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Decoding the Past of Chinatowns and Chinese Towns of 19th Century North America / Australia and British Malaya

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Abstract

Chinese began to migrate to the west coast of North America and Australia and the Malay Peninsula during the gold and tin rushes. The former was newly European-settled territories and the latter was almost unpopulated. The timing of the Chinese arrival and the background of host societies had an influence on the type of Chinese settlements that evolved. In America and Australia, the Chinese were primarily labourers and lived in narrow quarters later known as "Chinatowns." In Malaya the Chinese were labourers as well as pioneers in areas which they began to transform into townships.

This study is an attempt to decode the origins of the North American and Australian Chinatowns and the Malayan towns. Their background and experiences were strongly identified with the separate territories and were part of the historical tradition and heritage of the respective community. These early Chinatowns were unlike the modern-day versions which are modern and convey a sense of the romantic beloved of tourists. They had in fact passed through an inglorious period of history. The Malayan towns that appeared showed a different trajectory of social and economic transformation. Conceptually and in historical perspectives, the enduring differences between the Chinatown and Malayan towns have remained. Arising from this, one may caution that the Chinatown concept may not be imposed on what are "Chinese towns" so as not to risk misinterpreting their history and that of the Chinese community as a whole.

Keywords: Chinese immigrants, Chinatown, "Chinese towns," origins and characteristics, social and economic differences

Introduction

In recent years there is an increasing tendency to brand certain streets in Malaysia and Singapore as "Chinatowns." The contemporary image of the Chinatown is one of a busy and modern urban quarter featuring elements of Chinese culture. It is popular with tourists and its potential for tourism development is substantial. This study is concerned only with the Chinatowns that began in the mid-19th century gold rush in North America and Australia and the towns that appeared at the same time during the tin rush in the Malay Peninsula.

Large numbers of Chinese immigrants entered the west coast of North America and Australia and the Malay Peninsula from the 1850s in response respectively to the gold and tin rushes. These immigrants came from the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian and were motivated by the same desire for wealth, but their subsequent encounters and experiences were vastly dissimilar.

The Chinese immigrants founded two kinds of settlements. In North America and Australia where Europeans had settled down, the Chinese congregated in "Chinatowns" in emerging cities such as San Francisco, Vancouver or Melbourne. In the Malay Peninsula, then under British influence, some Chinese had settled down in the port cities of Penang, Singapore and Malacca, and new arrivals ventured into prospective tin fields in the inland districts. They developed mining camps which later grew into villages or small towns. The dominance of the Chinese was making the port cities and the emerging towns very "Chinese." For lack of a better term, they may be known as "Malayan towns with Chinese characteristics" or simply Malayan Chinese towns (MCTs). In this context, the question as to how and when a concentration of Chinese in an urban setting constitutes a "Chinatown" and when it is more correctly seen as a "Chinese town," including their origins and characteristics, deserve attention. In the current context, what are the historical, social and cultural connotations associated with each settlement?

This study will decode the origins of the Chinatowns and the MCTs. The purpose is not to compare them but to place them in a proper perspective in order to stress the distinct differences between them. A proper reading of the nature of their origins has a significant bearing on the interpretation especially of the history of the Chinese community of 19th century Malaya. The first section proposes some conceptual considerations based on certain factors that might induce the formation of the Chinatown or MCT. The second deals with the origins of the Chinatown and the fate of its inhabitants while the third does the same for the MCT. The final section draws some insights from the study and points to the implications of transplanting the idea of the Chinatown to the contemporary setting of Malaysia or Singapore.

Much has been written about the Chinatowns of North America and Australia. They are mentioned in broad surveys of the Chinese communities in the U. S. (Lai, 1998); Canada (Ng, 1998), and Australia (Inglis, 1998). Accounts of Chinatowns invariably touch on the disadvantaged

and marginal position of the Chinese in society and the economy. A common theme is the negative image of the Chinese and the prevailing attitudes that were unfriendly and unwelcoming, often associated with hostility, discrimination, demonisation and even violence.[1] The adverse impression of the Chinese in America began even before the Opium War of 1840s (Miller, 1969). The Chinatown was depicted as a place of conflicting images and contested terrain (K. S. Wong, 1995) and, even more so, as a "place and institutional practice in the making of a racial category" (Anderson, 1987; Tchen, 2001).

The literature on the towns of Malaya is considerable. Among important works are those by McGee on Kuala Lumpur and the Southeast Asian city (1963; 1967), while others include research on the urban system of Malaya (H. K. Lim, 1978), early Singapore (Hodder, 1953), Kuala Lumpur (Gullick, 1955), Penang (Y. T. Wong, 2015), Ipoh (Ho, 2000), small towns in general (Jackson, 1974), and case studies on Pontian Kechil (Neville, 1962), and Kampar (Y. T. Wong, 2018).

The "Chinatowns" of Singapore and Malaya have generated interest. A website known as "Chinatownology.com" is "dedicated to the heritage and culture of Singapore Chinatown." Recent publications on this subject include a book on the Chinatowns of ASEAN countries (Suryadinata & Ang, 2009). It identifies a Chinatown in each of the ten ASEAN countries, including Singapore's "Kreta Ayer" and the "cultural street" of Petaling Street in Kuala Lumpur. More recent studies in Singapore were intended to create a narrative of the "Chinatown" as "the cradle of Chinese community" of Singapore (see Yeoh & Kong, 2012; G. H. Lim, 2019; Y. K. Chan, 2023). In Malaysia, adding to the literature was a popular publication entitled *New in the Old Chinatown Kuala Lumpur* (Koon, Aw & Powell, 2022), and a paper on Kuala Lumpur's Petaling Street recently officially "rebranded" as a Chinatown (Ding, 2023).

