KUALA LUMPUR
1880-1895
A city in the making

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The Heritage of Malaysia Trust
Pelanduk Publications
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Urban Development is in progress in every large city: it is one of the Facts of Life. But when this modern Juggernaut threatens our own territory it may arouse alarm and despondency.

The little town of Kuala Lumpur began to take shape around 1875 about twenty miles up the Klang river on its East bank. The administrative headquarters of the State of Selangor was moved there from Klang in 1880. Expansion was rapid, and in 1895 the town was officially designated the capital of the Federated Malay States.

The first settlement grew up along the bank of the Klang river on low lying ground. A Market was its focal point. Small houses and shops built of planks with attap thatched roofs bordered the market on two sides to form lanes, which were known as ‘Ampang Road’ and ‘Market Road’. A third road named ‘Pudu Road’ grew up at the same time. Pudu and Ampang were mining areas and the lanes led in those directions, but only extended to the edge of the surrounding jungle.

The settlement was often flooded and it also suffered from disastrous fires on three occasions before the start of the Civil War (1869–1873). It was destroyed by fire during the last months of the Civil War and might never have been restored if it had not been for the courageous determination of Yap Ah Loy. He caused houses and shops of plank and thatch to be rebuilt in what later became the pre-war pattern, with the Market in the centre, and his own plank house facing the market.

The population began to grow and soon expansion was necessary. But swamps bordered the settlement on
the West and South and the river flowed along its East boundary. Expansion was only possible to the North. The land on that side rose gently but had been left unoccupied. Yap Ah Loy, the pioneer, took the lead and erected a 'Sick House' for miners suffering from Malaria and other tropical diseases on this higher ground. Not long afterwards he built the first Chinese School on the rising ground and followed this with a Theatre. Attracted by Ah Loy's initiative, several other leading pioneers, headed by Yap Kwan Seng, (the Third Capitan China) built large houses on the high ground, though Ah Loy continued to live beside the Market. These houses were built before 1890.

When Swettenham was appointed Resident of Selangor in 1882, he tried to reduce the fire hazard by issuing directions that all old houses should be rebuilt using bricks and should have tiled roofs. But the brick kilns which had been built in an area known as 'Brickfields', could not supply the needs of even half the town. Rebuilding was therefore carried out by phases. The first two roads to be rebuilt were Market Road and Ampang Road. Priority was then given to the road which had grown up along the higher ground. It had been named 'High Street', not because it was then a main thoroughfare, but because it was higher than the rest of the town.

High Street was surveyed and lots on each side of the street were sold for $400/- each. One of the new tenants was a Chinese bakery.

Two Temples were built there, the first by Yap Ah Loy, who sited it at the junction of High Street and Pudu Road. He named it after his Patron deity, Sen Ta. It is still standing. A Hindu Temple named 'Mariammah Temple' was built by the head of the Indian Community, Thambusamy Pillai, soon afterwards.
High Street became increasingly popular and before 1890 it was extended Southwards until it reached the river bank, so that travellers who wished to go to Klang could follow High Street. About the same time a small Central Police Station was built near the Southern end of the road.

This development took place while the town was the State capital and before it was promoted to be the capital of the Federated Malay States. When the new Government Offices on the opposite side of the river were opened by the Governor in 1896, High Street was the longest and most handsome street in Kuala Lumpur.

This Street (now called Jalan Bandar) and its elderly neighbours, form an oasis in a modern city which has spread in every direction, no longer handicapped by swamps or floods.

Kuala Lumpur has been widely publicised in the capitals of the World as a Tourist attraction. But will the Tourists who come here pause to admire the monolithic structures, which may resemble high-rise buildings in their own countries, or will they not prefer to walk between rows of low, brick shop houses, a novelty which they can photograph and show to their relatives and friends when they return home? Will they admire the towering Police Headquarters across the river or will they prefer to visit the simple, historic Police Station at one end of Jalan Bandar, where it has stood for nearly a century?

Few people in the City today know how their town grew and developed. Fortunately, Mr. J.M. Gullick, a former member of the Malayan Civil Service, has assembled in this little book, a detailed account of Kuala Lumpur between 1880 and 1895. It includes a vivid account of how the town grew, the development of tin mining, which brought the town into existence,
the trade which provided good business for the shopkeepers, the administration, the schools, and the railway which carried passengers and freight to and from the town.

High Street (or Jalan Bandar as it is now known) played a vital part in this story. The Heritage of Malaysia Trust — "Badan Warisan Malaysia", strongly supports the action which is being taken by the Mayor of Kuala Lumpur to preserve the Old Town, and in particular the Shop Houses in Jalan Bandar and the old Police Station which helped to maintain Law and Order in those early days.

