Old Kuala Lumpur
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KUALA LUMPUR began as a very small settlement on the river bank through which the surrounding tin mines received labourers and the food to support them. By the same route they sent back the ingots of tin which they had produced. Above the junction of the Klang River with the Gombak—more a stream than a river—heavy river boats could not go (Plate 1). Hence, the boats making the four-day transit to and from the town of Klang offloaded or onloaded their cargoes at this point. It was close to the mines and goods could be carried over jungle tracks on the backs of porters.

Malays, mainly Sumatran immigrants, had long before settled on the banks of the Klang River to grow food, to collect jungle produce such as rattan (a useful substitute for rope), and to work alluvial surface tin ore deposits. As far back as the 1820s we hear

1. The kuala (river junction) which gives the town its name.
   (Steven Tan)
of Malay villages such as Petaling. This washing for tin in the beds of streams, to earn a little money between harvesting the paddy crop and planting the next, only showed how much more could be gained by more intensive methods. In 1857 Raja Abdullah, the business-like Malay chief who governed—more or less—the entire Klang Valley from the estuary to the watershed which divides Selangor from Pahang, sent a party of eighty-seven Chinese miners, recruited with the backing of merchants in the Straits Settlements, to mine for tin in the upper valley, then known vaguely as Ulu Klang. The party disembarked at the Klang–Gombak junction, and set off to prospect. As strangers in a foreign land, disposed to believe that success or failure depended on the favour or enmity of local genii, they recruited Malay magicians (pawang) who might be counted on to have a good working relationship with the spirits of the place. A pawang had a smattering of practical geology, gained by experience, to supplement his incantations. If he found tin, he then gave additional service for his consultant’s fee by imparting to the superstitious Chinese miners various rules of conduct by which they might avoid giving offence to the local deities. On a Chinese mine it was forbidden to wear shoes or to carry an umbrella (it was cynically suggested that these taboos kept Chinese financial backers from making on-site inspections). There were others, however, which defy rational explanation, such as, a man must not work in the mine with only his bathing cloth around his body; he must wear trousers. If he took off his hat and put it on the ground, he should turn it over so that its crown was downwards—all very like not walking under a ladder and keeping one’s fingers crossed.

However, Chinese mining methods were energetic and effective. At the selected spot they dug a rectangular pit (which could be enlarged if ore was found) called an open-cast mine (lombong) (Plate 2). A notched tree-trunk served as a ladder to get down into the pit and to climb out of it. On such ladders the miners, like a column of ants, carried up out of the pit baskets full of excavated soil. It might take weeks, even months of digging to get down to the ore, if indeed there was any. In a rainy country the pit filled with water overnight, and so the miners began each day’s
work by baling out the flood water. Later they used a water-wheel pump, imported from the rice-fields of China (Colour Plate 1).

To bring in a Chinese labour force, and keep it supplied until the export of tin began to repay the outlay, required the investment of substantial sums of money. Malay venturers also had difficulties in controlling an alien labour force, which on one occasion at least rose against them. Later on, the Malay ruling class simply gave concessions to Chinese capitalists who managed their own enterprises, paying export duty on the tin produced to the local Malay chief at the point of export.

Clearing the jungle caused mosquitoes to breed in vast numbers. It is no surprise that within a year most of the eighty-seven pioneers had died of malaria. But more labourers came to replace them—life was cheap—and on established sites the incidence of
malaria was less. By 1860 there was a steady and profitable trade along the river, men and supplies coming in and tin going out, with the river junction the point at which boats were loaded and unloaded. When the tin reached Klang, Raja Abdullah stored it in his warehouse, which still stands, a museum known as the 'Gedong Raja Abdullah', probably the oldest building in the State (gedung is the Malay word for 'warehouse').

Two Hakka traders set up a shop at the river junction. It was on the right-hand side of the Klang River (facing upstream) since most of the tracks to the mines started from that bank, so that heavily loaded porters did not have to cross the river on the way to the mines. There was also a track down the valley to Petaling, the next important centre of Chinese mining in that direction. Kuala means 'junction' or 'estuary' but in Malay usage it is followed by the name of the river or tributary which ends at that point. Kuala Lumpur should rightly have been called 'Kuala Gombak', but it was not. Lumpur can be used as a common noun or adjective to mean 'mud' or 'muddy', but it is rare to find such a construction in idiomatic Malay. One explanation, perhaps a little far-fetched, is that lumpur is a corrupt form of a Chinese word meaning 'jungle'. Certain it is that Kuala Lumpur began as a trading post at the river junction. The tracks which ran from it to the mines are to this day preserved in the line of Jalan Ampang, Jalan Pudu, Jalan Petaling, etc. The modern passer-by who goes along these roads can be sure that he follows the weary footsteps of heavily laden porters of 130 years ago.

