

Transforming the Development Frontier: Chinese Pioneers in the Ulu Langat District of Selangor, Malaysia

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Abstract

The Ulu Langat district of Selangor witnessed the beginning of modern development in the late nineteenth century. This was one of numerous localities in the country that was responding to demands for commodities from overseas markets. It was this transformation of place that made up the totality of the country's development process. Contributing to this process were Malays and communities of Indonesian, Chinese and Indian immigrants, Europeans, and commercial enterprises.

Understanding the process of development of a place requires attention to the past and local situations. This study will focus on the role of Chinese pioneers and settlers in changing the face of Ulu Langat during the era of British rule. The Chinese were engaged in the opening of tin mines, the spontaneous agricultural pioneering especially of rubber, and in the establishment of settlements. The development process is in effect a chronicle of the transformation of virgin forests into a cultural and economic landscape. The Ulu Langat experience reveals insights to a distinctive model of development contributed characteristically by the Chinese during the colonial era.

Key words: Local development, Chinese pioneers, mining, agriculture, settlements

Introduction

The British take-over of Penang in 1786 and Singapore in 1819 and the subsequent inclusion of Melaka to become the Straits Settlements in 1826 provided the initial impetus to the modern economic development of the Malay Peninsula. These coastal enclaves served as beachheads for economic penetration into the Malay hinterland. The advent of British "protection" in 1874 was catalytic in changing the face of the peninsula from an economic backwater into a rich protectorate. British control was further consolidated when the states of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, and Pahang became the Federated Malay States in 1895

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and five other Malay States to the north and south accepted British “advice” between 1903 and 1914.

The British created in each of the Malay States a hierarchical administrative structure to expedite development. At the apex of the administrative machinery was the British Resident whose advice the Sultan was obliged to follow. Each state was divided into districts and administered by District Officers and their subordinates. The district was in turn subdivided into several *mukim* that formed the lowest unit of land administration. A *Penghulu* (mukim headman) was appointed to look after the larger mukim and he was assisted by the *Ketua Kampung* (village headman) in the villages.

The development process became more organized and permanent with the introduction of law and order under British colonial administration. Anxious for imperial gain and acutely conscious of the need to stimulate development of the newly-acquired possessions, the British acted quickly to attract investment and settlement. Policies were formulated to expedite the exploitation of resources, to safeguard the interests of property owners and investors, and to create a system of land administration to convert land held under communal tenure into private, transferrable properties. A core function of government was the administration of land which was effectively decentralized at the district and local levels. And it is on the basis of the expansion of landownership and settlement and the construction of infrastructure that the chronicles of the local place are recorded. In many localities, the development history may be traced in detail from the late nineteenth century when the system of land administration and the codification of land laws were put in place.

Thus began the evolution of the economic landscape of modern-day Malaysia. This process was driven by the combined efforts of different communities of pioneer settlers and workers comprising Malays and immigrant communities from the Indonesian archipelago, China, India, and the planters and corporations from Europe.

The transformation of the local place is the country’s development writ large. The history of the development process in Malaysia is relatively short and may be reconstructed without much difficulty. Yet there are many gaps in the development story. These gaps may be filled by focusing on two paradigms that take into account the historical and the local. Different methodologies may be used to obtain different insights into the development process but it may not be fully appreciated without reference to its history. It is at the local level that the development process may be examined for its multi-dimensional social and economic significance. The local area and its development thus provide the “building blocks” of the country’s economic history as the mechanics of the development process and the enterprise, hardships and contributions of different actors are revealed.

This paper deals with the development of Ulu Langat district in Selangor with reference to the Chinese especially in the Semenyih valley. Selangor had become the political domain of the Bugis with the proclamation of the first Sultan in 1742 (see Gullick, 1960) and had its northern boundary extended to the Bernam valley following the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of

1826. Its southern extension into Lukut, where tin mining in the first half of the nineteenth century had turned it into the richest part of state, was only formalized with the advent of British protection in 1874. In 1883 the Lukut district was exchanged for the Semenyih valley and became part of Negeri Sembilan (see Radcliffe, 1969). This year too marked the beginning of Ulu Langat as a district under effective British administration.

Actively advancing the cause of local “development” was the colonial administration at the district level. Among the many official duties that the British Resident, district and other officers were charged with was the drafting of reports on the state and the respective districts to monitor progress, the growth and movements of population, and to diagnose problems. At the district level, different types of reports, some on a monthly basis, were prepared on a routine basis, and large amounts of correspondence were exchanged among officials and with the people. Reports by the district and state departments, the census bureau, secretariat files and many others were subsequently transferred to the National Archives. The materials on which this study is based are derived from archival sources, census reports, and selected land records to piece together the broad pattern of development of the district in the pre-independence period.

Development of the Local Area: A Conceptual Outline

Development in colonial Malaya was effected largely through the exploitation of resources. The theoretical basis of development and pioneering was anchored on the privatization of land formerly held under communal tenure. This had required enactments to lend legal basis to the conversion of “state” land into private properties. The commodification of land was to turn it into productive use via a *laissez faire* policy of free competition among the owners of capital. This was a move to safeguard private property rights and protection to investments on a permanent basis. The mechanism to put this policy into practice was by means of “spontaneous pioneering” which thrust the risk-taking function on private capital in the search for profits. In this manner, private enterprise and capital took the initiative and bore the cost of transforming the colonial territory for imperial economic gain minus the direct exposure to financial risks to the colonial authorities. Thus spontaneous pioneering was much more than the act of opening up land; it was a development regime that was driven by a political agenda with social and economic repercussions on different ethnic communities (see Voon, 1999).

