods from trying to edge in.
13. Between 1883-1914, the annual rent for the Singapore opium farm formed about 50% of the total revenue, in some years it was as high as 66% (Trocki 1990, 188).
14. Buku Salinan Surat-surat Maharajah, p. 29.
15. Song Ong Siang gives his name as Tan Yeok Nee.
16. Buku Salinan Surat-surat Maharajah, p. 248.
17. The building is now the headquarters of the Salvation Army. It has been gazetted a national monument as it is the only surviving building of its kind in Singapore.
18. G.A. 82/1911.
19. State Secretariat Letterbook, no. 256, 23 June 1892.
20. State Secretary S.S. 563/1916.
21. Wong Ah Fook was a builder and revenue farmer. He was a Cantonese and so far as can be ascertained, was not a member of the Ngee Heng (Lim, forthcoming).
22. Lim Jin He was a *kangchu* (Wu, 5).
23. Wong Yee Chor, a Cantonese, was a leader of the Guangzhao Huiguan and one of the founders of the Chinese Association of Johor Bahru (Wu, 5).
24. Its name in Chinese was originally Roufu Huaqiao Gongsuo (Johor Overseas Chinese Office). After World War II, it was revived in 1946 with the name Xinshanqu Zhonghua Gonghui (Johor Bahru District Chinese Association).

About 1948, this was changed to Xinshan Zhonghua Gonghui (Johor Bahru Chinese Association) (Wu, 5-6).

25. Wong Shee Fun was a Cantonese entrepreneur, banker, politician and philanthropist. He held leadership positions in many Chinese organisations in both Malaysia and Singapore. In Johor, he was a member of the State Council, chairman of the Board of Governors of Foon Yew School and president of the Johor Bahru Chinese Association as well as the national Federation of Chinese Associations. He was founder-president of the Johor MCA and was national treasurer for 11 years. (Lee and Chow, 180).
26. After the Japanese surrender in 1945, there was a breakdown of law and order in various parts of Malaya including Batu Pahat and Kluang in Johor. The clashese arose when communist-led guerrillas emerged from the jungle to take reprisals against collaborators, reprisals that turned into serious inter-communal conflict when Malay district officers, *penghulus* and policemen were killed. See Cheah Boon Kheng (1987).

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