5

COLONIAL RULE AND “CATEGORY”

Policing in Colonial Singapore

Takeshi Onimaru

5.1 Introduction

Since its founding in 1819, British Malaya and the Straits Settlements, including Singapore, were colonies that had developed through the labor of mostly Chinese immigrants accepted into the territories as workers. In Singapore, people of Chinese descent accounted for over half of its population from the middle of the nineteenth century. This was because Singapore was a frontier city that was premised on the presence of immigrants and formed one of the important intersections in the flow of Chinese immigrants across the Pacific Rim region. Because of this demographic and social reality, Singapore’s colonial government and law and order enforcement found it necessary to treat Chinese immigrants and residents of Chinese descent as an important target group to bring under their rule. As the number of Chinese immigrants grew, some turned to crime or joined what Westerners called “secret societies” to cause disturbances in the streets or organized political and labor movements to mount strikes and anti-British and anti-colonialist campaigns. Identifying these “troublemakers” as a threat to their control and economic advancement in British Malaya, of which Singapore formed a part, the colonial authority devised a system of policing these people and containing such disturbances. How did the colonial government in Singapore implement this system?

In order to answer this question, this chapter examines how Chineseness itself came to be labeled as “problematic” and how “the Chinese” became “racialized” as a distinct group with inherent characteristics as their “secret societies,” and communist activities became the target of surveillance by the British colonial administration. In doing so, it elucidates the formation of “categories” with which the colonial ruler tried to screen out and clamp down upon such immigrants in this highly mobile frontier island city.
Categories of “race” and “ethnicity” were only introduced during the colonial period in Southeast Asia. As Benedict Anderson and Takashi Shiraishi point out, in the colonial states of Southeast Asia, the “ethnic” categories used in the census were initially insubstantial, but these “ethnic” categories became gradually “substantial” from the later nineteenth century through to the early twentieth century, as a consequence of the imposition of colonial rules and regulations on places of residence, education, and customs which were implemented on these “ethnic” categories (Anderson 2006; Shiraishi 2000). As this process of substantialization went on, group-based discrimination could be seen in the Southeast Asian region, and it was the population categorized as “the Chinese” who were targeted the most. They were labeled with terms such as “outsiders,” “troublemakers,” “communists,” and “Jews of the Orient.” Some of these labels are still utilized when anti-Chinese sentiments become heightened in post-independent Southeast Asia.

In Singapore, like many other societies in Southeast Asia, “race” as a concept introduced from the West is linked with differences in observable physical appearances between groups, whereas the term “ethnic group” is preferred to designate groups whose phenotypical differences are not immediately perceived. However, this chapter employs the concept of racialization, as defined in the Introduction of this volume, as the process of differentiation and discrimination on the basis of people’s belief in “inheritable” characteristics, whether phenotypically visible or invisible. From this perspective, it will shed light on a colonial, modern development of the category of “the Chinese” in Singapore as the target of law-and-order enforcement by paying attention to the process of visibilization of inherent characteristics of “the Chinese.”

5.2 Colonial Singapore and the Chinese

Singapore was founded in 1819 by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, an officer of the British East India Company, and was added to the Straits Settlements along with Penang and Malacca in 1826. In 1832, Singapore became the administrative center of the Straits Settlements, which had been ruled by the British East India Company and then the government of British India before becoming a Crown Colony under the direct control of the British Colonial Office in 1867.

Since its founding, Singapore had always been expected to function as a British trading post in the Southeast Asian region (Turnbull 1989: 20). Singapore was designated as a “Free Port” with no customs or trade-related impositions, and its trade steadily grew, as shown in Table 5.1. From the 1820s, it thrived as Southeast Asia’s intraregional trade hub as it expanded commerce with its major trading partners in the region (Kobayashi 2013; Wong 1991).

Singapore is a city-state situated off the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula and on the southeastern end of the Straits of Malacca—a vital waterway connecting South and East Asia. Today it has become one of the financial and economic centers of Asia and Southeast Asia. Singapore is a multicultural, multilingual,
Colonial Rule and “Category”

and multiethnic society. English, Standard Chinese (Mandarin), Malay, and Tamil are Singapore’s official languages.

According to the *Yearbook of Statistics Singapore 2018*, published by the Singapore Department of Statistics, the total population of the country at the end of 2017 was approximately 5.6 million, of which 3.43 million were citizens, 0.52 million were permanent residents, and the remaining 1.64 million were temporary residents in Singapore for work or other purposes. The combined 3.95 million citizens and permanent residents comprised 2.94 million Chinese (75 percent), 0.53 million Malays (13 percent), 0.35 million Indians (9 percent), and 0.12 million people of other ethnicities (3 percent) (Singapore Department of Statistics 2018).

While the cultural and linguistic diversity is palpable in the range of people and languages one encounters in the streets, it is evident from the data that the Chinese form the dominant group in the multiethnic state. They came to comprise a majority of the country’s population when Singapore was part of the British Straits Settlements in the mid-nineteenth century (Table 5.2). The large presence of the Chinese traces its history back to the mid-nineteenth century, as Singapore was also a major transfer point for Chinese immigrants to Southeast Asia.

