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A British Labor Settlement Experiment and the Socioeconomic Experience of the Chuah Tamil Settlement in British Malaya

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Abstract

We explore the socioeconomic experience of a group of south Indian Tamil laborers and their families who established the Chuah Tamil agricultural settlement in British Malaya during the Great Depression. These were laborers who, though unemployed, refused to be repatriated to south India. Progressing from subsistence farming to small-scale agricultural production, their settlement evolved into an organized, socioeconomic system. It was also a critical field experiment for the British to assess the viability of a self-generating labor pool. In this article, we examine the social history of the settlers and the development of the Chuah Tamil colony within the context of Britain's overarching desire to create a labor source. Our study contributes to the reconciliation of microsocial history and colonialism, as well as to global labor history more broadly, by situating the settlers' experience and the settlement itself in relation to historical contemporaries.

Keywords: Tamil laborers; settlement; land colonization; Great Depression; Federated Malay States; British Malaya

Introduction

There is now in Malaya a generation of Tamil estate labourers, born in the country, healthy, perfectly acclimatised, speaking Malay, conversant with the laws and customs of the country, and nevertheless with no desire to acquire their 'stake in the country' by taking up land for themselves.¹

In his above remark in 1932, William George Maxwell (Chief Secretary of the Federated Malay States [FMS] from 1921–1926) not only addressed the lack of land colonization on state lands by domiciled south Indian immigrant laborers, particularly among the ethnic Tamil, but he also indirectly recalled a long-standing, but only intermittently materialized, colonial ambition beginning in the late nineteenth century to develop a settled and expandable labor pool through land colonization. In 1932, in the Jimah *mukim* of Port Dickson, a coastal district in Negeri Sembilan, one of the British protectorate Malay states, a Tamil agricultural settlement made up of laborer families was established in a village locally known as Chuah. The

Chuah Tamil settlement was built in a large forested area. Since its founding coincided with the former colonial administrator's remark, at the time the settlement was widely publicized in local newspapers for, as *The Straits Times* put it, "answering Sir George Maxwell's query."² Actually, the establishment of the Chuah Tamil settlement spoke to broader issues for the British that went beyond Tamil land colonization per se. This type of settlement was used as a pretext by the colonial administration to respond to contemporary critics who condemned it for carelessly treating estate laborers like "sucked-out oranges" during the 1930s, when the colonial administration repatriated many laborers due to economic constraints. Tamil settlements were also beneficial for projecting the image that the British were not opposed to migrant labor colonization in Malaya, where they maintained a conciliatory relationship with the native aristocratic class as well as the peasants. In this essay, we frame the Chuah settlement through the lens of a more immediate concern, namely labor shortage, and argue that its socioeconomic development was an experiment by the British to test the creation of a self-generating labor pool.³

The dual purposes of Tamil land colonization as a labor socioeconomic enterprise and a colonial experiment for the preservation and expansion of the labor force in the pre-Second World War period are a less visible picture in Malaysia's labor historiography. This, we suggest, is due to the prevalent usage of the triadic category of colonialism, capitalism, and the institutionalization and racialization of Tamil labor by Parmer, Huff, and Kaur, among others.⁴ We propose that, as Bhattacharya felt was necessary in the context of British-Indian social contact in nineteenth-century India, a social sensitization to the constitution of colonial authority is required.⁵ To this end, we attempt to gain a view of the "ground history" of the Chuah Tamil settlement, as well as its relevance to the British desire to create and promote labor colonies during the 1930s. As we see in the Chuah case, the labor settlement was economically logical for the British, even while its growth marked a new phase in the social history of migrant labor.

By the late 1930s, productive land settlement had become an official policy for retaining and developing a settled labor force. According to the *Malayan Agricultural Journal*, a colonial research periodical, vegetable allotment plots on plantations where laborers worked could develop a "settled labour force in the country."⁶ In fact, the British had strategized for this since 1912, when they implemented the Labour Code, (which was later amended in the 1920s). The code required plantations to settle their laborers on small agricultural allotments to help alleviate food shortages and retain labor.⁷ Although paling in comparison to squatter farming by Chinese immigrants, Tamil allotments during the 1930s economic dip demonstrated the prospect of labor retention.⁸ Tamils at the Permatang, Rubana, and Sungei Ujong estates in the British protectorate states of Selangor, Perak, and Negeri Sembilan participated in fairly large-scale livestock, poultry, and vegetable farming while remaining on the estates as a useful labor force.⁹ Over seventy acres of land in Melaka's Bukit Asahan Estate in the Straits Settlements were also freed up for labor holdings.¹⁰

Unlike allotments, where "only a part of (Tamil labor) appears to have been able to turn to more than makeshift cultivation," the Chuah Tamil settlement grew into a long-term, socioeconomically sustainable agricultural colony.¹¹ As mentioned previously, the settlement received much press coverage at the time of its establishment.

