

## Crimes in the Straits Settlements before World War II

**Nordin Hussin\* and Shakimah Che Hasbullah**

*School of History, Politics and Strategy Studies,*

*Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,*

*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,*

*43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*

*\*E-mail: nordin@ukm.my*

### ABSTRACT

Not much has been done on research and writing on the history of crimes in colonial Malaya. Therefore, this study aimed to elaborate and discuss about the history of criminal activities and behaviours in the Straits Settlements (Penang, Melaka and Singapore) since the end of 19th century until the period of World War II. Some of the crimes that often occurred were crimes on property and crimes on human beings. Thus, this study attempted to examine the major factors that had led to all these crimes and investigated on what the English colonial administration had done in order to overcome the problem. In addition, this study also looked into criminal activities that had been done by the multi-racial local citizens who had and practised different cultures and religions in Singapore, Melaka and also Penang. The main question of this study is that whether there are close ties and causal relationship between the occurrence of crimes and the economic development in the Straits Settlements. In addition, this study also attempted to explain whether those crimes could be linked with the presence of the Chinese immigrants who had caused significant social and economic change in the Straits Settlements. Last but not least, this study also tried to explain the aspects that influenced the occurrence of crimes, apart from identifying the English colonial administration's efforts in handling the problem.

**Key words: Crimes, Straits Settlements, Singapore, Melaka, Penang, Malay history**

### INTRODUCTION

The history of crime occurrences during the era of English colonial rule in the Straits Settlements (Penang, Melaka and Singapore) can be categorized into two categories; namely, the criminal activities at seas (piracy) and criminal activities on land. This study focused on the latter type of crimes. The criminal activities on land included crimes, such as robbery, rape and murder that became a major security problem for the British Colonial Administration. Even worse, groups' competition to gain control over prostitution activities and other criminal activities had eventually increased the

cases of murder and blackmailing that created chaos and thus, disrupting public safety and harmony. In the early stage, the British colonial administration thought that the police force alone was enough to ensure the security in the Straits Settlements. However, the drastic rise of crimes left the administration with no choice but to use other ways to overcome all those crimes, including enforcing the rules and ordinance that they thought they could use in combating the crimes in the Straits Settlements.

The rise of crimes in the Straits Settlements was also a result from the British policy that brought in prisoners from India to serve

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\*Corresponding Author

their punishments in the Straits Settlements, especially in Singapore which functioned as a penal station at that time (Turnbull, 1970). These Indian convicts were transported from British India to the Straits Settlements to serve their sentences and assist the British administration in the problem of labour shortage and other development requirements. Singapore, being the fastest growing state among the three settlements, immediately became a convict centre. However, control over these prisoners was rather loose. After serving their punishments and sentences, most of these prisoners from India were freed, whereby most of them then settled down in the Strait Settlements. As a result of the lack of control from the British authorities over those ex-prisoners, security problems and crimes emerged and threatened the public safety in the area. In Melaka, the history of crimes during the era of the Dutch was mostly committed by slaves (Radin Fernando, 2006). In fact, a huge portion of the population in Melaka in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was made up of slaves (Nordin Hussin, 2007). Nonetheless, the crimes in Melaka under the Dutch Administration were perfectly under control since there were tight rules and regulations. This was totally different when the British ruled Melaka. On the other hand, most crimes that occurred in Penang were committed by the Chinese immigrants (Nordin Hussin, 2007). These Chinese immigrants were divided into a few groups and thus led to all sort of conflicts and murders on the island (Nordin Hussin, 2007). Based on these data, it could be seen that the main factor which led to the security problems in the Straits of Settlements was the presence of foreign immigrants spurred by British's no-restriction immigration policy.

#### **MANAGEMENT OF CRIMES DURING THE BRITISH COLONIAL ERA**

The management of crimes under the British administration in the Straits Settlements was written in the Penal Code.<sup>1</sup> The Law of Straits Settlements strictly stated the role of Penal Code in strengthened rules and laws related to crimes.<sup>2</sup> According to the code, individuals from

the Straits Settlements who committed crimes at places outside the British occupation would also be trialed and handled according to the rules and regulations of the Penal Code, just like the crimes committed in the Straits Settlements itself.<sup>3</sup> The Penal Code also mentioned clearly about the acts against the law that could be punished under the law of the Straits Settlements constructed based on the British legal system.<sup>4</sup> Chapter XVI in the Penal Code also clearly stated that there are two types of criminal acts that should be punished; these were the crimes on properties and crimes on human beings. The crimes on human beings refer to the criminal acts that involved human lives, such as murder act or hurting other individuals on purpose (Straits Settlements Penal Code, 1884, p. 31). The same goes to other criminal acts like kidnapping, human smuggling and trafficking for prostitution, as well as rapping that could be punished with heavy penalties such as 10 years in prison and caning (Straits Settlements Penal Code, 1884, p. 33-37).

It is undeniable that the presence of the British in the Straits Settlements had brought rapid development not only in terms of its economy but also in terms of politics and social conditions. In 1830, British unified Melaka, Penang and Singapore under one administration under the control of British Government based in India.<sup>5</sup> Despite the huge changes in the administrative aspect, the problem of crime was still a huge threat to the public safety in the area, especially in Singapore which served as the penal station for prisoners from India and Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup> The lack of prison staffs and security forces like police in the Straits Settlements also created a situation where dangerous criminals and prisoners who served as labours for the British administration in the Straits Settlements became very difficult to control and observe. As a result, a lot of them were free to commit crimes like robbery in the Straits Settlements.