### TABLE 5.1 Trade in Singapore (1824–1938) ($ million)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Imports</th>
<th>Exports</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1824</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1833</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1843</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1853</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1863</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>55.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1873</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>89.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883</td>
<td>79.2</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>147.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>124.0</td>
<td>108.5</td>
<td>232.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>299.3</td>
<td>257.7</td>
<td>557.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>349.7</td>
<td>272.4</td>
<td>622.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>573.0</td>
<td>402.7</td>
<td>975.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>261.7</td>
<td>251.1</td>
<td>512.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>369.6</td>
<td>320.2</td>
<td>689.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Wong (1991: 51).*

### TABLE 5.2 The Population of Singapore in the Nineteenth Century

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Ratio of Chinese (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1824</td>
<td>10,683</td>
<td>3,317</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1834</td>
<td>26,329</td>
<td>10,767</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1849</td>
<td>52,891</td>
<td>27,988</td>
<td>52.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>81,734</td>
<td>50,043</td>
<td>61.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>97,111</td>
<td>54,572</td>
<td>56.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>139,208</td>
<td>86,766</td>
<td>62.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>141,300</td>
<td>100,446</td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Makepeace et al. (1991: 355–359).*
Asia. Immigrants from South China arrived in Singapore and journeyed on to the Malay Peninsula or the Dutch East Indies in search of livelihoods. The number of immigrants from South China to Southeast Asia increased due to the rising demand for a workforce to support the development of the tin mining industry in the Malay Peninsula from the 1850s and the deregulation of migration from China under the 1860 Convention of Peking (Yong 1994: 2). Southeast Asia was not the only region that experienced a rise in the number of Chinese immigrants during this period. As Takeshi Hamashita points out, the abolition of the African slave trade in the middle of the nineteenth century led to the expansion of demand for Chinese and Indian immigrants in Southeast Asia, Africa, and America (Hamashita 2013: 277). For Chinese immigrants, however, Southeast Asia was the primary destination because colonization by Britain, the Netherlands, and France had turned Hong Kong, Singapore, Batavia, and Saigon into major destinations and transit points for migration (Hamashita 2013: 277–279). In other words, the influx of Chinese immigrants into Southeast Asia was the main source of the expansion of Chinese migration to the Pacific Rim region, including the Americas, and Singapore was the colony that played an extremely important role in this current.

The population of Singapore continued to grow along with its commercial expansion, dramatically increasing from an estimated 1,000 at its founding in 1819 (Gillis 2005: 15) to over 10,000 in 1824. By 1891, the population of Singapore exceeded 140,000. Chinese immigrants from mainland China drove this population growth. They had become the largest ethnic group in Singapore by 1827 and continued to proliferate partly because the Straits Settlements actively promoted the intake of Chinese immigrants as a workforce for further development of the colony (Shiraishi 2000: 62–63; Turnbull 1989: 36). The presence of Chinese immigrants was thus integral to the development of the frontier colony of Singapore.

The population growth of Singapore over a short period of seventy-odd years was rapid. While a majority came from mainland China, Singapore was a frontier city inhabited by immigrants from all corners of the Southeast and South Asian regions. How did Britain, its colonial ruler, try to classify and govern these immigrants? How did Chinese residents live, and what kind of communities did they form?

Two Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) stations, Bugis MRT station and Chinatown station, can be found in present-day Singapore. Bugis station, named after the group of people who lived in the southwestern part of Indonesia’s Sulawesi Island and became active in the Southeast Asian maritime world from the fifteenth century (Tachimoto 2008: 377–378), is situated on the left (northern) bank of the Singapore River past the current City Hall, which used to be the administrative center of colonial Singapore. Chinatown station is located on the right (southern) bank of the river. The reason behind the locations of these two MRT stations stems from the city planning devised by Raffles and others at the founding of Singapore in the early nineteenth century.
Raffles planned the new city by segregating residential communities on the basis of “ethnic” categories such as European, Chinese, Malay, Arab, and Bugis. In his plan, government offices, churches, and the military post were first established on the left bank of the Singapore River, and the European residential district was placed next to this center, followed by the Arab and Malay Sultan communities. The Bugis settlement was constructed further away from the center. On the right bank of the river, the commercial district was established near the river mouth, and a community of South Indian immigrants called Chulia was settled a little further up the river, while the Chinese town was built a short distance away from the river (Shiraishi 2000: 95–98; Turnbull 1989: 12).

As Shiraishi points out, these all-encompassing ethnic categories, including the “Chinese” category, did not correspond to reality at the time (Shiraishi 2000: 93–94). The Chinese immigrant community in colonial Singapore was divided into five subgroups on the basis of their place of origin and topolects, namely, Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, and Hainanese. Almost ninety percent of the Chinese residents in Singapore were new immigrants, called “newcomers” (xin ke), and relied on connections based on their hometown, topolect, and kin relationship when seeking work and protection. Such care and protection were provided by organizations called kongsi, hoey, and huidang (Lee 1991: 23–24; Shinozaki 2017: 102; Shiraishi 1975: 77; Turnbull 1989: 52–53).

These were multifaceted organizations that functioned as business entities that operated plantations and tin mines, mutual-help associations that assisted immigrants in looking for work or housing, protected immigrants in dire circumstances, and organized funerals and repatriation of remains and crime syndicates involved in labor management, the transportation and management of immigrants, protection racketeering with opium dens, brothels and gambling houses, and violence used to resolve organizational or financial conflicts (Lee 1991: 30; Shinozaki 2017: 57, 102; Shiraishi 1975: 78–80, 82–83).

