PRISON IN SOCIETY, SOCIETY IN PRISON:
ANALYSING OMEGA’S RACIALLY STRUCTURED
REALITIES WITHIN AND BEYOND

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In the sea there are countless treasures,
But if you desire safety, it is on the shore.

Sa’dī al-Shīrz

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III. Abstract

This thesis begins by highlighting and seeking an explanation for the three empirically-defining features of the Omega secret society which differentiates Omega from the oft-studied Chinese secret societies in the Singaporean context. Specifically, the three features include ethnic affiliation among ‘Malay-Muslims’ as a prominent ideology underlying Omega’s formation, the ethnically exclusive composition of its members, and the prison as a stronghold for gaining manpower to facilitate the formation, continued existence and expansion of the Omega secret society in Singapore. These defining features of the Omega secret society, in terms of organisational structure and function, as I will subsequently argue, are structurally induced within the milieu of the illegitimate sector of Singapore society, hereafter termed ‘Singapore’s illegitimate society’.

To account for the emphasis on ethnic affiliation among ‘Malay Muslims’ as a prominent ideology underlying Omega’s formation and Omega’s ethnically exclusive membership, the breadth of ideas contained in Merton’s (1938) ‘Social Structure and Anomie’ paradigm has played a substantial role. Within the context of the illegitimate sector of Singapore society, Malays are confronted by two structurally compromising positions. At a micro level, within the hierarchy of Chinese secret societies, Omega members claim that ‘Malay members of Chinese secret societies, are restricted to rank and file positions and are deprived of access to both illegitimate economic opportunities and learning structures, vis-à-vis the Chinese members.’ At a macro level, Malays are unable to seek redress for their abovementioned socio-economically
marginalised positions within Chinese secret societies due to a symbiotic relationship that exists between the police and the institutionalised Chinese secret societies in the context of the illegitimate sector of Singapore society. Nevertheless, Merton’s assumption and proposition of an inverse class-crime/deviance relationship, embraced in his original essay is problematic. I have integrated the concept of race into Merton’s SS&A paradigm to suggest a different causal model, albeit one with the capacity to explain the emergence of the Omega secret society within the illegitimate sector of Singapore society.

As a corollary of the two abovementioned structural dilemmas faced by Malays in the illegitimate sector of Singapore society, the prison institution where Malays inmates are over-represented compared to their ethnic Chinese and Indian counterparts, is exploited by Omega members to function as a stronghold that facilitates the establishment and expansion of the Omega secret society. To effect the proselytization of socio-economically marginalised ‘Malay-Muslim,’ males from Chinese secret societies into Omega and to elicit the solidarity of unaffiliated ‘Malay-Muslim’ prison guards and inmates to lend support to Omega, members of Omega embark on a three-pronged approach, which will be explored. The success of Omega’s three-pronged approach to elicit the solidarity of ‘Malay,’ ‘male,’ ‘Muslim,’ inmates and prison personnel to perpetrate verbal and physical abuse and overt discriminatory treatment towards Malays in Chinese secret societies requires the contextualisation of Omega’s approach against the backdrop of socio-economic and political relations between the Malays and Chinese in larger society.
CHAPTER 1

1. FRAMING THE PROBLEM: INTRODUCING A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE

OMEGA SECRET SOCIETY IN THE SINGAPORE MALE PRISONS

Bismi-llâhi ar-rahmāni ar-rahîmi. Omega is jihad and Omega members are mujahideen. To jihad is to strive in the way of Allah, and Omega symbolises a struggle. Omega members struggle, sacrificing money, blood, limb and life to prevent the oppression of Malay Muslim IDs by Chinese infidels. Omega is not blind to members of Chinese SS (secret society) beating up and bullying our fellow brothers to showcase their masculinity. But the worst are the Malays in Chinese SS, who pray to Chinese idols, perform Chinese rituals and join the Chinese infidels to crush other Malay Muslims! Worst than the Chinese infidels are these Malays who betray their race, abandon their religion. They shed the blood of their brothers while glorifying their oppressors. They’re a norm, not an exception. Look at the Malay leaders in Singapore slaving under the iron fist of Chinese PAP, like puppets! PAP tells them to be moderate Muslims, they nod. PAP tells them to sanction organ donation they kick Islam away and abide by the ways of the infidel Chinese PAP. Malays in Chinese SS and in the PAP while they suppress their Malay Muslim brothers are themselves being suppressed by the Chinese. If they retaliate, the Chinese get rid of them. Omega wages war to stop the Chinese SS from oppressing Malay Muslims, in prison and in the underworld.

On 23rd September 1989, seven ethnic ‘Malay-Muslim’ inmates incarcerated in the Singapore Chia Keng Prison swore upon the Holy Quran, an oath of secret allegiance to each other and a pledge of martyrdom, to establish the Omega secret society. The pledge of martyrdom, initially conceptualised by the seven ethnic ‘Malay-Muslim’ founders of the Omega secret society ideologically refers to the endeavour of securing and protecting the interests of two separate groups of ‘Malay-Muslims,’ simultaneously reflected in the above excerpt. First, the martyrdom of Omega secret society is directed towards the protection of ‘Malay-Muslims’ who are unaffiliated with any delinquent groups, from being victimised by members of
Chinese secret societies within the context of the Singapore prisons. Second, members of the Omega secret society aim to induce ‘Malay-Muslim’ members of Chinese secret societies to be conscious of their socio-economic marginalisation vis-à-vis their Chinese counterparts, within the broader milieu of the illegitimate sector of Singapore society.

Despite having been in existence for almost two decades within the Singaporean context, the Omega secret society, for a myriad of reasons which I will subsequently elaborate upon, has not merited a single instance of academic research. Among the myriad of reasons include, methodological impediments (see Chapter 2) and the dominance and bias of a “social control perspective” over researches on organised criminal groups in Singapore (see Chapter 3). More importantly, in the wake of a traumatic separation from Malaysia that saw statehood rudely thrust upon Singapore, academic researches within the field of social sciences became pragmatically geared towards addressing the processes of forging a new national identity through defining the role of citizenship, thus serving the imperative needs of the vulnerable city-state (see Chapter 3). Such pragmatism undoubtedly induced the further marginalisation of researches on organised criminal groups in the Singaporean context. Impelled by multifarious factors, including my ability to transcend methodological impediments by being ethnic Malay Muslim, my access into the Singapore prisons having served as an intern four years previously, and my interest in reviving the field of sociology of organised crime in Singapore, I aim to endeavour an exploratory study of the Omega secret society.
Ideologically motivated to secure and protect the interests of two separate groups of ‘Malay-Muslims’ as mentioned above, the emergence of the Omega secret society challenges the traditional theorisation for the emergence of secret societies within the Singaporean context. Traditionally, researches on delinquent groups in Singapore have specifically focused on Chinese secret societies, whose emergence has normatively been charted from a structural-functional perspective. Historically, Chinese secret societies in colonial Singapore have been theorised as a product of the society’s economically marginalised, primarily migrant workers, mostly male, who came from different parts of Asia to work as menial laborers. Institutionalised as a laissez-faire entrepôt, the British colonial authorities in Singapore provided only the basic economic infrastructure, mainly for the benefit of British firms. British colonial authorities offered little else in terms of social services or welfare. By instituting a laissez-faire system, the British colonialists had directly dichotomised Singapore’s class structure into a very small community of administrators, merchants, businessmen and entrepreneurs, and a very large population of uneducated, lower-class menial workers. As a result of losing faith in the capacity of society to work on their behalf, the Chinese migrants organised and created countercultural structures that they believed were capable of delivering the kinds of emotional support and material goods the larger society promised but did not make available to them. These migrant workers were convinced that conventional society was unlikely to deliver the goods necessary for a better life. Because of this perception, the migrant workers turned inward to appropriate social and cultural elements of the migrant community creatively in a way that enabled them to experience participation in, and activities of
the Chinese secret societies as superior to the roles traditionally forced upon people of their backgrounds by the dominant culture (Padilla, 1992: 5).