Conceptual Considerations

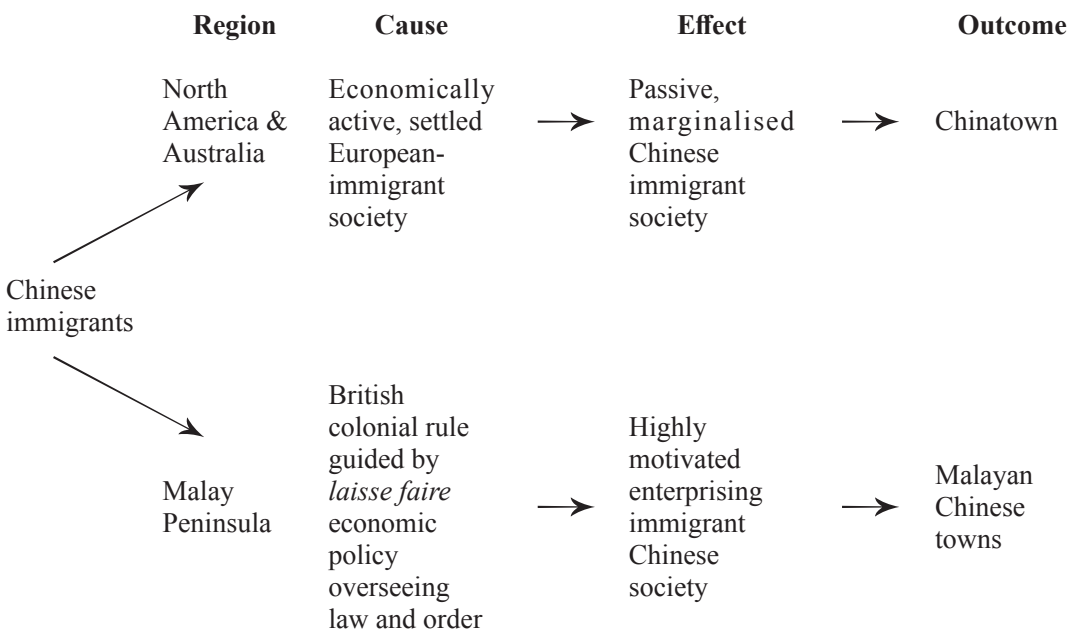
Conceptually, the Chinatown and MCT were fundamentally different in their backgrounds, origins, the perceptions of the local societies and their impacts on the social and economic status of the Chinese communities. Indeed, they were an integral part of the history of the Chinese in the territories where they had settled.

Early European settlers found a land of opportunity in North America and Australia and regarded them as their own. The British controlled a resource-rich Malaya at a time when large swarths of the land were still uninhabited. Chinese immigrants settled down in "Chinatowns" in the former and in what were ordinary towns in the latter.

Several factors determined whether Chinese immigrants settled in Chinatowns or in ordinary towns similar those in Malaya. The first was the climate and environment. Europeans preferred to live in the temperate zone rather than in the tropics. Another factor was whether the territory was

already occupied or colonised by Europeans when Chinese immigrants arrived. Where Europeans have settled down to form the mainstream society, Chinese immigrants were regarded as "aliens" and the "other." The third was the economic role of Chinese immigrants, whether they served mainly as labourers and were marginalised, or were left on their own to pursue their wealth. Lastly, the hostile and negative, or friendly and positive perceptions of the mainstream society or colonial authority on the Chinese had a direct influence on the social and economic fate of the Chinese communities (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Attitude of Host Society towards Immigrant Chinese in North America/Australia and Malaya



The combination of factors led to two settlement types which evolved according to circumstances unique to each. Chinese immigrants were "late-comers" to the North America and Australia. The defining feature of the Chinatown where they congregated was an enclave (see Zhou, 1992; Johnson, 2007; Sales et al., 2009). Like an island surrounded by a sea of white residents, the enclave was an isolated Chinese "out-post" beyond which Chinese residents or culture were absent. The physical segregation was often enforced by a host society that accepted the Chinese as labourers but not as sojourners or neighbours. This marginalisation led to economic control and restriction by the host society. With limited access to economic opportunities, the overall income level of the people was low. As an enclave it was difficult for the population to expand outwards. Hence the Chinatown was

home to only a fraction of the city population. The prevailing perception of the host society was one of prejudice manifested in various forms of maltreatment and social injustices. Being a general target of humiliation, the early Chinatown was marked by a dark period of history.

The ports and mining belt towns in mid-19th century British Malaya were, to a significant extent, the creation of Chinese immigrants. They were early arrivals, and almost the first to enter inland districts to open tin mines (see L. K. Wong, 1965). They penetrated the forested interior as pioneers, with their own capital and resources, ran all the risks and often paying severe penalties. It was this initial push that saw the birth of the earliest settlements in the interior. They evolved into small towns to form the nuclei of a chain of towns along the tin belt. The Chinese played a multiplicity of roles to advance economic progress and well-being of the local place, often hand-in-hand with local Malay leaders. The dominance of the Chinese presence imprinted distinctive Chinese characteristics on the townscape. The Chinese were not the subject of unjust treatment by the local inhabitants or the colonial government. Instead, they had access to respectable social status and some became Kapitan China or community leader and later even as members of the Federal Council.

Ultimately, the Chinatown and MTC were the outcome of the attitudes and actions of the local societies or the colonial authority. The social conditions in North America and Australia were deeply influenced by ideas of racism. In North America, the idea of Chinese living among them was rejected. It was the white community's attempt to arbitrarily divide the territories separating them and the Chinese (Anderson, 1987). In Australia, the initial phase of its history was marked by an "immigration policy (that) was based on racism – on an assumption that to be a white-skinned European was somehow superior" (Macleay, 2011: 1). The social plight of the Chinese was similar to that of a person "lodging under someone else's roof" and at the pleasure of the host. The freedom of choice of work was limited and the display of personal initiatives minimal.

In British Malaya, the harsh physical setting was amply compensated by the availability of economic opportunities. The indigenous population was sparse and the colonial rulers adopted a *laissez faire* policy of development and the exploitation of resources to create wealth. Chinese immigrants were welcomed and enjoyed unimpeded opportunities to display their initiatives as pioneers on the resource frontier. As a result, many towns were founded and expanded with great spontaneity.