At the early stage in the formation of the Straits Settlements, the centre of the British administration was placed in Penang and was then moved to Singapore in 1836 (John Bastin, 1959).<sup>7</sup> As the centre of British administration

of Straits Settlements, Singapore became a place where every decision related to British colonies was made (John Bastin, 1959, p. 5).<sup>8</sup> Its role as an administrative centre and trading port made it a popular destination for foreign immigrants in search of occupations. As a result, Singapore became an island that consisted of citizens from different races, religions and cultural backgrounds. The interactions between such a unique society gave rise to all kinds of social problems with their own implications on the security of the state. All these made it even difficult for the colonial government to enforce the law and ensure social harmony in the Straits Settlement. In addition, the British colonial government was busy handling the rise of crimes in India and thus paid very little attention to the Straits Settlements.

In the colonial administration in the Straits Settlements, a Governor was assisted by Executive Council and Legislative Council, which was entrusted with law-making role in the Straits Settlements, including laws related to crimes that were crucial to overcome the phenomenon of the drastic rise of crimes in the Straits Settlements (John Bastin, 1959).<sup>9</sup> The governor had the power of assent and veto on all bills. However, the governor would have to wait for the royal approval in any law-making process, indicating that the ruler of England had the right to exercise the veto power over any ordinance in his colonies (Straits Settlements Government Gazette, January-February 1900, p. 5).<sup>10</sup> This apparently delayed and slowed down the legislature process and disrupted the justice system in the Straits Settlements. Penang was also facing the same problem where there was no enforcement of laws since the British administration in Calcutta only paid little attention to that island. All these stemmed from the failure of the British to coordinate its legislative power in its colonies, especially in the Straits Settlements (Nordin Hussin, 2007).

### **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE STRAITS SETTLEMENTS AND THE RISE OF CRIMES**

Rapid economic growth in the Straits Settlements not only could be seen through its profits from the import and export activities but also through its annual income.<sup>11</sup> The total income of the Straits Settlements in 1896 hit \$4,223,881 and this increased to \$4,320,207 in 1897. In 1898, the total income of these states reached \$5,071,282 and it continued to increase to \$5,199,150 in 1899. The continuous increase in the annual income proved that there were rapid economic growths in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century that gave rise to the development of criminal activities in the Straits Settlements.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, the presence of foreign immigrants had increased the total population in the Straits Settlements. This is parallel to the 1921 Statistic Report which stated that the main factor that had led to the increase in the total population in Malaya was the immigration of Chinese and Indians to the Straits Settlements and Malaya.<sup>13</sup> The criminal activities in the Straits Settlements were closely linked to the presence of these foreign immigrants. This was because most of the criminal activities in the Straits Settlements were committed by these immigrants. In 1891, the total population of the Straits Settlements was 501,059, but this amount increased as much as 71,190 to 572,249 in 1901. In particular, the number of the Chinese immigrants increased as much as 72,464 people, while the Indian immigrants increased around 11,985 people in the same period. One of the major implications of the presence of these foreign immigrants was the emergence of various types of social problems, such as prostitution, gang fights and increase of crimes rate.

**DEVELOPMENT OF CRIMINAL  
ACTIVITIES IN THE STRAITS  
SETTLEMENTS 1895-1899**

The end of the 19th century witnessed the occurrence of various types of crime as a result of mass immigration by foreign immigrants into Malaya, especially through the Straits Settlements.<sup>14</sup> This could be seen in the report provided by the police regarding the criminal activities detected from 1895-1899, as shown in Table 1 below.

The increase of crime rates was also parallel to the rapid economic development, alongside with the increase in the total population and the influx of the foreign immigrants. In 1895, there were 10 murder cases and 8 cases of armed robbery (Jarman, 1998, p. 211-536).<sup>15</sup> In the time period between 1895-1899, there were 76 murder cases and 68 cases of armed robbery in the Straits Settlements (Jarman, 1998). There were also other criminal activities such as blackmailing. This was normally done by triad members towards those who were involved with prostitution during that time. In addition, there were also simple crimes like theft and burglary. In fact, there were 113 cases of burglary reported in Penang in 1898, 107 cases in Singapore and 18 cases in Melaka.<sup>16</sup>

Other factors that led to the occurrence of crimes during this period were the lack in the number of police officers and their overlapping responsibilities. For example, the Chief Police Officer of Melaka, who served the government and the people mainly as a peacekeeper, was also an Assistant Protector for the Chinese community and hence, took

over the responsibilities of the Inspector and Detective that were left vacant in order to save cost.<sup>17</sup> The Chief Police Officer could also be the Excise Licensing Officer, Superintendent of Fire Brigade etc.<sup>18</sup> The vacancy for the post of Inspector in Kesang and Pangkalan Balak even made the Chief Police Officer visit every police station in that area to distribute the salary for the policemen every month, and this duty alone had taken about half a month to settle.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the Chief Police Officer was unable to give full attention to his real responsibility as a peacekeeper in urban areas which were already full with criminal activities.<sup>20</sup> The British administration in the Straits settlements also tried to reduce cost by cutting down the number of government servants, particularly the policemen. In 1895, the total number of policemen in Melaka was reduced from 272 to merely 223 people. In Penang, the number of Corporal and Constable policemen were also greatly reduced. As a result, the criminal cases that had been trialed in the Police Court were also reduced from 617 cases in 1894 to 547 cases in 1895, a reduction of 70 cases.

