



THE CHANGING AND DECLINE OF JOHOR KANGKAR SETTLEMENTS: A CASE STUDY OF MUAR, JOHOR

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Abstract:

Kangkar is a traditional Chinese historic settlement in Johor, which established during Kangchu system from 1844 to 1917 represents strong historical significance in the Chinese architectural paradigm. However, the number of *kangkar* settlements decrease drastically from 100-120 to less than 20 in current context. This article aims to identify the possible reasons of *kangkar* decline in order to give insight in developing conservation policy for the historic settlement. Historical method was employed through archival research, literature review, and historical cartography; while field trip was carried out to examine the current development of *kangkars*. The findings revealed that 75% of *kangkars* are lost while the rest of 25% have been survived at least partly in today's context. The establishment of New Village Resettlement and development of new town near to the *kangkar* settlements greatly contributed to the diminishing of *kangkars* at Muar. In short, the identification of reasons contributes to decline of *kangkars* act as the lessons to be integrated in traditional village conservation or town development planning in the future. This could avoid further neglect, gradual deterioration, and destruction of the traditional environment built with the experiences gained over the centuries.

Keywords:

Kangkar, Chinese Settlement, Muar, Johor

Introduction

Kangkar settlements were established in Johor from 1844 to 1917 through Kangchu system by the Johor ruler Temenggung Daeng Ibrahim (Coope, 1936; Jackson, 1965; Trocki, 1979).

There were several different types of Chinese settlements exist after Kangchu system, which include New Village by British intervention after appointment of British advisor in 1914, New Village Resettlement through Brigg's plan to fight against Malayan Emergency from 1948-1960, not to mention other modern residential developments after 1960s due to modernization (Low et al., 2019a). It is undeniable that there were some minor number of Chinese fishing villages exist in Johor before 1844, however the large number of *kangkar* which established in the early time reached up to 100-120 upon the gambier and pepper cultivation (Kolej Selatan, 2004) had drastically changed the landscape as well as development of Chinese settlements in Johor. Irony, the *kangkar* settlements which possess invaluable vernacular assets that bear the traces of past rural life and embody the spirit of cultural significance are declining from time to time. It is urgent to carry out research in identifying the cause of deterioration in order to provide insight of strategies in sustaining the historic *kangkar* settlements and avoid further neglect, gradual deterioration, and destruction of the traditional environment built with the experiences gained over the centuries.

Literature Review

Muar is also known as Bandar Maharani, directly translated as the Town of Empress due to Maharani Fatimah. It was once declared as the second most important and biggest town of Johor after Johor Bahru in those days. Before Chinese came to Muar in a large batch through *kangchu* system, Muar was already rich in history. There was Malay communities resided along Sungai Muar and Kesang before mid of 19th century (Abdul Malek Munip, 1984). The Malay villages were scattered in Muar with a few of them found in hinterland of Sungai Muar.

Although the modern Muar town found by Dato' Bentara Luar in 1884, however Chinese was relatively active in gambier and pepper plantation through *kangchu* system before that year. *Surat sungai* were generously granted to Chinese from 1881 to 1883 along Sungai Muar. A Chinese Kapitan, Chua Tuah Soon was even elected in 1886 due to the growing Chinese population in Muar. In 1904, Chinese was the largest population at Muar, while they were the people who came and cultivated for gambier and pepper plantations (Abdul Malek Munip, 1984).

Muar lies at the most northern part of Johor district, acts as the last district received Chinese immigrant under *kangchu* system. Comparing to Johor Bahru, *kangkar* settlements were established as earlier as 1844, while Muar was thirty-seven years late than the former. Throughout different historical periods, Johor Bahru is undergoing rapid urbanisation while the speed of urbanisation in Muar is slower than Johor Bahru. It is believed that by selecting Muar as the case study could provide a more comprehensive and rich data compare to other districts.

Methodology

By referring the aim of the research to identify the reasons of *kangkar* decline, a study which requires both historical layer and contemporary phenomena is needed. The past data is collected through historical method which comprises of archival research, literature review, as well as historical cartography. On the other hand, field trip is carried out to collect contemporary data in enriching the research data collected from historical method.

Historical Method

Historical method which is originated from history discipline will be employed to study for the past data. Although it is not fall under the architectural field, however it started to be employed in current field recently (Groat & Wang, 2013). Since Kangchu system was implemented from 1844 to 1917, historical method is essential to investigate elements from the history. In addition, the study of the past day will also help to develop and provide insight of conservation guideline (Spilackova, 2012).

Archival Research

Archival data refer to information that already exist and originally generated for reporting purpose. It is often kept because of legal requirements and it is not subject to change. At the same time, it is an important tool of data gathering that is focused on the past and its impact on the present. When it is used systematically with information drawn from other sources, archival research can give a hint on the past and its relationship with current context (Stan, 2012).

Surat sungai was an official legal document produced by the Johor government to grant the Chinese immigrants for opening *kangkar* and permission to plant gambier and pepper (Coope, 1936; Trocki, 1979). The archival records of *surat sungai* are listed in two registers known as *Buku Daftar Surat-surat Keterangan Berkebun 1844-1902 (SKMK-I)* and *Buku Daftar Surat-surat Keterangan Membuka Kebun Gambar dan Lada Hitam Johor 1880-1908 (SKMK-II)*.