The colonial initiatives in development were the building of administrative institutions and legal structures. The state influenced the nature and direction of economic progress by formulating policies to steer development in a way that would maximize state revenue from the exploitation of resources. The *laissez faire* policy encouraged intense competition among owners of capital and prompted efforts to attract labour and settlers for the profitable utilization of land. Capital was largely sourced from Europe and among the growing local community of

Chinese immigrants, and labour primarily from China and India, to produce commodities for the markets of the West.

The sparks that ignited the transformation of a place are started not by fortuitous circumstances but the interplay of enabling conditions. Areas that attracted capital were endowed with initial advantages and often enjoyed nodal or central locations. In the local context, of special importance was the presence of mineral resources and potential agricultural land. These became exploitable assets when the necessary operational framework to induce the investment of capital and labour on a long-term basis were put in place.

The work of pioneers and subsequent clustering of population gave rise to villages and towns. The collection of revenue funded the construction of basic infrastructure in the form of roads, railways, telephone and telegraph lines to connect and integrate emerging settlements into an effective network. These facilities in turn provided access to and encouraged investments in opening up new tracts of land for settlement and production.

The cumulative effects of development led to differential rates and prospects of growth according to the extent of economic agglomeration or inertia of the local area. The impetus of comparative initial advantages would quicken the pace of economic expansion of the principal nodal areas leading to greater differentiation from less favoured areas. The early settlements in various local areas eventually formed a hierarchy of central places comprising one or more principal centres, several secondary centres and many local towns and villages (see Lim, 1978).

In the wider context, colonial development was driven not by economic forces that originated locally but rather by strong demands in markets that were far removed from the scene of production itself. It was the escalating demand for commodities driven by the industrialization in Europe and America and exploited by colonial rule that provided the initial impetus to local development. British colonial rule and the presence of a rich resource base had enabled Malaya to build up its budding economy to integrate with the global economy through the simultaneous transformation of many local areas. The eventual outcome was the emergence of Malaya as the world's largest producer of tin and rubber that lasted through the greater part of the twentieth century.

Despite the force of positive economic stimuli, large stretches of the country remained untouched by development. These were largely forest-covered with a scanty population and little prospects for change. Conditions only began to alter with independence in 1957 when land settlement schemes on a regional scale pushed the development frontier to areas that have hitherto been bypassed by development (see Johari, 1983; Shamsul Bahrin and Lee, 1988).

Early Development in the Malay States

The Malay Peninsula was for many centuries the home of several Malay sultanates of which the most important was that of Melaka. These were areas where wet rice cultivation

could have been practised from the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries or even earlier (see Zaharah, 1992). Elsewhere, Malays and immigrant Indonesian communities had ventured into major river valleys, often led by local or Indonesia headmen who obtained land from the sultan and recruited their village folks as settlers and cultivators (see Gullick, 1985). Small Malay villages or *kampungs* that appeared were primarily aligned along rivers. What emerged was a *kampung* economy based on subsistent farming (Gullick, 1989: 124-149).

Before the advent of British “protection” in 1874, the port merchants and traders were searching for avenues of investments in tin mining and agricultural production in the scantily populated interior. Commercial agricultural production by Chinese entrepreneurs and labour appeared in several widely scattered areas. This process induced constant movements of people, capital and entrepreneurship into the “outback” where tin and agricultural produce were sent to the ports for export. The states that attracted early attention were the hinterlands of the port cities. These were Johor in the south, Province Wellesley (Seberang Prai) and Perak in the north, and Selangor and Negeri Sembilan in the centre. Chinese immigrants took the lead in venturing into these states from the 1820s in search of tin and to produce gambier, pepper, sugar, and tapioca (see Jackson, 1968).

There is little documentary evidence to show the extent of agricultural activities in the Malay States. Relatively large-scale development took the form of canal building for irrigation and transport in various Malay States. A well-known case was the 37km canal in Kedah completed in 1888 under the supervision of the enterprising *Menteri Besar* (Chief Minister) Wan Saman (see DID, not dated: ii). An early estimate for Perak in 1891 indicates that 52,000 persons were engaged in agriculture production, out of a total population of 214,000. Among them 40,740 were Malays of whom 32,226 or four-fifths were engaged in rice cultivation (Merewether, 1892: 30). The preponderance of the Malays in rice farming was thus confirmed. In 1911, 164,427 Malays or 52 per cent of the total agricultural workforce of 316,965 in the FMS were engaged in agriculture. Rice farming tied down 108,211 or two-thirds of all Malay farmers, with another 18,307 or 11 per cent identified as “*kampung* owners” (Pountney, 1911: 132 and 141). The colonial policy of turning the Malays into the rice producers of the land and the introduction of major irrigation works in the early twentieth century succeeded in engaging a growing number in this role.¹

Outside the pockets of *kampungs* and local areas of commercial production, extensive swaths of the interior remained inaccessible and largely untouched and development of a more permanent nature had to await the advent of large-scale tin mining activities. Mining began in the upper Klang valley when Raja Juma’at of Lukut and Raja Abdullah of Klang brought in labour from Lukut in 1857 to work in Ampang (Gullick, 2000: 10). Tin was exported for the first time in 1859 and Chinese traders moved in to supply the mines with rice, opium, *arrack* (spirits), dry goods, and meat. Kuala Lumpur gradually emerged as the central settlement to which traders and mine workers gravitated. By the 1870s and 1880s, mining had spread out from the Ampang area to surrounding areas and farther north in Ulu Selangor (Middlebrook,

1951: 54).