The Chinese community in colonial Singapore was also economically stratified. As mentioned earlier, a great majority of Chinese residents were impoverished immigrants who engaged in physical labor with the top echelon in this community occupied by a small number of wealthy merchants and industrialists. They made their fortune through Southeast Asian regional trade and retail business operations, management of or investment in plantations and tin mining, and tax farming to collect taxes on opium and spirits under contract with the colonial government. Some of them had been living in Southeast Asia well before the foundation of Singapore, married locally, and built their economic bases there. Because of their wealth, they were called “headmen” (taukeh) and respected within the Chinese community, where they acted as community leaders (Shiraishi 1975: 77–78; Turnbull 1989: 13–14; Yong 1994: 3–4).

These Chinese community leaders were deeply involved in the organizations kongsi, hoey, and huidang. They were managers of, or investors in, plantations and tin mines, but the actual operation of these businesses was conducted by the said organizations. These organizations played a significant role in tax
farming and also in the prevention of smuggling, maintenance of distribution networks, and sale of opium and alcohol to coolies. The *taukeh* even mobilized the members for violence within these organizations in order to protect their own economic interests (Lee 1991: 28–29; Shiraishi 1975: 78–80).

In short, the Chinese community in colonial Singapore, especially in the nineteenth century, was not a monolithic group that converged under the ethnic category of “Chinese”; it was divided into the Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, and Hainanese subgroups based on topolect grouping and stratified with headmen in the upper echelon and a large number of new immigrants in the lower tier. *Kongsi*, *hoey*, and *huidang* played a significant role in this community but were described as “secret societies” by the colonial administrators.

### 5.3 Secret Societies and Colonial Rule until 1867

In the nineteenth century, “secret societies” was the primary category used as almost equivalent to the Chinese “ethnic” category. In the early twentieth century, it shifted to political movements, especially the communist movement. The colonial rulers identified both secret societies and communist movements as troublemakers and targeted the Chinese.

The *kongsi*, *hoey*, and *huidang* organizations were accessible institutions for Chinese residents and not at all secret and hidden. In times of trouble, new immigrants sought help from these organizations rather than turning to government agencies (Lee 1991: 30). Given this fact, why did authorities call them “secret societies”?

The answer to this question largely lies in the fact that the colonial administration did not have any officers who understood the Chinese language and its topolects. Many of these organizations had memberships of young single men bound by oaths of brotherhood (Shiraishi 1975: 80; Trocki 1990: 3). It is not surprising that government officials regarded these organizations as “secret societies” because they had no idea about the rites and discussions of these organizations.

Another reason was their frequent use of violence. The violent aspect of *huidang* soon became apparent after the founding of Singapore. For instance, it was noted in *The Story of Abdullah*, which recorded the early days of colonial Singapore, that the *huidang* organization Tian Di Hui had established its base in the inland jungle from which its members mounted raids on surrounding towns (Abudurrā 1980: 2–6). These organizations played a central role as the apparatus for violence in the 1854 clan war between the Hokkiens and the Teochews and the frequent Hokkien-Teochew clan wars that erupted between 1871 and 1873 (Lee 1991: 35–39).

These organizations even used violence against the colonial government when it attempted to impose regulations on the Chinese community or moved to infringe upon its economic interests. In October 1872, a riot broke out in opposition to the Contagious Diseases Ordinance to regulate brothels for the purpose of controlling venereal diseases and in response to regulations on street vendors. In 1876, a riot and a shopkeepers’ strike took place against the establishment of
the Chinese Post Office, which was set to take the money remittance service for Chinese residents out of the hands of the mostly Teochew operators and place it under government control. In both cases, huidang members were mobilized and led the riots (Lee 1991: 38–43; Shiraishi 1975: 79).

From the viewpoint of the Singaporean government and resident Europeans, organizations such as kongsi, hoey, and huidang were regarded as secret societies due to their “secrecy” and “violence,” even though they were common and offered accessible services to Chinese residents. So, what measures did the Straits Settlements administration take to deal with the secret societies which posed a significant threat to law and order enforcement in Singapore?

Little was done to control secret societies while Singapore was under the jurisdiction of the British East India Company or British India. For example, in 1843, residents, including the Chinese, held a public meeting demanding that the government enact a law to suppress secret societies. The administrators drafted an ordinance in response, but it was rejected by the Bengal office of the British East India Company. Another ordinance, modeled on one already in operation in Hong Kong, was drafted in 1854 to establish a registry of residents, give the governor-general the power of deportation, require secret societies to register, and appoint headmen as officials in charge of maintaining public order. Once again, this attempt was unsuccessful due to opposition from British India. In both cases, legal control was not implemented based on the argument that the problem should be solved by expanding police forces (Blythe 1969: 63–67, 80–82; Shinozaki 2017: 56–57).

