

Historical Data on Kuala Lumpur

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Abstrak: Bagi mereka yang berminat pada sejarah Kuala Lumpur, sumber terbaik untuk maklumat, tetapi yang tidak digunakan dengan sepenuhnya, ialah akhbar-akhbar tempatan. Sebelum 1896, di samping *Straits Times* dan *Singapore Free Press* yang menyiarkan berita-berita mengenai Kuala Lumpur, pengetahuan mengenai perkembangannya juga boleh didapati dalam sumber-sumber utama yang lain seperti *Selangor Journal* dan dokumen-dokumen rasmi kerajaan. Beberapa buah kajian mengenai tempoh ini yang telah diterbitkan juga adalah amat teliti dalam liputannya. Akan tetapi, tempoh selepas 1896 telah diabaikan dalam penyelidikan. Akhbar-akhbar masih merupakan sumber utama bagi maklumat, khususnya akhbar *Malay Mail*. Sebagai sebuah akhbar yang berpusat di Kuala Lumpur, ia menerbitkan berita-berita harian, peristiwa-peristiwa penting, kenang-kenangan dan surat-surat daripada pembaca — semuanya perkara-perkara yang mempunyai kepentingan sejarah.

Abstract: For those interested in the history of Kuala Lumpur, the best source of information and one that has been overlooked, is the newspapers. Before 1896, besides the *Straits Times* and the *Singapore Free Press* which contained accounts of Kuala Lumpur, information concerning its development could also be obtained from other major sources like the *Selangor Journal* and official government documents. Several studies that have been published are excellent in their coverage of this period. But the post-1896 period has been neglected in research. Newspapers are still the major sources of information, particularly the *Malay Mail*. Being a Kuala Lumpur newspaper, it contained daily news, records of important events, reminiscences and letters from the public concerning Kuala Lumpur — all matters of historical significance.

It is probably not widely known that Victor Purcell, famous author of *The Chinese in Malaya* and *The Chinese in Southeast Asia*, wrote, in 1939, a lengthy article on Kuala Lumpur, published in three parts in the *Malay Mail* of June-July. The first article dealt with Kuala Lumpur in the late 1890s and the next two focused on 'the Edwardian era'. His data was derived, as Purcell himself explained, 'from many old minute papers, newspaper files, annual reports, and books in general'. But the document that seemed to Purcell 'to epitomize the age [the 1890s] is a volume of the *Selangor Journal* for 1896-97'.

The *Selangor Journal* which commenced publication in 1892 does contain valuable information on Kuala Lumpur in the 1890s, and also, occasionally, the earlier years. But, since it ceased publication by 1897, the historian in search of material on 20th century Kuala Lumpur must turn to other sources. The *Selangor Annual Reports* and the State Secretariat files are no doubt valuable sources but it is difficult to obtain a rounded perception of Kuala Lumpur through sources which are at best general and, more usually, fragmentary.

The best sources for any study of Kuala Lumpur history are undoubtedly the newspapers. For the period before the appearance of the *Selangor Journal*, the *Straits Times* (Singapore) and the *Singapore Free Press* both help to fill in the gaps. However, news of the Malay States appeared only periodically in the Singapore and Penang newspapers and often only very briefly. The more lengthy reports were usually extracts from the *Annual Reports*. The following is an example. It appeared in the *Straits Times* of 25 June 1885:

... the Malay population left the country [during the Klang War], and all efforts to repopulate it have to a great extent failed. The remission of the quit rents on agricultural lands for three years from the 1st. January 1884 in the depopulated district has had the effect of considerably increasing the Malay population, who settle down on small fruit and padi plantations, and are excellent cultivators. It appears, however, that a large proportion of some 13,700 acres of land that have been taken up in the state during the year 1884 has been opened

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under the wasteful conditions of periodical "Ladang" cultivation; that is, burning the trees and planting the ground with padi, maize, bananas, and sugar-cane, and abandoning it after a year or two in favour of another tract, thus destroying the forest and yielding the country to no permanent good.

