

REFERENCE MATERIALS

Sir Cecil C. Smith, and the Chinese Advisory Board

A Straits-Born Chinese

When Sir Cecil Smith conceived the noble and brilliant idea of abolishing the dangerous Secret Societies, he knew that something had to be done to take their place, as the large number of ignorant members, accustomed to look to their Kongsees for advice and counsel, would then be left without guidance. Enquiries were then carefully and diligently set on foot with the object of finding out the best substitute for the many powerful secret organisations that were shortly to be suppressed, and the ingenious mind of our late Governor soon found a scheme which culminated in the formation of the Chinese Advisory Board in the year 1890 consisting of representative men, selected by the Government from the different sections of the Chinese community. The Protector of Chinese is a member or *officio*, and although he has yearly been elected President by the Board, nevertheless the chair might be occupied by any member elected by that body. The duties of this new Council, as its name would imply, are to tender advice and assistance to the Government in all matters concerning the Chinese and to give their views on any new measure that may be introduced by the local authorities.

That the Board has fulfilled these functions and justified its existence may be judged by the satisfaction it has given both to the Government and to the public. In all important matters where the advice and support of the Chinese were required, the Advisory Board never hesitated to throw its heart and soul into the matter. Some years ago, after the suppression of the old Secret Societies, the Chinese of this Colony and Hongkong were greatly disturbed and troubled by the doings of a new secret organisation known as the “Chui Liok Peng Ann” or “*The Breaking Coffin Society*,” whose sole object was to rob and plunder unwary passengers while on their way home to China with their little savings. This society included persons of both sexes, whose character was of the blackest dye, and who were cunning in the extreme and most unscrupulous in all their dealings. They went about in gangs, but, to disarm suspicion, the members behaved like strangers to each other, each individual assuming a distinct and separate character in order to throw dust in the eyes of intended victims. One of their first tactics was to endeavour to win the confidence of their fellow passengers and find out the state of their purse with the view of stealing it.

One incident that happened here a few years ago will suffice to give some idea of the many sly and artful devices adopted by these cruel and heartless robbers in order to gain their end.

A P. & O. mail steamer arrived here from Penang, and one of the male passengers on board was arrested by the Police on the accusation of a female fellow passenger for attempting to run away with her money which, she alleged, had been entrusted to him for safe custody. This charge the man stoutly denied. But the woman related how she had become acquainted with the man some years before while they were staying in Perak as new neighbours in a certain street which she then named. She also gave other details in support of her charge against him. This narration of past events made her history so plausible that many who heard her could not but believe in the truth of her statement. The prisoner was astounded with the audacity of his accuser. It bewildered him and for a time he was at a loss how satisfactorily to rebut the charge preferred against him. One of his friends, however, sent an appeal for assistance to a certain Towkay in Penang, a former employer of the accused, who in response to this appeal, requested a friend here, a very influential merchant, to render all necessary help to the poor man. The man's cause was taken up, and further investigation was made into the matter with the result that the man was set at liberty, but with his years of savings half gone, caused by the expenses incurred in his defence. Had some one taken the trouble to give more thought to this disgraceful case, the woman and her associates would have been punished for their perjury.

It transpired afterwards, that the woman in question had become acquainted with the man during their passage from Penang, and in that short voyage, she had so well succeeded in ingratiating herself into his favour, that he made her his *confidante* and unbosomed to this newly made companion all the secrets of his life. He must have also told her of the amount of money he had with him. Armed with this knowledge of the man's past career, this female swindler, apparently an associate of "*The Breaking Coffin Society*," endeavoured to extort money from him, failing which she brought the false charge against him above referred to. In this attempt, she was undoubtedly backed up by the secret agents of the society here, some of whom were subsequently deported to China on evidence connected with other crimes.

Horrible deeds were occasionally perpetrated by these marauders. Passengers on the deck were sometimes, at dead of night, allured to the side of the ship and pushed overboard so as to make the fall appear accidental, in case of detection by the people on board. These atrocities soon became known to the public, and reports concerning them spread abroad like wildfire, increasing in exaggeration as they passed from mouth to mouth. Fear and alarm took possession of the Chinese community, and great anxiety was felt by those who had dear relatives travelling on the high seas. The authorities in Hongkong and here were indefatigable and worked hard to secure the desperadoes, but want of proper evidence prevented them from dealing effectively with the gangs. The Chinese Advisory Boards of Penang and Singapore gave the full weight of their support to the Government. At last, the Chinese Protectorate with the co-operation of some members of the Advisory Boards succeeded in obtaining important information which led to the

arrest and conviction of the ringleaders. Thus, the most wicked conspiracy that had ever seen the light of day in our midst was suppressed.

The present and future generations of the Chinese of this Colony must and will ever feel grateful to Sir Cecil Smith for having initiated and brought into existence the Ordinance for the suppression of the dangerous secret societies, and for having successfully put it into operation under circumstances so difficult that other men, stronger than he, might have shrunk from undertaking so serious a responsibility. Unsupported by the Unofficial Members of Council, but backed only by his Executive, particularly by our late Attorney General, now Sir Winfield Bensen, he fought his battle in the most persistent manner, conscious of the righteousness of his case, and he won it, conferring thereby untold benefits upon our community and ridding us of a pest that could only thrive and flourish by playing upon the fear and ignorance of our working classes. Thus, a great social plague was removed from our midst. The Chinese Advisory Board has always afforded great facility to the Government for ascertaining the feelings of the Chinese Community on any questions it may choose to raise. On the other hand, the Chinese have secured through this establishment an easy and inexpensive means of ventilating their views on any subject which might be considered by them inimical to their interests. But the sphere of usefulness of this Board must always depend not only upon the measure of confidence the Government would bestow upon it, but also upon the spirit and energy of a few leading members on the Board, as the majority of them, unacquainted with the constitution of this Colony, cannot yet be expected to follow all current events with that amount of interest so essential to the formation of a correct judgment on any question that may be at issue between the Government and the public.

Source: *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 1, March 1897: 60-62