While the processes of socio-economic and political marginalisation faced by certain segments of the population in legitimate society has commonly preceded traditional analyses of the emergence of Chinese secret societies in Singapore, such a trend is indiscernible in the case of the Omega secret society. Contrarily, Omega’s emergence which is tied to the ideological motivation to secure and protect the interests of ‘Malay-Muslims,’ both affiliated and unaffiliated with any delinquent groups within the illegitimate society, has directed this thesis to focus on the socio-economic structure, and the intra-ethnic relations between Malays and Chinese in the illegitimate sector within Singapore society. In order to appreciate the emergence of the Omega secret society, it is imperative to focus on the socio-economic structure of institutionalised Chinese secret societies, and more importantly to shed light on the dynamics of intra-ethnic interaction between ‘Malay-Muslims’ and Chinese within these Chinese secret societies, which dominate the illegitimate sector of Singapore society. I am suggesting that existing theoretical frameworks to account for the emergence of Chinese secret societies which primarily focus on the processes of socio-economic and political marginalisation occurring in legitimate society, induced by class relations, is incongruent with the empirical data provided by members of the Omega secret society. Such incongruence is a corollary of the neglect of existing theoretical frameworks to elucidate the experiences of ‘Malay-Muslims’ vis-à-vis their Chinese counterparts within Chinese secret societies. In order to grasp the salience of ethnic affiliation among ‘Malay-Muslims’ as a prominent ideology that
underlies Omega’s formation and expansion, a theoretical framework that emphasises the concept of ‘race,’ rather than ‘class’ as a primary analytical tool is necessary.

Incited by the sketchy conceptualisation of the Omega secret society in the above excerpt, this thesis begins by highlighting and seeking an explanation for the three empirically-defining features of the Omega secret society which differentiates Omega from the oft-studied Chinese secret societies in the Singaporean context. Specifically, the three features include ethnic affiliation among ‘Malay-Muslims’ as a prominent ideology underlying Omega’s formation, the ethnically exclusive composition of its members, and the prison as a stronghold for gaining manpower to facilitate the formation, continued existence and expansion of the Omega secret society in Singapore. These defining features of the Omega secret society, in terms of organisational structure and function, as I will subsequently argue, are structurally induced within the milieu of the illegitimate sector within Singapore society.

The salience of ethnicity as an ideology in the discursive construction of the two-fold aims underlying the formation of the Omega secret society constitutes a fundamental feature that differentiates Omega from Chinese secret societies. Contrary to Omega’s blatant emphasis on ethnicity, Chinese secret societies which comprise individuals from various ethnic groups have had to ideologically emphasise a downplaying of ethnic allegiance and allusions among its members, in order to fulfill its function. Historically in Singapore, Blythe contends that Chinese secret societies provided their members with a ‘social background, a body politic in miniature, in and through which he found authority, protection, assistance, a sense of kinship, a collective means of exploiting new economic resources, both criminal and legal
enterprises, and through the ritual bond some measure of spiritual content, in a foreign land where the ruling power was completely alien in race, language, religion, manners and customs’ (1969: 1-2). To function as an intermediate layer of extra-legal jurisdiction in regulating the social, economic and political life of immigrants, Chinese secret societies required a substantial population of followers. Recruiting a substantial following however proved challenging in the Singaporean context, a frontier community of multi-ethnic migrants, inclusive of Chinese of various dialects, Malay and Indian emigrants, and in which numerous secret societies additionally existed and competed for members in order to flourish (Musa, 2003; Mak, 1981; Blythe, 1969; Wynne, 1941). Another factor exacerbating the difficulty for Chinese secret societies to gain a foothold in Singapore was the over-representation of ethnic ‘Malay-Muslims’ as local police officers, with whom the ethnic Chinese could neither network with, nor secure cooperation from, so as not to maintain surveillance over the activities of the secret society (Musa, 2003).

Confronted by the need to strengthen their population of followers and to foster relations or to manage conflicts with the police who comprised a ‘Malay-Muslim’ majority, Chinese secret societies in Singapore strategically invoked an accompanying ideology where ethnic allegiance and allusions among members were de-emphasised. Such a strategy, in the Singaporean context, facilitated the recruitment of, and the promotion of social cohesion among, members from an ethnically heterogeneous migrant community. The over-representation of ‘Malay-Muslims’ as police officers in Singapore necessitated Chinese secret societies to recruit ‘Malay-Muslim’ members, who could then be invoked to fulfill the pragmatic
function of dealing with, and bribing the police officers to overlook the activities of Chinese secret societies (Musa, 2003). Additionally, the activity of going against the police could also be left to the ‘Malay-Muslims’ and in this way the reputation of the Chinese secret societies as trouble-makers could be hidden (Wynne, 1941: 227). By emphasising an ideology of ‘brotherhood,’ enforced through a secret ritual, gestures, communication symbols and binding blood-oath of loyalty, Chinese secret societies tactically removed the communication barrier among members, comprising of Chinese from different dialect groups, Malays and Indians (Chu, 1947: 75-98).

Ethnic self-identification as a central criterion in gang affiliation and solidarity and an ethnically exclusive membership, which is de-emphasised in Chinese secret societies, is contrarily intertwined in the two professed aims of the Omega secret society. Two ethnically-pertinent aims underlie and facilitate the formation of the Omega secret society. First, members of the Omega secret society espouse ‘safeguarding the interest of Malay-Muslim individuals who, despite being unaffiliated with any criminal groupings, are nevertheless indiscriminately harassed and beaten by members of Chinese secret societies both inside and outside the penal institution.’ Second, members of Omega aim ‘to induce Malay-Muslim members of Chinese secret societies, who are restricted to rank and file positions and deprived of access to both illegitimate economic opportunities and learning structures, to be conscious of their socio-economic marginalisation vis-à-vis the Chinese members.’ With regards to the latter aim, members of the Omega secret society contest the notion of *brotherhood* professed by Chinese secret societies, which purportedly assures all members an *equal* opportunity to achieve personal progress in illegitimate
society, as ideological. Despite their multi-ethnic membership composition, Omega members affirm that ‘contemporary Chinese secret societies tend to provide the socio-structural mechanisms by which only younger Chinese, by virtue of ethnicity, could gain access to the illegitimate opportunity and learning structures and realistically recognise the potentiality for personal progress in the (illegitimate) community through participation in the illegitimate network (emphasis mine)’ (Ganapathy and Lian, 2002: 144). Conceptually, ‘illegitimate economic opportunities’ include ‘first, being placed in leadership positions to either manage a myriad of illegal businesses like gambling houses and brothels or to organise and direct various criminal operations like protection-racket, money-laundering, drug and human trafficking.’ Second, ‘illegitimate economic opportunities’ involve ‘being entrusted with capital derived from the abovementioned organised crime activities in order to establish and run legitimate businesses like tattoo parlours, coffee shops and legalised brothels.’ ‘Illegitimate learning structures’ on the other hand, refer to the way Chinese secret societies’ activities constitute “a training ground for acquisition of skill in the use of violence, concealment of offence, evasion of detection and arrest, and the purchase of immunity from punishment” (Cloward, 1959: 172). In rationalising the basis for his dissatisfaction with, and his disassociation from, the Chinese secret society Sa Kong Sa⁶ in favour of the Omega secret society, Andra⁷ cited the economic marginalisation of Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese as a principal motivating factor. Encapsulated in the excerpt below is Andra’s frustration with an intangible barrier within the hierarchy of the Chinese secret societies that systematically prevents Malays from having access to both illegitimate economic
opportunities and learning structures, although Malays participate in the permissible
and required procedures for attaining these ends:

