

The 1876 Chinese post office riot in Singapore

The 1876 Post Office Riot is often lumped together with other nineteenth century Chinese secret society riots in Singapore, but it was in fact the owners of Chinese remittance agencies who instigated the riot to defend their new business practices against an intrusive colonial state trying to regulate modern transportation and communication networks.

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AT 7:30 IN THE MORNING of 15 December 1876, an Indian police officer of the Singapore colonial government noticed a crowd of Chinese reading a placard at the corner of Philip and King Streets. The placard offered a 100 tael reward for the decapitation of two Straits-born Chinese, Ong Kong Chang and Ong Kong Teng, who were opening the new Chinese Sub-Post Office (華人小郵局) to handle letters and remittances to China, at 81 Market Street at 8 o'clock that morning.

Less than an hour later, someone in the crowd gathered outside the Sub-Post Office threw a brickbat inciting the 'mob' to ransack the office. Having demolished the premises, rioters attacked the Ellensborough New Market Police Station where the police fired into the crowd killing three and wounding several others. Police arrested 40 rioters, most of whom received a caning and a term of 'rigorous imprisonment'. Deciding that the dead men were secret society members, the colonial government ordered the arrest of Lim Ah Tye, the leader of the Teochew (Taizhou) branch of the Ghee Hin (義興) secret society. The government also detained a number of Chinese merchants involved in remitting letters and money to China, locally known as 'towkays'.

The next morning, Chinese merchants throughout the city shuttered their businesses in a general strike against the 'Red-Haired Barbarians'. Shopkeepers refused to re-open until the towkays were freed. Defiantly, the colonial government marched the towkays to Boat Quay and placed them on the *Pluto*, which steamed out into the northeast monsoon swell. Two days later, the colonial government returned the towkays, green with seasickness, when they compliantly agreed to pay a bond guaranteeing their good behavior. Convinced that Lim Ah Tye was behind the riot, the government deported him. Local shops reopened on Sunday and by Monday morning the owners of the Sub-Post Office, 'in a considerable funk', cleaned up their office as police patrolled the block.¹

Colonial officials and newspaper reporters portrayed the riot as a conspiracy of secret society 'evil winded rascals' who 'duped' the 'coolies' into rioting against the government. Sir William Jervois (1821-1897), Governor of the Straits Settlements, described the 'coolies' as 'unfortunate dupes of these crafty leaders'. Scholars have followed these contemporary accounts by arguing that the riot 'emanated from some leaders of the secret societies' or was 'fomented by Chinese secret societies'.² Emphasis on secret society involvement in the riot, however, distracts attention away from the broader political context and slights the significance of the postal issues at stake.

Overseas agents in the South Seas, 1850-1870

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, the emergence of new communications and transportation technologies transformed the information infrastructure around the world. In Singapore, the colonial state used the new technologies to interfere in existing communications and transportation networks under the guise of creating a state postal monopoly. For overseas Chinese involved in the remittance trade, the new networks allowed them to create more efficient profit-making strategies, but their very success brought them to the attention of the colonial state. The 1876 post office riot, then, was not a secret society affair, but a clash over control of the remittance business, Chinese resistance to the rise of the interventionist state, and a misunderstanding by colonial officials about how the remittance agencies earned their profits.

A surge in Chinese emigration began in the mid-nineteenth century as tens of thousands of coastal Chinese sought economic opportunities in the mines and fields of Southeast Asia. They entered local indigenous states whose rule was weak, diffuse, and decentralized and an economic system increasingly dominated by the colonial powers – the Dutch in Batavia, the British in Singapore, and the Spanish in Manila. The inconsistencies of direct/indirect local and colonial rule, the lack of demarcated territorial boundaries, and the gradual transition to capitalist-oriented production left open enough space for overseas Chinese to thrive as middle-men, within this hybrid economic system, from their bases in the polyglot cities scattered throughout mainland and archipelagic Southeast Asia.

Circumambulating independent contractors known as Overseas or South Seas Agents (水客/南洋客) linked seaward China, the entrepot of Hong Kong, and colonial cities and towns in Southeast Asia through informal letter and remittance networks.³ The financial linchpin holding together their junk-traversed networks was a ten percent surcharge on all remittances. The structure of their letter and remittance networks, and the agents' profit-making strategies, rapidly changed in the 1860s and 1870s with the arrival of new communications and transportation technologies.