The Chinatowns of North America and Australia

Chinese immigrants arrived at the west coast of North America in the 1780s. The discovery of gold in 1848 led to a rapid increase in the Chinese. Before the gold rush, there was "fewer than fifty" Chinese in America. Among them were "a handful presented to the American public as sideshow curiosities" (Chang, 2003: 26). The gold rush induced considerable inflows of Chinese

immigrants. By 1852, more than 25,000 Chinese had arrived in California (Lai, 1998). A Chinese neighbourhood began to appear in San Francisco in the 1850s as the economic and cultural centre of the community. In 1880, it was reported that there were 21,000 Chinese in San Francisco (Tchen, 1999). The Chinese congregated and as more shops were opened the place became identified as "Chinatown." In 1980, the San Francisco Chinatown consisted of:

> "twelve blocks of exclusion Chinatown, a warren of cobbled streets and crowded wooden and brick houses, with restaurants and steaming laundries, curio shops and business house, temples and family and district associations, huddled, crowded homes, fetid rooming houses for bachelor majority, cribs for prostitutes, opium dens, headquarters of the fighting and criminal gangs and gambling halls they controlled, guarded by iron-plated doors and the police who were supposed to put them out of business. Some 22,000 or more people lived in the quarter…" (Chen, 1980: 182).

Gold mining and construction of the transcontinental railway from the 1860s to the 1880s fuelled the demand for Chinese labour. With the completion of the railroads in 1869 and increased violence against the Chinese in the West Coast, many Chinese moved to the East Coast. A few arrived in New York City and its Chinatown appeared in 1873. In 1880, the census reported 748 Chinese living in Manhattan and another 143 in Brooklyn and Newark (Tchen, 1999). By then, there were more than 100,000 Chinese in the country (Lai, 1998). Chinese migration to Canada was similarly driven by the gold rush to the Fraser River in British Columbia from 1858 and by the construction of the Pacific railway in the 1880s (Ng, 1998). In 1881, the Chinese population of Canada was 4,383 persons, rising to 9,129 in 1891, and 17,312 in 1901. In 1901, they made up a mere fraction of 0.32% of Canada's population (Ng, 1998).

British sailors first landed in Australia in 1788 (Coupe, 2002). Chinese immigrants arrived in considerable numbers after the discovery of gold in 1851 (Inglis, 1998). In Victoria, they passed through Melbourne where Chinese lodging houses first appeared in 1854. Provision stores and clan associations were soon put up to serve those in transit to the mines. By 1861, the Chinese made up almost 7% of the population in Victoria and Melbourne's Little Bourke Street became a busy Chinese quarter (Museum Victoria Australia, not dated). With the decline of gold mining, some Chinese took up vegetable farming or started grocery stores in country towns, and others sought work in the Chinese quarter in Melbourne. They worked as storekeepers, carpenters, operated laundries or helped out in restaurants, medicine shops, and import-export businesses. Religious and cultural associations soon followed and newspapers were started to serve the community.

An enduring Western image of the Chinese was their value as labourers, for which role they were welcomed but not as sojourners or neighbours. In California, Chinese immigrants were forced

to live in their own secluded neighbourhoods (Le, 2007) and Vancouver Chinatown was "a legally enforced ghetto" until the end of World War 2 (Miller, 2004). In northern Mexico in the early 20th century, the Mexicans, inspired by the belief that the Chinese in San Francisco were segregated in its Chinatown, demanded that the Chinese be confined in a separate neighbourhood (Bloch and Ortoll, 2010).

The Unwelcome Immigrant

Early Chinese immigrants in North America were perceived as targets of all that was socially and morally objectionable and ethnically intolerable or unacceptable. These perceptions were fueled by sections of the mainstream society which held stereotyped images of the Chinese. The Chinatown reflected the handling of "race relations" and the inevitable emergence of "ethnic enclaves." The Chinese were targets of hostility and discrimination and the history of Chinatowns were written in the language of racism and Western standards of morality, and enacted in three broad episodes of racial discrimination, demonisation and anti-Chinese violence.

The Chinese "have been convenient scapegoats on whom the dominant group vents its frustrations, hostilities and hatred in a crisis" (Lee, 1960). In the days when opium featured as a major item in the China trade and when Western ideologies and sense of superiority held sway, Chinese living in the midst of Western societies were barely tolerated. The Opium War (1839–1842) accentuated the negative American image of the Chinese (Miller, 1969).

In the U.S., intense anti-Chinese feelings were fuelled by the economic depression of the 1870s when the Chinese were blamed for high unemployment. It was deemed politically correct to impose restrictions on the entry of the Chinese in the form of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The law was subsequently tightened to make it difficult for the Chinese to enter. Those who had opted to stay were disqualified for citizenship (Lai, 1998). The number of Chinese fell from 107,488 in 1890 to 61,639 in 1920.

In Canada, the "Chinese question" was already a matter for state intervention in the 1880s, even though the census of 1881 showed only a total of 4,383 Chinese in the country. The Chinese were allowed limited participation in political life, access to state land, and employment in public works. With the completion of the trans-Canadian railway in 1885, the federal government imposed a head tax of C$50 on the Chinese, raised to C$100 in 1900 and C$500 in 1903. Between 1886 and 1923, 82,000 Chinese entered Canada but many left eventually. Canada passed its own Exclusion Act in 1923 which was repealed in 1947 (Seagrave, 1996). In 1931, the Chinese population peaked at 46,519 and it was not until 30 years later that the number rose to 58,197. The Chinese never exceeded 1% of the total population until 1981 (Anderson, 1987; Ng, 1998).