However, the police were unable to adequately control the situation. The colonial government did not recruit Chinese inhabitants into the police force in fear of infiltration by secret societies. Consequently, police officers could not exert sufficient control as none of them spoke the Chinese language and topolects. Moreover, the power of the police was limited to the urban area until around the 1860s, and the inland headquarters of secret societies were largely untouched. Even though the police force did not recruit Chinese police officers, it was infiltrated by secret societies. For example, the interpreters hired by the police to assist in their inquiries often turned out to be members of secret societies (Blythe 1969: 2–3; Jarman 1998: Vol. 1: 208, 464; Lee 1991: 35).

Since there was no law to regulate secret societies and the police force was ineffective in controlling them, the only way for the colonial government to deal with the disturbances was to seek cooperation from the headmen who presided over the Chinese community or to suppress them by the use of military force.

Gaining the headmen’s cooperation was essential not only to exert a measure of control over secret societies but also to achieve effective governance of the Chinese community. The colonial officers referred to some headmen as “respectable Chinese” those able to speak English, those who had their economic bases in Singapore or the rest of Southeast Asia, or those who had trade and commercial relationships with Europeans—and made use of their influence in governing the Chinese community by giving them official positions such
as Justice of the Peace (JP). The colonial state relied on its powers over secret societies to resolve problems when secret societies engaged in disorderly conduct (Shiraishi 1975: 76–79; Yong 1994: 13–14, 293–294).

When a violent confrontation between the Hokkiens and the Teochews broke out in 1854, for instance, Superintendent of Police Thomas Dunman declared that the police did not have the capacity to deal with the situation and called for military intervention. The administration asked Teochew headman Seah Eu-chin and Hokkien headman Tan Kim-seng for their cooperation in bringing the situation under control. In the disturbance of 1857, the authorities were assisted by Hoo Ah-kay of the Cantonese and Tan Kim-ching of the Hokkien in restoring order (Lee 1991: 35–37; Yong 1994: 13–14).

Another reason behind the colonial administration’s continued tolerance of the existence of the secret societies was the important role they played in tax farming, especially for opium and spirits. Kongsi, hoey, and huidang carried out the work of controlling smugglers and protecting distribution networks that were needed to secure tax farming revenues. The consumers of opium and spirits were coolies, especially the Chinese immigrant laborers who worked on inland plantations. And the business operation, labor management, and sale of opium and spirits to the workers were controlled by secret societies. The colonial government had no choice but to rely on secret societies while the inland part of Singapore was covered in dense jungle with no road access, as it was difficult to send in officials to collect taxes directly from the inland plantations (Song 1967: 34; Trocki 1990: 48, 70, 77; Wong 1991: 54; Yen 1986: 115, 122).

In Singapore, the secret societies enjoyed the status of imperium in imperio because the police were unable to control them effectively due to a prolonged absence of laws to regulate them and because the colonial government was forced to rely on them for tax collection even though they were recognized as a threat to law and order (Shiraishi 1975).

5.4 Illegalizing Secret Societies

The situation started to change in the late 1860s after the control of Singapore was transferred from British India to the Colonial Office, making it part of a British Crown Colony in 1867 that included Penang and Malacca.

In 1867, an ordinance was enacted to give the Governor of Singapore the power to deport anyone who threatened law and order in the colony upon declaration of a state of emergency. Two years later, in 1869, another ordinance was passed for the purpose of regulating the secret societies by making registration and notification of meetings compulsory for organizations with ten or more members and enabling justices of the peace or police officers to attend such meetings. This ordinance also decreed that secret societies were obligated to pay for any damage caused in clan wars. These ordinances were initially passed as temporary measures to be in force for a single year, but in 1872 they were made permanent (Blythe 1969: 151–152; Jarman 1998: Vol. 2: 141; Lee 1991: 57–60).
The above two ordinances used deportation and registration as means to exert control over secret societies. The threat of deportation turned out to be effective in this regard. For the leaders of secret societies, expulsion from the colony meant a loss of their personal wealth, prestige, and power base, and, moreover, deportation to mainland China might lead to death by beheading (Shiraishi 1975: 87; Turnbull 1989: 88).

From 1871 to 1873, Singapore was frequently beset by clan wars and anti-government riots. In particular, the clan war between the Hokkiens and the Teochews that broke out in December 1872 was the most violent since the Hokkien–Teochew conflict of 1854 and prompted the Straits Settlements administration to proclaim a state of emergency. This state of emergency was not lifted until 1885 (Blythe 1969: 155–156, 198; Jarman 1998 Vol. 2: 137; Lee 1991: 35–41; Yen 1986: 197), and the Chinese Post Office Riot of 1876 erupted during this period.

The Chinese Post Office Riot was mainly led by Teochew merchants involved in the remittance business who saw the opening of a Chinese Sub–Post Office by the government as an infringement of their vested rights. During the riot, Singapore was paralyzed entirely for four days as the Sub–Post Office was burned down and shopkeepers went on strike. The government initially asked local headmen to help quell the disturbance and requested that the shopkeepers end their strike, but to no effect. It was rumored that Tan Seng-poh, a Teochew headman, had aligned himself with the authorities in suppressing Chinese residents. In light of the headmen’s failure, the colonial administration adopted a strategy of isolating the Teochew merchants and secret-society leaders who had been in detention since the onset of the riot by keeping them on a ship off the coast of the island. This approach proved effective, and the town regained calm that night. After the riot was quelled, the colonial administration expelled the leaders of the secret societies from Singapore. The government’s resolute actions in this situation had a significant bearing on the subsequent development of countermeasures against secret societies (Blythe 1969: 202; Lee 1991: 43–46; Shiraishi 1975: 86).