Besides, there were also police officers in the Straits Settlements who had caused problems and were expelled from the police force. For example, in 1895 in Melaka, a police officer called Inspector Blackburn was charged and sentenced to 3 months in prison for his involvement in bribery (Jarman, 1998).<sup>21</sup> Another example is the case of Ong Seng Chye, a police officer who had worked in the Department of Crime Registration in a police station in Singapore and was expelled from the police

TABLE 1  
The Overall Criminal Activities in the Straits Settlements, 1895-1899

States	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899
Singapore	11 496	12 361	12 671	13 190	11 932
Penang	9 241	9 284	9 677	10 283	14 845
Melaka	561	795	843	875	854
Total	21 298	22 440	23 191	24 348	27 631

Source: Annual Report of Police Force in the Straits Settlements and the Crimes Rate For 1898 in 11/939, Straits Settlements Government Gazette, year 1899, April- June, Vol. XXXIII, Part 2

force having misconduct in his service.<sup>22</sup> In 1898 alone, 202 policemen were expelled from the police force in the Straits Settlements.<sup>23</sup> They were reported to commit bribery, violence act, gambling, robbery, theft, blackmailing, created fake evidence and many more.<sup>24</sup> The weakness of the security team and dishonesty of the police officers led to the increase in the crime rates in the period between 1895-1899.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES IN THE STRAITS SETTLEMENTS IN 1900-1940

According to the Annual Report of the Straits Settlements and Annual Report of Straits Settlements Department 1900-1940, there was a drastic rise in criminal activities in the

Straits Settlements. Table 2 shows the rate of the criminal activities detected in the Straits Settlements for 20 years. The table shows that 1901 was the year with most criminal activities accounted for 6.3% of the total criminal activities in the period of 20 years. Meanwhile, Penang had the highest percentage of criminal activities, with 51.4%, compared to Singapore (45%) and Melaka (3.6%).

There are few factors that can explain the reason for the high crime rates between 1900-1919. There was a close connection between the increase in the criminal activities and the rapid economic development in the Straits Settlements. At that point of time, the Straits Settlements were very much relying on tin trading imported from Malaya. When the United States of America

TABLE 2  
Overall Crime Cases Reported in the Straits Settlements, 1900-1919

Year	Singapore	%	Penang	%	Melaka	%	Total	%
1900	11 543		12 757		816		25 116	
1901	11 778	+1.9	13 473	+5.3	955	+14.6	26 206	+4.2
1902	11 413	-3.1	11 663	-13.4	992	+ 3.7	24 068	-8.2
1903	12 778	+10.7	10 609	-9.0	865	-12.8	24 252	+0.8
1904	10 941	-14.3	11 180	+5.1	1075	+19.5	23 196	-4.4
1905	12 765	+14.3	10 300	-7.9	1317	+18.4	24 382	+4.9
1906	12 498	-2.1	9 127	-11.4	988	-24.9	22 613	- 7.3
1907	10 596	-15.2	8 514	-6-7	900	- 8.9	20 010	-11.5
1908	15 926	+33.5	7 796	-8.4	1090	+17.4	24 812	+19.4
1909	11 311	-28.9	7 364	-5.5	1082	- 0.7	19 757	-20.4
1910	11 834	+ 4.4	6656	-9.3	1233	+12.2	19 723	- 0.2
1911	9 667	-18.3	6810	+2.3	1477	+16.5	17 954	- 9.0
1912	9 084	- 6.0	7135	+4.6	1516	- 2.6	17 735	- 1.2
1913	11 482	+20.9	6 264	-12.2	1607	- 5.7	19 353	+ 8.4
1914	11 223	- 2.3	5 920	-5.5	2097	+23.4	19 240	- 0.6
1915	8 852	-21.1	6 674	+11.3	1827	-12.9	17 373	- 9.7
1916	8 497	- 4.0	5 496	-17.7	1874	+ 2.5	15 867	- 8.7
1917	9 587	+11.4	4 624	-15.9	2151	+12.9	16 362	+ 3.0
1918	12 420	+22.8	4 684	+1.3	1906	-11.4	19 010	-13.9
1919	9 758	-21.4	5 304	+11.7	1117	-41.4	17 735	- 6.7
Total	202 452		162 350		26885		414 764	

Source: Annual Report of SS, Vol. 5-7, SS Annual Departmental Report, 1900-1919

attempted to get tins directly from its source, it resulted in an economic slowdown in 1901 and brought about negative impacts to the tin trading in the Straits Settlements (Parkinson, 1957, p. 96-103). The negative impact on the mining sector then led to the rise in crimes since the salary of the miners and factory workers was reduced. At the same time, the increases in the cost of living and the prices of land, houses and constructor materials in the Straits Settlements were also the factors that had contributed to the increase in the number of crimes in 1901.<sup>25</sup>

Fig. 1 shows the overall criminal activities in the Straits Settlements during the period of 1900-1919. Singapore had the highest crime rate during 1908-1909, and Penang had its highest crime rate during 1900-1901, while Melaka had the highest crime rate during 1916-1917. On the contrary, Singapore had its lowest crime

rate during the period of 1916-1917, followed by Penang in 1918-1919, and Melaka in 1900-1901.