I joined SS because they promised me money, ranking, businesses. I did
everything the Chinese asked, rob, steal, smuggle, fight, kill, you name it I did it. I risk life and limb, trying to be a tiang (headman) in the underworld. See
this scar; three fingers got chopped in a fight. Lucky I found them, my brother
(gang mate) put them in ice and the doctor managed to re-attach them. When I
was in Mooncrescent prison, I met Omega. I realise Chinese were fooling me,
they never planned to any Malay rise the ranks. I’ve shown my loyalty but I
don’t see the rank, the money, the business. Chinese are not loyal to me. Look
at Salim Babu, he is famous in Sio Kun Tong. He’s been stabbed, beaten, did
all for Chinese but his ending is prison, CLD (Criminal Law Detainee)⁸. Chinese are fucking liars. So I joined Omega. I decide to protect and help out
my Malay brothers instead, who are not out to make use of me. I am a martyr
that protects the rights of my Malay Muslim brother and prevent their further
exploitation.

Thus far two defining features of the Omega secret society have been analysed,
specifically an ethnically exclusive membership and the emphasis on ethnic self-
identification as a central ideology in gang affiliation and solidarity among ‘Malay-
Muslims’ who are socio-economically marginalised in the context of the illegitimate
sector of Singapore society. Both abovementioned features render Omega distinct
from Chinese secret societies, which ideologically stress ‘equality and brotherhood
among its multi-ethnic members, who collectively seek to advance each member’s
personal progress in Singapore’s illegitimate society. Addressing the process by
which Omega members seek to redress the socio-economic marginalisation of Malays
in the context of the illegitimate sector of Singapore society sheds light on the third
defining feature of the Omega secret society. The centrality of the prison to the
formation, continued existence, and expansion of the Omega secret society, as
opposed to the context of larger society in which institutionalised Chinese secret
societies monopolise access to (illegal) opportunity and learning structures constitutes the third defining difference between the Omega and Chinese secret societies. Prior to elucidating why the prison constitutes a fertile environment to be manipulated by Omega members in order to function as a stronghold for recruiting members to ensure the continued existence and expansion of the Omega secret society, it is imperative to begin by examining the structure of the illegitimate sector of Singapore society.

Understanding the centrality of the prison to the formation, continued existence, and expansion of the Omega secret society has to be set in the context of the symbiotic relationship that the police have traditionally maintained with the institutionalised Chinese secret societies to ensure the reproduction of social order in the criminal underworld. As a result of this symbiotic relationship between the police and the Chinese secret societies, non-institutionalised criminal groupings are subjected to the Social Disciplinary model of policing. The Social Disciplinary model of policing eschews concern for both legal and factual guilt, concentrating instead on the task of subordinating certain sections of the population viewed as problematic by the police (Ganapathy and Lian, 2002). The symbiotic relationship between the police and Chinese secret societies has historically evolved to address the problem of policing areas and activities that attract criminal elements, particularly relevant to certain groups, prostitutes, illegal moneylenders, owners of massage parlours and karaoke, by virtue of their occupation are either not rendered full protection of the law, or require round the clock protection that the police are unable to provide. Here the Chinese secret societies play a functional role in offering protection to the vulnerable and marginalised population (subscribers) in return for gaining territorial
monopolisation and control of (both legal and illegal) economic activity generated within these territorial, extra-political entities, thereby ensuring the reproduction of social order in the criminal underworld (Ganapathy and Lian, 2002; Mak, 1974). By practicing a social disciplinary model of justice, the police prevent the non-institutionalised criminal groupings from gaining a foothold in the criminal underworld. To relinquish non-institutionalised criminal groupings to a marginal status in the illegitimate society, akin to a Cloward and Ohlin’s (1960) concept of a ‘retreatist’ gang, the Social Disciplinary model of policing subjects members of non-institutionalised Chinese secret societies to ‘stop and search practices, detention without trial, detention in police stations, questionings and status degradation ceremonies.’ The net effect of allowing secret societies to exist but within an institutional framework designed by the police is that it achieves the police-defined objective of reproducing order in the illegitimate society: first, by disengaging and marginalising minority (non-institutionalised) gangs from the ‘market’ of criminal activities, and second, through conflict-reducing mechanism i.e. symbiotic participation that demands secret societies self-police/restrict their activities to boundaries prescribed by the state police, or risk being evicted from the institutional arrangement (Ganapathy and Lian, 2002: 150). The impact of the institutionalisation of Chinese secret societies and the consequence of social disciplinary model of policing for members of the Omega secret society is succinctly captured by Louise: 

In Singapore’s underworld, Omega is like a sampan (a small wooden boat) in a Chinese sea. Chinese SS (secret societies) are established on the outside, richer and have more muster than Omega. Chinese have police backing. High ranking officers in SSB (Secret Societies Branch) and CID (Criminal Investigation Department) are from Chinese SS or are connected to them in
some way. The SSB and CID let the Chinese SS control all red light districts, collect protection money from coffee shop stall owners, bar owners, and use these places as pangkeng\textsuperscript{11}. When there’s going to be a raid, the Chinese leaders will know beforehand and only the small fry in the SS will go down for it and only a small profit will be lost. In exchange, the Chinese SS solve all the crime for the police and the police can go on Crime Watch\textsuperscript{12} and act macho and smart. Chinese SS got men everywhere who will report to the headmen everything that happens in the underworld, who’s involved in fights, who killed who, where and why. One call from the SSB or CID to the Chinese headman and all the information are revealed, case solved. Omega is not a friend to the police so life is hard for us outside. They question us for no good reason, take us in when we get hang around together and if we fight with Chinese SS, police go down harder on us.

Within the illegitimate sector of Singapore society, ‘Malay-Muslims’ are confronted by two structurally compromising positions. At a micro level, within the organisation of Chinese secret societies, ‘Malay-Muslim’ members are socio-economically marginalised vis-à-vis their Chinese counterparts. At a macro level, ‘Malay-Muslims’ are unable to seek redress for their socio-economically marginalised positions due to a symbiotic relationship that exists between the police and the institutionalised Chinese secret societies in the illegitimate sector of Singapore society. As a corollary of the two structural dilemmas faced by ‘Malay-Muslims’ in the context of Singapore’s illegitimate sector, the prison becomes a context that is explored as a stronghold of Omega secret society. The prison institution, where ‘Malay-Muslim’ inmates are over-represented compared to their Chinese and Indian counterparts, is subsequently exploited by members of the Omega secret society to function as a stronghold that facilitates the existence and expansion of the Omega secret society in illegitimate society.