The Malaya Tribune declared it “the only one of its kind in the country.” *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* quoted G.V. Thaver, the settlement’s Colonization Officer, saying it was the “first organised settlement of Indians in Malaya.”¹² It piqued the British administration’s interest, not so much due to Tamil labor-settlers socializing themselves into an agricultural settlement, but because of its emergence as a model example of a socioeconomically functional labor source. The Department of Agriculture specifically selected the Chuah settlement as an instance of a settled labor force produced through sustained agricultural land colonization where land ownership was gradually transferred to the settlers themselves, unlike plantation labor allotments where land ownership belonged to the estates.¹³ It was, in fact, the type of quasi-agriculturist labor settlement that the British had hoped for and occasionally tried but failed to achieve in the 1900s, 1910s, and early 1920s. It was a model of a labor agricultural settlement on state land where cultivation had to be consistent, unlike past colonial “schemes to settle on land in Malaya [that] fizzled out chiefly due to any absence of occupation rights.”¹⁴ The evolution of the Chuah Tamil settlement therefore signified more than just the socioeconomic experiences of its settlers. It also finally infused optimism into a long-standing plan by the British for labor retention through productive settlement,¹⁵ particularly because many of the settlers remained in the country despite state-wide repatriation during the Great Depression.

Initially recruited in small numbers from British India’s Madras presidency in the early nineteenth century, the British imported Tamils en masse to work on rubber estates in the early twentieth century.¹⁶ Malaya’s rubber development, dubbed “the Empire’s most promising gold-dollar earner,” hit a major stumbling block when the labor force was reduced through repatriation in response to a dramatic decline in rubber production in the 1930s.¹⁷ As Krastoka points out, the repatriation, while intended to prevent the growing retention of unemployed Tamils and food shortages, instead created the possibility of labor insufficiency.¹⁸ Amrith estimates that between 1930 and 1932, the labor force was reduced by around 190,000 individuals.¹⁹

Fortunately for the British, by 1932, a generation of local-born, south Indian plantation workers had already domiciled in the FMS.²⁰ No Malayan official involved in the early phases of Tamil mass immigration, commencing in 1907 with the establishment of the Tamil Immigration Fund, would have predicted that by 1934 there would be seventeen thousand local-born Tamil children, and by 1936, over twenty-three thousand.²¹ Vlieland, however, dismissed the number of settled Tamil laborers as a “negligible proportion,” suggesting that they had mostly been “sent back to . . . India,” apparently because they lacked the “intelligence, education, or enterprise to rise . . . above manual labor.”²²

Within a Marxist framework, economic and social historians further limit perspectives on the social activities and agency of settled Tamils by reproducing the narratives of exploited proletariats who, in this context, lacked control over their means of subsistence. This is shown by Sundara Raja and Raymond’s periodization of the marginalized history of the Tamil working-class in colonial and independent Malaya.²³ In contrast, despite the overarching colonial context of labor preservation, we examine the socio-agricultural participation of the Chuah Tamil settlers to demonstrate that it is

possible to write a sub-history of a group of Tamil proletarians who appropriated their own labor to begin agricultural subsistence activities.²⁴ Netto mentions the Chuah settlement, although only briefly,²⁵ as does Sinnappah's work.²⁶ Sandhu provides a quick demographic analysis of the settlement.²⁷ His study, however, suffers from a shortage of primary data. Kim was simply interested in, and never goes beyond, mentioning the Chuah Tamil settlement's development in the depths of the Great Depression in the 1930s.²⁸ Jain's study, published in 1968, is the only specialized work on its evolution and underdevelopment; yet it underutilizes historical sources.²⁹

Benefitting from British colonial sources as well as secondary literature, we begin by tracking early twentieth-century British immigration and immigrant settlement policy prior to 1907, when the Tamil Immigration Fund gave the institutional basis to mass-recruit Tamils. It was at this time that a colonial strategy, albeit a short-lived one, was conceived to habituate Tamils as ad hoc agricultural cultivators in order to retain and expand the labor force. We then identify the Chuah Tamil settlement as a micro-socioeconomic history of Tamil migrant laborers, presenting a field-level picture of how the Chuah settlement functioned as a socioeconomic mitigation space for its settlers as well as a labor settlement colony.