Gold was discovered in Australia in 1851 but legislation to restrict Chinese immigration was introduced as early as 1855 in Victoria. This was followed by South Australia in 1857, New South

Wales in 1861, Queensland in 1877 and West Australia in 1886. Although the law was soon repealed by a couple of states, new laws to restrict Chinese economic participation was introduced in Victoria and New South Wales in 1896. The various states were formed into a federation in 1901. Among the reasons for federation was that of control over Chinese and other non-European immigration. One of the first enactments of the federal parliament was the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, at a time when there was less than one Chinese out of a hundred in the total population. Thus was born the White Australia Policy that was based on the practice of racism (Inglis, 1998; Macleay, 2011).

Demonisation of the Chinese added to the discrimination of the host societies. The mass media, magazines, government reports and hearings, films and others were mobilised to paint negative images of Chinatowns. The racist depictions "have much more to do with the agendas of the framers of these representations than they do with the residents of Chinatown" (K. S. Wong, 1995). The Chinese and Chinatowns were seen in the images of the host communities. The purpose was to serve the larger socio-political "battles" that made up the anti-Chinese movement. Chinatown was painted as unacceptable and foreign while the white communities were portrayed as clean, without odour, safe, and Christian, qualities that were lacking in Chinatowns (K. S. Wong, 1995).

To superior-minded officials and observers, the Chinatown was much more than a physical place. It carried moral, social and cultural connotations of all that was negative and repulsive to the host society. In Vancouver, the Royal Commission of 1885 described Chinatown as a place "attended with evils" as it would depreciate the value of properties and their crowded living and filth would breed diseases. Chinatown was likened to "an ulcer lodged like a piece of wood in the tissues of the human body" (*Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration*, 1885, quoted by Anderson, 1987: 10). Another Royal Commission in 1902 described the Chinese as unhygienic and a "menace to health." As they lived "without home life, schools or churches, and so nearly approaching a servile class," their effect on Canadian society was morally and socially bad (quoted by Anderson, 1987: 1).

In New York, the negative perceptions of Chinatown were formed "in the shadows of Victorian New York." Chinatown was not created by the clannishness of the Chinese but was "established in the crucible of racism" that had denied the possibilities of cross-cultural understanding (Tchen, 1999: 294). Before New York's Chinatown had even appeared, there was already a level of hostility towards the Chinese that amounted to the rejection of "others." By the 1880s, the young Chinatown was already seen as "the most wretched haunt occupied by human beings in the New World," a scene of "misery, and, alas, of crime" and "a terrible neighborhood" that the police had to be careful at night. The Chinese were also "inveterate gamblers" and prone to "stupefying themselves by smoking opium." City neighbourhoods and their residents were ranked according to moral, cultural and socioeconomic considerations. The Chinese quarter was seen to represent all that was "deviant and contrary to the dominant cultural idea." The Chinese were evil and "flourished, like the rat, in

all that was opposed to and subversive to Western civilization" (Tchen, 1999: 278).

In Australia, among the sources that campaigned against the Chinese with cartoons magazines such as *Boomerang, Sydney Punch, or Melbourne Punch* in the 1880s. These cartoons, displayed in the Chinese Museum of Melbourne, that depicted the Chinese as someone who should pay the poll tax; an "unsightly" person who should be got rid of; a "rogue elephant" which was "a danger and nuisance to all mankind"; a carrier of small pox; a man likened to a "hybrid Chinese goat" and; if they were to enter from America, they would be a "Yellow Gulf Stream…(that) threatened to overflow Australia."

Violence against the Chinese was common. In America, Chinese gold mine workers were robbed by white gangs. The few who ventured into fishing had their boats burnt by the whites. Whites vented their anger on the Chinese during the recession of the 1880s. Some set fire to Chinatowns and some Chinese were killed or burned alive on bonfires (Seagrave, 1996). In Mexico an anti-Chinese movement was stirred in the copper mining town of Cananea in northern Sorona in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Anti-Chinese feelings were also linked to rising Mexican nationalism and their desire to create a racially unified nation. During the 1911 Revolution, 300 Chinese were killed in one city and by 1916 Chinese immigration to Sonora was banned (Bloch and Ortoll, 2010).

In Australia, "organised riots" broke out in different gold fields over water rights and claims in Victoria and two other states. The Chinese protested by legal means, petitioned the government, forming associations to voice their concerns, wrote letters to the newspapers or went on strike (Chinese Museum of Melbourne, 2015).

The Malayan Chinese Towns

The Chinese were trading along the coasts of Malaya and Borneo well before the arrival of the British (Logan, 1855; Chang, 1954). Chinese settlers in Malacca and later in Penang and Singapore inter-married with the locals and their descendants became known as *Peranakan* (Shellabear, 1913). "By the beginning of the seventeenth century," Malacca already had a "Campon China" or Chinese village (Sandhu, 1961: 5). Small numbers of Chinese were living in Penang and Singapore when the British took control in 1786 and 1819 respectively (黃尧/Wong Yao, 1967; Song, 1984).

The Malay States were sparsely populated with indigenous communities scattered along rivers and inland valleys. In 1826, the maritime centres of Penang, Singapore, and Malacca became the Straits Settlements. In 1812, Penang was already a thriving port with a mixed population of 9,854 Malays, 7,558 Chinese and 7,133 Indians (Wright and Reid, 1912; Purcell, 1947). The population of Singapore rose to 5,000 just four months after it was founded and many were local-born Chinese from Malacca (Song, 1984). By 1850, there were 27,988 Chinese in Singapore, 10,608 in Malacca, 15,457 in Penang and 8,731 in Province Wellesley (Logan, 1855).

The British were gradually extending their control over the Malay Peninsula and in 1895 merged the states of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang into the Federated Malay States (FMS) (Kennedy, 1993). The colonial provision of law and order enabled Malays, Chinese, and other ethnic communities to work and live in peaceful co-existence. The British found Malaya rich in resources but its climate like "a perpetual Turkish bath." The environment was unhealthy for permanent settlement as the clearing of forests would "cause a great deal of sickness and a high death rate" (Swettenham, 1929: 232).[2]

Large-scale inflows of Chinese were triggered by the tin rush in the Malay States from the 1850s.[3] The indigenous, Chinese and other ethnic groups gave rise to a multi-ethnic society in which each group played the role of its choice. Ethnicity was not a "burden" or an excuse to justify discrimination by one group against another. Instead, the different communities lived in their respective localities according to their own customs, beliefs, and cultural practices and coming into contact for purposeful social, commercial or official functions. There was a sense of "unity in diversity" and it was this reality that constituted the guiding principle of national integration after independence (see McGee, 1963) .