To elicit the solidarity among ‘Malay-Muslims’ to lend support to Omega secret society, members of Omega embark on a three-pronged approach. The
discourse racialising the prison as a ‘Malay’ institution because of the over-representation of Malays in prison specifically targets the proselytization of socio-economically marginalised Malay members within Chinese secret societies into Omega. Omega members rationalise the over-representation of ‘Malay-Muslims’ in prison as a result of ‘Malay-Muslim’ members in Chinese secret societies being restricted to rank and file positions, whose responsibilities to protect the myriad of illegitimate economic structures and investments belonging to or coming under the protection of the Chinese secret societies, exposes them to the gaze of social control agents. This discursive correlation between the socio-economic marginalisation of ‘Malay-Muslim’ members of Chinese secret societies and the over-representation of ‘Malay-Muslims’ in prison, as affirmed by Omega members, will be explored in depth in Chapter 5.

A separate discourse is perpetuated to elicit the solidarity of all ‘Malay-Muslims’, including prison guards and inmates who are unaffiliated with any criminal groupings to join Omega secret society. This separate discourse is the ethno-racialisation of the socio-economic marginalisation of ‘Malay-Muslim’ members in Chinese secret societies vis-à-vis the Chinese members as a ‘Malay’ problem, rather than an isolated instance of marginality that plagues Malays in the illegitimate society. Ethno-racialising the culture of marginality as an attribute of ‘Malayness’ is contingent upon a parallel drawn between the deprivation of access to both illegitimate economic opportunities and learning structures faced by ‘Malay-Muslims’ in Chinese secret societies within the illegitimate society, and the socio-economic and political marginality of the Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese in the
legitimate society. By discourse of ‘ethno-racialisation’ that racialises the socio-economic marginalisation of ‘Malay-Muslim’ members in Chinese secret societies’ as a ‘Malay’ problem as opposed to an instance of marginality that solely characterises Malays in the illegitimate society is meant the following. Drawing upon the visible over-representation of Malays in prison, members of Omega have initiated a discourse that draws a parallel between the socio-economic marginality of ‘Malay-Muslims’ in Chinese secret societies vis-à-vis their Chinese counterparts’ on the one hand, and the socio-economic and political marginality of Malays vis-à-vis Chinese within the context of Singapore society on the other. The discourse of ‘ethno-racialising’ the culture of marginality with ‘Malayness’ inevitably implicates the image of all ‘Malay-Muslim,’ male inmates and prison personnel who share overlapping social identities as ‘Malay-Muslims’ and male, regardless of an affiliation with any criminal groupings. Through this discourse of ethno-racialisation, the “spoilt identity” of Malays as socio-economic and politically marginalised, both in prison and in Singapore society becomes intensified, and simultaneously strengthens existing discourses of ethno-racialisation of Malays as generally ‘weak, incapable of surviving in a modern society and subordinate’ (Rahim, 1998). This consequently elicits the solidarity exhibited by ‘Malay-Muslim,’ male inmates and prison personnel in favour of the Omega secret society.

The discourse of ethno-racialising ‘Malayness’ with marginality, which is triggered and perceived as embodied by the over-representation of Malay members of Chinese secret societies in prison, has a very important consequence. An important ramification of the discourse of ethno-racialising ‘Malayness’ with marginality is that
such a discourse simultaneously facilitates Omega members to impute and generalise the conspicuous attributes of the ‘Malay-Muslims’ members in Chinese secret societies onto all ‘Malay-Muslim’ males because of the overlapping social identities, as abovementioned. Two conspicuous traits of Malays in Chinese secret societies are especially relevant. First, a conspicuous feature of Malays in Chinese secret societies, specifically their subordinate socio-economic status vis-à-vis their Chinese counterparts result in the discursive ‘gendering of male members of the Malay race’ as effeminate (read: weak, subordinated). Such a discourse, once again, implicates the Malay inmates and prison personnel who are unaffiliated with any criminal groupings.

The second prominent characteristic of Malays in Chinese secret societies relates to their espousal of Chinese culture specifically values, mentality, attitudes as critical to the socio-economic and political dominance of Chinese over Malays whether in legitimate or illegitimate society. Such a stance by Malays in Chinese secret societies has been discursively rationalised by Omega members as a symbol of how the former symbolise the racialisation of ‘Malay culture’ as inadequate in achieving socio-economic and political dominance, and thereby inferior to ‘Chinese culture’. Ignited by the over-representation of Malay secret society members in prisons, this discourse of ethno-racialisation which implicates all ‘Malay-Muslims’ is crucial in explaining the solidarity expressed by the ‘Malay-Muslim,’ male inmates and prison personnel in supporting members of the Omega secret society. In some instances, such solidarity has manifested in the form of verbal and physical abuse and overt discriminatory treatment of the Malay members of Chinese secret societies by ‘Malay-Muslim’ inmates and prison personnel. The manipulation of the conflation of
ethnic Malays in Singapore as Muslims, will be explored as the third strategy employed by Omega members to effect the proselytization of socio-economically marginalised ‘Malay-Muslim,’ males from Chinese secret societies into Omega and to elicit the solidarity of unaffiliated ‘Malay-Muslim’ prison guards and inmates to lend support to Omega.

Subsequently, this thesis will formulate an explanation for the empirically uncharacteristic solidarity expressed by ‘Malay,’ ‘Muslim’ prison personnel and inmates unaffiliated with any criminal groupings, and those who have been proselytized into Omega from Chinese secret societies, in perpetrating overt discriminatory treatment and verbal and physical abuse towards Malay members in Chinese secret societies. Such solidarity is uncharacteristic because it challenges the normative conception of prison as a “total institution”, whose population consists of a “basic split between the large managed group, conveniently called inmates, and the small supervisory staff” (Goffman, 1961: 18). Although Foucault (1979) recognises that power would not exist without resistance, it is equally important to recognise that the agency/structure dichotomy underlying Foucault’s argument poses a limitation in explaining the solidarity exhibited by ‘Malay,’ ‘Muslim’ inmates and prison personnel in the process of “othering” Malay members of Chinese secret societies. Despite Foucault’s (1979) argument that the imposition of power in the process of disciplining and inmate management is not merely a top-down exercise and that coercion is not so manifest, his analysis of the penal process nevertheless remains restricted to the exercise of power by the authorities. Such a restricted focus buttresses the conceptualisation of the prison population as a dichotomy of guards
versus inmates, and fails to pay attention to how inmates and guards themselves construct and conceive of their actions.

A second uncharacteristic feature of the abovementioned empirical phenomenon is the verbal and physical abuse and overt discrimination that characterise the treatment of the Malay members of Chinese secret societies by Malay Muslim inmates and prison personnel, which counters numerous prison literature in line with the concept of ‘prison as an institution in society’. Proceeding from an assumption of prison as a ‘total institution in society,’ the theoretical advancement of the ‘deprivation’ model of imprisonment which adopts a structural-functional perspective has suggested that the emergence and importation of delinquent groups into the prison counters the numerous ‘pains of imprisonment’. Delinquent groups safeguard against the threat and reality of physical violence in prison as a consequence of the material and psychological deprivations and against poverty through an ‘informal prison economy, involving the selling and consumption of contrabands smuggled into the penitentiary,’ (Ross and Richards, 2002; Toch, 1998: 172-3; Hunt et.al., 1993; Mosher and Tompkins, 1988: 63; Jacobs, 1974). As well, members of delinquent groups draw strength in numbers to espouse intimidation and violence at homosexual confrontation towards, and degradation of, fellow members (Fleisher and Rison, 1999: 237; Jacobs, 1974: 400). Following the ‘deprivation’ model of imprisonment, the myriad functions of delinquent groups in prison theoretically and empirically instils in unaffiliated inmates that membership in delinquent groups is crucial as a ‘currency’ to survive incarceration.
Existing prison literature, by conceptualising the prison as a ‘total institution’ has subsequently influenced two pervasive ideas. First, prison as a ‘total institution’ has influenced the idea that the prison population is a dichotomy of inmates versus guards whose interaction revolves around relationships of force and dominion. Second, prison as a ‘total institution’ has influenced a ‘deprivation’ model of imprisonment that supports the “gang thing” as the most significant reality behind the walls both as an adaptive response to the pains of imprisonment and a ‘currency’ for prison survival. Existing prison literature, typically based on the concept of ‘prison in society’ is consequently limited in its capacity to explain the solidarity between ‘Malay-Muslim,’ male prison personnel and inmates, unaffiliated with any criminal groupings, and those who have been proselytized into Omega from Chinese secret societies, in perpetrating overt discriminatory treatment and verbal and physical abuse towards Malay members in Chinese secret societies.