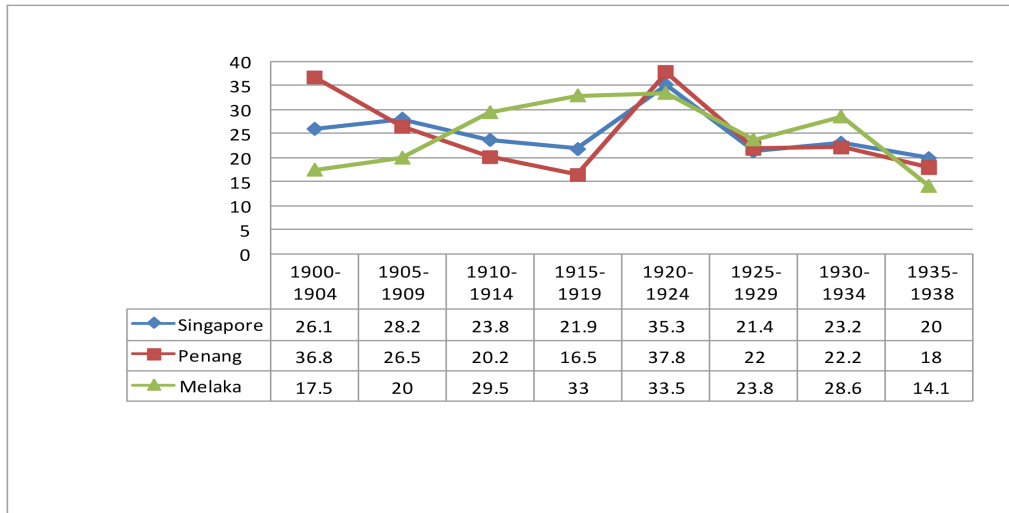
Table 3 shows the overall criminal activities for seizable offences. Based on the data presented in the table, the highest crime rate was in 1938, i.e. before World War II broke out. In the same year, Singapore reached the highest percentage of crime rate, followed by Penang and Melaka. This was because of the Sino-Japanese War which had happened a year earlier, whereby the Chinese communities in Malaya and the Straits Settlements showed their support for their origin country - China by boycotting Japanese products.<sup>26</sup> This in turn increased the crime rates in the Straits Settlements whereby whoever purchased Japanese products were beaten, injured or even killed. In the period of 1920-1938, the lowest crime rate was recorded in 1923, when the economy began to recover

TABLE 3  
Overall Crime Cases Reported in the Straits Settlements, 1920-1938

Year	Singapore	%	Penang	%	Melaka	%	Total	%
1920	2949	-	1438	-	715	-	5102	-
1921	3066	+ 3.9	1390	-3.3	811	+12	5267	+3
1922	3359	+ 8.7	1391	+ 0.1	614	-24	5364	+2
1923	2137	- 36.4	997	-28.3	547	-11	3681	-31
1924	4108	+48.0	1569	+36.5	743	+26	6420	+42
1925	3693	-10.1	1429	- 8.9	677	-9	5799	-9
1926	3389	- 8.2	1353	- 5.3	569	-16	5311	-8
1927	4175	+18.8	1616	+16.3	641	+11	6432	+17
1928	4624	+ 9.7	1544	- 4.5	706	+9	6874	+6
1929	4598	-0.6	1561	- 1.1	774	+9	6933	+1
1930	5101	+9.9	1653	- 5.6	784	+1	7538	+8
1931	4996	-2.1	1570	- 5.0	906	+13	7472	-1
1932	4 905	-1.8	1638	+ 4.2	873	- 4	7416	-1
1933	3 829	-21.9	1395	- 14.8	903	+ 3	6127	-17
1934	3 307	-13.6	1288	- 7.7	586	-35	5181	-15
1935	3 725	+11.2	1259	- 2.3	517	-11	5501	+5
1936	3 831	+ 2.8	1416	+11.1	462	-10	5709	+4
1937	4 702	+18.5	1571	+ 9.9	488	+5	6761	+16
1938	6 893	+31.8	1899	+17.3	521	+6	9313	+27
Total	77 387		27977		12837		118 201	

Source: Annual Report of the Straits Settlement, Vol. 7-11, SS Annual Departmental Report, 1920-1938





Source: Annual Report of the Straits Settlement, Vol. 7-11 SS Annual Departmental Report, 1900-1938

Fig. 1: The Overall Crimes in Singapore, Penang and Melaka in 1900-1938.

after the economic slowdown which took place in the early 1920s. It is important to note that the economic slowdown in the early 1920s had caused unemployment and tough living conditions to the people. Therefore, widespread criminal activities could be witnessed during that period of time. When the economic started to recover, however, the problem of unemployment started to reduce, and the living conditions of the people in the Straits Settlements also began to improve. Thus, the crime rate was also reduced at that time.

The increase in the number of crimes in the Straits Settlement during 1920-1938 is illustrated in Table 3. Singapore was still the leading state with the highest crime rates among the three states of the Straits Settlements. In Singapore, the criminal activities increased in 1920-1921, 1922-1923 and also 1924-1925 because of global economic slowdown. In Melaka and Penang, however, the crime rates decreased in 1920-1921 and 1922-1923, but it showed the a similar trend with Singapore when the crime rates increased in 1924-1925. Once again, the crime rates in Melaka and Penang dropped in 1926-1927. The three states shared the same trend throughout

the periods of 1928-1929 and 1930-1931, with an increase in the crime activities in all the states. This trend changed in the period of 1932-1933, when the crime rates only decreased in Penang and Singapore but increased in Melaka. Similarly, there was a similar trend between the three states in 1934-1935 when the crime rates dropped simultaneously. In 1936-1937, the crime rates declined in Melaka, while Penang and Singapore showed an increasing trend in crimes for the same period

### CRIMINALS IN THE STRAITS SETTLEMENTS BY RACE AND GENDER

The population in the Straits Settlements was made up of the multi-ethnic society consisting of Malays and immigrants of other ethnics. This means that the criminals in the Straits Settlements were from the multi-ethnic society. Based on the Straits Settlements Prison's Report, the nationality and race of the criminals admitted to the prison could be identified.<sup>27</sup> The number of criminals jailed here included only the those who had undergone trials and were sentenced

to either jail or death sentence depending on the offences committed. To ease the supervision of the prison, the numbers and particulars, such as the criminals' race and nationality, were recorded. Table 4 shows the diversity of the race for the criminals in the Straits Settlements for the period of 1930-1938.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, almost all the records by the British did not indicate the ethnicity of the criminals, both in the Straits Settlements and any other British settlements.<sup>29</sup>