Networking empire, nation, and colony

The arrival of steamships in the 1840s, the expansion of the submarine telegraph network, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, and the inauguration of modern postal services, helped usher in the era of high imperialism in Southeast Asia, but they also allowed overseas agents to increase their profits. To take advantage of these opportunities, overseas agents transformed themselves into Qiaopiju (僑批局), literally Overseas Letter Offices, specializing in mobilizing and transporting labor overseas, shipping goods and letters throughout the diasporic network, and providing remittance and other banking services to overseas Chinese.⁴

The Qiaopiju firms also developed a set of new business practices. To limit their liability, Qiaopiju owners stopped transmitting currency and shifted to small slips of paper known as *pixin* (批信) representing the amount sent by each remitter. They placed the slips inside a small parcel, referred to as a 'clubbed package' (總包), and entrusted it to the supercargo of a China-bound ship. Instead of charging large remittance fees, the firms used this procedure to retain the remittances as a form of temporary capital over the time it took the supercargo to reach his destination. The capital was used to purchase goods in Southeast Asia, sell them in Hong Kong or

coastal China, and then pay the remittances. Qiaopiju owners also used the funds to engage in exchange rate speculation between currencies in Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, and China to make their profits. Lastly, to protect the remitter, the Qiaopiju also provided *huipi* (回批), a return receipt, that not only verified delivery, but also included a short note from the recipient as a check against fraud. This new business model increased profit margins, allowing Qiaopiju firms to expand to new locations, and provided more security for remitters.

The Singapore colonial government and the Qiaopiju in the 1870s

In the 1860s and 1870s, national and colonial officials throughout the world sought to define and enforce state postal monopolies to control and regulate communications and transportation networks. In Singapore, Postmaster General Henry Trotter (served 1871-1882) first broached the subject of closing the Qiaopiju firms in mid-1872, claiming they were violating the terms of the India Post Office Act of 1866, making the post office a government monopoly. The Qiaopiju not only violated a state monopoly, Trotter argued, but siphoned off a significant portion of state revenue. The Singapore Legislative Council considered the proposal, but the Attorney-General rejected it on the grounds that the Indian Act only dealt with postal matters within the jurisdiction of colony, which included Singapore, but not China.

The Legislative Council's discussion sparked the interest of two Qiaopiju owners in Penang, Ong Kong Chang and Ong Kong Teng, who volunteered to act as a monopoly agent for the Singapore Post Office in collecting remittances for China. Andrew Clarke, then Governor of Singapore, gladly accepted their offer in the fall of 1874, arguing that the private Qiaopiju system not only infringed the state monopoly, but that they were inherently corrupt and inefficient; Clarke was unaware of the new *pixin* and *huipi* system created by the Qiaopiju.⁵ Remaining uncertainty about international postal law, however, left the agreement in abeyance.⁶

In mid-1876, Governor Jervois created a modified system that made the Ongs salaried colonial sub-postmasters thus circumventing uncertainty about international postal law. Under Jervois' scheme, the Ongs did not have a monopoly on the collection of remittances, but did have one on their transmission. As Jervois explained, any Chinese firm could collect remittances, but all remittances and letters had to be 'stamped and sent either through the Sub-Post Office, or through the General Post Office'. Jervois' fundamental mistake was in believing the Qiaopiju profited on remittance fees, but he was unaware that their new business practices required control over transmission time. By transforming the Qiaopiju into remittance collecting agents of the state, Jervois removed their ability to use the new communications and transportation networks to profit on remittances as a form of temporary capital. The owners of the Qiaopiju firms, using the secret societies to organize the protest, instigated the riot against the interventionist state to defend their new profit-making strategies.

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Cabinet Photograph of Sir William Jervois (1821-1897), Governor of the Straits Settlements (1875-1877).



Notes

- 1 The above narrative and quotes that follow are based on the *Straits Times* (16, 23, and 30 Dec. 1876, 19 May and 4 Aug. 1877), *Straits Times Overland Journal* (27 Dec. 1876, 11 Jan., 8 Feb., and 1 Sept. 1877), and the *Straits Observer* (20 Dec. 1876).
- 2 Ong Siang Song. 1923. *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*. Reprint: University Malaya Press, 1967, p.185; Leon F. Comber. 1959. *Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Survey of the Triad Society from 1800 to 1900*. Locust Valley, NY: JJ Augustin Inc. for the Association for Asian Studies, p.235.
- 3 The earliest description of overseas agents in Singapore is: UC Siah. 1847. "Annual Remittances by Chinese Immigrants in Singapore to their Families in China," *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and East Asia* 1:35-36.
- 4 Other general names for Qiaopiju include Letter Agency (批信局), Money Letter Office (銀信局), Overseas Letter Office (僑信局), Remittance Office (匯兌局), Remittance Letter Office (匯兌信局/莊), Overseas Letter Shop (僑批館), and Letter Shop (批館).
- 5 Despatch by Andrew Clarke, 9 October 1875, cited in Wong Lin Ken. 1980. "The Chinese in Nineteenth-Century Singapore: A Review of Lee Poh Ping's *Chinese Society in Nineteenth Century Singapore*," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 11(1):178.
- 6 T. A. Melville. 1921. "The Post Office and Its History", in Walter Makepeace et al (eds.) *One Hundred Years of Singapore: Being Some Account of the Capital of the Straits Settlements from Its Foundation*, 2 vols. London: John Murray, pp.135-36.