Having briefly highlighted presented the conceptual and theoretical limitations of existing prison literature, into which I shall delve in depth in Chapter 4, I am establishing at the very start that this thesis does not deal with the place of delinquent groups in prison in any conventional way. By conventional way is meant that this thesis does not seek to test whether the ‘deprivation’ or ‘importation’ model of imprisonment better explains the solidarity between ‘Malay-Muslim’ prison personnel and inmates, unaffiliated with any criminal groupings, and those who have been proselytized into Omega from Chinese secret societies, in perpetrating overt discriminatory treatment and verbal and physical abuse towards Malay members in Chinese secret societies. In analysing the aforementioned solidarity, the thesis will
move beyond confirming or compounding existing paradigms, whether the ‘deprivation’ or the importation’ model of prison socialisation. In order to explain the abovementioned solidarity, I was triggered to leave the prison walls and problematise literature on inmate culture and social structure. Specifically, I was induced to re-think the implications of the existing conceptualisation of the prison as a ‘total institution’ for the theoretical frameworks that sought to explain inmate culture and social structure. In making sense of informal inmate culture and social structure, the processes of socio-economic and political marginalisation occurring in the larger society typically precede as a reference point in most prison literature. To cite an example, Irwin (1980), in formulating reasons for the evolution of prison gangs in California identified ‘the radicalization of the prison population in conjunction with external political movements’ as a major factor. Gangs that developed in the 1960s were believed to pose a new type of correctional problem since these gangs were larger, younger, more politicised and tended to be organised along ethnic lines. Rather than subscribing to the aforementioned conventional analysis, this thesis emphasises how an empirical phenomenon in prison, specifically the emergence of the Omega secret society, constitutes an underlying reaction to, and accordingly sheds light on, the obscure processes of socio-economic and political marginalisation occurring in the illegitimate sector and larger Singapore society.

Rather than subscribing to the conceptualisation of the prison institution as a microcosm endowed with its own material and symbolic tropism, this thesis aims to invigorate and to internationalise the ethnography of the carceral universe as a vector of social forces, political nexi, and cultural processes, imported from larger or
Singapore society. An invigoration of the ethnography of the carceral universe is contingent on rectifying the existing conceptualisation of ‘prison as an institution in society’ which will be accomplished by developing the antithetical concept of ‘society in prison’ (see Chapter 4). The concept of ‘society in prison’ will be examined in Chapter 5 of this thesis. Through the concept of ‘society in prison,’ the solidarity between ‘Malay-Muslim’ inmates and prison personnel in perpetrating overt abusive and discriminatory treatment towards Malay members in Chinese secret societies is explicable only by deciphering and contextualising the concept of Malay identity, triggered by the over-representation of Malays from Chinese secret societies in prison, against the backdrop of socio-economic and political relations between the Malays and Chinese in larger society. Reflecting on the way Omega members make sense of the over-representation of Malays in prison through the discourse that ethno-racialises what it means to be ‘Malay’ and the inherent attributes of ‘Malayness’ imported from Singapore society, this thesis will subsequently offer a rectification of the existing conceptualisation of ‘prison as an institution in society’. The discourse of ‘ethno-racialization’ surrounding the over-representation of Malays in prison, imported from larger society, proves the point that the prison is not simply an institution in society, or a ‘total institution’. Inmates do not become “docile bodies” upon entry into the prison, divorced from the socio-economic and political relations of which they were a part, as members of a particular race vis-à-vis the other races. Power is not unidirectional, as reflected by the data, to be exercised by the custodians of control on the inmates but the intersection of race, religion, gender and discourse of ‘ethno-racialization’ does affect the flow of power within the prisons. Where race
consciousness is ignited, and the management of the “spoilt identity” of the Malays is at stake, the solidarity between prison guards and Malay Muslim inmates accords more power to members of the Omega secret society. Members of the Omega secret society are then accorded the privilege to exercise this power over Malay members of Chinese secret societies who are viewed as exacerbating the “spoilt identity” of the Malay race.
is bismi-llāhī ar-rāḥmānī ar-rāḥīmī, meaning “In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful”. This phrase constitutes the first verse of every “sura” (or chapter) of the Qur’an (but one), and is used in a number of contexts by Muslims. It is recited several times as part of Muslim daily prayers, and it is usually the first phrase in the preamble of the constitutions of Islamic countries. The Basmala has a special significance for Muslims, who are to begin each task after reciting the verse.

2 Jihad (Arabic: جهاد IPA: [ˈʃiːhād], which means “to strive” or “to struggle” in Arabic, is an Islamic term and considered a duty by most faithful Muslims. Jihad appears frequently in the Qur’an and common usage as the idiomatic expression “striving in the way of God (al-jihad fi sabil Allah)”. A person engaged in jihad is called a mujahid, the plural is mujahideen.

3 ID is a prison slang which stands for Independent. Inmates who are categorized as Independent are not affiliated with any secret societies, both within and outside of the prison.

4 PAP is an abbreviation for the People’s Action Part, which is currently, and has been since independence, the ruling political party in Singapore. Ustaz Ikrar has referred to it as Chinese PAP because Chinese constitute the overwhelming majority in the party and the policies of the PAP are seen to be politically biased towards the ethnic Chinese majority in Singapore.

5 This excerpt was articulated by Ustaz Ikrar from Sembawang Drug Rehabilitation Centre/Prison. He is 63 years old and is referred to as an Ustaz or ‘religious teacher’ because he is knowledgeable in matters pertaining to Islam. Within the prison, he leads members in prayers and also he heads every single initiation ceremony because he is well-versed in the Quran. As a source of income, Ustaz Ikrar also gives religious lessons in his home. He tutors male students in Arabic to read the Quran, while his wife tutors female students.

6 Sa kong sa is the name of a Chinese secret society in Singapore. The name, in Hokkien, literally translates to the number ‘303’. Sa kong sa, according to its members, have a long, established history in Singapore, from the early 20th century. Although Sa kong sa was fairly established, its influence in contemporary Singapore is waning, attributable to its weak monopoly over illegitimate opportunities and subsequently its inability to maintain a substantial population of followers.

7 Andra is 33 years old and he is an Associate Member of the Omega secret society. He is a second timer in prison, convicted for drug possession and rioting with weapon, in both instances. He is one of the ‘Traju’ or ‘leader’ of Omega, and ‘Traju’ are prime movers of the gang. There are numerous ‘Traju’ in Omega. The task of ‘Traju’ is to follow the instruction from their upper man and make sure that the tasks are being carried out. They are also the recruiters of the gang and will inform the leaders above them on the profile of the new members.

