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The strong growth of the Malaysian economy in recent years has largely stemmed from the investment of foreign capital, attracted by favourable conditions guaranteed by a stable government. But the provision of cheap labour and ample land to these investors has not necessarily been to the advantage of local residents, despite government rhetoric. This study will look at the consequences of industrial expansion in the southernmost tip of Peninsular Malaysia where manufacturing activities have both competed and co-operated with those established in nearby Singapore. As will become clear in this chapter, the close association with Singapore has a long history. Capital from Singapore was one of the driving forces of the economic expansion within Johor, and the dealings of the Malay rulers of Johor with Singapore Chinese established the patterns of class and race relations within the state.

Early History of Southern Johor

The southern coasts of Johor were not associated with centuries of Malay settlement. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Malay activities were centred further south on the island of Riau, where first indigenous orang laut (sea peoples) and then Bugis from the island of Sulawesi established supremacy. But their contact with the southern coast of Johor was minimal. At most, orang laut, many of whom lived by piracy and raiding and who formed the naval strength of the Johor–Riau Sultanate before 1760, may have had temporary bases on and off this coast. However, Johor remained largely uninhabited until the 1840s (Trocki, 1979: 75). In a circumnavigation of Singapore Island in 1825, Crawfurd reported that along the entire southern coast of Johor ‘the country is one dreary forest without human habitation or apparently the marks of there ever having existed any’. All was jungle and swamp apart from a few ‘wretched and temporary’ woodcutters’ huts on Pulau Ubin and a few small villages up the Johor River (Crawfurd, 1825, quoted in Trocki, 1979: 42–3).

The settlement and development of Mukim Plentong dates to the 1840s. Gutta-percha, a latex-like substance harvested for years by
Malays in Singapore, was recognized by the European powers in 1843 as having potential for manufacturing surgical and chemical apparatus and a few years later was found to be ideal for protecting underwater cables (Trocki, 1979: 76). The forests of Johor suddenly became a prized source of gutta-percha. By 1848 Temenggong Ibrahim, the Malay ruler of Singapore and Johor, had not only asserted a monopoly on the trading of gutta-percha but was dispatching gangs of labourers to fell the forests of Johor for it. Conspicuous among these were groups of aborigines, orang benua and orang biduanda kallang. ‘These were under a Malay official known as a jenang who employed them in collecting gutta-percha, dammar, rattan, gharuwood, ebony, chandan, and wax. In return, they were given rice, sago, and a little cloth.’ (Trocki, 1979: 79.) The jenang, also known as pengulu, were Malays from Singapore posted at various river mouths to ensure monopolies on trade with orang benua. Incoming traders were required to visit the pengulu as ‘head of the river’. The system was exploitative of both forests and people. Between 1844 and 1848, 270,000 trees were estimated to have been cut down in Johor, with no attempt made to plant new trees, so that Logan (1848: 532–3, quoted in Trocki, 1979: 88) wrote, ‘The imports [of gutta-percha] from Johor have greatly diminished since last year. The tree in many districts has become so scarce that the taban obtained does not repay the time consumed in searching for it.’ The prices of jungle produce paid to the orang benua were fixed by the pengulu at anything from 100 to 400 per cent below Singapore market price while the goods sold to forest people were priced at anything from 100 to 400 per cent above their value in Singapore (Trocki, 1979: 80).

**Chinese Settlement in Mukim Plentong**

With the destruction of the forests, Temenggong Ibrahim turned to the Chinese of Singapore both to develop Johor and to finance his ailing administration. This new initiative became possible as a result of secret society wars between Teochew and Hokkien Chinese residents of Singapore. The disputes between these two dialect groups originated in the fact that Teochews were the smallholder planters of Singapore and generally remained in poverty and debt to the Hokkien shopkeepers and merchants who supplied them with provisions, capital, and credit. Many planters never cleared their debts with these merchants. Falling prices for their gambier crop, land shortage, and new land laws enabling merchants to hold title-deeds as surety for planters’ debts led to increasing tensions between the two groups, represented by their respective secret societies. These led to Teochew leaders persuading 4,000 gambier and pepper planters to leave Singapore for the Johor mainland in 1846 (Trocki, 1979: 101). Thus the economic development of Johor was initiated through the introduced crop of gambier.

Gambier was cultivated in Riau and Singapore before it reached Johor. In the mid-seventeenth century, gambier production was a traditional Malay occupation in Sumatra, on the west coast of the Malay
Peninsula, and in West Java. The astringent gambier was used as medication and chewed in conjunction with betel. In the eighteenth century, Chinese began to use gambier as a tanning agent. This led in 1734–40 to the Bugis leader in Riau, Daing Chelak, setting up a gambier and pepper plantation worked by Chinese coolies. By 1784 gambier cultivation and trade had become an important part of the indigenous economy in Riau, with perhaps 10,000 Chinese settled on Bentan Island (Trocki, 1979: 20). Then in 1835 Europeans recognized its worth and its cultivation spread to Singapore. By 1846 there was little land in Singapore left uncultivated, and Teochew planters began to move on to the Johor mainland.

Gambier and pepper could be intercropped. As Trocki (1979: 96) observed:

Ideally, a gambier plantation was worked by about three to eight men. According to various reports, the acreage could have been from 50 to 250, but the lower figure is more plausible. The main equipment in a bangsal [plantation] was a large cauldron used for boiling the gambier leaves. After most of the liquid was boiled off, the remainder was filtered and reboiled until it was fairly thick. It was then poured into flat moulds and left to harden. These were cut up into small cubes, wrapped, and prepared for shipment. The dregs were used to fertilize the pepper plants.

The Chinese settlement of Johor was administered by Temenggong Ibrahim and his Malay officials through documents known as surat sungai (river letters). These gave authority to individual kangchu (river headmen) to open plantations on the banks of the river named in the document, and to collect taxes, exercise the functions of government, and control cultivation within the river valley covered by the grant. To administer the settlement the kangchu constructed a large house near the mouth of the river which was called kangkar (river foot). As far as the government was concerned, the kangchu were responsible for collecting taxes and conducting revenue farms on opium and gambling. They were responsible to a Chinese kapitan (headman) stationed initially on the Tebrau River, who was appointed by the Malay administration. However, the kangchu were also important in mediating between the independent planters who settled around the kangkar and their creditors, the shopkeepers and merchants of Singapore and later Johor Bahru. By the 1860s these merchants had gained control of the surat sungai, employing kangchu as their deputies and managers at the river site. These merchants were known as taukeh tuan sungai (river boss), and it was they who financed the gambier plantations, and marketed their produce.

The first surat sungai were issued in 1844, and by 1862 forty had been issued over thirty-seven rivers, mostly along the Johor River and the Johor Straits (Trocki, 1979: 112). Included among these were three in Mukim Plentong—Lunchu, Paksi, and Buloh Besar—all issued in 1845. By 1864 there were at least thirty-four rivers opened for cultivation; about one thousand plantations were in operation, and the total