As a contribution to the efforts by City Hall to preserve this historic Street and its neighbouring buildings, the Council of the Badan Warisan Malaysia has arranged for public a new edition of 'Kuala Lumpur 1880-1895' with the cordial consent of Mr. Gullick and the generous cooperation of the Managing Director of Pelanduk Publications.

We also hope that this well-researched book will be widely read, not only by residents of Kuala Lumpur, but also by visitors from overseas, who share with us a keen appreciation of the importance of preserving the visible evidence of local history.

Tan Sri Dato' Dr. Mubin Sheppard
Kuala Lumpur, 1880-1895
by J. M. GULLICK, M.A.

Early in 1888 Frank Swettenham returned to Kuala Lumpur after a period of absence from his post of British Resident, Selangor. Soon after his return A. R. Venning proposed to him that a botanic garden should be laid out in the valley of the Sungei Bras Bras. Venning was the State Treasurer, Selangor, but before coming to Malaya he had been a planter in Ceylon. This fact may explain his interest in horticulture. Swettenham was a thorough administrator. Before he would give the scheme his support, he and Venning spent several early mornings scrambling up and down the sides of a “valley which consisted of several acres of swamp, in which briars and lallang, forest trees, screw pines and tree ferns were interspersed in picturesque confusion.” At length Swettenham was satisfied and agreed to authorise a small grant from State funds for the new garden.

Venning then began what his colleagues recognised as a “labour of love”. Over a period of nearly ten years he gradually cleared and laid out a garden or park of 173 acres. Scrub and rank grass were cut down; common trees were replaced by ornamental and flowering trees and shrubs; “an experimental economic garden” was laid out (not for nothing had Venning been a planter). The project attracted public interest and support from the start. Towkay Chow Ah Yeok, leading figure of the Cantonese community, contributed one hundred white chēmpaka and orange trees to Venning’s initial planting programme of 1888. A European construction contractor called Gordon undertook to dam up the Sungei Bras Bras so as to make an ornamental lake. Later on there were band concerts in the gardens and the general management of the place was entrusted to a representative committee over which Venning presided.

Even in his first year Venning achieved a great deal. When, therefore, the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Cecil Clementi Smith, came on a visit to Kuala Lumpur in May 1889, Swettenham asked him to recognise Venning’s work by formally opening the new gardens. A heavy downpour of rain on the afternoon of the 13th May did not entirely mar the occasion. In the presence of a large gathering Clementi Smith declared the gardens open and gave the name “Sydney Lake” to the “fine sheet of water” dammed up by Mr Gordon. It was so called after Mrs Swettenham’s Christian name.
Thus Kuala Lumpur got its Lake Gardens. The episode is typical of a process at work throughout the fifteen year period with which this paper is concerned. In 1880, when the State capital was moved from Klang to Kuala Lumpur, the town was a thriving but raw and rumbustious Chinese mining centre. The first European administrator to be permanently stationed in Kuala Lumpur arrived only in the autumn of 1879. Until then Kuala Lumpur had been administered by its Capitan China, Yap Ah Loy. Ah Loy's achievement in this respect deserves high praise. But his government was limited to maintaining law and order and promoting economic development in the form of tin-mining. He hardly tackled the problems of health, fire prevention and municipal administration generally. Kuala Lumpur in 1880 was a crowded and appalling dirty village, swept by fire and epidemic disease in almost every year.

By contrast Kuala Lumpur in 1895 had for some years been "the neatest and prettiest Chinese and Malay town" in Malaya (this was the opinion of a visiting Governor). The deficiencies of Ah Loy's administration had been remedied. There had also been a subtler change in the minds of men. In 1880 Kuala Lumpur had been a place to which men came to work for a few years and to make money. In 1895 it had become a settled community or group of communities with their own institutions and social organisation. Thus its inhabitants had founded the need which did not exist in the mining camps of 1880. Thus Victoria Institution for the education of their children — a social Venning's ornamental trees in the Lake Gardens were both an acknowledgement of a need for amenity and recreation, and a declaration of intention to remain and enjoy such things.

The subject of this paper is a study of the making of this urban community.

Kuala Lumpur up to 1880.

Kuala Lumpur in 1880 was Yap Ah Loy's Kuala Lumpur. For nearly twenty years this dynamic and masterful Chinese miner had defended, reconstructed and developed Kuala Lumpur. This story has been well told by S. M. Middlebrook in his biography of Yap Ah Loy (JMBRAS, 24 (2) 1951), but a summary of it is a necessary introduction here.

Tin had been mined in the Klang valley for centuries and it is reasonable to suppose that the deposits around Kuala Lumpur had been worked from time to time. But tin-mining until the nineteenth century was generally a very small-scale and