Table 4 shows that 99.6% of the total criminals in 1930 were Asians, and only 0.4% was European. The Asian society here refers to the various ethnics, with Malay<sup>30</sup> contributed to 1.8% of the total criminals in 1930, Chinese (92.4%),<sup>31</sup> Indians (5%)<sup>32</sup> and other nationalities that were not specified (0.4%). When the criminals were compared, the number of those from the Asian and European society declined by 0.1% in 1931, in accordance with the decline in the number of criminals in prison for that particular year. The reduction in the number of criminals during the economic slowdown is considered as strange because of this scenario usually produces more criminals, but that was not the case in 1931. This was because in that year, the government took measures to send more immigrants to their home country, especially the Chinese labourers, and blocking the entry of

male immigrants to the Straits Settlements. As a result, there was a reduction of 3.1% of the Chinese criminals in the area for that period. However, the number of Malay and Indian criminals increased for the same year. This could be easily understood since there was economic instability at the point of time that had led to the rise in the criminal activities. Therefore, it is clear that the decline in the number of Asian criminals resulted from the reduction in the number of the Chinese criminals and those of other races who were sent into prison in that year. In 1932, the number of Asian offenders increased as much as 1109. Unfortunately, data related to their ethnicity were not available. On the other hand, the number of the European criminals declined by about 10 people compared to their number in 1931.

Similarly in 1933, the number of the Chinese and Indians criminals declined as a result of the British policy in sending the Chinese and Indian immigrants back to China and India to solve unemployment problem and also due to the banishment of the punishment sentenced to hardcore criminals. The number of the Malay criminals also increased because of the tough living condition during the era of economic slowdown, whereby depression caused them to commit crimes.

TABLE 4  
Criminals in the Straits Settlements According to Race, 1930-1938

Year	Asians								Total Asians	%	Eur	%	Total
	Malay	%	Chinese	%	Indians	%	Others	%					
1930	215	1.8	10970	92.4	592	5.0	53	0.4	11830	99.6	44	0.4	11874
1931	325	3.0	9647	89.3	757	7.0	43	0.4	10772	99.7	34	0.3	10806
1932	*	--	*	--	*	--	*	--	11881	99.7	33	0.3	11914
1933	540	0.7	7073	86.8	502	6.2	17	0.2	8132	99.8	16	0.2	8148
1934	935	15/6	4592	76.8	401	6.7	21	0.4	5949	99.5	28	0.5	5977
1935	964	10.9	6896	78.5	753	8.6	147	1.7	8760	99.7	27	0.3	8787
1936	*	--	*	--	*	--	*	--	8794	99.4	51	0.6	8845
1937	701	9.0	6099	78.7	711	9.2	191	2.5	7702	99.4	44	0.6	7746
1938	342	3.4	9204	91.3	430	4.3	49	0.5	10025	99.5	54	0.5	10079
Total	4022		54481		4146		521		83845		331		84176

\*Data not found; Eur – European. (Source: SS Departmental Annual Report, 1930-1938)



As for the locals, they could not be sentenced to banishment or to be sent home. This had apparently increased the number of Malay criminals. A comparison made in 1934 and 1935 revealed that the rate of the Malay criminals continued to increase, while the number of the immigrant criminals declined in 1934, although it increased again in 1935. The recovery of the economic conditions from the recession led to the withdrawal of restrictions on the entry of the Chinese and Indian immigrants into the Straits Settlements, while the number of the immigrants to be sent home in the Straits Settlements was reduced. This consequently contributed to the increasing number of Indian and Chinese criminals.

1936 witnessed the increase in the number of criminals from Asia and Europe. Meanwhile, the year 1937 was filled with various turbulences involving the Chinese (such as Sino-Japanese War) which saw a reduction in the criminal rates for the entire majority races - Chinese, Indian and Malay. Besides, more criminals were sentenced to banishment, while many Chinese immigrants were sent home because of their involvement in the crimes spurred by their anti-Japanese spirit and the influence of the communist elements. Similarly in 1938, the number of the Chinese criminals increased as the spill-over effect of the turbulence which had occurred in the previous year. This situation contributed to the increase in the Asian criminals even though the Malay, Indian and criminals of other races continued to decline. The majority of the criminals were the Chinese, while the Malays and Indians were ranked as second. European and other Asian criminals were very low in rates. There were not many Europeans who became criminals in the Straits Settlements. The actual number of the European criminals were 68,392 persons for the period of 1932-1937, as compared to the Chinese (847,914 persons) and Indians (622,441 persons) for the same period.<sup>33</sup> The majority of the criminals were Chinese because of their involvement in triads and gangs.

There were also women who involved in criminal activities in the Straits Settlements although the number was far lower than the male

counterparts. Statistic showed that the smallest percentage of the female criminals was in 1930, with only 2.3% from the total number of criminals for the said year. Nonetheless, the subsequent years saw an increase in the percentage of female criminals in prison compared to the male criminals. Such increases could be associated with the entry of more female immigrants into the Straits Settlements in the 1930s because the economic recession during that time forced the colonial government to impose restrictions on the entry of male immigrants. However, this restriction was not applied on the female immigrants. Thus, this was the reason for the decline in the percentage of male criminals in 1931. Furthermore, the British colonial government practiced the policy of sending more male immigrants to their country of origin to avoid unemployment. Therefore, 1937 also saw the lowest percentage of the male criminals in prison in the Straits Settlements. This decrease certainly had the connection with the decline in the crime rates triggered by gangsters, banishment sentences imposed on criminals, and the communist elements that had threatened the security of the Straits Settlements. On the other hand, the highest percentage of the female criminals was recorded in 1937, with 9.2% of the total number of criminals recorded. This could be closely linked to several developments that occurred during that time, such as the rise of the extreme nationalism among the Chinese due to Sino-Japanese War. Meanwhile, the highest rates recorded for the male criminals were in 1930, which was immediately right before the enforcement of laws that restricted the entry of the foreign immigrants into the Straits Settlements.

