

CORRESPONDENCE

The Editor,
Journal of Southeast Asian History,

Dear Sir,

Re: Review Article "*Secret Societies in Malaya*".

I was interested to see the joint father-and-son review of my book *Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya* by Dr. Wong Lin Ken and Mr. C. S. Wong in the first issue of your journal. May I have the privilege of being allowed to reply to some of the points raised in your next issue?

Of course, as I said in the Preface to my book, it was largely based on the writing of Wynne. I note that my acknowledgement to the debt I owed Wynne was quoted towards the end of Messrs. L.K. and C.S. Wong's long review. But if they had inserted it towards the beginning of their review, I am sure that there would have been no need to copy verbatim long passages from Wynne's and my book to bring out the similarity that exists between them in certain passages. This would have been obvious from reading my prefatory acknowledgement. I think also for the accuracy of the record Messrs. L.K. and C.S. Wong might just as well have quoted what I said about my debt to Wynne which appeared in the footnote to page 43, viz., "we acknowledge again our debt to Wynne for many lines of research that he illuminated. He was obviously a most painstaking worker and deserves greater credit than he has hitherto been accorded."

If Messrs. L.K. and C.S. Wong had followed my suggestion given above, they could have reduced, with some advantage, their review to about half its present length.

Messrs. L.K. and C.S. Wong also try to make a point that I did not produce evidence to disprove Wynne's theory of the dual origin of Chinese secret societies in Malaya. May I draw their attention to the Chinese authorities cited by me in support of my view in the footnote on page 2? I do not know what Mr. Blythe has said about it in the foreword to the re-issue of Wynne's book *Triad and Tabut* which the reviewers say they have consulted because I have not seen it, but the authorities on which I rely are clearly given in the footnote.

I welcome Messrs. L.K. and C.S. Wong's criticism of my Chinese scholarship — actually, I harbour no pretensions of being a learned sinologue — and, of course, we all learn from constructive criticism. However, in all fairness to myself, I should like to point out that the errors and discrepancies that Messrs. L.K. and C.S. Wong have discerned in certain Chinese characters, are not due to my ignorance but to the oversight of the printers. In other words, they are printing errors. I do not know whether Messrs. L.K. and C.S. Wong have ever had any experience of trying to produce a book of this kind, incorporating, both English and Chinese character founts, of which the author is living in the Far East, the publishers are in the States, and the book is being printed in West Germany, but if they had they would appreciate the difficulties and complexities involved.

I was interested to see Messrs. L.K. and C.S. Wong's treatment of the translation of the catch-phrase "hsun t'ien hsing tao" (順天行道). Of course, it all hinges on the translation of the small word "tao" and the English translation of this word has long been a hoary chestnut over which Chinese scholars have argued. There is no need for me to go into it here. Suffice it to say that I consider that my translation (and, incidentally, that of previous authorities) is just as serviceable as Messrs. L.K. and C.S. Wong's.

Finally, I was surprised to find that Messrs. L.K. and C.S. Wong, who are in the vanguard of that growing body of specialists, the Asian historian, failed to bring out the main point of the book which was the inability of successive British Governments in Malaya to deal with the secret societies effectively or even to foresee any competent long-term policy in their dealings with them. Consequently, we still have this problem on our hands today.

Yours faithfully,
Leon Comber.