The other important catalogues which store in Arkib Negara Malaysia Cawangan Johor such as Commissioners, Lands and Mines (CLM), Survey Office (SO), and General Advisor (GA) provide important information in tracking the changes of *kangkar*.

Literature Review

Literature review or documentary research is carried out as a supplementary data in supporting the archival data. Besides some important literatures listed as in Table 1, other literatures including articles or newspaper articles produced by locals in recording the progress or changes of Muar *kangkar* settlements.

Table 1: Important Literatures Related to Formation of Kangkar Settlements

No.	Secondary Sources (Author, Year)	Description
1	Johore (Lake, 1894)	Location of early <i>kangkar</i> s
2	Johor Archives & Kangchu System 1844-1910: A Bibliographic Essay (Trocki, 1975)	Name and location of <i>kangkar</i> traced from a list of <i>surat sungai</i> translated to English from Jawi as filed in SKMK-I and SKMK-II.
3	Chinese Place - Names in Johore (Cowgill, 1924)	A list of Chinese and Malay names showed the Chinese places in Johor. The names of “kang” and “kangkar” was recorded.
4	Sejarah Ringkas Muar (Shukor Ismail, 1984)	Description of some important settlement including <i>kangkar</i> .

Historical Cartography

Historical cartography not only reflects historical phenomena and events, but also show their cause-and-effect connections. It defines the historical phenomena or events and illustrate the relationship of social development of the past and geographic factors.

Historical maps reveal the origin location of *kangkar* settlements and changes of *kangkar* settlements. The two very important historical maps include Johore, 1893 produced by Harry Lake and Map of Muar and Batu Pahat, 1904 produced by Dato' Bentara Luar shows complete picture of Muar *kangkar* settlements at that period. Besides, several versions of historical maps surveyed by British from 1920s to 1970s capture the changes of *kangkar*.

Field Trip

In order to examine the current development of Muar *kangkars*, field trip is employed to check the existence of *kangkars*. The data collected from field trip is considered as contemporaneous data, used to enrich the research data collected from historical method.

Findings

In the following session, the first part provides a general overview of Muar *kangkar* settlements stated a total of 20 *kangkars* are revealed with the changes being categorised in table form. Three prominent *kangkar* built heritages are discussed in the next section including temple, *tuachu*, and school. The retain naming of *kangkars* as well as decline of *kangkars* are also discussed in the last section of the findings.

Overview of Muar Kangkars

A list of Muar *kangkar* settlements have been produced by cross-checking multiple sources from the author in the past paper in 2019 (Low et al., 2019b). The summary of changes is listed as in Table 2 below; while details of each *kangkar* are explained as in Table 3. From the study, 75% of the *kangkar* settlements have been lost in today's context. 25% of the *kangkar* settlements further developed from the origin of *kangkar* while only 10% of them possess traces of *kangkar* heritage.

Table 2: The Summary of Muar Kangkars

No.	Changes of Kangkar	No	%
1	Yes, traces of <i>kangkar</i> exist	2	10
2	Yes, traces of <i>kangkar</i> lost	3	15
3	Lost	15	75
	TOTAL	20	100

Kangkar Built Heritages

Gerisek and Lenga are the only two which still reserve the *kangkar* built heritages: temple and school which established by Kangchu as well as existence of *tuachu* (administrative point of Kangkar).

Temple

Chinese temple could be the key in tracing the *kangkar* settlement. The importance of Chinese belief and religion avoid the temples diminish due to new development. The temple at Gerisek was believed to be established by Kangchu. The beam of the old temple carved with 1889, which falls within Kangchu period. Figure 1 below shows the photo taken in 2021 during field trip at Gerisek.



Figure 1: Current Front Elevation of Temple Built in 1889

Tuachu

Tuachu or Rumah Besar, translated as “Big House” in English was the center and administration point of the *kangkar* settlement. It had multi-purpose functions such as police station, office, and where people dropped by (Johor Archive No. SO 531, 1913). Figure 2 refers to the *tuachu* of Gerisek, however was collapsed in the year of 2000; while Lenga is the only *kangkar* which has the *tuachu* erected.



Figure 2: Photo of Tuachu at Gerisek

Source: Provided by SJK(C) Pei Eng

School

The establishment of Chinese schools at *kangkar* was found quite late compare to other building components in the settlement. In fact, *kangchu* was one of the founders for Yang Cheng Chinese school in 1935. Although *Kangchu* system was abolished in 1917, the Lenga *kangchu* named Tan Ling Song was responsible in contributing the Chinese education for local community.

Retain of Kangkar Names

Bukit Kangkar, Durian Chondong, and Jorak are three *kangkar* which developed as a village from the *kangkar* origin, however lost traces of *kangkar* heritages and the residents have no memory on the *Kangchu*. There are no physical attributes that still exist in this category, however the Chinese names of three *kangkars* possess trace of *kangkar* heritage, i.e. with the suffix “Kang” or the name “Kangkar”. Apart from Bukit Kangkar, Jorak is known as “Tao Tiao Kang” and Durian Chondong is known as “Lau Bu Kho Kang” by the locals.