The above is found in the *Report on Selangor for 1884* which also contains the following information with regard to Kuala Lumpur:

The Chinese market gardeners are very numerous within a radius of some three miles from Kuala Lumpur, but besides these, most of the small planters are Malays from Sumatra. The few native Selangor Malays are distributed along the banks of the three rivers, and cultivate coconuts, durians, mangosteens, and other fruits.

By 1889, the *Straits Times* started to pay a little more attention to Kuala Lumpur for 'Kuala Lumpur News' became quite a regular feature in the paper. On 19 January 1889, the following appeared under 'Kuala Lumpur News':

The roads here are something awful just now. Those that have been metalled, the Rawang and Cheras roads, are like the cobbled high streets of old seaside towns in England. Driving over them is almost as bad as camel riding; and I expect to see the Arab custom adopted of tying a long scarf tightly round the chest, under the arms, to prevent the ribs being shaken to pieces.

And towards the end of the year, after the death of Kapitan Yap Ah Shak in Kuala Lumpur, the *Straits Times* (28 October 1889) commented on the subject when no new appointment had yet been made:

I hear some moaning that no Capitan China is yet elected. The fact is that the best authorities are said not to see wherein the great value of this vague functionary lies. Certain it is that by such an appointment a single Chinaman is elected to a great eminence over his fellows. Certain it is that the opportunity given to such an individual, if not too scrupulous to squeeze the pocket of every single Chinese immigrant, is obvious and tempting. It is true also that the Capitans of the past have all grown rich with celerity. What is not so clear however is the necessity and advantage of such an individual to the Government. At present all the Chinese sections stand on an equal footing from this point of view. The appointment of any given individual would probably be distasteful to some other sections of the populace other than his own. Cheow Ah Yeok, who is most popular among Europeans, is said to be unwilling to

accept the post even if offered to him. He is, however, a Pun-ti [i.e. a pure Cantonese] and does not represent or closely sympathise with the majority of the Chinese residents, very few of whom are Pun-ti [the majority of the Chinese in Kuala Lumpur then were Hakka]. It is believed that all the more influential headmen would prefer not to have another Capitan China.

But useful as the *Straits Times* is, for those who would like to study the history of Kuala Lumpur in the 1880s, it may be mentioned that the subject itself has not been hitherto neglected. J.M. Gullick's 'Kuala Lumpur, 1880-1895' (*JMBRAS*, XXVIII, Pt. 4, 1955), cannot be easily improved upon. And it is complemented by A.B. Rathborne's *Camping and Tramping in Malaya* (London, 1898) as well as Emily Sadka's *The Protected Malay States 1874-1895* (Kuala Lumpur, 1968), not forgetting S.M. Middlebrook's 'Yap Ah Loy' (*JMBRAS*, XXIV, Pt. 2, 1951, edited by J.M. Gullick).

It is the post-1896 period which has been badly neglected. Gullick himself has attempted to fill the void in more recent years. But his book entitled *The Story of Kuala Lumpur (1857-1939)*, published in 1983, is too sketchy; it is written clearly for those who require but a very general knowledge of the history of Kuala Lumpur. J.G. Butcher's *The British in Malaya 1880-1941* (Kuala Lumpur, 1979), is a more successful attempt at writing social history and although his study is 'British Malaya' he draws heavily on Kuala Lumpur for his examples. Still, he is primarily concerned with the European community in Malaya rather than the development of Kuala Lumpur.

Two geographers have contributed to the study of Kuala Lumpur (its history included). Manjit Singh Sidhu's *Kuala Lumpur and its Population* (Kuala Lumpur, 1978) is concerned with the peopling of Kuala Lumpur, beginning from the mid-nineteenth century. Lim Heng Kow's *The Evolution of the Urban System in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur, 1978) is a larger study; Kuala Lumpur is just one of a number of urban centres discussed. Although both scholars have adopted a historical perspective, neither has endeavoured to collect a larger corpus of data than that readily available.