It is generally normal that the criminal activities committed by men are higher than those by women. Studies conducted by Criminology experts revealed that the criminal activities conducted by female criminals would always be lower than male criminals no matter where the study was conducted (Sheley, 1979, p. 59). Cesare Lombroso assumed that this happens because women naturally do not have the desire to get involved with crimes while men have the

initiative to do so.<sup>34</sup> This is because men usually play the role of breadwinner and have to bear the burden of the family, while women are normally housewives. This is consistent with the situation in the Straits Settlements, where there were many male Chinese and Indian immigrants who had migrated to the Straits Settlements to find themselves jobs and livelihood. This situation certainly contributed to the high number of the male criminals in the area. In 1930 for example, the entry of the Chinese and Indian male immigrants amounted to 158,123 and 49,030 people, respectively, while the numbers of the Chinese and Indian female immigrants only amounted to 44,313 and 8,933 people, respectively.<sup>35</sup> The huge differences of 74.3% (153,907 for the Chinese immigrants) and 81.8% (40,097 for the Indian immigrants) between the male and female immigrants clearly indicated the answers for the question on why there were more male criminals compared to the female criminals in the British colonies, particularly in the Straits Settlements.

### CONCLUSION

The occurrence of the criminal activities that occurred in the Straits Settlement before the Second World War is apparently not healthy. Overall, the crimes were increasing in the Straits Settlements even though there were certain years when the crime rates actually declined. Statistics showed that the average of the crime cases in the Straits Settlements was estimated to be 544 cases per year, which could be considered as a high rate. The high crime rates were particularly detected specifically during the economic slowdown in the period of World War I (1914), the economic depression during 1921-1922, 1928-1932 or the rapid economic recovery during 1908-1912. There were also high crime rates during the period of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937-1938. This also showed that the political development in China had also affected the occurrences of crimes in the Straits Settlements. In more specific, the decline in the crime rates was normally detected after the occurrence of certain events. One good example

was the economic recovery after the economic slowdown during World War I. The decline in the crime rates was a good indication because it proved that the colonial government had taken effective measures to tackle the problem. Overall, there were also increases in the property crimes such as theft and burglary, and also crimes like murder each year.

An observation of the development or occurrence of crimes in Singapore, Penang and Melaka before the Second World War revealed a few things that were associated with the criminal behaviour that could actually be explained. The crime rates in all three states of the Straits Settlements showed an up and down trend, depending on the current conditions, especially the economic and social conditions at that point of time. For instance, the development of the overall crime rates for 1900-1919 revealed a declining trend from 6.1% in 1900 to 4.3% in 1919. Meanwhile, the period of 1920-1938 onwards witnessed the opposite trend, with an increase of 4.3% in 1920 to 7.9% in 1938. This trend suggested that the crime rates were actually increasing in tandem with the economic growth in the Straits Settlements.

The study on the rate of crimes involving property in the early years showed inconsistent fluctuations. The trend in the occurrences or development of crimes in those years was more directed to the decline in the crime rate in the early stage, whereby the rate was rather high (8.3%). Meanwhile, the crimes involving properties showed a different development in their trend in the early stages, with a low crime rate of about 4.4% which then increased to 7.7%. Overall, the most common crimes occurred in the Straits Settlements were thefts (86.4%), while the lowest was extortion with only 0.9%.

Based on the studies conducted in prisons in Singapore, Penang and Melaka, it was found that the majority of the criminals in the Straits Settlements were Chinese who normally involved in serious crimes involving properties and crimes committed on human beings. They were also involved in gangsters, triads and opium, which became important elements in the Chinese culture. Their active involvement in

the criminal activities was related to their large number in the Straits Settlements, particularly in Singapore. Based on the statistics for crimes, on the other hand, the percentages of the Malay and Indian criminals were far lower compared to that of the Chinese who contributed around 6% of the total number of criminals for each race. The Malay criminals were made up of the local Malays and other Malay ethnics who migrated from the Dutch East India Islands. However, the records by the British did not particularly differentiate the local Malays from other Malay ethnics that migrated into the Straits Settlements. In terms of gender, majority of the total criminals are made up of adult male criminals. Although there were also teenage male criminals, they were separated from older prisoners to avoid them from being influenced by the latter criminals who had repeatedly been in and out of prisons.

Hence, it could be stated that the economic development played a major role in causing crimes, especially ones involving properties. In other words, the economic growth in the Straits Settlements had led to the increase in the number of crimes such as group robberies. One thing for sure is that these criminal activities declined during the economic slowdown. Similarly, cheating and extortion were more prevalent during the time of rapid economic growth. In addition, economic development also indirectly led to crimes on human beings. When there were crimes involving properties such as group robbery or burglary, they sometimes ended with rape, murder and injuries. This means that although economic growth was good to improve the living standard of the people in the Straits Settlements, it also exposed them to various crimes involving properties and human beings.

From the economic factor as discussed above, it revealed that economic slowdown would also lead to various types of crimes. During the world economic recession in the era of World War I, the criminal activities increased drastically because of the financial problems faced by the society when their wages were reduced while some others lost their jobs. The situation led to the occurrences of crimes,

mainly because the people, especially labourers who did not have sufficient financial resources to meet their needs. Moreover, the increases in the prices of goods, house rental and cost of living were also among the challenging living conditions where people had struggle for their survival. Hence, it was not surprising that criminal activities like theft and burglary increased drastically at that time. Similarly, crimes involving human beings like murder would also increase because stress could cause someone to lose their mind and resorted to committing violent crimes.

