The Chinese because of their self-sufficiency had had little to do with other countries throughout history. It was only during the reign of the Ming Emperors, who followed a policy of expansion that they started to venture out of China but the number was rather limited.

During the middle of the nineteenth century floods and famine were common in South China. This together with the outbreak of the Taiping Rebellion caused the people to leave and to search for better opportunities in the South Seas. They were particularly attracted to the newly established Straits Settlements because it provided good opportunities for advancement as labour was scarce and trade was expanding rapidly. There was a demand for labour in the tin mines and the administrative restrictions by the government was much milder than in China itself. They had considerable control over their own affairs and were, in practise, administered by their own headman.

Most of the immigrants came from the province of Kwantung, Kwangsi and Fukien. They came as labourers or craftsmen, single men without their families. They hoped to do sufficiently well to retire rich to China or bring their families and relatives, along to join them. The Chinese people themselves did not like to stay permanently in Malaya, for there was always the possibilities of being buried here with no one to perform the necessary ceremonies for ancestor reverence. Ancestor worship which emphasises on filial piety and the mutual responsibilities of members of the same clan, shaped the family system which has thus become a powerful social and political unit and the pivot of Chinese society.

The immigrants were usually brought to the settlements by shipowners who gave them free passages. In return they had to work for one year for the employer who purchased their services from shipowners. Most of them came to Penang as it was the gateway to the rich Larut tin mines. Some of them (mostly Hokkiens) settled down to trade in Penang and other coastal towns in Province Wellesley while the more enterprising and adventurous, especially the Cantonese, drifted over to the mainland into the Kinta Districts and also the Klang District in Selangor.

These new immigrants tended to stick together according to the districts they came from. They preserved the clan system for mutual help and protection so...
much so that in the early days, Georgetown was split up into spheres of influence controlled by different clans.

A genius for combination, they soon established their own individual kongsis or clanhouses. These kongsis have been constantly renovated. Till today, the kongsis are still standing and are visited by tourists who are attracted by the Chinese architecture and statues.

The most important factor that brought about the building of the kongsis is the belief of ancestor worship. Those who neglected the welfare of their ancestral spirits were guilty of unfilial conduct. This led the immigrants to bring along their ancestral gods and incense burners and set up shrines. The kongsis provide a place for the clansmen to worship and a home for the ancestral gods. This community worship can usually be performed on an impressive scale with the kongsis funds. The kongsi is also a place of congregation to celebrate certain religious festivals such as the birthdays of the patron saints and the Winter Solstice.

The kongsis also perform social functions in the interest of their members. When they first started, they provided temporary accommodation for the clansmen who were disabled or who were in need of financial help. The new immigrants were provided lodging by their kongsis until they had found work and established their own homes. The kongsis were also responsible for giving its "dead" members a decent funeral.

The kongsis were first started on very little capital. However, owing to the careful investments made by the trustees, the kongsis have built up a very enlarged treasury. The kongsi also acted as a bank and the interest on money deposited is generally higher. Depositors had more faith in the kongsi as they knew that their fellow clansmen would not cheat or fail them. The kongsis also advised its members on investments and advanced loans to those who were in need.

In the heyday of secret societies many of the members of these kongsis were also members of these secret societies. This led to the frequent quarrels and rivalry among the clansmen. However, these disputes were usually settled by the "kongsi" trustees and elders. The kongsi would also act on behalf of its members in quarrels against an outsider. The members who were also members of secret societies also made use of the kongsis as centres for operating riots.

As more and more Chinese settled down here with their families, education was necessary, for the Chinese placed a high value upon academic qualifications. Thus, the kongsis also acted as an educational institution. Today these schools no longer exist except for the Tan kongsi which has its own modern Chinese school in Katz Street. Scholarships were granted to the children of poorer members. Promising students were sent abroad for further studies at the "kongsis" expense. No strings were attached to these scholarships but the recipients must take part in ancestral worship. Many a time weddings were also solemnised in the kongsi premises. There is a hall set aside to be used by members for wedding receptions.
The administration of a kongsi is run by a Board of Trustees elected from the members. The chief worshipper or "lor choo" is appointed by the patron saint. This is done by dropping two kidney-shaped pieces of wood together, after a short prayer had been chanted to the patron saint. The way the two pieces of wood fell determined whether the candidate for the post should be accepted or rejected. Except for the "lor choo" who is appointed annually, most of the trustees hold their post till they die.

Of all the kongsis in Penang, the richest and most beautiful kongsi is the Khoo Kongsi. It was built by the descendents of Khoo Chean Eng Kong. They came to Penang before it was founded by Francis Light. However the kongsi was only first established in the 1830's with merely $528.00. In 1903, the trustees decided to build a bigger temple but it was destroyed by fire when it was still under construction. The whole temple was rebuilt and most of the materials were transported direct from China, ranging from the marble altar to the wooden beams. The Khoo Kongsi is a distinct example of Chinese architecture and its walls are adorned with paintings and carvings depicting scenes from Chinese classics and legends. The beams supporting the roofs are artistically painted the roof is further supported by big strong granite pillars with dragons. The Khoo Kongsi, situated at Cannon Square is often visited by tourists as well as local people who spend many happy hours admiring its beauty.

One of the oldest kongsis in Penang and Malaya is the Cheah Kongsi. It was first established as far back as 1801. Its full name is Cheah Kay Seh Tong Seah Hock Hwa Kong. Only in 1846 were rules drawn up for the proper control of the kongsi and these were printed in booklets and distributed to members. Though the great ancestor of the Cheah Clan was Cheah Phek Ghee, the present Cheah Clan regards Beng Hun Kong, a grandson of his, to be their first ancestor. This was because Cheah Phek Ghee was too much before their time.

The Yeoh Kongsi which was founded in 1840 is also one of the oldest kongsis in Penang. Unfortunately, all documents and records relating to the history of the kongsis were lost during the Japanese Occupation. The only source left is a stone tablet which was erected in 1900 and it gives a brief account of how the kongsi was founded. The official name given to the Yeoh Kongsi is Eng Guan Keong. Their ancestral God is Sai T'ao Kong. The Yeoh Kongsi is famed for its emblem of a black oriole holding a string of white jade bangles, the last of which has a break.

The next kongsi is the Lim Kongsi which was established in 1863. It was divided into two separate kongsis — the Toon Pun Tong and the Bian Soot Tong. However both kongsis were founded by Lim Cheng Kah. There is a golden-coloured plate, written personally by the famous historical figure, Commissioner Lim Tze Hsu, in the Lim Kongsi.

Besides those mentioned above, there are many other kongsis such as the Tan Kongsi, Khor
Kongsi, Ong Kongsi, Yap Kongsi, Lee Kongsi and Kwai Kongsi. However, these kongsis are more recently built. All kongsis were built for the same benevolent purposes and are still continuing with their duties. The rich Chinese culture can still be felt once we enter the kongsis. The Chinese have always stayed united under their respective kongsis but they do mingle with their fellow Chinese men as well as people of other races. In fact, the clan system do not play such an important role as it did before. Perhaps this is because the younger generation no longer need to look towards the kongsis as protectors like their ancestors did when they first stepped onto Penang soil. Most of the members are undoubtedly the elders.

Nevertheless the kongsis deserve a place in Malayan history for their very existence add to the richness of our local history.