The source most neglected by historians studying Kuala Lumpur so far is the *Malay Mail*. First published in 1896, the paper has survived through the years and, as far as it has been possible to ascertain, did not cease publication at least during the early phase of the Japanese Occupation. Apart from daily news, the paper also contained data, in various forms, of immense value to historians. In the issue of 20 April 1904, for example, there appeared a reprint of a

lengthy report by the Director of Public Works Department on the history of the Kuala Lumpur Waterworks (1888–1903). And, on 13 April 1904, the paper printed a number of documents dealing with the founding and development of the Malay Agricultural Settlement (now known as Kampong Baru) which, for the modern scholar, should usefully complement John Hands' article on the same subject which was published in *The Malayan Historical Journal* (Vol. 2, No. 2, 1955).

The *Malay Mail* also published reports of the Kuala Lumpur Sanitary Board meetings though not from the beginning as the Board was established several years before the commencement of the paper. But for historians interested in the development of local government in Kuala Lumpur, a particularly important document was printed in the *Malay Mail* of January 1905. This was a memorandum submitted to the Government by three members of the Sanitary Board – H.C. Ridges, J.H.M. Robson and Dr. E.A.O. Travers. Entitled 'Memorandum On The Future Policy Of Municipal Schemes In The Town Of Kuala Lumpur' the authors explained the purpose of the memorandum in the following manner:

The Town of Kuala Lumpur as the Capital of the Federated Malay States should continue to grow in importance with even greater strides than it has made in the past. Its development has been phenomenal, but the lines on which it has taken place have been somewhat haphazard.

There is a danger of repeating the kind of mistake that has arisen hitherto. They may be attributed generally to a want of continuity of policy, to the absence of a programme of development of a far-reaching nature, and there can be no wonder that so simple a cause has sufficed to give occasion for a word of warning at the present epoch in the history of the town, when we consider the constant change of officials. The Resident, the Board and its officers, may be said to have found their hands full from time to time with the municipal work of the year in hand, which one and another has had to relinquish without formulating a programme for the remoter future, having, as a rule, held a responsible relation to the department for a comparatively short period.

The lesson of the past is therefore the need of a programme of improvements, an outline which may be kept in view and handed on from year to year for fulfilment. We have set out in this memorandum a sketch of the progress which we think should be made in the course of the next few years. The evils for which we have tried to indicate a remedy are mainly those of

overcrowding, with the consequent higher mortality, and of dearness of living, and, without going into detail, we have made proposals which, we conceive, are suggestive of an advance in the right direction, and will, if acted upon, form a sound basis on which to found a progressive policy with a view to later schemes.

Several years later (in October 1920) the *Malay Mail* also published, in serial form, a lengthy article on 'Malaria: Its History in Kuala Lumpur'. Together, these several reports and articles throw light on the problems of municipal administration in Kuala Lumpur during its formative years. Apart from these there were also numerous brief reports and comments which were no less valuable such as the following which appeared in the *Malay Mail* of 13 July 1905:

It is now July but little visible progress has been made in carrying out the authorised Kuala Lumpur Municipal programme of new works, such as road improvement, new roads, etc. It is getting on for two years ago, we believe, since the residents and builders on Weld's Hill asked the Government to give them a good approach road from Klyne Street. The present Resident and the late Resident-General gave every help, but the matter was hung up elsewhere pending the taking over of a private road.

Writings on Kuala Lumpur have tended to ignore the outskirts and to concentrate on the town centre. This could be due to want of material but, unknown to many, the *Malay Mail*, in August 1908, published a series of fourteen articles dealing with 'fifteen townships, villages or hamlets in the Kuala Lumpur district'. Entitled 'Rural Rambles in Kuala Lumpur District' the intention was to draw the attention of the Government to the need for greater control over these places to ensure more hygienic conditions of living. A few examples may be given.

Of Kepong it was said:

Kepong, large as it is, in point of numbers, possessed no properly-constituted school, but there are two small private seminaries where a few only of the children in the place are instructed. They say that labour is too valuable in Kepong to waste any time.

The drainage and general system of sanitation in this place may be easily summed up in the word 'nil'.

Batu village, situated on the road to Rawang, was just as neglected. According to the *Malay Mail* correspondent:

The water supply in the main part of Batu over the bridge leaves something to be desired. The railway people are all right; they have a good supply on higher ground beyond the

township proper; but the bulk of the inhabitants obtain their allowances from two wells just round the corner of the Kepong road, some 300 yards away. The first of these wells is situated immediately below a piggery and on the edge of a vegetable garden, while the other, about forty yards away, has a Chinese hut just above it, with the drainage in the direction of the well.