A Colonial Experiment: Agricultural Settlements as a Labor Source

In the early twentieth century, colonial authorities in Malaya attempted to settle Tamil laborers by allowing them to cultivate their own food in agricultural settlements. This was also the Dutch strategy in 1902, when they settled Javanese peasants and their families on East Sumatran estates.³⁰ The difference was that in Dutch Sumatra, the policy was driven by population pressure, while in Malaya, it was due to an expanding immigrant labor force and greater dependency on Siam, a regional rice producer.³¹ The native, traditional rice growers could not be conscripted for large-scale cultivation, so the British basically struck a deal with the Malay sultans, all of whom maintained their sovereignty in the British-protected Malay states, to protect the Malay masses from exploitation. Hence, the FMS administration experimented with "Malaysian subsistence farmers from the archipelago with their families" undertaking food production.³² As such, it was likely more than religious motivation that led the British administration in the protectorate state of Perak to loan a Roman Catholic missionary society \$4,000 in 1899 (headed by H.E. Rene Michael Marie Fee) to open the Kampong Padre Tamil settlement for a group of Tamil settlers to engage in agricultural cultivation.³³

Labor settlement through agricultural settlement entered a policy-making and experimental phase a few years later. In March 1904, a land settlement scheme was proposed at the Conference of Residents in Carcosa, Kuala Lumpur; R.G. Watson, the Land and Mines Commissioner, and F. Belfield, a legal advisor, were among the drafters.³⁴ A. Hale, the Collector of Land Revenue in Kuala Lumpur at the time, also coordinated the settlement of a group of Tamil laborers on agricultural holdings.³⁵ In September 1904, the Seremban division of Negeri Sembilan's Labour Protectorate planned to expand the agricultural colonies for some laborers in Kuala Lumpur.³⁶ W.H. Treacher, the FMS Resident-General, had wanted to

experiment with Tamil labor productivity as subsistence cultivators a year before. He agreed with the United Planters' Association (UPA), a conglomeration of plantation investors, to grant them free land on which to cultivate subsistence foodstuffs.³⁷

British initiatives to transition Tamil laborers to self-sufficiency as a means of promoting immigration and expanding workforce pools were short-lived and mostly forgotten after laborers were mass-hired for rubber production beginning in 1907.³⁸ Subsequently, there were only two other colonial attempts at labor settlement, when the FMS Public Works Department badly ran the Batu Caves Tamil Settlement between 1915 and the 1920s, and in 1919, when E.S. Hose, Director of Food Production, recommended that the families of Tamil laborers be introduced in Briah of Perak under the Krian Irrigation Scheme for commercial paddy cultivation.³⁹

Only during the Great Depression of the 1930s did another phase of labor settlement experiments ensue with significance. Since they were useful for industrial labor, the productive domiciliation of Tamil laborers, especially the unrepatriated and wandering, was pursued to prevent the local labor force from shrinking.⁴⁰ The workers had to be most advantageously settled to maximize their labor. In the 1920s and 1930s, the British occasionally put some unemployed, rootless Tamils, as well as Chinese, to work on vegetable cultivation near *gaols* (jails) to support themselves; the Leper and Decrepit Settlement in Sungei Buloh, Selangor, was established for this purpose.⁴¹ The administration also pushed rubber estates to expedite opening agricultural allotments where unrepatriated rubber estate laborers and their dependents could practice subsistence agriculture. The strategy was, of course, not new. In fact, it borrowed from allotment culture in England, where a land provision passed in 1806 required rentiers to open allotments for the low-income, working-class. The expansion of allotments in England through the Allotments Act of 1887 and the Small Holdings and Allotments Act of 1908 was attempted, in principle, in Malaya with the passing of the Labour Code amendment in 1928.⁴² The revision, which was quickly implemented, required that 1/16th of an acre of grazing land be kept for the labor force and dependents.⁴³ However, save those on the estates of Permatang, Rubana, Sungei Ujong, and Bukit Asahan, allotments elsewhere were underdeveloped and, in some cases, abandoned.⁴⁴