In Singapore, although an area south of the Singapore River was designated in about 1828 for the Chinese was often referred to as "Chinatown," it was just one neighbourhood in a predominantly Chinese town (Knapp, 2010). In 1901, "despite the Europeans' political and social dominance…. (Singapore) was in all other respects a Chinese city" (McGee, 1967: 72).[4] The Straits merchants recognised the immense potentials of the Malay States for mining and agriculture. Early commercial ventures in the interior of the Peninsula were connected with these merchants. In due course, the flows of goods, capital and labour developed an economic nexus between the ports and hinterlands.

Tin mining laid the foundations of Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh in the 1850s and 1880s respectively. The founding of Kuala Lumpur, which became the capital of FMS in 1896, was inseparable from the pioneering efforts of Yap Ah Loy. The town had started on the south bank of the Klang River near the old central market and where Yap Ah Loy built his house in the 1870s and also a tapioca mill (see Middlebrook, 1951). It was in this locality which has since become known as *Ci Chang Jie* (茨厂街or *Chee Chong Gai* in Cantonese dialect). The early wooden dwellings and shophouses were destroyed by a fire and floods in 1881. Yap Ah Loy rallied his followers to rebuild the town and to restore the economy. His contributions earned him praise and respect from the British who acknowledged him as the "leading spirit in Selangor, his energy and enterprise extraordinary" (Middlebrook, 1951).

Within the central business quarter was a street called Klyne (Indian) Street laid out in 1883 and occupied by the Indian Chettiar or money-lending caste. A Malay settlement called Kampong Bharu was established in 1899 to enable the Malays to retain an economic stake in the town and to add to the multi-ethnic element of Kuala Lumpur (Middlebrook & Gullick, 1989). Apart from these ethnic-based land uses was a veneer of the colonial structures. The colonial presence dominated the

north bank of the Klang River to provide a counterbalance to the Chinese town on the opposite bank on which was sited the imposing Secretariat Building and the Court House to symbolise colonial authority. Just across the road was the obligatory "*padang*" or open space for sports and recreation (such as cricket) and the indispensable Club House to cater to the needs of the colonial and European elites. Immediately behind were the army barracks and police headquarters on a hilltop as reminders of colonial power and authority. Farther along the road was the central railway station and the Majestic Hotel for elite travellers. Behind this layout was a large swarth of land known as the Lake Gardens and the official quarters of the British Resident and senior administrators, professionals and their families.

The growth of Kuala Lumpur and other large cities was characterised by multi-nucleic development centres that enable businesses to expand into a number of sub-centres. The idea of Chinese businesses being confined to a single neighbourhood and surrounded by businesses of other communities in the "Chinese town" has never come to pass. The expansion of the town outwards to the neighbourhoods of Pudu, Batu Road (now known as Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman), Ipoh Road, Sungai Besi, Setapak, Batu, and several other precincts was spontaneous. By 1911, Kuala Lumpur had a population 46,567 inhabitants (Pountney, 1911).

Tin mining catapulted Ipoh to the forefront of the new towns. In 1882, it was only a village of about 200 Malays and a small number of other ethnicities. By 1888, it ranked as one of the two largest towns in the Kinta district (Ho, 2009). By 1911, its population of 23,354 persons had enabled it to overtake Taiping, the state capital (Pountney, 1911).

The Pioneering Spirit

The genesis of towns was the outcome of the spontaneous pioneering efforts of the people particularly the Chinese. Enabling this was the free and open environment that was positive to private enterprise, and later re-affirmed by a laissez faire policy of the British.

The origins of Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh followed a model that was "Malayan" in nature. It was a process of construction fuelled by the tireless energies of Chinese entrepreneurs and labourers, on land that was frequently owned by local Malay chiefs, and completed by essential colonial infrastructures. There were much economic, political and social relations between the Chinese and Malays in the initial stages. It was only years later that the British appeared on the scene to institutionalise these relations on a more formal footing. In the major towns, Europeans started commercial firms to engage in import and export trade, banking, legal services, hotels, and specialised services such as agency houses and tin smelting. But the majority of the shophouses were built and owned by the Chinese.

A few prominent Chinese merchants or *towkays* would live in imposing private residencies just outside the larger towns. These are still evident in the old-established cities of Penang and

Singapore, as in several major cities in Southeast Asia (see Knapp, 2010). In Kuala Lumpur, palatial mansions were built by leading miners and planters such as Loke Yew, Chan Weng, Cheong Yoke Choy and Chua Cheng Bok; and Leong Fee, Eu Tong Seng, Chung Thye Phin and others in Ipoh (Ho, 2009). These houses were complete with the indispensable well under an open air-well and an internal layout according to *fengshui* or geomantic principles. Some of these buildings, especially in Penang, have been preserved as heritage sites.

The development of towns was most conspicuous in the tin belt. In 1911, seven of the eight towns with 5,000 to 50,000 persons were found here. Besides, there were another 73 towns and villages with 1,000 to 5,000 persons each in the FMS (Vlieland, 1932). The growth of these towns led to increased specialisation of labour, employment opportunities and settlement on a permanent basis.

These towns featured a common sight consisting of neat rows of shophouses. These elongated shophouses were double-storey structures combining the functions of business on the ground-floor and dwellings above. Before the availability of piped-water supply, these shophouses possessed their own well to provide permanent water supply. Each row of shops had its covered veranda or "five-foot-way" that afforded shade and shelter to pedestrians. This architectural style was well-adapted to the humid tropics. It was later introduced into Guangzhou by wealthy Nanyang merchants (see杨宏烈/Yang Hong Lei, 2010).