Apart from the poor sanitary conditions prevailing in the outlying areas, the *Malay Mail* also drew attention to two general shortcomings:

One was the apparently unnecessarily large number of liquor shops i.e. places in which liquor was exposed for sale. There should be some limit based on population or number of houses. For instance, at Ampang there were 26, at Sungei Besi 15, at Kepong 15 and at Salak South 15. And as far as we know there is nothing to prevent the vendors from palming off the rankest poison on the public, if they choose to do so. The other point was the limited educational facilities offered to Chinese children (by far the largest proportion) by the State.

Perhaps some of the most interesting materials are those which represent various persons' reminiscences or memories of Kuala Lumpur. There was, for instance, an old resident (name not given) who was already in Kuala Lumpur at a time when the Selangor Club Padang did not exist. Instead, he said:

... there was to be seen a vegetable garden laid out in those ridge-like beds which now exist only outside town limits. Where the Bank now stands, there was a swamp, which, extending under the Damansara Road, also occupied the site of the present Railway Offices. Where our fine pile of Government buildings now rears its haughty head, there was then only low-lying land, chiefly occupied by dhobies, who pursued their avocations unhindered, even where Loke Yew Buildings now stand. In passing, we may mention that the late Mr. Tamboosamy then lived in a little attap hut on the side of the road leading to Skew Bridge. The Gaol, with a bamboo palisade around it, stood as a warning to all evil-doers on the spot which is now devoted to the Recreation Club.

(*Malay Mail*, 3 March 1905)

There was also 'an old colonist' from Ceylon who had arrived in Kuala Lumpur in 1886. He remembered that when he arrived 'Kuala Lumpur was a wild place altogether, and there were pirates on the river who gave no end of trouble. The Railway was just being opened out... The only tiled building in this, the chief town of Selangor, was the railway bungalow,

and no one would think of making a half-an-hour's journey inland alone if he valued his life'. (*Malay Mail*, 13 March 1906)

Pat Zilwa, of Ceylon origin and a well-known Kuala Lumpur personality, at a luncheon meeting of the Kuala Lumpur Rotary Club, recalled the period after 1907:

In those days, except for the big Government Office, Post Office, Survey Offices, Sanitary Board Offices, the P.W.D. and Railways Offices near the Chartered Bank, there were no other big buildings to speak of. Trains crossed our main arterial roads, and there were level crossings at Sultan Street, High Street, and Residency Road, which held up traffic several times each day, much to the general annoyance. Trains to Singapore ran through Foch Avenue, and those to Penang, until a few years ago, ran past the back of the Selangor Club. The Singapore train, leaving Kuala Lumpur, made its first stop at Sultan Street Station where it halted for several minutes. Here it picked up the Chinese passengers, who preferred to take the train there as it was close to their business places.

(*Malay Mail*, 30 March 1939)

J.H.M. Robson, founder of the *Malay Mail*, who died in Changi Gaol during the war, wrote frequently on Kuala Lumpur history for he had been one of the first to arrive here after British administration had been consolidated. In one instance, he wrote on Kuala Lumpur in 1889:

... I lived with the then Traffic Manager of the Railway (Mr. Snell) in the house (since much enlarged) now occupied by Major J.C.G. Spooner. This house was then partly surrounded by jungle and was very much on the outskirts of the residential quarter. There were no European residences on the Ampang Road beyond the Circular Road.

The Rest House, now an annexe to the Selangor Club, had just been opened.

There were no hotels.

The first race course was on Rifle Range Road. Only amateurs were allowed to ride.

The only European shop was Maynard's near the present Market Street Bridge. Medicine, provisions and drinks were sold there. The place was a rendezvous for Europeans.