At the same time, some unrepatriated and unemployed Tamils were cultivating on small plots of land on the outskirts of rubber estates. The British wanted them to apply for and occupy state lands, anticipating similar attempts by others to eventually create labor settlements. At the same time, the FMS administration was cautious about granting extensive land entitlements to Tamils (or to even more enterprising Chinese laborers).⁴⁵ Expanding migrant agricultural settlements was, in any case, politically unfeasible due to the constitutional commitment made by the British to the sultans of the Malay states with the 1933 Malay Reservation Enactment, which reserved state lands for native Malays. Although they never formally declared their opposition to immigrant land settlements, the sultans expected the British to guarantee that all native Malay lands were reserved for the exclusive use of the community.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, the 1933 enactment was only effectively used to prevent commercial investors from acquiring Malay lands.⁴⁷ The FMS administration did little to prevent Tamil colonization of lands outside estates. But it was to be a wholly independent

enterprise, meaning that Tamil laborers were expected to attempt it using their own resources and efforts. The establishment of the Chuah Tamil settlement was an example of this.⁴⁸

A Labor-Agricultural Colony: The Chuah Tamil Agricultural Settlement

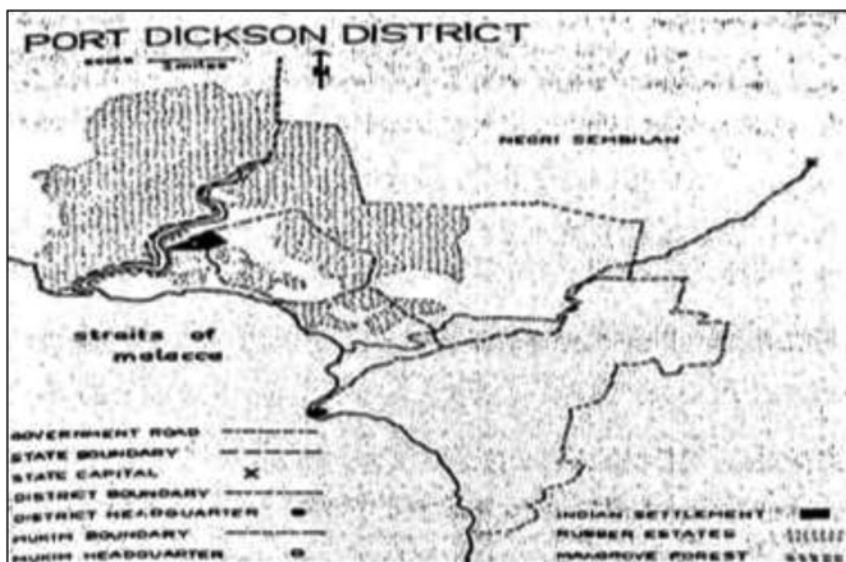
The Chuah Tamil settlement was not only a means for labor socioeconomic stabilization during the Great Depression, but also a site where the British could assess the viability of a self-generating labor pool. It began with spontaneous, unplanned farming by pioneer-settlers, then attracted helpful intervention, before finally gaining colonial approval and cooperation. A group of unemployed Tamil laborers and their families, some of whom worked in Malay gardens in Chuah village, conducted subsistence cultivation for themselves.⁴⁹ They had lived in the country for over two decades and were disengaged from southern India. Malaya was their home in every practical sense. Two of the group's senior members, S. Suppiah and V.A. Muttiah, reportedly led the rest of the pioneers to begin land clearance and cultivation.⁵⁰ Initially, the FMS government was indifferent about the initiative. Between previous unsuccessful outcomes and ongoing Malay land protection policy, it chose to wait until the settlers' bona fides were proven.