Tin mining in the nineteenth century was virtually a Chinese monopoly, largely as a result of their adaptability in economic organization. Mining then consisted mainly of surface workings and excavation was therefore comparatively cheap (*A.R. Selangor*, 1889: 3; 1894: 13). Chinese methods of mining were open to almost everyone though mining was usually conducted by groups (*Report on Mines Department and Mining Industries, F.M.S.*, 1909: 12). A leading miner then was Yap Ah Loy who arrived in Kuala Lumpur in 1862 and who played a decisive role in the development of Kuala Lumpur. He operated mines in many parts of Selangor on his own and in partnership with other prominent Chinese miners (see Middlebrook, 1951). The discovery of tin in the Kinta Valley in the 1870s was catalytic in accelerating development in British Malaya.

Spearheaded primarily by the Chinese, tin mines were started in the major tin fields of Selangor and Perak. Many of the early mining camps evolved into townships and some emerged as commercial centres such as Taiping, Ipoh, and Seremban, while Kuala Lumpur, endowed with a favoured location, became the federal capital and business hub with a population second only to that of Singapore.

Mining attracted large numbers of Chinese into the tin fields. In 1891, the population of the FMS had reached 418,000, or four-fifths of the total in the Straits Settlements, and the bulk of it was concentrated in the major tin mining states of Perak and Selangor. In Perak there were nine Chinese to every ten Malays but in Selangor the ratio was almost two to one (Merewether, 1892). As mining expanded, the Chinese population in the FMS rose in tandem, increasing from 165,000 in 1891 to 302,000 in 1901, and 433,244 in 1911 (Pountney, 1911: 94). In 1911, 96 per cent of the 163,680 labour force in mining in the FMS were Chinese, the vast majority working as mining coolies (Pountney, 1911: 148).

Away from the mine fields, well-located areas witnessed ventures in commercial agriculture. Spontaneous pioneering in tin mining and agricultural production gave rise to a class of largely Chinese entrepreneurs or *towkays* who were in possession of capital. At any point of time, there were a few whose business interests were spread across many parts of the peninsula while many others operated at the state or local levels. The development process in local areas varied in pace and intensity according to the rate of exploitation of mineral resources or the opening of virgin land.

Development in Ulu Langat came later than many local areas in the Peninsula. Sumatran migrants were the first to penetrate the river valleys for rice and kampung cultivation. Sumatran migrants colonized the upper Langat River in the 1880s (see Radcliffe, 1969) and spread later to the Semenyih, Rinching and minor river valleys. These migrants were generally led by their enterprising headmen (*Dato Dagang*) who, with the Sultan's permission, settled in pre-selected sites with followers from their native villages to pioneer padi, kampung, and "general" cultivation (see Gullick, 1960; Voon, 1976a).

Mining: The First Key to Development in Ulu Langat

In Ulu Langat as in many parts of the Malay States, the first stir of commercial activity began with tin mining. An American prospector probably attempted mining for tin at Reko near Kajang in the 1840s (Wong, 1965: 32). This venture was soon abandoned and taken over by some Chinese. Although the upper Semeniyih valley was believed to be rich in tin, it was only in the later part of the nineteenth century, following the accelerated tempo of activity in many parts of the west coast, that mining began and ushered in radical change. Much was due to a group of enterprising pioneers some of whom had already found success elsewhere in the state.

The district became a hive of mining activity in the mid-1890s. From \$25 in early 1895, the mining revenue of Ulu Langat district reached \$717 a year later. Tin was first exported from the district in 1895 (*DOUL*, 677/1895). Expecting a “mining boom”, Chinese poured into every part of the district and many applications were received in 1896 for mining in the upper Semeniyih valley (*DOUL*, 587/1896; *MRUL*, January 1896).

Tin mining in the district was pioneered by Chinese *towkays*. One of them was Goh Ah Ngee who was active at Balau (in present day Broga) where there was a small group of Christian Chinese for whom he had built a small church and a house for the priest on his periodic visits from adjoining Sungei Ujong. In 1895, Goh’s mines at Balau accounted for 7.5 out of 8.0 tonnes of tin exported from the district (*DOUL*, 677/1895). The District Office was “much impressed by the energetic way” in which Goh was opening up the country. Trade at the emerging Semeniyih township became busier than before thanks to Goh’s enterprise (*MRUL*, February, March and June 1898).

Other miners were quick to follow upon the footsteps of Goh Ah Ngee. Among them were Loke Yew, Low Boon Kim and Khoo Seah. Loke Yew was granted 40ha of mining land at Sungei Merbau in Ulu Langat in February 1896 (*MRUL*, February 1896). In 1897, he began mining in the outskirts of Kajang with 180 workers. He then ventured into Sungei Kachau in the upper Semeniyih valley in 1898 with 100 workers to work on a 40ha concession (*MRUL*, August 1898). Khoo Seah opened his mines in the Sungei Chua Road with about 400 coolies in 1896 (*MRUL*, November 1896). Low Boon Kim was active at Sungei Jebat with 450 workers in his mines in 1897 (*ARUL*, 1897).