8 Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Act (CLTPA) Section 55, is a law in Singapore, which was introduced in 1958, during the colonial era and intended to be a temporary measure. This Act shall continue in force for a period of 5 years from 21st October 2004. It allows for suspected criminals to be detained without trial. There are two categories of Criminal Law detainees in prisons, one group who are consist of members believed to be masterminds in drug-trafficking operations and the other group which consist of individuals who are believed to be leaders of secret societies. Lee Kuan Yew has provided the following rationale for this law:

“It must be realised that if you abolish the powers of arrest and detention and insist on trial in open court in accordance with the strict laws of evidence of a criminal trial, then law and order becomes without the slightest exaggeration utterly impossible, because whilst you may still nominally have law and order, the wherewithal to enforce it would have disappeared. The choice in many of these cases is either to go through the motions of a trial and let a guilty man
off to continue his damage to society or to keep him confined without trial” (Kwang, Fernandez and Tan, 1998, Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas. Singapore: Times Editions and The Straits Times Press, p. 203).

9 Louise’s parents are Indonesian. He was an athlete who represented Singapore in the Sea Games in Jakarta and was educated in a private institution. At the peak of his athlete career, he got involved with numerous friends at pubs and clubs. Among the people he got involved with included gangsters who then introduced him to drugs. His first offence was at Tanjong Pagar Train Station at the Dreams Pub. At that time he was part of Omega. He was dancing with this girl and her boyfriend from Sio Kun Tong became unhappy and challenged him to a fight outside the pub. Louise ended up stabbing his opponent 13 times and in the process of fighting he had accidentally sliced off the girl’s left breast. Another Omega member took the wrap for Louise. Psychologically Louise never recovered and turned to drugs. He started to miss his athletic training and his career saw a downward spiral as he was eventually banned for a year from competing although his gang connections grew stronger. He began drug-trafficking for Omega and has risen up the ranks to be an influential member who traffics drugs from Thailand. He is 34 years old and this is his fifth time in prison, all of which are for drug-related offences.

10 *Muster* is a slang adopted from the prison to refer the number of people in the secret society. To line up for muster means sitting in a line without talking or moving until the inmates are given permission to stand at ease. Muster time is essentially a time to account for the number of inmates, to ensure that the numbers of inmates are accounted for, in short to ensure no inmate has escaped. Muster is taken three times a day in both Selarang Park Prison/DRC and Tanah Merah Prison. The first muster is taken in the morning before breakfast from 7a.m. to 7:15a.m. The second muster is taken before lunch from 12 p.m. to 12:15p.m. after which lunch will commence. The closing or final muster is taken at 5:30p.m to 5:45p.m. before the inmates are given their dinners and locked up until the next morning. However muster can also be a form of punishment in case of fights or any trouble. Inmates would then have to sit quietly for as long as the officer in charge deems fit. Anyone who fidgets about or talks will be punished or be the cause of the rest of the inmates having to sit longer for muster. Nevertheless, secret society members have adopted the word *muster* to check their population in a particular block, in a particular housing unit and in a particular prison.

11 *Pangkeng* is a Hokkien word which refers to one’s private space. *Pangkeng*, as used by members of the secret societies, refers to the territories they protect such as coffee-shops, bars, karaoke outlets, in exchange for protection money from the owners of these places.

12 *Crimewatch* is a documentary-drama television programme produced by the Singapore Police Force and MediaCorp Television Singapore. Currently presented by serving regular police officers, it showcases the work of the Singapore Police Force: including solved cases that showcase the professionalism of the police force, appeals for witnesses in unsolved cases, as well as crime prevention advice. The programme is telecast monthly in four languages: English (“Crimewatch”), Mandarin (“绳之以法”), Malay (“Jejak Jenayah”) and Tamil (“Kutrak Kankaanippu”). The English version was first shown in 1986, followed by Mandarin, then Malay in year 2000 and Tamil in 2001.
CHAPTER 2

2. FIELD RESEARCH WITH ETHNIC MINORITY MALAY MALE PRISONERS: METHODOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

2.1. Rationalising Qualitative Orientation towards Research

Social science literature on minority research has expanded greatly in the past few decades. Many are critical of earlier findings and the relationships between researchers and minority peoples. The first critique is conceptual, emphasizing that inappropriate assumptions and frameworks have produced distorted accounts of minority group life. Some social scientists who study minority groups have experienced compelling pressures to reexamine their concepts, methods and to change their relationships with the people they study (Moore, 1973). Critics of past research in minority communities have emphasised field research in studying minority groups, arguing that this technique better sensitises investigators to the social realities of the community because it can capture ongoing behavior and meaning in terms of the people being studied (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973: 13). Field research or first-hand observation of events in the communities being studied appeals to those who see the distortions in earlier research as coming from frameworks and conceptions imposed from the outside.

Comparing my qualitative research experience with male transvestites in the male prisons with the quantitative survey I administered during my internship in the prison and as a research assistant on a ‘youth criminality’ project funded by the Police
Intelligence Department, I am inclined towards the qualitative method (Muhamad Hanif, 2005). A quantitative questionnaire, defined by the researcher’s analytical perspective where certain questions are deemed significant for analysing social behaviour, although the subsequent categories these questions give rise to may not reflect how the participants think about what they are doing, restricts the voice of the informants. Conversely, semi-structured interviews capture the complexities of inmates' everyday life and interaction patterns, which is vital in generating rich data and alternative lenses through which a phenomenon could be framed. Through qualitative inquiry for example, I was able to test the extent to which existing sociological literature on ‘gangs,’ which have thematically emphasised class, race and ethnicity, as analytical tools in understanding the emergence of, and, the motivation underlying an individual’s subscription to gangs applies to the Singapore case as Louise affirms:

Not all Omega men are motivated by religion, to alleviate the oppression of the Malays by Chinese secret societies. Few enter Omega to have brothers to talk to, to get cigarettes, for their own comfort so they won’t go mad in this hell hole. Omega’s like an umbrella, which they find when it’s raining, but chuck when it’s sunny.

Furthermore, a self-administered questionnaire which assumes a high level of formal education on the part of the informants was problematic since most of my respondents were illiterate in English. Most of my informants were unable to understand the contents of the consent forms (Appendix A) and required me to interpret the entire consent form in Malay language. This made me favour qualitative
methodology. Azar’s\textsuperscript{2} lack of proficiency in English is epitomized in an interaction between himself and a corporal in the prison below:

Once this corporal ask me about the kitchen duties because I am a \textit{tea-boy}\textsuperscript{3}. He spoke English so, I told him in Malay “aku tak faham” (I don’t understand). The corporal who couldn’t understand Malay said I was rude and want to charge me. \textit{Bagaikan ayam berbual dengan itik}\textsuperscript{4}.