The Chuah settlers were practically "squatting" at first. When the settlement was formed, it was a microscale and localized socioeconomic organization, nowhere near the scale of the U.S. "back-to-the-land" movement, although both were about achieving self-sufficiency. Chuah grew from unorganized farming, contrasting with President Ford's careful nurturing of three thousand worker plots and fifty-five thousand home gardens from 1918 through the 1930s.⁵¹ In another comparison, Heartbreak Hill, as well as Hamsterley Forest Instructional Centre, and Swarland Team Valley Trading Estate, all in Northeast England, were areas where holdings were laid out in an organized landscape. Systematic labor colonization was also pursued in Germany in the 1930s as part of the Internal Colonization and Creation of New Peasantry schemes.⁵² The Chuah Tamil settlement was thus not immediately expected to utilize its laborers.⁵³ The British left it to the Tamil immigrants at the settlement to become subsistence farmers, only to integrate them into industry after they had established a strong socioeconomic footing.

Kunhiraman Nair, an Indian Agent deployed from British India, was among the first to assist the settlers. Arguing for Tamil working-class land settlements in the 1930s, he came across the group cultivating a plot of land.⁵⁴ Nair believed that any Indian land settlement scheme might work, provided arable land and occupancy rights were granted.⁵⁵ With his assistance, the settlers applied to the Land Revenue Collector in 1932 for a piece of logging land in the Timber Cutting Reserve.⁵⁶ Land officials were skeptical about the long-term commitment of the settlers. But at the same time, contemporary critics argued that the British should absorb domiciled laborers into agricultural settlement schemes. In 1930, S. Veerasamy, the Indian representative on the Federal Council, proposed that with a permanent labor force in place, the colonial administration would not have to rely on foreign countries for laborers.⁵⁷ He cited the high cost of repatriation for the government—\$1,278,145 in 1931 and at least \$900,835 in 1932.⁵⁸ An article in *The Straits Times* in 1933

warned of a labor shortage. It was remarked that repatriated laborers would almost certainly never return to Malaya if irrigation projects in southern India brought huge swaths of paddy land into cultivation and provided them with employment.⁵⁹ Therefore it made sense to evaluate if the Chuah Tamil settlement could supply laborers to the five surrounding European-owned estates: Waless, Sungei Nipah, Tanah Merah, Sepang, and Telok Merbau Estate (see [Map 1](#)). The British came to believe that with Nair's involvement, the laborers would be better directed to settle themselves through "sympathetic guidance" and opt for laboring when they felt necessary.⁶⁰ In late 1932, there was a promising sign when, as settlement development began, some of the male pioneers were occasionally hired part-time on the neighboring estates.⁶¹

M.V. Tufo, the District Officer, L.D. Gammons, Assistant Director of Cooperatives, Mc Nee, Drainage and Irrigation Engineer, and J.W.W. Hughes, Negeri Sembilan British Resident, then all agreed to consider the land application by the Tamil settlers.⁶² They did, however, want to confirm their capability as pro tem subsistence cultivators, so they stipulated that a Permanent Occupation License (POL) be issued only after all premiums, survey fees, and yearly land rent were paid in full. The yearly fee rate of \$10 (Straits dollar) per acre set was high in light of the fact that the colonial land rate to entice rubber investors was just \$2 per acre in 1899, considerably lower in the 1900s at \$1 per acre, and never exceeded \$4 per acre until the late 1920s.⁶³ A survey fee of \$20 per four-acre plot was added to the \$2 yearly deduction per acre.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the British administration retained the authority to evict without notification. This would have put off settlers who expected tenement security. They eventually agreed on a Temporary Occupation



Map 1. The Location of Chuah Tamil
Source: Jain, "Ramanathapuram Experiment," 165.

License (TOL), paying one dollar per acre.⁶⁵ In September 1932, a joint TOL was issued to sixty-nine families based on the recommendation of the Land Revenue Collector.⁶⁶ Thirty-nine received four acres each, fourteen received three acres, and sixteen received two acres.⁶⁷

Although large areas were eventually planted, the settlement was still in its infancy.⁶⁸ Initially, due to financial constraints, the settlers were unable to build homes or purchase agricultural tools.⁶⁹ They had to raise capital by pledging their own assets and using their savings from selling cultivated crops.⁷⁰ The settlers opted to open the area more actively in order to quickly begin farming for sale; indigenous settlers from the forest hinterlands helped the Tamil laborers clear the land. After the trees were felled, makeshift huts were built out of bark and jungle wood. Houses were built as soon as the TOL was granted. The settlers then spent more time clearing and cultivating their plots.⁷¹ Portions of the land were set aside for a cemetery and grazing grounds, as well as for the construction of a temple dedicated to the Hindu deity Shiva.⁷² The agricultural and drainage departments of the British administration provided technical help. After seeing that the settlers were forced to transport themselves by boat, they paved a road through the settlement. Five main drains were widened and dug deeper by 1933.