By comparison, however, economic slowdown or recession would encourage or lead to more crimes because the poor living conditions and poverty could force people into stealing or robbing to fulfil the needs in their lives. Although economic growth also led to high crime rates, these were usually done by those who wanted to get wealth easily and not due to stress. Criminals who get involved with thefts or robbery during the economic recession would stop doing so when the economic condition became stable because by that time they would have gotten jobs and stable income to ensure their survival.

As for the efforts made by the British administration to tackle the problems involving crimes in the Straits Settlements which were administered by the Government of India (1826-1867) at that time, the three states were also placed under the British administration in London, whereby the efforts to tackle crimes at the early stage were not thoroughly effective successful because of the administration's failure to control the activities of the triads that had led to other criminal activities. Legal and police organizations as the two main aspects in crime prevention were not given enough attention. Moreover, the criminal laws in the Straits Settlements were also based on the ones passed and enforced in India although the situations in India and the Straits Settlements differed significantly. The British administration in London emphasized on the problems involving gangsters and triads in the Straits Settlements. As a result, their efforts to control the Chinese

community in the period of 1867 – 1899 could be clearly seen through the legal aspect and its enforcement by the police. In particular, the Ordinance of Society Registration, Societies Ordinance and all the amendments enabled the British government to identify the number of secret societies or triads and their leaders so that strategies could be planned and carried out to overcome the said problems. In addition, the legal system extracted from India and London was later adjusted in accordance with and to suit the local conditions to assist the police in carrying out their responsibilities as the guardians of peace. The Criminal Penal Code, which is the reference to the British authorities, strictly outlined the type of crimes, penalties and jurisdiction of the parties involved in managing the crimes. Meanwhile, the police only had the power or the authority to arrest criminals who were involved in serious crimes such as murder, rape and robbery. Other cases were placed under the jurisdiction of the court. In other words, the police could not simply arrest anyone (criminals) without having any warrants or court orders.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> British crime laws are based on crime laws in India. Penal Code refers to ordinance created in 1871, adjusted in 1872 and 1882. Refer to *The Laws of the Straits Settlements* (Revised Edition), Vol. 1, 1835-1900, p.v.

<sup>2</sup> *Straits Settlements* (S.S.) No. 12 of 1941, *An Ordinance and Amend the Penal Code*, p. 207.

<sup>3</sup> To the English colonial administration, the significance of these laws was because these laws were accepted and applied to all citizens in the Straits Settlements no matter where they are. Please refer to *The Laws of Straits Settlement*, p. 64.

<sup>4</sup> The interesting part is that these laws were so important for the British that they took initiative to translate the types of crime and their punishments from English to Bahasa Melayu. Please refer to *Straits Settlements (S.S.) Penal Code*, 1884.

<sup>5</sup> Before the establishment of the Straits Settlements, the three colonies were administrated separately by different residents in each state. This indeed gave rise to all sorts of problems in terms of financial problems, human resources, etc. The administration of the Straits Settlements was transferred from India to London in 1867 to overcome these problems.

<sup>6</sup> The government of the Straits Settlements received a lot of complaints from the community about criminal activities committed by prisoners from Hong Kong. Thus, the colonial government stopped sending in Chinese prisoners from Hong Kong to that area.

<sup>7</sup> Penang failed to fulfil British requirement as a military base and trading centre in order to contain the Dutch in Southeast Asia. The island has shallow waters and is not suitable for the placing of 'Akbar' warships. These were the factors that brought changes to the administration centre. Please refer to John Bastin, *Historical Sketch of Penang in 1794*, in *JMBRAS*, Vol.32, Parts 1-2, No. 185 & 186, 1959.

<sup>8</sup> Resident Counsellor assigned to administer the respective states and was responsible to Governor of the Straits Settlements. Governor is appointed by the Commission under the "Royal Sign Manual and Signet". Administrative affairs were (based on the Governor's instructions) conducted in Singapore by the Colonial Secretary, while in Penang and Singapore by a resident counsellor with the help of their respective District officials. Administration of the cities was handled by the Municipal Council in the respective states, while the administration in



rural areas was managed by the "Rural Boards" in each British settlement. Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup>Executive Council headed by Governor of the Straits Settlements was made up of Army Commanding Officer, Colonial Secretary, Resident Counsellor, State Counsel, Treasurer, 2 official members and two unofficial members. Legislative Council is headed by the Governor along with 11 ex-officio members, 2 official members, two appointed members who were not official and 11 unofficial members nominated. Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Laws enacted by the Legislative Council are based Imperial Act of Parliament, Sultan's command in the Council (Orders of the King in Council) and the ordinance of Legislative Council. Refer to Straits Settlements (SS) Government Gazette, January-February 1900, p. 5

<sup>11</sup> Straits Settlement Revenue Detailed (D3-D8). In *Straits Settlements (S.S.) Blue Book Volume 1. 1895*.

<sup>12</sup> Abstract of Revenue and Expenditure and Of Receipts and Payments on Personal Accounts 1901 (C7 - C 11), Straits Settlement, Blue Book, Volume 1, 1895.

<sup>13</sup> This is different from the European countries where the rise of population was resulted from higher birth rate compared to death rate. Refer to P/PER 2/5, 2007/0043775, the Census of British Malaya (The Straits Settlements, Federated Malay States And Protected Malay States of Johor, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu and Brunei, 1921.

