The 1876 Chinese post office riot in Singapore

The 1876 Post Office Riot is often lumped together with other nineteenth century Chinese secret society riots in Singapore, but it was in fact the owners of Chinese remittance agencies who instigated the riot to defend their new business practices against an intrusive colonial state trying to regulate modern transportation and communication networks.

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AT 7:30 IN THE MORNING of 15 December 1876, an Indian police officer of the Singapore colonial government noticed a crowd of Chinese reading a placard at the corner of Philip and King Streets. The placard offered a 100 tael reward for the capture of two Teochew (Taizhou) blacklegs, Kong King Chung and Ong Kong Teng, who were opening the new Chinese Sub-Post Office (批信局) to handle letters and remittances to China, at 81 Market Street at 8 o'clock that morning.

Less than an hour later, someone in the crowd gathered outside the Sub-Post Office threw a brickbat inciting the mob to ransack the office. Police arrested 40 rioters, most of whom received a caning and a term of ‘gross improper conduct’. Deciding that the dead men were secret society members, the colonial government interrogated the arrest of Lim Ah Tye, the leader of the Teochew (taizhou) branch of the ghee hin (桂平) secret society. The government also detained a number of Chinese agents representing the amount sent by each remitter. The structure of their letter and remittance networks, and the agents’ profit-making strategies, rapidly changed in the 1860s and 1870s with the arrival of new communications and transportation technologies.

Network empire, nation, and colony

The arrival of steamships in the 1840s, the opening of the submarine telegraph telegraph network, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, and the inauguration of modern postal services, helped usher in the era of high imperialism in Southeast Asia, but they also allowed overseas agents to increase their profits. To take advantage of these opportunities, overseas agents transformed themselves into Qiaopiju (侨批局), literally Overseas Letter Offices, specializing in moulding and transporting labor overseas, shipping goods and letters throughout the diapcoric arc, and providing remittance and other banking services to overseas Chinese.

The Qiaopiju firms also developed a set of new business practices. To limit their liability, Qiaopiju owners stopped transmitting currency and shifted to small slips of paper known as pixin (批信) representing the amount sent by each remitter. They placed the slips inside a small parcel, referred to as a ‘clubbed package’ (结包), and entrusted it to the supercargo of a China-bound ship. Instead of charging large remittance fees, the firms used this procedure to retain the remittances as a form of temporary capital over the time it took the ship to reach its destination. The capital was used to purchase goods in Southeast Asia, sell them in Hong Kong or coastal China, and then pay the remittances. Qiaopiju owners also used the funds to engage in exchange rate speculation between their interests in Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, and China to make their profits. Lastly, to protect the remitter, the Qiaopiju also provided huipi (批单), a return receipt, that not only verified delivery, but also included a short note from the recipient as a check against fraud.

This new business model increased profit margins, allowing Qiaopiju firms to expand to new locations, and provided more security for remitters.

The Singapore colonial government and the Qiaopiju in the 1870s

In the 1860s and 1870s, national and colonial officials throughout the world sought to define and enforce postal monopolies to control and regulate communications and transportation networks. In Singapore, Postmaster General Henry Trotter (served 1871-1872) first breached the subject of dismissing the Qiaopiju firms in mid-1872, claiming they were violating the terms of the India Post Office Act of 1866, making the post office a government monopoly. The Qiaopiju not only violated a state monopoly, Trotter argued, but shouldered off a significant portion of state revenue. The Singapore Legislative Council considered the proposal, but the Attorney-General rejected it on the grounds that the independent post office, with postal matters within the jurisdiction of colony, included Singapore, but not China.

The Legislative Council’s discussion sparked the interest of two Qiaopiju owners in Penang, Ong Kong Chang and Ong Kong Teng, who volunteered to act as a monopoly agent for the Singapore Post Office. The Qiaopiju owner Ong Kong Teng, who volunteered to act as a monopoly agent for the Singapore Post Office.

In mid-1876, Governor Jervois created a modified system that made the Qiaopiju colonial sub-postmasters thus circumventing uncertainty about international postal law. Under Jervois’ scheme, the Qiaopiju did not have a monopoly on the collection of remittances, but did have one on their transmission. As Jervois explained, any Chinese firm could collect remittances, but all remittances had to be cleared by the government department, both stamped and sent either through the Sub-Post Office, or through the General Post Office. Jervois’ fundamental mistake was in believing the Qiaopiju profited on remittance fees, but he was unaware that their business practices required control over remittance time. By transforming the Qiaopiju into remittance collecting agents of the state, Jervois removed their ability to use the new communications and transportation networks to profit on remittances as a form of temporary capital. The owners of the Qiaopiju firms, using the secret societies to organize the protest, instigated the riot against the interventionist state to defend their new profit making strategies.

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Notes
1 The above narrative and quotes that follow are based on Strouts Times (16, 23, and 30 Dec. 1876, 19 May and 4 Aug. 1877, Strouts Times Overseas [21 Dec. 1876, 5 Jan., 1 Sept. 1877], and The Straits Observer (20 Dec. 1876.).

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Cabinet Photograph of Sir William Jervois (1821-1897), Governor of the Straits Settlements (1875-1877).