In June 1933, the Chuah Tamil settlement officially opened. However, Malay nationalists were unhappy since it was only four miles from the Chuah Malay village. They contended that it would lead to the establishment of more such settlements by migrant laborers.⁷³ They questioned the political appropriateness of settling Tamil laborers on their lands.⁷⁴ It was argued that because the Tamils migrated as temporary workers and were not genuine settlers, they were not entitled to “equal rights with the Malays and facilities for taking up and holding government land”.⁷⁵ And they insisted that the only races eligible to permanently settle beside the Malays were those of the Alam Melayu (Malay Archipelago). Some colonial administrators agreed, believing it was vital for homogeneity since other Malaysians, such as the Bugis, Banjarese, and Javanese communities neighboring the Tamil settlers in Chuah, could more readily adapt to the Malay peasant lifestyle.⁷⁶

Despite objections, the Chuah Tamil colony was actively organized. It was run by the General Purposes Co-operative Society and employed a self-management system. This had been a condition for the issue of occupation licenses, which were not granted to individual settlers but were owned collectively by members of the co-operative.⁷⁷ Thaver—Chuah’s Colonization Officer, Negeri Sembilan’s Co-operative Officer, and President of the Malayan Indian Association (MIA)—was put in charge.⁷⁸ He kept track of the settlement’s general affairs and managed its account book, which was written in the Tamil language.⁷⁹

Due to the persistence of another Indian Agent, K.A. Mukundan, the British were compelled to provide schooling.⁸⁰ The Mukundan Tamil Pathsala was built in 1933 on a six-acre plot for the settlement’s some sixty school-aged children.⁸¹ Another Tamil school opened in 1936.⁸² The co-operative was in charge of educational matters such as curricula, teaching personnel, and facilities.

The settlers were also urged to save with the co-operative in order to support settlement development initiatives. They made monthly deposits to accumulate the money to pay premiums, land rents, and survey costs. Indeed, the construction of

Table 1. Share Capital and Deposits (in Straits Dollar) of the Sixty-nine Chuah Settlers in the Cooperative Society, 1937–1939

Share Capital and Deposits/Year	1937	1938	1939
Share Capital	\$2,766	\$2,766	\$2,766
Deposits	\$852	\$787	\$450

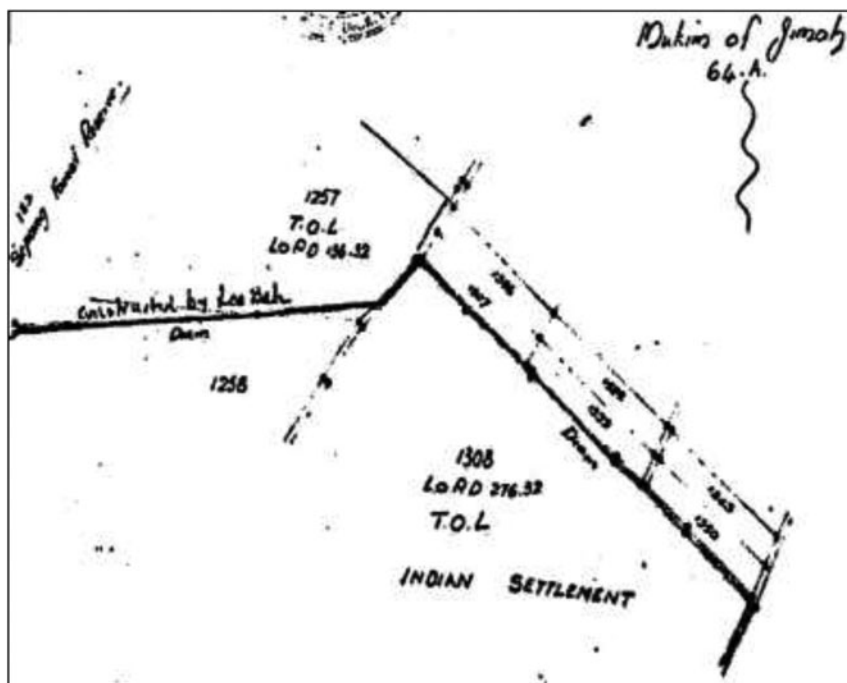
Source: CO 435/3-4 (Negri Sembilan, Sungei Ujong and Jelebu Sessional Papers), Annual Reports on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of Negeri Sembilan for the year 1937, 1938 and 1939.