As the village grew, it took shape around a square. On one side was the river bank, and on the higher ground parallel with the river was the main thoroughfare, known for many years as the High Street (now Jalan Tun H. S. Lee), apparently because it stood on ground above the expected flood level when the river rose. Two shorter lanes ran down from the High Street to the river. They may originally have been 'corrugated' timber paths by which loads were carried to and from the embarkation points on the river. This space, known a little later as Old Market Square, is now Leboh Pasar Besar. Although the buildings and the general appearance may have changed a great deal, these alignments
around a rectangle are a relic of the earliest times (Plate 3).

There was a Malay quarter too. The Malays lived apart since the pigs, raised by the Chinese for meat, were offensive to them. The boundary between the Malay quarter and the Chinese settlement around the square was a rough track, later to be called Java Street (and then Mountbatten Road and nowadays Jalan Tun Perak). In the Malay village there was a mosque, with a burial ground on the triangle of land that lay between the Gombak and Klang Rivers (where the Jamek Mosque now stands).

The whole village stood on the east side of the Klang River, for convenient access to mines by tracks leading to Ampang, Batu, and Pudu. On the opposite bank of the river there were some vegetable gardens and a few shanties. But the river, which had no bridges until the 1870s, was a barrier which confined the village to the east side.

From the mid-1860s to 1885 the Chinese headman (Capitan China) of Kuala Lumpur was Yap Ah Loy, one of the many thousands of Chinese peasants who came to South-East Asia in search of a fortune (Plate 4). The migrant worker, far from home, sought security and mutual help (and a decent burial if he died) by association with others of his kind. Thus, it was among the

3. Swettenham’s sketch map of 1875, the earliest we have, perhaps drawn from memory as he omits the kuala, from Sir Frank Swettenham’s Malayan Journals.
'overseas Chinese' of South-East Asia that the all-pervasive and all-powerful organizations were the so-called 'secret societies'. On arrival in the Straits Settlements the bewildered newcomer (sinkheh) was initiated, with ceremonies of blood and drawn weapons intended to frighten him, into membership. He swore total obedience to his society and its leaders, to never to disclose its affairs, and to rally to the aid of any fellow members under attack by their enemies or oppressed by the local authorities. He hoped to find security but was vulnerable to exploitation by his own society, and too easily dragged into gang warfare and riots between rival societies.

Yap Ah Loy was a Hakka Chinese, born in 1837, who first arrived in Malaya in 1854; he never returned to China. In the first years he suffered the adventures and hardships typical of the immigrant labourer. In 1862 he moved to Kuala Lumpur, where he was first assistant and, in 1868, successor to the Capitan China. In this position of recognized authority he was also head of the dominant secret society and the largest mining entrepreneur of the district. In his portraits he appears as a short, dour figure with a heavy jaw, obviously a man of determination. It is said that he spoke with a rather gruff voice, but he could also be very jovial. He had that gift which enables a born leader to lift the morale of his followers in times of adversity.
The Selangor civil war which raged from 1867 to 1873 is part of the wider history of Selangor, though its local effects on Kuala Lumpur were devastating. The war was fought between rival coalitions of Bugis and other Malay chiefs, Malay peasants, and Chinese miners, backed by Straits Settlements financiers. In 1872 the Sumatran miners lost confidence in the cause of the Malay viceroy, Tunku Kudin, with whom Yap Ah Loy was allied, and joined his enemies led by three famous warriors, Raja Mahdi, Raja Mahmud and Syed Mashhur, whose names, according to Swettenham, 'were to the western Malay States what that of the Black Douglas was once to Scotland'. Mashhur, who was the most deadly of the three, closed in on Kuala Lumpur, ambushed the European mercenaries of Tunku Kudin and their troops, and burnt the town to the ground. Yap Ah Loy fled through the jungle to Klang, the one remaining town held by Tunku Kudin. But the tide of war turned, and in 1873 Yap Ah Loy came back to the ruins of his town and the surrounding mines, derelict and waterlogged.

In 1874 a British Resident had been sent to Klang to assist Tunku Kudin. Swettenham, the Assistant Resident, came to Kuala Lumpur in March 1875 (he had also been there on a private visit in 1872). He wrote in his journal: 'I went straight to the house of the Captain China . . . he offered me champagne, but that I declined, preferring excellent beer which I certainly never expected to find here.' With dynamic energy Yap Ah Loy had already rebuilt the town and Swettenham was much impressed: It was 'by far the best mining village I have seen, the streets wide and excellently arranged, the shops most substantial . . . in the front of the Captain's house are the Gambling Booths and the Market . . . there are about 1,000 Chinese in the town and some 500 to 700 Malays . . . if he had lost heart no one else would have had the courage to stay. If he did not lose heart, he lost money, and it will take him many years of success to recover his lost fortune.'

Just at that time, however, Yap Ah Loy was denied the 'many years of success' which he needed. The mines were only slowly coming back into production. The miners were living precariously on imported supplies obtained on credit from merchants in the Straits Settlements towns. Thus, it was a disaster when the volatile