The inland towns were characterised by lines of shophouses in Chinese architectural style. In the state capitals, the British put up stately structures to house the state administration, the courts of law, the railway stations and official quarters to give a layer of colonial façade to the towns. In Kuala Lumpur, a Malay kampong was sited in a reserved area. Malay presence in commerce was generally inconspicuous and tentative. The distinctive Chinese character of the towns has remained until today (Gullick, 1955).

The Chinese were instrumental in creating new employment avenues to diversify the economy. In 1911, 63% of the FMS workforce in commerce and transport, 12% of government employees, and half of the workforce in the "professions" were Chinese. With more than 50,000 engaged in the "informal" sector, they made up two-thirds of its workforce (Pountney, 1911).

The maritime and inland towns had substantial Chinese populations. Mining and associated activities provided the economic base for the spontaneous growth of local towns from a few hundred to several thousand people each. In 33 out of the 42 large and small towns in 1901, the Chinese comprised half or more of the population, and more than two-thirds in 19 of them (Table 1). Although this majority has declined today, their distinctive Chinese characteristics have persisted.

Table 1
The Population of Towns with more than 500 Persons in the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States, 1901

Towns	Chinese Population	Total Population	%
Singapore (1891)	121,908	184,554	66.1
Penang (1891)	87,920	235,618	51.9
Malacca (1891)	18,161	92,170	19.7
Kuala Lumpur	23,181	32,381	70.6
Ipoh	9,067	12,791	70.9
Taiping	7,972	13,331	59.8
Kampar	5,056	5,907	85.6
Serendah	4,564	5,358	85.2
Rawang	3,639	4,015	90.6
Sungei Besi	3,576	3,756	95.2
Menglembu	3,105	3,193	97.2
Lahat	2,397	2,530	94.7
Seremban	2,379	4,765	49.9
Papan	2,211	2,441	90.6
Gopeng	1,983	3,157	62.8
Klang	1,976	3,576	55.3
Kuala Kubu	1,851	2,643	70.0
Batu Gajah	1,700	3,261	52.1
Teluk Anson	1,618	3,134	51.6
Kajang	1,167	1,999	58.4
Mantin	934	1,068	87.5
Tapah	897	2,244	40.0
Titi	883	928	95.2
Port Dickson	765	1,388	55.1
Kamunting	706	728	97.0
Bagan Serai	652	1,942	33.6
Parit Buntar	630	1,566	40.2
Rasa	652	775	84.1
Temoh (Chenderiang)	572	806	71.0
Kuala Pilah	570	3,206	17.8
Kuala Kangsar	514	1,157	44.4
Sepang	500	566	88.3

Sources: 1891 statistics are based on Merewether, 1892: 1, 10, 47, 96, 135.
1901 statistics are based on Hare, 1902: 67.

Chinese immigrants were accepted as legitimate residents and workers by the indigenous and colonial authorities from the day of their arrival. Their role and contributions to the advancement of Malaya were abundantly acknowledged and appreciated by all including Sir Frank Swettenham.[5]

As early pioneers, the Chinese fulfilled three essential roles of development: they were often the first to enter the undeveloped interior, the early pioneers in opening up tin mines, and the force behind the development process. The founding of towns was the outcome of the contributions of countless individuals playing different roles as entrepreneurs, builders, shopkeepers and traders, suppliers of urban services, community leaders, workers, and settlers and residents. The Chinese were welcome as agents of development. Never was there any policy that was deliberately enacted to interfere negatively with their economic activities. Instead, under the of laissez faire policy of the British, the Chinese were free to display their initiatives and enterprise to pursue wealth on a spontaneous basis. The colonial government made "advances to enterprising Chinese miners and agriculturists of all classes." All these advances were repaid without fail (Swettenham, 1929: 239). While the Chinese were "the first real miners in the country," the process of opening a mine often involved the service of the Malay *Pawang* or diviner to ascertain the presence or otherwise of tin deposits (Swettenham, 1929).

The ports and the towns in the tin mining belt were the direct outcome of the free pioneering spirit of Chinese miners and entrepreneurs. Mining centres were curved out of virgin forests and transformed into rich production zones that saw the birth of Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Taiping and other towns. Other towns emerged in the smaller mining centres stretching from north Perak to Negeri Sembilan. The origins of these towns were driven by economic factors unimpeded by official or local interference.

Epilogue

The Chinatowns and MCTs evolved into separate urban forms of unmistakable Chinese characteristics. Beyond their "Chineseness," they were marked by historical, social and cultural differences. From the background and formation of the early Chinatowns and MCTs, one may filter out the key features or attributes that characteristised their development (Table 2).

Table 2
Key Attributes in the Formation of Chinatowns and Malayan Chinese Towns of the Mid-19th Century

Attributes	Chinatowns	"Chinese Towns"
Distribution	• Europe, Americas, Australia, Japan, parts of Southeast Asia	• Malaysia, Singapore and parts of Southeast Asia

Location	• Selected quarters of existing cities in Western societies	• New towns or urban centres in the pioneer zones of the Malay Peninsula and selected parts of Southeast Asia
Time of arrival of Chinese immigrants	• Late-arriving immigrants to areas with established European societies • Forced to live in their own secluded neighbourhood or in "legally enforced ghettos"	• Among the first to arrive and entered into sparsely or unsettled areas • Pioneers on the development frontiers
Urban forms and architectural styles	• "Chinatown" as an official or generally- accepted label • Enclave, spatially confined to specific clusters of shops • Severely impeded expansion • European and local style business premises • Rare or absence of private Chinese residences	• Known as a town or township, also generally recognised as colonial towns • Shophouses for living and conducting business • Common five-foot ways linking rows of shophouses • Spontaneous spread from a point of origin or single cluster of shophouses to multiple clusters sprawling over one or more neighbourhoods • Private houses and mansions on outskirts of towns • Presence of colonial and multiethnic land-uses
Population of Chinese community	• Tiny minority of the total population of towns or countries	• More than half to an overwhelming majority of the total population of towns with distinctive Chinese characteristics
Economic role	• Source of cheap labour • Self-employed, largely confined to working as cooks, ttailors, barbers, and other low-paying jobs.	• "Mainstream" and dominant economic players and the driving force of development • Major sources of labour and capital • Pioneers and entrepreneurial pacesetters • Middlemen, entrepreneurs, contractors, investors and creators of employment • Risk takers when Europeans "feared the risk" • Major contractors of Government projects • Major contributor to government revenue and to economic diversification