fifty-one houses in 1932 was paid for completely with pooled funds.⁸³ Table 1 shows the share capital and deposits of Chuah settlers in the co-operative toward the end of the decade. Deposits, however, were declining. Some of the settlers likely withdrew money for personal and family reasons. It is also probable that during that economic period the settlers were not making enough money selling agricultural products. The co-operative had not set restrictions on selling or mortgaging the land. As a result, the settlers were able to sell their lands to Chinese capitalists or mortgage them to Chettiar (Tamil financial capitalists) moneylenders.⁸⁴

Farming activity did not take off when the TOL was granted. Only after Hughes declared the settlers eligible for POL in 1935 and granted it in 1936 did agricultural activity accelerate. Crop cultivation and animal husbandry became the settlement's mainstays. Because the settlement was bordered by mangrove forest and the Sepang River, it benefited from its topography of flat terrain on coastal plains with clay alluvial deposits for cultivation (see Map 1).⁸⁵ Peat soil compounds, formed from the accumulation of plant residues, were used as natural manure for crops.⁸⁶ The settlers planted a variety of food crops for their personal sustenance as well as for sale.⁸⁷ Rice and millet were the initial crops, although both were susceptible to rat infestation. The Tamil settlers also cultivated “bananas, tapioca, sweet potato, sugar cane, eddoes, ragi maize, brinjal, and even tobacco.”⁸⁸ The settlers did not conduct rotational planting in order to preserve soil fertility.⁸⁹

Tapioca and sweet potatoes were farmed extensively after the settlement received the POL. Surplus was sold to local Chinese pig keepers for feed.⁹⁰ Onions, ginger, and sesame were also grown. To supplement their nutritional intake, the settlers grew maize and green vegetables. Fruit trees were planted around the homesteads.⁹¹ Since mangrove trees surrounded the settlement, the settlers supplemented their income by selling mangrove bark, which was also used to build dwellings.

Livestock farming was one of the most important economic activities for the Chuah Tamil settlers. Pig breeding was the most profitable of all. By the late 1930s, the settlement had seven hundred pigs and two hundred goats.⁹² The pigs were housed in sheds with slatted floors. Since the pig feces were gathered for manure, the ground beneath the floor was filthy. The goats were fed in stalls and housed in raised sheds.⁹³ They were given homegrown tapioca tops and jack fruit leaves. Not only did the settlers avoid buying goats for consumption, they also sold them for extra money. However, they had difficulty producing poultry since chickens and ducks often ruined their vegetable gardens. The livestock produced useful natural fertilizer. Manure was also gathered from the cattle. In comparison to the Kampong



Map 2. Proposed Drainage (in bold) for the Chuah Tamil Settlement

Source: Land Office of Port Dickson (L.O.P.D) 27/1935, Asks Permission to Construct a Drain along the Access on the North of the Indian Settlement to Drain out the Land, September 20, 1935.

Padre settlers, who Mukundan noted were only barely participating in agriculture during the 1930s depression, agricultural activities in the Chuah colony were more diversified and actively pursued.⁹⁴

The Chuah Tamil settlers were largely healthy thanks to their crops, barring a malaria outbreak in the mid-1930s and then again in the 1940s, blamed on wet days. A plugged drain was another possible culprit. Repairs were often postponed owing to disagreement with the neighboring Chinese colony. According to Thaver, in 1935 the Chinese settlers opposed a plan to connect the Tamil and Chinese settlement drainage systems in order to drain water from the Sepang River.⁹⁵ Malaria cases eventually decreased as a result of a colonial Health Department awareness campaign.⁹⁶ The Departments of Agriculture and Irrigation and Drainage also routinely inspected agricultural plots for mosquito breeding grounds.⁹⁷