Reasons of Kangkar Decline

Muar *kangkar* settlements could be considered as most established Chinese villages in the early period. Due to the vast of virgin jungle in Johor, agriculture has been the main income of the state. Kangkar which was initiated by gambier and pepper plantation had influenced the Johor landscape in the early time. Although there were other types of Chinese settlements established before or during implementation of Kangchu system (1844 to 1917), they were considered scattered and lesser in number compared to *kangkar* settlements. For instance, Bukit Mor has a Chinese temple dating back to 1872 formed due to mining activity and Parit Jawa fishing village has a Chinese temple built in 1875. It was believed that these Chinese settlements established earlier than any *kangkar* in Muar. The earliest *surat sungai* granted to Muar was Sarang Buaya in 1877 as archived in SKMK-I No. 112. Since then, more than 20 *kangkar* settlements were established in Muar (Low et al., 2019b). The establishment of *kangkar* settlements is significant that, considered to change the Johor landscape in the early period (Coope, 1936; Trocki, 1979).

When the price of gambier decreased while the demand for rubber increased, most of the planters or *kangchu* chose to proceed with rubber plantation rather than gambier and pepper plantation. The rise of rubber industry, appointment of British advisor in 1914, and changing of river dependency to road transportation started to influence the *kangkar* development. Most of the *kangkar* settlements at Muar were established along Sungai Muar, the only main river in the district. However, most of the *kangkar* settlements are diminished in today's context.

Since the appointment of British advisor, British had promoted modern planning which promotes better hygiene. New towns were established along the main road, while attraction have been transferred to the new town rather than the remote *kangkar* which situated at riverside.

Besides, Johor state was also affected by Malayan Emergency which happened between 1949 to 1953 in Malaysia. New Village was established under Brigg's Plan to resettle Chinese from rural area and thick forest to the town or along the main road. New village was described as new urban centers due to its features which provide various amenities (Huang & Lu, 2020). Some *kangkars* which still survived at this period were mostly at rural area, hence the resettlement of villages was needed. One of the archival records revealed that, villagers from nearby Chinese villages includes Bukit Serampang (Lau Tsu Kang) was moving to Lenga New Village (Johor Archive No. JSRO 102, 1951).

From the available data as in Table 3 below, it could be noticed that the establishment of new town near to *kangkar* and New Village Resettlement due to Malayan Emergency caused great impact to the diminishing of *kangkar* settlements.

Table 3: The Changes of Muar Kangkar Settlements

No.	Kangkar	Existence of Kangkar	Changes
1	Gerisek (T)	Yes, traces of <i>kangkar</i> exist	Kangkar remains with new village
2	Lenga	Yes, traces of <i>kangkar</i> exist	Kangkar remains with new village

3	Bukit Kangkar (T)	Yes, traces of <i>kangkar</i> lost	Sungai Mati new town
4	Durian Chondong (T)	Yes, traces of <i>kangkar</i> lost	Untraceable
5	Jorak	Yes, traces of <i>kangkar</i> lost	New economic industry (brick kiln), new village, development of Bukit Pasir new town
6	Bukit Kepong	Lost	Untraceable, new village
7	Bukit Serampang (T)	Lost	Untraceable
8	Labis (S)	Lost	Untraceable, Labis new town
9	Lak Tiao Sin Kang	Lost	Untraceable
10	Pagoh	Lost	Development of Pagoh new town
11	Pengkalan Bukit	Lost	Malayan emergency
12	Renchong / Liang Batu	Lost	Malayan emergency
13	Reng (T)	Lost	Untraceable
14	Sarang Buaya (M)	Lost	Untraceable, mining at Bukit Mor
15	Sinkang Bukit Serampang (T)	Lost	Untraceable
16	Sinkang Durian Chondong (T)	Lost	Untraceable
17	Sinkang Pagoh	Lost	Development of Pagoh new town
18	Sinkang Renchong	Lost	Untraceable
19	Sinkang Reng (T)	Lost	Malayan emergency
20	Tui	Lost	Untraceable

T indicates today's Tangkak district, *S* indicates Segamat, the rest are within today's Muar district

Conclusion

Besides the politic reasons, the rapid industrialization, urbanization, and modernization in the last three decades speed up the deterioration of historic settlements (Harun et al., 2020). Some historic settlements which located at rural area managed to survive at least partly, however they are also greatly affected by new developments. Till date, 75% of *kangkars* are lost while the rest of 25% have been survived in today's context. It indicates the *kangkar* heritages are in danger and requires high attention for conservation.

The establishment of New Village Resettlement and development of new town near to the *kangkar* settlements greatly contributed to the diminishing of *kangkars* at Muar. In short, the identification of reasons contributes to decline of *kangkars* act as the lessons to be integrated in traditional village conservation or town development planning in the future. This could avoid further neglect, gradual deterioration, and destruction of the traditional environment built with the experiences gained over the centuries.

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