Social status	• target of humiliation • Marginalised and segregated • Subjected to immigration restriction • Subjected to discrimination, demonisation, sometimes to violent treatment	• Internal community governance • Community leaders appointed as Kapitan China or members of the Federal Council • Respectable social status with access to the colonial authority and Malay leadership • The courts of justice "treated alike…all classes and nationalities."

The collective memories of the inhabitants of the Chinatowns and MTCs were associated with unique sets of histories and experiences. Chinatown Chinese encountered a dark history living as a marginalised society under the shadow of discrimination and hostility. The MCT stood as a proud symbol of Chinese partnership with the colonial state under its *laissez faire* policy and often in co-operation with other ethnic groups to transform the tropical jungles into productive landscapes. They were to play significant roles in the subsequent process of nation building and governance. That present-day Chinatowns are thriving urban quarters does not erase the history and memory of the past. The Chinatown model was not unique but replicated in other forms of such as Filipinotowns, Nihonmachi (Japantowns), Little Indias, Koreatowns, and Little Saigons especially in America (Johnson, 2007). Yet none of these would be replicated in their countries of origin.

The Chinatown and MCT are entities that are organising concepts relevant to research into the history, culture and identity of Chinese communities overseas. The Chinese and what the term stands for in the historical context are too diverse and too large to be captured by the concept of the Western-type "Chinatown." It will be self-defeating to label any part of the "Chinese town" as "Chinatown," even though the enticement of the tourist dollar or other agendas might be too tempting to be overlooked.

Chinatowns were created by host societies through the latter's socially and institutionally imposed exclusion rules. The concept is a tool of the mainstream society to subjugate Chinese immigrants, for economic and social oppression through restrictions on living space, livelihood, and human rights infringements, verbal and print vilification, and physical violence. It was a mental construct by which host societies differentiated the Chinatown residents as "outsiders," undesirable aliens who lived in their midst (Anderson, 1987; K. S. Wong, 1995).

The Chinatown is easy to visualise but not easy to define. A convincing definition is still lacking. Current attempts to define the Chinatown tend to convey a romantic sense of what Chinatown ought to be rather than what it really is. A source attributes the Chinatowns of Southeast Asia of the early colonial era with the presence of brothels, gambling houses and opium dens (Suryadinata and Ang, 2009).[6] In truth, these were not special to the "Chinatowns" but were common in all the towns where Chinese were found in substantial numbers. Other definitions tend to provide a list of features

associated with the Chinatown.[7] A comprehensive definition of the early Chinatowns of North America and Australia will have to include the outwardly visible as well as less obvious features. Physically, the Chinatown was an enclave beyond which Chinese presence and culture were largely absent, and where the Chinese engaged in a narrow range of business and cultural activities. Less obvious were the fact that the Chinese were late arrivals and who formed a minuscule portion of the city population in which the White community was the mainstream society. The Chinese were marginalised socially and economically, discriminated against, demonised and frequently subjected to violent treatment. Their social and economic status was low and upward mobility was limited. None of these features were found in the towns of early Malaya.

The MCT was the outcome of a different trajectory of development primarily determined by Chinese enterprise. The key ingredient of Chinese contributions to the development of Malaya were many and diverse and all were duly acknowledged by none other than the senior colonial administrator such as Sir Frank Swettenham. In an honest appraisal of the Chinese, he concluded that they were hard-working, law-abiding, energetic and enterprising. They provided the labour when this was absolutely an essential ingredient to open the limitless expanses of the country. They contributed the necessary enterprise and risk-taking spirit as well as the capital when the Europeans were reluctant and uncertain of the returns. Being pragmatic, the Chinese invested their labour to transform the land by starting businesses and promoting trade, founding towns and creating new enterprises which in turn diversified the economy and generated employment. They undertook contract work to construct government buildings and infrastructure projects. Through their efforts, consumption and taxes, they yielded "nine-tenths of government revenue" to finance development and the government payroll (Swettenham, 1929: 239).

The branding of specific streets or quarters of towns seems to be an attempt to "commodify" a romantic idea to "revitalize and enhance the Chinatown experience. The only rationale for doing so is clearly to draw in tourists and their dollars" (Suryadinata and Ang, 2009: 118). The main purpose of rebranding Petaling Street of Kuala Lumpur as "Chinatown" is to enhance its touristic appeal (Ding, 2023). The concept itself does not match the historical reality of Chinese contributions as depicted by Swettenham.

The name "*Chee Chong Gai*" is not the only place name that is of historical value to the collective memory of the Chinese community. Officially, this street has always been known as Petaling Street. There are several other Chinese place names in Kuala Lumpur that are still in use by the Chinese today. These are *Banshanba* (半山芭 – half-forested, a reflection of the ongoing process of jungle clearing), Brickfields as *Shiwu Bei* (十五碑 - 15th milestone), or Setapak as *Wenlianggang* (文良港). There are other Chinese place names that are used exclusively the local Chinese communities. The town of Seremban is still known to the Chinese as *Furong* (芙蓉 - cotton rose hibiscus *Hibiscus mutabilis*) as a throwback to the days when the district was known as Sungai

Ujong. These place names bear an endearing ring to Chinese memory.[8]

Some tend to see the "Chinatown" not in the context of Western usage but often as a convenient and general term to describe the dense Chinese quarters of the larger towns. Both the terms "Chinatowns" and "Chinese towns" are found but not defined in the literature on Southeast Asia. "Chinatown" is used to indicate the overcrowded downtown Chinese quarters, in what is Chee Cheong Kai of Kuala Lumpur. Other Chinese quarters identified by McGee were Pudu and Sg Besi (McGee, 1963: 184).