Tin mining in late nineteenth century Perak and Selangor was the darling enterprise among Chinese miners and workers. By 1891, there were 50,844 Chinese in Selangor, or 62 per cent of the total population, as against less than 30,000 in 1884 (*AR Selangor*, 1891). Kuala Lumpur had 19,020 persons, of whom almost 14,000 were Chinese. The mining settlements around Kuala Lumpur also grew into townships with Chinese numbering over 2,000 in Batu to more than 8,000 in Pudo (*AR Selangor*, 1891). Other towns in the state with considerable Chinese settlers were Cheras with 3,000, and Serendah, Rawang and Kuala Kubu in Ulu Selangor district, with about 2,000 each.

Ulu Langat district had a population of 3,695 people in 1884, many of whom were attracted by encouraging economic prospects in the tin mines (*AR Selangor*, 1884). By 1891, the district population had reached 8,015, of whom 58 per cent were Chinese and 34.5 per cent Malays (*MRUL*, August 1898). Semenyih grew into a sizeable township of 1,413 persons, 27 per cent of whom were Chinese (*AR Selangor*, 1891). By 1901, there were 7,269 Chinese mine workers in the district in June but fell to 5,200 at the end of the year (*ARUL*, 1903).

Tin mining stimulated the development of land transport. Since the 1880s, a rudimentary network was beginning to form in Selangor. The first railway line from Kuala Lumpur to Klang, 35km in length, was completed in 1886 (*AR Selangor*, 1889). The line to the Perak border was completed in 1900 and the southern extension reached the Negeri Sembilan in 1903. The skeletal network of cartroads radiating from Kuala Lumpur was consolidated during the 1900s and 1910s. By 1911, most of the roads found in Selangor before World War Two were already completed. In Ulu Langat district, a cartroad of 24km was built from Kuala Lumpur to Kajang in 1888, and extended to Semenyih, 11km to the south, in 1889; a bridle path continued southwards to Beranang in 1890 (*AR Selangor*, 1890). The 1890s saw short extensions of branch cart and bridle roads from Semenyih to Bangi in the southwest, Broga in the east and Kachau village in Ulu Semenyih in the northeast. Part of the Semenyih-Kachau road, as was usual in early local development, was built by Goh Ah Ngee (*ARUL*, 1898).

Spontaneous Pioneering and Agricultural Development

Despite the prospects of the tin mining industry, it was soon realized that Ulu Langat district was nothing like the “Eldorados of Kuala Lumpur and Ulu Selangor districts” as “tin is everywhere too pockety” (*DOUL*, 587/1896). Patchy deposits in some localities were soon worked out and miners had to move elsewhere in the state (*ARUL*, 1897).

Tin mining did not leave behind significant impacts on the economic landscape of Ulu Langat. It was agriculture that spearheaded the process of transformation. In 1884, about 486ha of land were under shifting or “*ladang*” cultivation of hill padi, maize, bananas, and sugar-cane (*AR Selangor*, 1884). Early agriculture was subsistent in nature and yielded little revenue to the government.

In 1896, the District Office suggested that the government must “sooner or later make up its mind to depend mainly on agriculture for that share of its revenue which comes from Ulu Langat” (*DOUL*, 587/1896). Tobacco had been planted on a trial basis in Semenyih in 1890 but had ended in failure (*ARUL*, 1898). Just to the north in the Klang valley, European planters had pioneered coffee planting on a large scale in the 1890s, on large concessions of land granted by a government that was over anxious in promoting economic production (see Jackson, 1968).

The promise in coffee planting led Malay and Chinese farmers to venture into Ulu Langat in the 1890s. In 1893, some Sumatran migrants experimented with the planting of Liberian coffee. A year later, a European planter was reported to be clearing 607ha of land (*AR Selangor*, 1893).

and 1894). In 1896, Goh Ah Ngee, who was already active in Broga, embarked on coffee planting on a newly-acquired 130ha concession near Kajang (*DOUL*, 587/1896).

In December 1895, the Kindersley brothers of Inch Kenneth estate in Kajang put in an application for 130ha of land along Reko Road about 3km from Kajang town. This application was considered “of special importance” as it was reported that this locality was once both “populous and extensively cultivated”. Other European planters submitted six applications for 130ha each in the same locality. The hope placed on coffee was also boosted by the new railway line to Negeri Sembilan (*ARUL*, 1895). In 1896, several of the leading Chinese miners in the district applied for a total of 294ha of agricultural land (*MRUL*, June 1896). With the increased demand for land, land revenue more than doubled from \$572 in April 1895 to \$1,283 a year later. At the turn of the twentieth century, competition from Brazilian producers and diseases threatened to cripple the local coffee planting industry. Although it had yet to be replaced by rubber, coffee was vanishing from the scene. By the 1900s, only 13ha were alienated for its cultivation in the district.

Although rubber seedlings (*Hevea brasiliensis*) from Brazil were introduced to Singapore and Perak in 1876, the commercial cultivation of rubber did not take place until 20 years later. A number of problems had frustrated efforts in rubber planting. In the 1890s and early 1900s, Europeans and Asians alike were ignorant of the botanical characteristics of the rubber plant and its special requirements in cultivation and maintenance. Devising a proper method to extract the latex posed another serious challenge. Few knew how to process the latex or market the produce. The long gestation period of six to seven years was another disincentive as capital yielded nothing in return during the period (see Voon, 1976b).