Despite the settlement's growth as a self-sufficient agricultural colony, the Tamil settlers, particularly those who were young and physically able, were not always full-time farmers. By the late 1930s, some worked on neighboring estates to supplement their income, cutting into their farming hours. The settlers had reverted to wage laboring. The Department of Agriculture determined that the settlers had found employment on nearby estates and only tended their agricultural holdings in the late afternoon after work.⁹⁸ Wage laboring was attractive, especially when agriculture

sales were down. Furthermore, when the Kangany labor recruitment system was abolished in 1938, the Chuah settlers were tempted by the increasing demand for locally available laborers. By 1940, agriculture was something they performed in their leisure time; millet seeds were kept on hand solely for sowing purposes and never sold. Only when they were done with work would the settlers return to their fields. Some of them also worked on the food plots of Chinese squatters and in Malay gardens.⁹⁹

The history of the Chuah Tamil settlement during the Second World War, when Malaya was occupied by the Japanese, cannot be fully traced due to a lack of primary and secondary sources. But the settlement certainly continued to exist. When Japanese troops built a camp along the Nipah River, the settlers offered them tapioca and chicken in exchange for not being harassed.¹⁰⁰ Some settlers were recruited to work on the construction of the Burma-Siam railway.¹⁰¹ Little attention has been paid to the history of Chuah settlement in the reconstituted colonial states of the Malayan Union (1946–1948) and the Federation of Malaya (1948–1957).

Concluding Remarks

The socioeconomic experiences of the Chuah Tamil laborers and their dependents have been constructed within the context of colonial economic logic in this article. Unbeknownst to them, the Chuah settlers were participating in order to preserve their own labor, demonstrating to the British that self-generating labor was more effective than colonial-aided Tamil land colonization. Past colonial attempts were generally short-lived and failed to mobilize wider support within the Tamil working-class for sustained land colonization.¹⁰² The Chuah Tamil settlers began agricultural land colonization during the 1930s Great Depression, a timely socioeconomic move for them as well as a critical field experiment for the British to study the establishment of a labor reservoir through an agricultural settlement.

The settlers gradually built a form of social cohesiveness not commonly associated with the Tamil working class in British Malaya. A temple and, more crucially, two schools were key social elements. A democratic impetus drove their collective control of the settlement through a co-operative organization. The settlers eventually established a self-sufficient agricultural economy, though the workers gravitated to non-agricultural work.

Chuah Tamil land colonization, which emerged from a colonial spatial unit, is a critical local social experience that is globally comparable. Diagnosing labor agency in the context of Chuah settlers initiating and expanding their settlement's agricultural basis is beneficial in depicting them as responsive labor in order to give them a legitimate global/transnational role. We identify this as a particular contribution of micro-spatial viewpoint in nuancing global labor history by integrating on-the-ground labor experiences—most vividly seen from a micro-perspective—into a global framework. While the Great Depression promoted subsistence farming among native inhabitants all over the world—from the Appalachians in the United States to native cultivators in Southeast Asia, including Malay peasant cultivators in Malaya—the Chuah Tamil settlement's history is a case study of South Asian labor migrants' experiences with agricultural activities in a micro-social space. The Chuah Tamil settlement is then presented as a localized, colonial case for a growing,

parallel interest in global labor history in downscaling “the global” from its macro-analytical framework to a more micro-spatially conscious approach, as De Vito and Gerrisen argue.¹⁰³ They argue for—and the Chuah case demonstrates—“production of locality” for a spatially sensitive global labor history.¹⁰⁴ This may be beneficial for Ghobrial, who wants to examine how reconciling microhistory and global history may appear in practice.¹⁰⁵

A final thought: Colonial records helped us learn about the history of the Chuah colony and its settlers, as well as the British labor retention goal behind it. We see a potential for recovering Tamil labor agency buried in the largely “colonial” archives of south Indian laborers in Malaysia. This may allow, among other things, for the writing of their social history alongside the history of their proletarianization in British Malaya.

Notes

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Assistant Labour Controller, R. Boyd, Co-operative Director, Dr. S.R. Krishnan, Dr. V. Paniker, Dr. S. Rama, S. Thamby Rajah J.P., S.S. Pillay, Goh Eng Thye, G. Suppiah, and G.V. Thaver ("Indian Settlers of Chuah," *The Straits Times*, November 17, 1936, 17).

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