(*Malay Mail*, 14 Aug. 1933)

No less interesting were Yong Shook Lin's reminiscences of the Victoria Institution. Yong Shook Lin (one of the founders of the legal firm of Shook Lin and Bok) was a founder member of the Malayan Chinese Association in 1949. He was a pupil at the

Victoria Institution when it was located at the High Street. At an annual reunion dinner of the old boys of the school held at the Hotel Majestic, Yong Shook Lin said:

My memory dates back to 1902 when some of the then boys sat in an ex-oil store which was used as a class room. The name of our old school may have been adopted by that secondary school on the top of Petaling Hill but the spirit of the Victoria Institution appears still to hover over those old buildings in High Street.

When I said just now that we had not forgotten our old school, I meant to couple it with the name of Mr. B.E. Shaw. It is difficult to talk about the old school and the good old days without referring to him, to his many acts of kindness and to his patience in teaching us a language entirely foreign to us

Some of you may remember that he gave us an hour every week teaching us English literature with several set books on the Senior Local Examination in his house after a good feed of biscuits and lemonade. To use the words applied to a professor of Law at Cambridge, "He made dry bones live." Whether biscuits and lemonade were good flavouring matter for Scott's *Kenilworth* and *Waverly*, it is difficult to say, but reading and studying those books in those days was a very thirsty occupation. Present masters may well take a leaf out of Mr. Shaw's unpublished book on teaching and adopt the lemonade and biscuits method if their boys find English idiomatic phrases difficult to understand.

(*Malay Mail*, 5 August 1939)

B.E. Shaw was also responsible for helping to establish the V.I. Cadet Corps, the first in the country and the teacher who was directly involved was A.C.J. Towers. In Towers' words:

I came to Kuala Lumpur in 1897 as an Assistant Master when Mr. Bennett Eyre Shaw was your headmaster. I left exactly five years later so I never knew this building on the Petaling Hill, where I tried to play golf, a game I never could get to like.

It was, I think, in the year 1898 that I started and had the honour of being the first Commanding Officer of the Cadet corps, then known as "St. Mary's Boys' Brigade", while Mr. Shaw was on leave and the Rev. Knight-Clarke was acting as headmaster.

On the return of Mr. Shaw, however, it was metamorphosed into the Victoria Institution Cadet Corps. This would be in 1899, I think . . . the V.I. Cadet Corps was the first Cadet Corps

to see the light of the day in the whole of Malaya.

(*Malay Mail*, 1 July 1939,

reporting the presentation of a band leader's mace to the Cadet Corps by A.C.J. Towers)

The *Malay Mail* being a Kuala Lumpur newspaper recorded all the important events which occurred here — the opening of schools, riots, the founding of associations and the visits of dignitaries. The introduction of electricity, for example, was commended upon, rather dramatically:

Something approaching a panic was caused last night in the vicinity of the Padang when the whole region being suddenly brilliantly illuminated. This is a land of nerves, and the worst was at once feared. Krakatoa was suggested — we always think of it on these occasions; but this was contemptuously cast aside and in favour of some wonderful theory concerning the advent of a tropical *Aurora Borealis*. The Fire Brigade and those in charge of the guns on Barrack Hill appeared to have been the only ones who took a calm view of the situation from the outset; but then the latter never do things with a rush, while the former probably stole a march on the public by being informed beforehand.

Well, the first moment of alarm and confusion over, somebody suggested that the wonderful phenomenon was due to electricity.

(*Malay Mail*, 6 October 1905)

One of the more unforgettable scenes ever witnessed by Kuala Lumpur before World War II occurred during the visit of the Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII) in late March 1922. According to the *Malay Mail* report (31 March 1922):

From the 3½ mile New Petaling Road the crowd of people from kampongs and houses along the route were lined up four or five deep right up to the junction with Brickfields Road, and from there onwards the crowds grew denser. At the Malay village just on the border of the 3½ mile, a huge and tastefully decorated arch had been erected, while hundreds of Malay boys lined each side of the road, all of them waving flags, and shouting and cheering right lustily. Several more arches lined this particular section of the route, the last and most striking one having been erected by the Malay and Indian Police.

At the gateway leading up to the European Hospital, all those patients able to walk had assembled together with a number of nurses to add their quota to the cheering.

The Federal Capital was one mass of people from all parts. The Prince received a tremen-

dous ovation all along the route of the procession. There were beautiful decorations and illuminations everywhere.