In this way, the anti-secret societies policy of the Straits Settlements administration changed from non-intervention to aggressive control and policing after 1867. What was the reason behind this policy shift?

The placement of the Straits Settlements under the rule of the Colonial Office in 1867 was undoubtedly a factor behind this policy turnaround. In addition, a shift in Singapore’s socio-economic condition and a change in the nature of secret societies were essential elements.

Let us consider socio-economic change first. The number of inland plantations began to fall from the second half of the 1860s due to soil degradation. A government report in 1868 states that a majority of Singapore’s pepper and gambier plantations were being abandoned due to soil degradation and relocated to Johor on the other side of the Johor Strait (Jarman 1998: Vol. 1: 36). Secondly, access to the inland part of Singapore had improved. The clearing of the jungle by the development of plantations and the expansion of road networks improved transport to the island’s outskirts and inland areas. As a result, the government
was able to collect land taxes outside of the city and reported an increase in land-tax revenues during the 1870s. These changes began to reduce the level of the government’s dependence on the tax farming carried out by secret societies. The improved access to the outskirts and the inland also promoted urbanization and made administrative control easier than before (Jarman 1998: Vol. 2: 106; Trocki 1990: 149; Wong 1991: 53).

Further, there was a change in the nature of secret societies. In the aftermath of the suppression of the Taiping Rebellion in mainland China, many outlaws and criminals were driven out of the country and migrated to Singapore and the rest of Southeast Asia from around 1870. These were professional combatants called “samseng” who had been trained in martial arts. When they joined secret societies, the level of violence escalated, and even the Chinese community leaders were unable to control them (Lee 1991: 34–35, 42; Trocki 1990: 159–160).

It is reasonable to conclude that the colonial government changed its policy toward secret societies because these socio-economic shifts reduced its tax collection dependence on them and made it difficult to exert indirect control through community headmen on the increasingly violent and criminal organizations.

The next anti-secret society measure adopted by the Straits Settlements government was the establishment of the Chinese Protectorate in 1877, designed to take over the tasks of managing Chinese immigrants and protecting them from secret societies. The first Protector of Chinese was William A. Pickering.

Pickering had learned to speak Mandarin, Hokkien, Hakka, Teochew, and Cantonese while working in the Chinese Maritime Customs Service in mainland China from 1862 to 1871. He began to work at the Straits Settlements government in 1871 as a translator. Pickering was the first European official in the colony who was fluent in the Chinese language and its topolects and conducted research into secret societies and immigration issues even before he was appointed Protector (Blythe 1969: 157–158; Shinozaki 2017: 105; Turnbull 1989: 85).

As the Protector of Chinese, Pickering was tasked with managing and checking the employment contracts of Chinese immigrants to ensure that their interests were protected as well as administering the re-registration of secret societies. The latter task was undertaken in cooperation with Samuel Dunlop, Inspector-General of Police, from 1877 and involved identifying the local leaders of each secret society and the registration of its members. The re-registration process was completed ten years later in 1887 (Blythe 1969: 205–207; Lee 1991: 71, 75–80; Shinozaki 2017: 105–106; Shiraishi 1975: 86).

The Protector’s work was significant in two respects. One was to make newcomers to Singapore understand that they should rely on the government rather than secret societies. The other was to establish a system to keep secret societies under the control of the Chinese Protectorate using means such as deportation and the re-registration process through which secret societies became more “visible” (Shinozaki 2017: 10; Shiraishi 1975: 86).

In line with the strengthening of control over secret societies by the Chinese Protectorate and the police, legal regulations were also tightened. In 1882, the
law was amended to ban any secret society with British nationals or naturalized British subjects among its membership and to enable the government to declare a secret society illegal if it was considered dangerous. This amendment was introduced because the deportation of British citizens was not possible under the earlier deportation ordinance of 1867. In 1885, the government was given the power to expel people without the proclamation of a state of emergency (Blythe 1969: 213; Lee 1991: 97).

From the 1880s, a new system was set up under which cadet officers who specialized in Chinese affairs in the colony were sent to Amoy, Swatow, or Canton to learn Hokkien, Teochew, or Cantonese. The police force was also strengthened in terms of human resources and organizational upgrades. A police training school was opened in 1881, a criminal investigation section was created in 1884, and a number of Sikh and European ex-army officers were employed as inspectors and constables (Turnbull 1989: 84, 88).

The final step in the anti-secret societies policy of the Straits Settlements government was the passing of an ordinance in 1889 to make secret societies illegal and the implementation of complete prohibition upon the enforcement of the ordinance on January 1, 1890. However, this was not what the Protector of Chinese had wanted.

Before he was appointed as Protector of Chinese, Pickering had been in favor of the immediate outlawing of secret societies. In 1878, after his appointment, however, Pickering expressed the view that secret societies should be utilized in managing the Chinese community. He claimed that it was difficult to control the Chinese community through the rule of law and that it would be easier to do so using the framework of the secret societies because they were deeply rooted in the community. He developed an understanding of the role secret societies played in the Chinese community and became acquainted with their leaders through his work as the Protector of Chinese and through the re-registration of secret societies. In order to control the Chinese community through the secret societies and eventually integrate it into the rule of law, Pickering planned to persuade the leaders of secret societies to see the benefits of siding with the colonial government. For this reason, he considered it dangerous to expeditiously disempower secret societies and hence strip them of their ability to control the Chinese community (Shiraishi 1975: 8; Lee 1991: 92–98).