However, when commercial planting began in earnest, the rubber industry was to launch the most significant phase of development of Malaya. Significantly, the earliest systematic planting of rubber in Selangor took place in 1895 in Ulu Langat district itself. This was the experiment of the Kindersley brothers who planted 2ha in their Inch Kenneth coffee estate near Kajang. In the following year, Tan Chay Yan in Melaka put the commercial cultivation of rubber on a firm footing on a 17ha lot in his Bukit Lintang estate (Voon, 1976b: 31). In the Semenyih valley, the earliest venture into rubber cultivation on a relatively large scale was probably undertaken by Goh Ah Ngee on a 22ha land parcel that he acquired in 1898. As an enterprising pioneer who was keen to broaden his economic interests beyond tin mining, his venture into rubber cultivation was also a natural extension of his earlier interests in coffee.

Once the economic potentials of rubber had been proven, and having gained experience in coffee cultivation, European planters were quick to seize the opportunities offered by the new crop. Commercial production of rubber also marked the beginning of domination of European enterprise over Asian smallholders. There were 30 European and 22 other rubber estates in Ulu Langat district in 1908 (*MRUL*, May 1908; *DOUL*, 92/1908). European planters formed the Kajang Branch of the Planters’ Association in May 1912 to further their interests and organized a social club in June to strengthen ties among each other (*MRUL*, July 1912; *SSF*, 112/1912).

Global demand for rubber pushed prices to unprecedented levels between 1909 and 1911. Applications for land poured in and the opening of new estates was making the district “wonderfully prosperous and money very plentiful”. The District Officer found the progress in land clearing in the district in 1911 “simply astounding” (*ARUL*, 1911; *SSF*, 754/1911).

European domination of the rubber industry was due to several factors. These included biased colonial policies in land alienation, the introduction of the joint-stock companies in England which mobilized capital in the home country, the European head-start in the application for large areas of the “best” land for coffee planting that was later converted into rubber, and the large-scale acquisition of land from Chinese and Malay landowners (see Voon, 1967 and 1976a). In the Semenyih valley, European planting companies had obtained 792ha of land by 1915, with individual European planters acquiring another 3,178ha for a total of 3,970ha under European ownership (Voon, 1978: 512).

Acquisition of land by European interests and subsequently by Asian settlers pushed the agricultural frontier farther afield. In 1904, the output of rubber in the district was “practically nil” and that of coffee was 333 tonnes or 5,500 piculs (*ARUL*, 1904). In 1907, the district exported 38.4 tonnes of rubber, mainly from two European-owned plantations (*ARUL*, 1907). By 1908, rubber output had more than doubled to 81.7 tonnes (*ARUL*, 1908).

Competition to European planters in land acquisition came from a handful of Chinese pioneers. Leading the efforts in the two mukims of Semenyih and Ulu Semenyih that comprised the Semenyih valley, was Goh Ah Ngee. He had purchased several parcels of land from landowners in 1896 and 1897, later merged into two large parcels measuring 226ha and 16ha each (Selangor Land Grant Nos. 1936 and 1937). By 1904, Goh was the owner of 250ha of land in five adjoining parcels in the vicinity of Semenyih township but sold them off later to Low Boon Tit.

Another leading planter was Choo Kia Peng who obtained 182ha in Kajang mukim for rubber in 1910 but sold it off to a European plantation in 1912 (Selangor Land Grant No. 5139). Chua Cheng Tuan of Cycle and Carriage Company of Kuala Lumpur was granted 202ha in Beranang mukim in 1910 but was similarly disposed of the land to a European plantation in 1911 (Selangor Land Grant No. 4134). He was also granted a small piece of agricultural land in Semenyih mukim (Selangor Land Grant No. 4514). Loke Yew’s involvement in the district was rather subdued. His concession was 41ha in Kajang mukim acquired in late 1912 for rubber planting (Selangor Land Grant No. 5612).² Low Ti Kok of Kajang and “one of the leading miners” in Ulu Langat district, obtained 24ha for rubber cultivation in Kajang mukim and another 18ha in Beranang mukim in 1911 (Selangor Land Grant No. 6107).³

Rubber planting was by far the most attractive economic activity among the Chinese. Most of them sought small lots of land to establish rubber smallholdings with family labour. Land records in the mukims of Semenyih and Ulu Semenyih show that they applied for and obtained 1,554ha of land by 1915, compared with 3,970ha granted to European planters and

planting companies (Voon, 1978: 512). The Chinese were the most active in applying for land between 1915 and 1920. By 1920, when most of the state land in Semenyih valley had been given out by the Land Office, Chinese smallholders had obtained 4,064ha. This was 41 per cent of a total of 9,874ha given out by the state, with an identical share held by European planters and companies, and 14 per cent by Malay owners (Voon, 1978: 512). At the height of the “Emergency” in the early 1950s when anti-colonial guerrillas challenged the return of the British after the Japanese Occupation, the Chinese bought up a number of European estates that were under threats of violence. Prior to this, European planters had practically sold off all their land to European planting companies. By 1968, 6,177ha of land in the Semenyih valley were owned by the Chinese compared with 3,378ha under European planting companies (Voon, 1978: 526).

Townships and Community Life

The advent of tin mining stimulated the growth of several townships in Ulu Langat district. Among the earliest towns were Kajang, Cheras and Semenyih. The first shop lots in these towns were offered for sale to bidders. In a sale of building lots in Kajang and Semenyih on 6 July 1896, five lots in Kajang were bought up by the Kapitan China at a record price of \$200 a piece. This was double that of the highest price received hitherto (*MRUL*, July 1896). The larger towns had Sanitary Boards that issued licences and collected revenue. For example, the revenue for April 1896 was \$335.25, of which \$204 was due to renewals of licences for opium shops, \$86.70 from house assessment (*DOUL*, 587/1896).

