Kongsi and secret societies: governance beyond the colonial state

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The meaning of kongsi

The word *kongsi* has several meanings that shed light on the history of Chinese organisation. In its basic sense it means a partnership or company, a group of people who hold property or conduct business in common. The same word described the self-governing mining communities of western Borneo, the associations of gambier planters and the sworn brotherhoods that the British called secret societies. Modern Singapore uses it in the names of respectable institutions such as the Ngee Ann Kongsi, the Teochew association founded as the Ngee Ann Kun in 1830.[1]

The breadth of the term shows that the Chinese of the Nanyang did not draw a sharp line between commercial partnership, community association and political organisation. A group of men who pooled their capital to open a mine or a plantation also governed themselves, provided for their members and defended their interests against outsiders. The kongsi was an economic enterprise and a small polity at the same time.[2]

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The Tiandihui and the Ghee Hin

The sworn brotherhoods of Singapore descended from the Tiandihui, the Heaven and Earth Society, which arose in Fujian in the mid-eighteenth century with the aim of overthrowing the Manchu Qing dynasty and restoring the Ming.[3] In the Nanyang, far from the Qing state, the brotherhoods lost much of their political purpose and became organisations of mutual aid, labour recruitment and economic control. The Ghee Hin Kongsi, whose name means "Rise of Righteousness", was the first such society in Singapore and is recorded from 1820.[4]

The societies admitted members through elaborate initiation rituals, bound them by oaths and imposed severe penalties for betrayal. They offered protection to newcomers in a town where the colonial police force was small. As late as 1843 the police numbered 133 officers for a Chinese population of 32,132, a ratio that had barely changed by 1865, when 385 policemen served 50,043 Chinese.[5] In this vacuum, the societies organised the recruitment and control of labour on the plantations and in the mines, controlled parts of the revenue farms and settled disputes among their members.

Private order and violence

Like other forms of private order, the societies could turn violent. Rivalries between societies, often coinciding with rivalries between dialect groups and economic interests, erupted repeatedly in fighting. The riots of 1854 between Hokkien and Teochew groups were the most serious of the century and cost hundreds of lives.[6] Other disturbances followed, including riots in Penang in 1867 and the Post Office Riots of 1876 in Singapore.[7]

For the merchants, the societies had two faces. They provided the organisation that controlled labour and enforced obligations in the plantation economy, from which the merchants profited. At the same time their violence threatened property and trade and damaged the reputation of the settlement. Leading merchants were often members or patrons of societies. The boundary between respectable commerce and the world of the brotherhoods was porous.

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The colonial response

The colonial state responded gradually. The Peace Preservation Act of 1867 allowed the banishment of convicted Chinese immigrants. In 1869 the Dangerous Societies Suppression Ordinance required societies to register. The first round of registration recorded ten societies with 618 office bearers and 12,371 members.[8] In 1877 the government created the Chinese Protectorate under William Pickering, who spoke Chinese and became the first Protector of the Chinese.[9] The Protectorate took over some of the functions the societies had performed, such as the supervision of the arrival and employment of migrants.

The decisive step came with the Societies Ordinance of 1889, under which the secret societies were declared illegal from 1890.[10] The societies survived underground after losing their legitimate role in the governance of the community. Their functions passed to the associations, to the Protectorate and increasingly to the institutions of the colonial state.

Assessment

The history of the societies illustrates a general pattern in the development of financial centres: private order precedes and later yields to public order. Where the state is weak, communities create their own institutions for enforcing agreements and keeping the peace. Those institutions can be effective within the community and dangerous beyond it. As the state grows stronger, it takes over their functions, registers or suppresses them and brings their members under a common law.

The transition has costs and benefits. The benefit is the extension of security and enforcement to everyone, regardless of community membership, which widens the circle within which trade and credit can flow. The cost is the loss of local knowledge and informal flexibility that community institutions provided. Singapore's modern combination of a strong state with active community associations, examined in later parts of this book, can be read as a lasting compromise between the two.

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Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Seah Eu Chin" (accessed September 2026): helped establish the Ngee Ann Kun in 1830, which became the Ngee Ann Kongsi in 1845. ↩
2. On the kongsi as a form combining partnership, self-government and mutual aid, see Wang Tai Peng, *The Origins of Chinese Kongsi*, Petaling Jaya, Pelanduk, 1994, and Carl A. Trocki, "Chinese Revenue Farms and Borders in Southeast Asia", *Modern Asian Studies*, 2009. ↩
3. "Heaven, Earth and Brotherhood", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 13, issue 2, July–September 2017: the Tiandihui originated in Fujian in the mid-1700s with the aim of overthrowing the Qing and restoring the Ming. ↩
4. "Heaven, Earth and Brotherhood", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 13, issue 2, July–September 2017: the Ghee Hin Kongsi, Singapore's first secret society, was "formally registered in 1820". ↩
5. Wikipedia, "Secret societies in Singapore" (accessed September 2026): 133 police officers against 32,132 Chinese residents in 1843; 385 policemen against a Chinese population of 50,043 in 1865. ↩
6. The Hokkien–Teochew riots of May 1854 lasted about ten days; the number of deaths is usually given as around 400. See National Library Board Singapore, Infopedia, "Hokkien-Teochew Riots (1854)". ↩
7. Wikipedia, "Secret societies in Singapore" (accessed September 2026), on the Penang Riots of 1867 and the Post Office Riots of 1876. ↩
8. Wikipedia, "Secret societies in Singapore" (accessed September 2026): Peace Preservation Act of 1867; Dangerous Societies Suppression Ordinance of 1869 requiring registration; "10 societies, 618 office bearers and 12371 members were registered in the first round of registrations". ↩
9. "Heaven, Earth and Brotherhood", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 13, issue 2, July–September 2017: William A. Pickering became the first Protector of the Chinese in 1877. ↩

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10. “Heaven, Earth and Brotherhood”, *BiblioAsia*, vol. 13, issue 2, July–September 2017: the Societies Ordinance of 1889 led to secret societies being declared illegal, which took effect in 1890. ↩

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