In Java Street little Miss Elizabeth Halpern ran towards the Royal car carrying a bouquet. The Prince stopped the car and accepted the bouquet amidst thunderous cheering.

Other dignitaries who visited Kuala Lumpur before 1941 included Sir P. Ramanathan, the 'grand old man' of Ceylon, member of the Legislative Council and ex-Solicitor-General, in 1924; R. Tagore, in 1927, and Pandit Nehru, accompanied by his daughter, Indira Gandhi, in 1937.

Letters to the press are no less useful as historical sources. Often they provide a significant contrast to official reports which may tend to gloss over examples of incompetence and negligence. More important still they may help the historian to see the past in all its stark reality. The following, for example, is a 1915 description of Scott Road:

If one should walk down this street, any time after six or seven p.m. these are the sights that "stare one in the face". First at the corner of the street there is sure to be a drunken brawl, then a few yards away you see a number of rikisha coolies discussing the doings of the day, seated where? On their rikishas which they keep practically on the middle of the road. After you extract yourself from their shafts and wheels you are rewarded with sweet and pleasant music, either from a gramophone, an accordeon, or a harmonium. This brings you to the middle of the street, but lo and behold, what meets your eyes next is a whole herd of cattle standing stock still in the centre of the roadway

(*Malay Mail*, 11 December 1915)

Yet another 1915 description of a street in Kuala Lumpur tends to reinforce the belief that the town then needed more rigid municipal control. The writer said:

The beggars and outcasts who swarm in the streets of Kuala Lumpur present a problem which the general community can no longer defer considering. Those who have, in the course of their work, to pass through Java-st. see the problem in its true magnitude. They meet with crowds of these unfortunates in all stages of misery and emaciation, wandering about from place to place begging for food or stretched along the pavements and verandahs and sometimes by the dusty roadside, sleeping the sleep of the weary and worn, apparently overcome by hunger and exhaustion. The impression these pathetic figures leaves on our

minds is one of utter loneliness and desertion. Here are crowds of human beings for whom no one seems to care. They are just such crowds as moved the Divine compassion in Galilee of old and suggested the sad reflection of sheep having no shepherd.

(*Malay Mail*, 8 April 1915)

There were also descriptions of Kuala Lumpur by visitors. Although these appeared very occasionally in the papers, a few of them are true gems because of their authors' ability to describe with uncanny accuracy and economy the scenes before them. Consider the following:

Kuala Lumpur . . . contains some 30,000 people. I fear it is impossible to describe it. In the basin of the hills is the busy native town. Broad streets, lined with Cantonese stores, wide open as though the front of a modern English shop were taken completely out. Between stores and street, a narrow pavement under an arcade, which presents a welcome shade, when the sun rays threaten to penetrate one's felt helmet. Within the shops Chinamen, whose only clothing is a pair of trousers and a queue. I think of preserving as a curiosity one article of clothing made most creditably by a firm of Chinese tailors. The men serve in the shop, their families live in the rooms above, which extend over the arcade. Among the shops are opium dens, where the votaries of the drug are inhaling its fumes, and dreaming their luxurious dreams; or public gambling hells, where crowds of all nationalities are staking their own or other people's money; or houses of another description, equally open to public inspection, in each of which sit five or six gaily-dressed smiling Japanese women, chatting to each other, and playing games of chance.

(*Malay Mail*, 22 July 1909)

There is no dearth of material on Kuala Lumpur in the local newspapers, more in the *Malay Mail* certainly but, occasionally, useful data can be found in the other papers too such as the *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, the *Times of Malaya* (Ipoh) and the *Straits Times* as well as the *Malaya Tribune*, both of Singapore. But by the late 1930s there was, in fact, a Kuala Lumpur edition of the *Malaya Tribune*. However, while historical sources are easily available, the historian could still face a serious problem — one of culture. For like many Malaysian towns, Kuala Lumpur too has had a very cosmopolitan population. It is not often that a historian can cope with all the ethnic groups that form the subject of his study. On the other hand, unless he can, he cannot possibly write a rounded history of Kuala Lumpur.