In 1897, Semenyih town consisted of 28 houses, all except four were owned or occupied by Chinese. Nine of these were licenced opium shops (*DOUL*, 1155/1897). The town had a small market that came into use in late 1896 and the tender for operating the market was granted to Lee Piak at \$8 per month (*DOUL*, 1010/1896).

Other townships in the district included Sungei Chua, Kachau, Bangi, Broga, Beranang, Dengkil and Ulu Langat. Most were located along the margins of the relatively larger nodal settlements and comprised clusters of houses built of wood with corrugated iron or thatch roof. Fire hazard was a constant threat and in 1908, some of the shops in Kachau were destroyed by a fire on 16 May (*MRUL*, March 1908; *DOUL*, 52/1908). On 29 August 1926, 41 wooden and attap houses making up the “whole village” of Dengkil were burnt down (*SSF*, 4335/1926).

By 1911, the population of Ulu Langat district had increased to 12,618 people or 8.4 per cent of the population of Selangor. Kuala Lumpur district was the principal centre of the state with 60 per cent of the population, followed by the tin-mining district of Ulu Selangor with 19.4 per cent. From the beginning, the Chinese community was made up of several dialect groups, of which the Hakkas, Hokkiens and Cantonese were most numerous, followed by Teochews and Hainanese which were much smaller. The Hakkas formed the largest dialect group in Ulu Langat with 48 per cent of the district population, and in Kuala Lumpur with 43 per cent

(Pountney, 1911: Table 31).

Early Chinese community life was built on social networking according to ties of clan, dialect, occupational and other affinities. Temples were invariably the earliest institutions that were established to satisfy the spiritual needs of the community and the first temples were built in Kajang, Semenyih and Sungei Tekali in 1895 (*DOUL*, 1019/1895). Chinese settlers brought with them the tradition of organizing various associations according to dialect or village origins and trades to foster social connections and to safeguard their interests. Among the latter, the major ones were the chambers of commerce and tin mining associations. Persons elected to lead these organizations were generally those of high social standing in the community. Equally important was the concern with the final resting place of all individuals in the community. Cemeteries were established as a community undertaking and managed by elected committees. The normal practice was for the natives from the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian to have their own cemeteries and these were located at the margin of the towns or villages.

In the local community, a social pecking order emerged based on wealth and contributions in the eyes of the colonial authorities. Appointment to official bodies was an endorsement of one's social standing in the community. The pinnacle of social standing during the pioneer stage was the appointment as Kapitan China who served as the intermediary between the community and the colonial government. With the abolition of the Kapitan China system, the appointment to the State Council was considered most prestigious. In the larger towns, appointment to the sanitary or licencing boards was seen as an official recognition of one's social standing in local society. Each town or village might have its own Chinese "headman" whose status was social rather than official. The colonial authorities were not in favour of instituting official appointments of "*Ketua China*" (Chinese Headman) or "*Ketua Bengali*" (Bengali Headman) for their respective settlements (*DOUL*, 752/1923).

The social standing of individuals was built upon the track record of entrepreneurial success and accumulation of wealth, and often endorsed by appointments to official bodies. Wealth too gave rise to a hierarchy of merchants and capitalists among the Chinese that was generally acknowledged by local society. Among those active in the development of Ulu Langat district, this hierarchy consisted of entrepreneurs of pan-Malayan fame such as Loke Yew to state-level merchants such as Low Boon Tit. In early twentieth-century Malay States, Loke Yew and several revenue farmers were the leading entrepreneurs of pan-Malayan fame. He was made a member of the Selangor State Council in 1892 and a founding member and first chairman of the Selangor Chinese Chamber of Commerce in 1904 (see Butcher, 1993; Lee and Chow, 1997; 李业霖/Lee Yip Lim, 2001). Next were the enterprising headmen or *towkays* such as Low Boon Tit, a contemporary of Loke Yew, whose business interests included tin mines, properties and rubber in Selangor and parts of adjoining states (Lee and Chow, 1997). There were those who made their name at the district level. In Ulu Langat district, one of the early pioneers was Goh Ah Ngee. The last level comprised those leading personalities at the village or township level. In the case of Kachau, most of the land gazetted within the township in 1926

was granted to Koh Tam.⁴

The concentration of wealth among the Chinese may also be reflected in the ownership of properties such as land, shops and other enterprises. In 1912, the official assessment list of shop houses in Kajang town provided a clue to the distribution of wealth among leading shopowners (Table 1).

Table 1. Owners of Two or More Houses in Kajang, 1912

Name of Owners	Number of Houses
Raja Allang	20
Sung Thiang Fook	13
Loke Yew	11
Foo Thiang Hin	11
Goh Ah Ngee	9
Koh Tam	8
Low Ti Kok	8
Chin Ngim	6
Mat Rasat	6
Yap Kwan Seng	5
Chen Quee	5
Ng Peng Nam	5
Ibrahim bin Raja Brahugin	5
Daud	4
Low Boon Kim	4
Rev Brother Brossand	4
Chia Yew	3
Low Boon Liew	3
Wong Kim	3
Yap Chow	3
Yong Nee Chay	3
Chan Hee	2
Goh Soon Fatt	2
Koo Kai Siah	2
Lee Hin Neo	2
Quan Hio	2
Soh Liam Swee	2

Source: *SBUL*, 157/12

The list includes Loke Yew, by then one of the richest men in the Malay States, as one of the principal stakeholders of Kajang town properties. Another major figure was Yap Kuan Seng, Kapitan China of Kuala Lumpur in the 1890s and a prominent tin miner. Goh Ah Ngee was a leading pioneer in the district and Koh Tam was the *towkay* of Kachau. Liew Boon Liew was active in rubber planting and operated a brick kiln in Kajang from 1907. He was the only Chinese appointed to the five-member district Licencing Board for 1926-1927 (*SSF*,

4271/1912, 4664/1925 and 6044/1926).