Nevertheless, the move toward prohibition gathered momentum after a secret society’s failed assassination attempt on Pickering in July 1887 and further accelerated upon the appointment of Cecil C. Smith as the Governor of the Straits Settlements in October that year.

Smith began his career in colonial administration in Hong Kong in 1862. He specialized in dealing with Chinese residents in Hong Kong and adopted a rather heavy-handed approach toward them. When the Colonial Secretary of Hong Kong retired in 1878, John Pope Hennessy, the Governor, refused to appoint Smith to the position. Smith instead assumed the office of Colonial Secretary in the Straits Settlements and, after a posting in Ceylon in 1885,
returned to the Straits Settlements as its Governor (Holdsworth and Munn 2012: 398–399; Lee 1991: 151).

In 1888, Smith drafted a bill to prohibit secret societies completely. This move was opposed by Pickering and Dunlop, who feared that the government would lose the means to monitor and control the vast number of Chinese immigrant workers managed by secret societies with the supervision of the Chinese Protectorate’s registration system if it implemented a complete ban without establishing an alternative body to take over the function these organizations performed in the Chinese community. Despite their opposition, Smith tabled the bill in the Legislative Council and secured its passage with some alterations in 1889. The ordinance was promulgated on January 1, 1990, and the complete prohibition of secret societies became a reality (Blythe 1969: 233; Lee 1991: 135–144, 150; Straits Settlements Government 1898: 1106–1111).

Along with the outlawing of secret societies, Smith set up the Chinese Advisory Board. It comprised the Protector of Chinese and seventeen representatives from the Chinese community—six from the Hokkiens, five from the Teochews, and two each from the Cantonese, Hakka, and Hainanese—and was responsible for providing advice on various issues and legislative proceedings in relation to the Chinese community in response to requests from the colonial administration. As advocated by Pickering and Dunlop, this body was intended to take over the function of secret societies and constituted the first step in the move to govern the Chinese community by the rule of law rather than via secret societies through cooperation between the colonial administration and Chinese community leaders (Lee 1991: 150; Shiraishi 1975: 93).

The complete prohibition of secret societies did not mean that they were eradicated. However, it marked the end of the frequent occurrence of large-scale disturbances led by secret societies that had vexed the Straits Settlements administration until 1890 (Turnbull 1989: 89).

5.5 Policing Communist Movement

After the problem of the secret society was settled at the end of the nineteenth century, another threat emerged to jeopardize public order in the colony. This new threat to stability emerged in the form of political movements that upheld such goals as reforming political frameworks and achieving liberation from colonial rule. A wave of political movements was experienced across Asia from the end of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, including the Philippine Revolution seeking independence from Spain in 1898, a series of uprisings in China led by Sun Yat-sen and others from the end of the nineteenth century, the Dong Du Movement in French Indochina at the start of the twentieth century, and the Swadeshi Movement in British India. These political movements became the targets of policing and suppression as they posed a major threat to the establishment.
In colonial Singapore, around the turn of the twentieth century, the Straits Settlements government was concerned about several political movements: the Chinese nationalist movement, the Indian nationalist movement, and the communist movement.

The nationalist movement had been gathering momentum among Singapore’s Chinese inhabitants in step with political shifts in mainland China since the opening of a diplomatic mission in Singapore by the Qing Dynasty in 1877. More specifically, the colonial government targeted political movements concerning their financial support for the late Qing reforms and Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionist movement against the Qing Dynasty, the activities of the Kuomintang (KMT) in Singapore, and the rest of British Malaya after the 1911 Xinhai Revolution and the proclamation of the Republic of China (Lee 1991: 203–249; Onimaru 2014: 124).

The government increased its vigilance against the nationalist movement among the Indian inhabitants in response to the Singapore Mutiny staged by Punjabi Muslim soldiers of the 5th Light Infantry on February 15, 1915, during World War I. The event sparked the strengthening of Singapore’s intelligence gathering systems as the rebellion was suspected to originate in a conspiracy devised by the Ghadar Party based in the Ottoman Empire and on the West Coast of the US to help Indian independence with support from hostile Germany. After this incident, Singapore was on high alert for Ghadar Party activities and the influences of the nationalist movement in British India on its Indian residents (Comber 2009: 530–536; Onimaru 2014: 124; Popplewell 1995: 258–262).

As for the communist movement, communism was first introduced to British Malaya by Chinese anarchists around the time of World War II. In 1921 after the war, agents from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s organizations in Shanghai and Guangdong and Chinese communists who immigrated in search of jobs as teachers and editors began to organize students and workers by creating communist cells at night schools spreading propaganda through classes and magazines. Another wave of communists arrived from Shanghai, Guangdong, and Hainan from 1925 to 1926 and set up the Nanyang Communist Youth League, the Nanyang General Labor Union, and the Nanyang Regional Committee of the Communist Party of China (Yong 1997a: 9–10, 17–28, 41–44, 53–54, 62–63, 67, 69, 71–72).