<sup>14</sup> English's domination over the Malay states in Malaya, such as Perak, Negeri Sembilan, Selangor and Pahang triggered this phenomenon. The British's attempt to gain profit from Malaya's natural resources, such as crops, tin and rubber trading, had attracted many groups of immigrants to Malaya. They came through the ports of Penang and Singapore and settled there while waiting for the chance to work in the said Malay states.

<sup>15</sup> *Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements 1855-1941*, Vol. 4: 1892-1900, Archive Editions, 1998, pp. 211 – 536.

<sup>16</sup> Not all cases were convicted because there were two cases released by the Chief Police Officer, 193 by the Police Magistrate and 33 cases trialled in the Supreme Court. See S.S. 11/93 9 (2006 / 0000958), *The Straits Settlements (SS) Government Gazette* April - June, Vol. 33, Part 2 for the Year 1899, it 12-13.

<sup>17</sup> S.S 11/89: Supplement to the Straits Settlements Government Gazette, Friday 2 July 1898, in *Straits Settlement Government Gazette*, July - August 1898, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> For all the other extra responsibilities, the Police Chief never received any reward or allowance. Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> The post of Inspector was abolished to save the government spending by eliminating positions that were considered as government's financial burden.

<sup>20</sup> There was too much work burden shouldered by the Police Chief that the Resident Counsellor of Melaka during his Administration Report in 1897 proposed that the Chief Police Officer be excluded from certain responsibilities like being the Chinese Protectorate. He also suggested for the creation of the post called Assistant Superintendent who would take over the patrol duties at all police stations in order to pay the police salaries. See SS Gazette, July-August 1898.

<sup>21</sup> *Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements (SS) 1855-1941*, Vol. 4: 1892-1900, Archive Editions, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> General Resident, 1299/1897, Dismissal of Ong Seng Chye, clerk, Registration of Crime Police, Singapore. For incompetence, memorandum from Secretary of General Resident, Kuala Lumpur, to the Secretary of Colony offices in Singapore, dated 24 February, 1897.

<sup>23</sup> Actually there were a total of 4278 cases involving police misconduct reported but 3933 cases were released by the Chief Police Officer, 83 cases released by the Police Magistrate and only 202 were convicted. Refer to the *Straits Settlements (SS) Government Gazette*, April-June, Vol.32, Part 2, for the Year 1899, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> Although there were cases involving misconducts of police officers which did not have sufficient evidence for conviction, their behaviour was good enough for them to get expelled from the police force. Low salary and high work loads were said to be the causes of many incidents of misconduct involving bribery and extortion. See Annual Report of the Police Force of the Straits Settlements and Conditions for the Year 1899 in *Criminal Straits Settlements (S.S.) Government Gazette*, Part 1, 1900, p. 1-16.

<sup>25</sup> Annual Report of the SS for the Year 1901 by W.T. Taylor, Secretary for the British Colonies.

<sup>26</sup> Sino-Japanese war actually took place in 1894-1895. The second Sino-Japanese War began in 1931 and became worse in 1937.

<sup>27</sup> The British record showed that there were two types of prison for criminals and civil offenders. Please refer to Prison Report by S.S.W. Bartley, 28 Feb 1912. In *Straits Settlements Annual Departmental Report* for the Year 1911, p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> The criminal prison was to place offenders for the criminal offenders as stated under the Penal and other ordinance, except for Penal Code such as the Ordinance of Weapons and Explosives, Ordinance of Opium and others. Refer to report by the Acting Inspector NNS Prisons, G. Hall in *Straits Settlements Government Gazette* April-June 1907.

<sup>29</sup> Prison Report before 1930 merely listed the race to Asiatic offenders who were Malays, Chinese, Indians and other Asians, while all Caucasian offenders were listed as Europeans or Americans. There were also reports that mentioned about the race of the criminals, but did not specify their ethnicity, such as Hokkien, Tamil or Javanese. Refer to the Prison Report By E.G. Broadrick, Esq. Acting Inspector of Prison, NNS in the Straits Settlements (SS) Annual Departmental Report, 1902, p. 93.

<sup>30</sup> All the Malay ethnics, whether they were local Malays or those who migrated to the Straits Settlements from the Malay World, were categorized as Malays by the British Government. These Malay ethnics include Malays from Java, Aceh, Sunda, Madura, Bugis, etc. Please refer to the *Annual Report of Straits Settlement, 1855-1941, Vol. II, 1936-1941, p. 413.*

<sup>31</sup> Chinese Immigrants were made up of various Chinese ethnicity including Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien, Teochew and others. However, all of them were categorized as Chinese to make things easier for the British administration.

<sup>32</sup> Indian immigrants who migrated to Malaya and the Straits Settlements were also made up of various ethnicities, such as Tamil, Malayalam, Telegu, etc. Just like the Chinese and Malays, all the ethnic groups from India were categorized as Indians for easier management by the British administration. Refer to K.S. Sandhu, 1969, *Indians in Malaya: Immigration and Settlement, 1786-1957*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge, p. 97. Also refer to SS Government Gazette, August-September, 1907, p. 1685.

<sup>33</sup> Refer to SS Annual Departmental Report, 1932-1937.

<sup>34</sup> This was related to their roles as housewives, while men had their roles as breadwinner. This situation was different in the Straits Settlements, where there were a lot of female immigrants who worked as labourers, prostitutes, etc. Refer to Cesare Lombroso (1903). *The Female Offender*. New York: Appleton.

<sup>35</sup> The Straits Settlements Report for the Year 1930. By M.B. Shelley, Acting Colonial Secretary, S.S. 27 April 1931, in the Annual Report of SS, 1855-1941, Vol. 9, 1927-1931.