In Singapore, Raffles in 1822 appointed a committee to mark out quarters for different ethnic groups. There was a "European Town", Arab and Bugis zones, Malay village (kampong), Indian village and Chinese quarter (Hodder, 1953). Hodder uses "Chinatown" to describe the two areas with high Chinese densities identified as "Chinese Kampong" (1953: 30).

The branding of Petaling Street in Kuala Lumpur as "Chinatown" raises more questions than answers. Historically, it had developed as an integral part of Kuala Lumpur. It is almost impossible to identify the features along this street that could remind one of "Chinatown" or to distinguish this street as distinctly different from the streets in its neighbourhood. More inexplicably, one may wonder why "Chinatowns" are absent in the older towns of Malacca and Penang or the newer ones such as Ipoh, Taiping and others along the tin belt.

The history of the Chinese in British Malaya was of a different order from that in North America and Australia. To identify a "Chinatown" in the midst of local towns now will raise certain adverse implications. The first is the transplantation of an image that does not exist in local history. Another and more serious implication is the risk of ignoring the underlying circumstances and the larger historical significance surrounding the origins of MCTs. The "creation" of the Chinatown in a locality where they had never existed before would tend to distort the history of the Chinese community and their contributions to the development of the country.

Ironically, while the idea of the Chinatown gains acceptance in some quarters, the number of Chinatowns in America is rapidly declining as the Chinese begin to move out to live dispersed among other ethnic groups. There were 28 Chinatowns in the U.S. in 19]40, 16 in 1955 and only three of any size in the 1970s, namely, San Francisco, New York, and Boston (Chen, 1980).

The modern Chinatowns of the West and their residents constitute integral parts of the cities where they are found, and the towns of Malaysia are no longer as distinctly Chinese as before, but the "collective memory" of the past remains unchanged. This "collective memory" is more relevant today as it is part of the historical heritage of the Chinese.

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Notes

1 Among the general accounts on the Chinese in America include those by Lee (1960); Kung (1962); Sung (1967); Miller, (1969); B. P. Wong (1979); Chen (1980); Yuan (1988); Kinkead (1991); Zhou (1992); Chang (2003); Tsui (2009).

2 Hill stations were built in the colonial territories of Southeast Asia in the 19th century as periodical retreats for colonial officers. In Malaya, hill stations were established at Fraser's Hill, Maxwell Hill, and Cameron Highlands to serve as sanatoria and for the recreation and relaxation of the colonial and business elites (Voon & Khoo, 1980).

3 The discovery of gold in West Borneo in the 1770s had attracted Chinese immigrants (see Jackson, 1970). The Chinese were mining gold in Pulai in the state of Kelantan, Malaya "before the beginning of the tin rush" (see Middlebrook, 1933).

4 In other parts of Southeast Asia such as Siam (now known as Thailand), early Bangkok was a city that was characteristically "Chinese." Its population grew to 401,300 in 1828 with 360,000 Chinese. The Chinese were merchants, skilled tradesmen, labourers, fishermen, and farmers and were dominant among boatbuilders, blacksmiths, tinsmiths, tailors, leatherworkers and shoemakers (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1995). By the 1860s, "practically the entire industry of Siam had passed into Chinese hands" (Skinner, 1957). By the early 20th century, Bangkok was "an overwhelmingly Chinese city with large numbers of recent immigrants" (Knapp, 2010). In Indonesia, the town of Singkawang of West Kalimantan, and the main towns in Bangka and Billiton islands, all associated with former gold and tin mining activities, had substantial Chinese populations of more than 50% in 1930 (Tai, 2014).

5 Sir Frank Swettenham (1850−1946) was the British Resident of Selangor in 1882 and of Perak in 1895. In 1896, he was appointed the first Resident-General of the Federated Malay States comprising Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang were formed. In 1901, he was made High Commissioner for the Malay States and Governor of the Straits Settlements.

6 In Malaya, the colonial authorities monopolised the opium trade in 1910 and opium was widely available to Chinese consumers in the towns. Opium was effectively a "consumption tax" on the Chinese at a time when the income tax was non-existent (Wright and Reid, 1912). In 1879 when the revenue of the Straits Settlements was between $1 and $2 million per year, one-half to two-thirds was contributed by opium (Weld, 1884). Between 1898 and 1922, this share hovered between 40% and 60%. In 1920, opium revenue reached a peak of $19.5 million, an amount

that was more than the total annual revenue of the Straits Settlements up to the 1910s (Li, 1982).

7 In the website Chinatownology, the Chinatown is described as:
- an area in which many ethnic Chinese lived or work.
- with symbols that include the archway, stone Lions, icons of dragons and phoenix, restaurants, pavilions, temples and monasteries, and clan associations.
- a piece of China in the host country and at times associated with crime or disorder.
- the public space to celebrate Chinese festivals like the Chinese New Year.
- a major attraction for domestic and international tourists.
- a site to understand the relationship between the Chinese and the local society.

(http://www.chinatownology.com/Chinatown.html)

8 Other examples include the towns of Taiping (太平- Supreme Peace, to commemorate the restoration of peace after the inter-faction war among the miners and the signing of the Pangkor Treaty in 1874) and Yong Peng (永平 - Perpetual Peace) which have since their beginning been officially known by their Chinese names. In many towns too, certain roads were named after Chinese pioneers. In Kuala Lumpur, roads were named after Yap Ah Loy, Loke Yew, Yap Kuan Seng and other early pioneers. The three main streets of Bentong in Pahang still carry the names of the pioneers Loke Yew, San Peng and Chui Yin.

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