Its advantages notwithstanding, undertaking qualitative inquiry within the prison context is beset with challenges, especially where gatekeeper approval creates a stigma that retards, or prevents, the establishment of rapport with inmates. The difficulty of securing the trust and cooperation of my informants because the Prison Headquarters personnel had approved my study can only be understood by contextualising my informants’ past interactions with law-enforcement agents like the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). Recalling his apprehension, White\textsuperscript{5} described how he had been trapped into selling heroin to an officer from the CNB who had “disguised himself as a drug abuser.” Consequently White was paranoid that the CID and Prison Intelligence, in an attempt to emulate the “scheming tactics of the CNB,” had “sent an agent disguised as a student who could then dig into the secrets of Omega and the activities of secret societies in prisons.” Most of the inmates were concerned that if I was indeed working for the CNB, the Prison Intelligence Unit or the CID, any information they provided could result in their isolation, a lengthening of their prison sentence, caning for continuing their secret society-related activities in prison and elicit sanctions from members of their secret societies should they compromise the secrecy of their societies. White elaborates below:
People here are paranoid about who you are, who you might be, where you come from, what you do. I’m afraid you may be a hantu. I tell you all I know and suddenly I would be called up by the officer and placed in confinement. Some inmates are rats. We chat with our own brothers about our gang in the room or we smuggle cap merah, and suddenly tomorrow there is a spot-check, the officers know exactly where we hide the contraband and we get isolated.

Although many scholars have chosen field research as a corrective strategy to the rather restrictive quantitative research method, the literature on fieldwork processes, such as entering the field, and developing relationships of exchange and trust, does not adequately address all the problems of conducting research with an incarcerated ethnic minority community. This chapter will be focused on the methodological problems of minority research. Not only have the techniques of studying minorities remained largely uncodified, but there is little information on the unique conditions faced by minority scholars conducting research in minority communities (Montero, 1977: 2). Using my fieldwork with ethnic minority Malays in the Singapore male prisons, problems and advantages of minority field researchers will be considered in the context of recent critiques, in particular, informed consent, participant observations, interviews, reciprocity, and documentation, and the contention that the special insight of minority group scholars (insiders) makes them best qualified to conduct research in minority communities will be sympathetically but critically examined.
2.2. Sampling of Informants

In selecting the people to be studied, qualitative researchers emphasise the relevance of sampled cases to the research topic rather than their representativeness, since the purpose of sampling is to collect specific cases that can clarify and deepen understanding (Flick, 1998: 41). Within the Singapore prisons, inmates can be broadly divided into short-sentence inmates, whose sentence are less than a year long and long-sentence inmates, whose sentence exceeds one year. The first group of respondents consists of thirty-five inmates undergoing long-term imprisonment, divided further into ten inmates who have undergone only seven to eight months into their long-term sentence, fifteen inmates who have undergone more than a year into their long-term sentence and ten inmates who will be released from the prison within two to three months. Interviewing inmates at the different stages of incarceration facilitated documenting the circumstances inducing an inmate, unaffiliated with secret societies during his entry into prison, to join secret societies and the crucial stages during incarceration when this process occurs. The second group of informants comprised ten inmates who had undergone long-term imprisonment but who have been released to work camps and the third group comprised eight prison officers. Following a statistical over-representation of ethnic minorities in prison, I over-sampled ethnic minority inmates, specifically Malays.

Upon gaining the trust of my initial informants selected by the prison headquarters, my sampling method changed to snowball sampling where the former alerted me to the ‘inmate number’ of their “brothers” or other members of their secret societies who had not been ‘selected’ by the prison to participate in my study.
because, in the view of prison authorities, they possess invaluable information. Aware that the informants’ status as inmates within the prisons may deter them from revealing information on the functioning of secret societies in prison and thus affect the richness of the data, I decided to interview inmates from Lloyd Leas Work Camp. Interviewing inmates on home-detention in informal settings like fast-food restaurants and at coffee-shops made them less reserved about providing information on the topic of secret societies in prison.

Interviews were conducted daily over a period of five months in eight prisons. Since the gatekeepers claimed ownership to tape and video recordings, but not to personal diaries, I brought a personal diary in which I transcribed the interviews, to preserve the anonymity of my informants. Each interview session lasted about five hours with a single informant. A one-to-one interview was sensitive to the informant’s fear that they could be ratted on by other inmates, even members of their own secret societies. As well, a one-to-one interview since members of a particular secret society are hostile towards “outsiders,” as Adix summed up below:

If you want to know about gang in prison, I can tell you all you want to know but you cannot put us in one room. We all from different gang and we don’t get along with boys from other gang cos we may have had bad blood before. We don’t trust those who are not our brothers because they will reveal how we do things here in prison to everybody and it will be easy for the officers to target us. Even brothers can betray us.

2.3. The Insider-Outsider Controversy: Implications of Race

An important issue in research on minorities, according to Bridges (1973: 392) is “where shall race relations research come from?” Moore (1973: 66), for example,
contends the special insight of minority group scholars (insiders) renders them best qualified to conduct research in minority communities. Opponents argue that non-minority researchers are better qualified for such research because minority scholars may lack the objectivity required.

In academia this “insider-outsider” debate was stimulated by Merton's (1972) paper on the sociology of knowledge, a response paper to the popular view among some black scholars in the late sixties and early seventies that white scholars be excluded from research in black communities. Merton criticises blacks' claim to monopolistic and privileged forms of knowledge, characterising them as elitist and exclusionary. He identifies two extreme positions. One, the insider doctrine, holds that insiders have monopolistic access to knowledge of a group: the insider is “endowed with special insight into matters necessarily obscure to others, thus possessed of a penetrating discernment” (1972: 11). The other, the outsider doctrine, holds that unprejudiced knowledge about groups is accessible only to non-members of those groups. Merton's solution is to transcend the distinct statuses. He concludes: “Insiders and outsiders in the domain of knowledge, unite. You have nothing to lose but your claims. You have a world of understanding to win” (1972: 44).

Here I shall draw attention to the methodological issues Merton does not consider. Among the conditions affecting minority research is the reported hostility among minority people who are subjects of the research enterprise and their distrust of researchers and the research enterprise (Andersen, 1993). Moore (1977: 152) underscores a cynical truism when considering minority research: “Most mature minority persons are very well aware of the realities and their helplessness underlies...
much minority suspicion of the rationale of academic research.” Merton's call for insiders and outsiders to unite ignores the larger context of race relations within which research is carried out.

The methodological advantage of conducting field research as an insider, from my experience, is that it is less apt to encourage distrust and hostility, thereby ascertaining the validity of the study. Validity is defined as how accurately the account represents participants’ perceived realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them (Schwandt, 1997). People in minority communities have developed many self-protective behaviors for dealing with outsiders, so that it is quite reasonable to question whether many real behaviors and meanings are accessible to outsiders of another ethnic group (Altheide and Johnson, 1994). Researching on the Omega secret society was contingent on whether I corresponded to the members’ construction of ‘who is Malay,’ where language and religion are especially integral aspects of ‘Malayness’. Omega members, Pak Hitam informed me, are without exceptions Malay Muslims and “Omega is a secret society established by Malay Muslims for Malay Muslims.” Standing by this latter creed, Pak Hitam demanded I recited the Al-Fatihaah and Ayat Kursi two verses from the Quran commonly recited by Muslims during prayers and which all Omega members are required to recite during their initiation, before he would offer me his assistance in researching on the Omega secret society. Part of the ritual of differentiating themselves from members of Chinese secret society was their emphasis on their ‘Malay’ identity, demonstrated through the ‘salam’ (handshake), a verbal greeting of “assalamualaikum” (Peace be upon you) and their use of Malay language to converse,
which meant that I had to speak Malay to conduct interviews with Omega members. Being Malay Muslim facilitated gaining the trust of my informants, to such an extent that Azar voluntarily and without my knowledge risked isolation, getting caned and his prison sentence lengthened when he smuggled the secret writing code that Omega members use in prison which only allowed Omega members to decode messages sent among themselves, by taping the piece of paper on his body with scotch-tape (Appendix B). Although appreciative of his zest in assisting in the fieldwork process, I firmly warned Azar and my other informants that smuggling contraband into the interview room can be perceived as threatening the prison security, which may consequently induce prison authorities to punish them as well as jeopardize my fieldwork. My ethnic identity also facilitated my adoption as Pak Hitam’s “grand-daughter” as reflected below:

You are Malay Muslim. We are one blood. Religion binds us, being Malay binds us. I shall treat you as my grand-daughter. If you betray me you will be punished. I will help you honestly. Make known to the boys you are my grand-daughter and they will tell you no lies about Omega. We fool the outsiders but you are now family and Omega only help their own.