The dissolution of the First United Front between the KMT and the CCP and the launch of the White Terror by Chiang Kai-shek in 1927, together with the failure of the Guangzhou Uprising in December the same year, prompted many communists to flee mainland China to the Southeast Asian region. They became the leaders of the communist movement in British Malaya from mid-1929. The Malayan Communist Party was formed in 1930, and the Nanyang General Labor Union was re-formed as the Malayan General Labor Union in the same year. From then on, the communist movement in British Malaya was to evolve under the guidance of these two organizations (Yong 1997a: 68, 85–86, 91, 101, 113–114, 121, 130–131, 156).
The Straits Settlements government attempted to deal with these political movements by setting up the Political Intelligence Bureau. In 1919, the Criminal Intelligence Department was established within the Straits Settlements police force to handle political movements. The establishment of the political intelligence apparatus realized that Singapore’s intelligence gathering capacity needed to be improved following the aforementioned Mutiny of the 5th Light Infantry in 1915 (Onimaru 2014: 118–120). From the end of the nineteenth century, both the Indian nationalist movement and the Chinese nationalist movement remained major targets of the Political Intelligence Bureau into the 1920s to 1930s. However, at the top of its list during this period was the communist movement.

The reason for the raising of the highest level of alarm against the communist movement was primarily due to its potential to spread beyond ethnic boundaries. By their very nature, the Chinese and Indian nationalist movements waged within their respective ethnic groups calling for their independence, whereas the communist movement was meant to cross ethnic lines for the liberation of the proletariat. However, the communist movement in British Malaya during the interwar period was dominated mainly by Chinese communists. Attempts to go beyond ethnic divisions were made, albeit to a limited extent, when members of the Communist Party of Indonesia from the Dutch East Indies tried to indoctrinate Malays into communism in the 1920s, and in the early 1930s, there were reportedly around 1,000 Malay and Indian communists (Cheah 1992: 8–12; Hara 2001: 23).

The development of the communist movement beyond ethnic categories was under the directive of the Third International (the Comintern), whose presence was a second reason for the Political Intelligence Bureau’s high level of alertness toward the communist movement. The Comintern was formed in Moscow in 1919 to support communist campaigns across the world to achieve a world revolution. It also advocated liberation from colonial rule as part of its endeavor. The Comintern set up liaison offices in different parts of the world from which it dispatched agents to provide instructions and finance to various communist movements (Onimaru 2014: 30–31, 36–37).

In other words, if authorities wanted to counteract the communist movement in Singapore and the rest of British Malaya, they needed to take a three-pronged approach—suppressing the movement itself that was largely driven by Singapore-based Chinese communists, preventing its spread beyond ethnic boundaries and clamping down on Comintern agents who exerted influence on the local movement from outside of the territory.

Intelligence gathering was the first weapon in the Political Intelligence Bureau’s armory against not only the communist movement but also all political movements. The main sources of intelligence it used included informers, spies, and postal surveillance (Onimaru 2014: 123–128). The gathered information was used to identify movements’ members and operational bases, leading to raids on their hideouts and the arrest and imprisonment or deportation of activists. The process of intelligence gathering, detention, and deportation were precisely the
same as the countermeasures used against secret societies by the colonial administration in the nineteenth century.

The first countermeasure against the activities of Singapore-based Chinese communists involved the closure of the night schools used by the activists and the suppression of their publications. A crackdown was implemented during two periods, from 1922 to 1923 and from 1926 to 1927, resulting in the arrest and deportation of the leaders and the closure of many night schools. Next came the suppression of communist organizations such as the Malayan Communist Party and the Malayan General Labor Union. In the Straits Settlements alone, 1,704 people were arrested between 1932 and 1935 for their alleged involvement in communism. The number of communists who were exiled from the colony over the six years from 1930 to 1935 reached 882 (Yong 1997a: 33, 36, 57, 74–75, 169).

Secondly, the countermeasure against the spread of the movement out of the Chinese community was implemented mainly through the arrest and deportation of the activists of the Communist Party of Indonesia from the Dutch East Indies and the arrest of Malay communist leaders. The activity of Malay communists subsided after 1929 due to the rigorous crackdowns, the limited effort made by Chinese communists to overcome language barriers, and the indifference of Malay inhabitants toward the movement itself (Cheah 1992: 6–12; Hara 2001: 19–23; Yong 1997a: 139). However, the Straits Settlements government did not lower its guard against the spread of the movement. In 1930, a standing committee was set up to share intelligence on the political movements of all ethnic groups in British Malaya as well as to examine the influence of the political activities of Chinese inhabitants, especially their communist movement, over the “subversive” activities of other ethnic communities in the territory (Yong 1997b: 135).

The Political Intelligence Bureau made the political movements in the British Malayan territory “visible” by using intelligence obtained from informers and spies to clamp down on their activities. Its greatest success on this front was the recruitment of a spy named Lai Teck. He joined the Central Executive Committee of the Malayan Communist Party in 1936 and became the party’s Secretary-General in 1939 (Akashi 1994: 63–64; Yong 1997a: 145, 169, 194). For the Political Intelligence Bureau, this source of intelligence at the center of the movement rendered it “visible” and no longer a threat.