Among the five non-Chinese shopowners, four were probably Sumatran migrants and the fifth was a European Catholic brother. Raja Allang was a Mandailing and became a forest ranger in 1883 and Chief Ranger in 1889. The forest ranger was then involved in the work of land development and settlement. Educated in Malay in Melaka and Singapore, he was nevertheless more than a forest ranger and served as the right hand man in Malay affairs of the District Officer of Ulu Langat. In this role as an administrative contractor or broker, he helped the early British district administration in carrying out or advising on matters of policy on development (Radcliffe, 1969: 174-175). With his influence, it was not surprising that he became one of the largest shopowners in Kajang.

In 1931, the district population of 57,803 consisted of 27,474 Chinese, 18,159 Malays, and 9,740 Indians. But the economic downturn of the early 1930s and the Japanese Occupation of the early 1940s brought considerable damage to the district. In the 17 years to 1947, the population of the district increased by less than 10 per cent to 63,250 persons, comprising 34,669 Chinese, 20,377 Malays and 7,591 Indians (Vlieland, 1932: 147; Del Tufo, 1949: 145).

In British Malaya as well as North Borneo and Sarawak, many of the towns and smaller settlements were very “Chinese” in character with the majority of the population being Chinese. The townships in Ulu Langat were no exception as Chinese made up from two-thirds to more than 90 per cent of the population (except for Bangi in 1947)(Table 2). By 1931 Kajang was a fairly large town, ranking fourth in size in the state, and Sungei Chua and Semenyih were ninth and tenth respectively. In actual fact, these were “Chinese towns” that were rarely the case in other colonial territories where the Chinese had settled down.

Table 2. Chinese Populations of Towns and Villages in Ulu Langat, 1921, 1931 and 1947

Town/Village	1921	% of Total	1931	% of Total	1947	% of Total
Bangi	-	-	188	54.4	155	38.8
Kajang	2,159	65.1	3,806	62.5	5,118	67.9
Semenyih	757	74.1	1,582	81.4	1,861	80.2
Sungei Chua	2,292	97.4	2,433	96.3	2,387	95.3
Beranang	-	-	-	-	472	65.5
Dengkil	-	-	-	-	500	73.9
Simpang Kachau	-	-	-	-	585	98.3
Ulu Langat	-	-	-	-	454	79.6
Broga	-	-	-	-	692	92.5

- not available

Sources: Vlieland, 1932; Del Tufo, 1949; Nathan, 1922

Away from the towns and villages, economic life during the colonial period was centred on the production of rubber in European estates and Asian smallholdings, tin mines, and the padi areas amidst Malay kampungs. Local commerce and trade were confined to the small towns and villages and very much in the hands of the Chinese. An understanding of the trade in the towns and villages may be gauged from the supplies of daily necessities in 1924 (Table 3). These supplies were nearly all sourced from Kuala Lumpur. Some local residents obtained fresh milk from local suppliers but the Europeans preferred tinned milk brought in from Kuala Lumpur.

Table 3. A “Normal” Month’s Supply of Selected Foodstuffs to the Towns of Ulu Langat District, 1924

Town	No. of Shops	Rice (Bags)	Fresh Fish (Piculs)	Salt Fish (Piculs)	Curry Stuffs (\$)	Wheat Flour (Bags)	Pork (Pigs)	Beef*	Milk+
Kajang	18	3,000	200	18	8,000	400	300	15	150
Semenyih	12	1,500	-	15	1,000	150	90	-	50
Kachau	5	60	-	5	50	20	-	-	10
Cheras	3	60	0.5	3	50	10	Kj	Kj	3
Ninth Mile	5	100	-	5	100	12	Kj	Kj	10
Ulu Langat	7	200	-	21	200	70	-	-	7
Bangi	4	960	-	50	500	180	-	-	60
Dengkil	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Jendram	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

* Buffaloes+Cases (48 tins) Kj = supplied from Kajang town - not available

Picul = 133.3 pounds

Source: *DOUL* 407/1924

Certain trades were subject to government regulation or supervision. The important trade of buying of rubber from local producers was regulated by the Rubber Dealers Enactment. In January 1912, 70 licences were issued by the District Office to treat rubber (*SSF*, 112/12). The government also awarded various contracts to the highest bidders to operate the market and various farms. In 1927, the tender for operating the market in Kajang was awarded to K. Sunnakutty at \$352 per month, and that of Semenyih to Chia On Fatt for \$63 per month. At the same time, the Kajang Pig Farm was to be operated by Lee Keow for a monthly payment of \$150, the Kajang Buffalo and Goat Farm by Kok Low for \$8 per month and the Semenyih Pig Farm by Hew Kwee for \$58 per month (*SSF*, 1982/26). The Sanitary Board was also charged with awarding other contracts such as the supply of kerosene oil and petrol or the supply of trade notice boards and badges, and in approving licences for the sale of liquor.