The final point in this matter is that the colonial authorities needed to institute measures to stop the infiltration of Comintern agents into British Malaya. The Straits Settlements’ Political Intelligence Bureau regularly exchanged intelligence with its counterpart in the British Empire, British diplomatic missions overseas, and relevant departments in French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies to keep a close watch on agents’ movements. One of the outcomes of that effort happened in June 1931 when a French agent, who had been sent by the Far Eastern Bureau of Comintern in Shanghai, was arrested in Singapore. Information obtained through this arrest led to the detention of Nguyen Ai
Quoc⁴ in Hong Kong as well as the arrest of the agent in charge of international liaison at the Far Eastern Bureau in Shanghai. From a dossier seized during these arrests, it was discovered that the Comintern had planned to use Singapore as the liaison point in Southeast Asia and was taking steps to strengthen its partnership with the communist movement in British India (Onimaru 2014).

The colonial authorities were able to make the series of arrests in 1931 only because they had shared intelligence on the French agent obtained in France and Shanghai and spread a dragnet on this basis. It was extremely difficult to catch agents on the move in the absence of accumulated and shared intelligence. In 1934, the Straits Settlements Police Special Branch received information that an agent from Comintern’s Far Eastern Bureau in Shanghai had arrived in Singapore on board a train from Bangkok. The effort made by the Special Branch to identify this agent while he was in Singapore was unsuccessful, and he subsequently departed for the Dutch East Indies (Straits Settlements Policce 1934: No. 4, 6, 10, 11).

Although there were limitations on policing agents on the move, the communist movement in the Straits Settlements during the interwar period was well controlled. There were no incidents reminiscent of the series of armed revolts driven by the Communist Party of Indonesia in the Dutch East Indies from 1926 to 1927 or those that formed the liberated zones in French Indochina in the early 1930s. Policing the communist movement was inherently difficult because it was impossible to judge whether people were communists or not by their outward appearance. For this reason, policing was carried out by drawing links between the communist movement and more concrete and specific organizations such as night schools, labor unions, the communist party, and the Comintern. In doing so, the Political Intelligence Bureau utilized informants and spies as lenses through which to make the movement more “visible.”

5.6 Conclusion

The following statement was made in the memoir of René Onraet, who played a significant part in policing the political movements in British Malaya as the Chief of the Criminal Intelligence Department of the Straits Settlements Police during the interwar period.

From the very outset, subversive activities in Malaya were due to outside influences. There was no irritant within Malaya to give rise to such a reaction. There was no organisation within Malaya which was capable of producing such clever, political propaganda. All of it came from China.

Onraet 1947: 109

As expressed in Onraet’s statement, the view of Chinese immigrants as the root of the problem or as outsiders reflected the challenge that faced the colonial government in Singapore from the nineteenth century onward of how to control the Chinese immigrants and residents—in other words, how to identify and regulate
the troublemakers among them. However, the reality of colonial rule cannot be understood by this simple schematization alone.

To begin with, categories such as “secret societies” and “the communist movement” were applied to “invisible” targets of law and order enforcement whose inner workings were not easily apprehensible by the government. On the frontline of policing these “invisible” targets, however, efforts were made to make these organizations “visible” through meticulous intelligence gathering. As a result, it became apparent that secret societies were not simply violent gangs but that they performed various functions in the Chinese community and that their members were not limited to new immigrants. This realization led the colonial government to establish new agencies to take over the role played by these organizations in the Chinese community—such as the Chinese Protectorate and the Chinese Advisory Board—and to outlaw secret societies simultaneously.

As to the communist movement, the Political Intelligence Bureau knew that those involved were not limited to Chinese communists but were from various ethnic backgrounds, such as Malayan Communist Party members from the Dutch East Indies and Comintern agents. The Political Intelligence Bureau used informants and spies to identify those with connections to communist parties, labor unions, and the Comintern and implemented countermeasures such as arrest and deportation.

In short, the frontline personnel in the colonial government made continuous efforts to make “secrecies” of the Chinese community “visible” and identify targets that had been causing trouble, monitor them closely, and understand them before taking countermeasures. However, as the aforementioned remark by Onraet suggests, if the targets of law and order enforcement were associated exclusively with particular ethnic categories, finer points of difference and circumstances that were perceived on the ground level would be ignored, and only the simplified logic of “Chinese immigrants/residents were the root of the problem” would be perpetuated. This was the very process of racialization of “the Chinese” by which invisible but inherent characteristics of the target group were made visible and substantialized. The categorized population of the Chinese as a whole became the target of control, suppression, and discrimination.

Further, the argument in this chapter may be relevant to the question of racial representations of the Ainu people as a mode of domination in the development of Hokkaido from the Meiji era onward discussed by Hirano in Chapter 2. Colonial rule by making “invisible” targets “visible” in order to control them, as discussed in this chapter, can be regarded as one of the historical origins of the modes of “control” that uses biometric and individual authentication systems to identify and control “individuals” in contemporary India as discussed by Tanabe in Chapter 6.

Notes

1 An earlier version of this chapter was translated by the Transpacific Press.
2 “Clan war” refers to an armed conflict between different topolect groups or societies over clashing interests.
3 A similar system had already been introduced in Hong Kong in 1862 (Onimaru 2003: 515).
4 The pseudonym of Ho Chi Minh, who later became the first President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

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