Conclusion

Chinese pioneers and settlers occupied a fitting role in their enterprise and hard work to

transform many local areas into mines, agricultural holdings and towns. Much was due to their ingrained habit of unremitting hard work, the willingness to take risks and to sacrifice, and their flair in fostering social solidarity through clan and other organizations. Their commitments and sacrifices were such that many began to put down roots on a permanent basis and as stakeholders in the local area. While an unknown number succumbed to the risks of diseases and poverty in opening the tropical frontier, many adapted themselves sufficiently well to survive the test and even to excel. Operating under new political and socio-economic circumstances that were radically different from those in their native villages, Chinese settlers were able to carve out a living in the new environment.

As a state of growing economical clout, Selangor began to feature prominently in the early development process. Whether in mining and agricultural production, or in the development and spread of settlements and the transport system, Selangor had always assumed a leading role among the Malay States. The early development in Ulu Langat district had spread from the head waters of the Klang River just to the north when tin mining and the birth of Kuala Lumpur began to transform the hitherto untouched land. The decentralized system of colonial land administration soon took care of the demand for land by the early pioneers who ventured into tin mining and agricultural production in the remoter corners of the state.

The work of Chinese pioneers and settlers in Ulu Langat district mirrors the role of the Chinese in other parts of Malaya where they are present in substantial numbers. Their involvement in the development of Ulu Langat led to three clear outcomes.

The first is developing an entirely new mining industry. This was initiated by enterprising Chinese working with their own capital and labour. Although tin mining in Ulu Langat eventually turned out to be a relatively minor enterprise, its origins were due to risk-taking Chinese *towkays*. The industry contributed to government revenue, created employment, and brought wealth to the mine owners. It was an industry in which the Chinese were their own masters and not labouring merely as coolies.

The second was Chinese involvement in agricultural production, and rubber in particular. This was an activity spearheaded by European capital but Chinese settlers, and to some extent the Malays, also contributed significantly to building up the district's economy. Working independently and making use of their own resources to start their holdings, Chinese settlers were able to corner a share of the local rubber industry through the acquisition of land that was as extensive as that controlled by the resource-rich European plantations. The rubber industry was to serve as the mainstay of the local economy well into the twentieth century.

The final outcome was the emergence of towns and villages that are typically settled by the Chinese. Stretching over other parts of the Malay Peninsula where Chinese have congregated was a series of such "Chinese" towns and villages. These "Chinese" settlements are unique and rarely found among Chinese overseas outside Malaysia and Singapore.⁵ It was in such towns that trade and commerce oiled the wheels of the urban economy. Their access to the major towns turned them into local centres through which innovations and progress were introduced into

surrounding areas.

The local area forms the individual pixels of the national picture of development. The study of the history of the local area is therefore a fruitful way through which the larger picture of development may be portrayed in the right perspective and to allow local details to be drawn in sharper focus. It is for this modest purpose that this study of Ulu Langat district is undertaken.

Notes

- 1 Among the largest were the Krian irrigation and settlement scheme in northern Perak, first planned in the 1880s but completed only in 1906 (DID, not dated: iii; also see Overton, 1994). Similar government projects were launched to promote rice production. Among these were the Sungei Manik scheme in Lower Perak and the Tanjong Karang scheme in Kuala Selangor of the 1930s (see DID, not dated). Just before independence, there were 400,000 padi farmers in the country, of whom 97 per cent were Malays or half the Malay labour force (Rudner, 1979: 8; Short, 1971: 12).
- 2 Among the grants of land to Loke Yew were 861ha in Kuala Kulampang mukim in Ulu Selangor in early 1909 (Selangor Land Grant No. 4581) and 83ha in Setapak mukim in July 1911 for permanent cultivation. In 1926, the land in Setapak was transferred to Hawthornden Rubber Estate Ltd. (Selangor Land Grant No. 5262).
- 3 Low Ti Kok was a prominent member of Kajang society. He died in 1943 and left an estate comprising 24 lots of rubber land covering 351ha (18 lots in Kajang mukim, 5 in Cheras and a 15ha in Semenyih mukim), and nine town titles in Kajang mukim consisting of six shop houses, one bungalow, one dwelling house and one attap house, ranging in area from 177 sq metres (7 poles) to 2ha. The agricultural land was valued from \$20 to \$40 per hectare on 6 February 1942, and the town lots from \$100 to \$25,000. The agricultural land lots were worth a total of \$77,857 and the town lots \$44,118. The Collector of Land Revenue, Ulu Langat district, considered these valuations as fair and reasonable having regard to War conditions then prevailing (*DOUL*, 100/2603).
- 4 Koh Tam, described as a “hard working agriculturist” by the District Officer of Ulu Langat, owned 8ha of “well planted” rubber in Semenyih mukim in 1909, sold an equal area to the Sungei Purun Estate and at the same time applied for more land in 1910. He owned 64ha in Ulu Semenyih mukim in 1917 and three shop houses in Kachau in 1935 (*SSF* 1591/1910; Selangor Land Grant No. 7368; *SBUL* 84/35). According to the Selangor Registration of Titles records, when the Kachau township was developed in 1926, Koh Tam was granted 31 shop lots plus six other parcels of land within the township boundary and three agricultural lots adjoining it. Two other persons who held land in the township were Umar bin Mandor and Tai Swee.
- 5 Exceptions may be found among the Chinese in West Kalimantan.

References

Abbreviations

<i>ARUL</i>	<i>Annual Report Ulu Langat</i>
<i>DOUL</i>	<i>District Office Ulu Langat Files</i>
<i>MRUL</i>	<i>Monthly Report Ulu Langat</i>
<i>SBUL</i>	<i>Sanitary Board Ulu Langat Files</i>
<i>SSF</i>	<i>Selangor Secretariat Files</i>

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