Another methodological advantage of field research conducted by minority scholars is the that “lens” through which they see social reality may allow the former to ask questions and gather information others could not. Blauner and Wellman (1973:329) contend that there are certain aspects of racial phenomena that are difficult if not impossible for a member of the dominant group to grasp empirically and formulate conceptually. Such observations bring us to the question of whether traditional frameworks are inapplicable or merely insufficient for studying racial, ethnic and
cultural minorities (Becker, 1967). However that question may eventually be resolved, it is very clear by now that the fact of being insiders in the minority world will undoubtedly influence their research, and often for the better. This is not to suggest that such researchers' understanding or experience will substitute for more systematic knowledge, rather that it may generate hypotheses and discovery of data precluded from traditional frameworks and the experiences of outsiders, as Azar affirms:

Chinese intelligence officers\textsuperscript{15}, when they ask us about Omega, they have it in their fucking heads that we’re just a bunch of useless, stupid Malay boys who woke up one morning and decided to come together, with no strategy nothing. They don’t understand it’s about justice, injustice, the discrimination the Malays face in Chinese secret society, in Singapore. Only Malays understand Omega.

2.4. Impact of Gender on Data Collection

Women are “commonly perceived as more ‘natural’ fieldworkers since their traditional role in many societies is one of interaction and relationships” (Warren and Rasmussen, 1977:351). Nevertheless, I was concerned that my outsider position as a privileged, Malay, middle-class, heterosexual female researcher, ‘interviewing down upon my less powerful (economically, politically, socially) male, heterosexual, incarcerated informants’ (Patai, 1994: 21) would threaten the masculine role of my informants and subsequently compromise the process of building rapport. Coggeshall (1988: 7) noted that ‘heterosexual, male inmates define women as subordinate, sexual objects who use their effeminate qualities to their advantage by feigning helplessness…so female staffs in prison who occupy positions of power and authority over inmates are considered atypical women from a prisoner’s perspective and are subjected to hostility and antagonism.’ I therefore strategised, through dressing,
presentational rituals and demeanour, to facilitate my interactions with my informants. To emphasise my femininity, I wore fitting jeans and t-shirts, and put on make-up, which was avoided by all female staff working in the male prisons, since Foster (1994) had noted that this attire was the least threatening. The interview setting at Admiralty West Prison expected my informants to sit on the floor while I sat on a chair, which in my opinion symbolised my authority and status above that of my informants. To de-emphasise my authority, to stress the integral role of my informants in my research on informal inmate culture and social structure and to highlight the masculine role of my informants as ‘providers’ of information about life in prison, I conducted my interview session sitting on the floor as part of a ‘presentational ritual’ (Goffman, 1982: 60). This merited Amy’s attention:

If a guy came and he didn’t go through the hardships of being in prison and worst, he is doing good on the outside, I feel little compared to him and won’t cooperate. I’ll let him know this is enemy territory. You’re a girl, you said you need my help and what kind of a man would let you suffer? You’re not like the butch women officers, shouting and bossy. You nice, I got to ensure nobody bully you.

To emphasise the equality between myself and my informants and to ensure that the flow of interaction is broader, more reciprocal and open-ended, I obtained “informed consent, the knowing consent of an individual, so situated as to be able to exercise free power of choice without undue inducement or any element of constraint or coercion” (Annas et al., 1997: 291). In communication with his youth gang members, Felix Padilla was informed that ‘preceding researchers, by viewing themselves as authority figures and exhibiting vulgar insensitivity to the ideas and experiences of the gang members and disregard for the consent of informants, had consequently
failed to secure the enthusiasm and honesty of youth gang members to tell and share
their stories’ (Padilla, 1992: 18).\textsuperscript{18} Erikson (1967) had objected, on ethical grounds,
to studies which involved deliberate misrepresentations of identities since ‘such
deception is intentionally dishonest, violates the trust basic to all social relationships,
invades privacy, deny subjects a chance to weigh possible risks and to determine what
they want to reveal, may result in special harms and diminishes the general public
climate of trust toward sociology’. \textsuperscript{19} I therefore provided my informants with three
dimensions of informed consent, knowledgeability, voluntary and competent choice
(Kelman, 1972: 1002). Inmates were given a summary of my personal background\textsuperscript{20}. Additionally, all inmates were informed that ‘secret societies in prison’ was the focus
of my study despite the prison’s ‘zero tolerance’ policy on gangs in prison which
threatened inmates who subscribed allegiance to a gang or admitted that their gang
exists and operates in prisons, to twelve strokes of the cane and a lengthened prison
sentence and the disapproval of the gatekeepers \textsuperscript{21}. Barnes (1963) argued that
‘fieldworkers are rarely as honest and forthcoming with information as they could be,
stressing on the most innocuous aspects of their studies,’ which explains the shock
expressed by an informant, Sugi\textsuperscript{22}:

I’m surprised you didn’t lie. You know the amount of trouble we can get into
for talking to you about *abang-abang main baju* (boys in gangs). Hell, at least
you gave me a choice, like a man, not an inmate. No games, straight up, good,
I’ll help you out. I know you’ll keep to your words, no revealing of names and
all that. Don’t think I’m afraid of the caning and threats of the fucking officers.
You ask for help and Omega shall answer that plea.

Nevertheless this masculinity which can be viewed as a performance
constructed to provide others with impressions that are consonant with the desired
goals of the actor (Goffman, 1982) simultaneously threatened the quality of the data. According to anthropologist Edward Hall (1974: 18-21), “little happens or is thought of that does not occur in a temporal and spatial frame, and that frame provides much of the context in which events occur, albeit an unspoken or taken-for-granted frame” and “information taken out of context is meaningless and cannot be reliably interpreted.” Within the totalitarian structure of the maximum security prison marked by the detailed regulations extending into every area of the individual's life, the constant surveillance, and the wide gulf between the rulers and the ruled, Bettelheim (1947) noted that the response of male prisoners tend to militate against the process of degradation, mortification of the self, depersonalization and anomie. What is oft-neglected is the impact of the abovementioned deprivations on data collection and validity, which makes triangulation critical. This emerged saliently during interviews with Brahim\textsuperscript{23} whose accounts of his experiences in prison often bordered on incredulous as reflected below:

I’ve been involved in gang clashes in prison and outside. Everyone knows my reputation as a brave fighter and they shake if they have to cross paths with me. Once four Omega fighters tried convince me to leave my gang cos’ they needed a fighter with skills like mine. When I refused, they sent their four best fighters to beat me up but I defeated all four Omega fighters on my own. When the guards came, all four Omega fighters were on the ground.

Apprehensive that his exaggerated accounts may be an attempt to present his masculine self rather than a valid account of the dynamics of secret societies in prison, I verified his accounts to see if could be corroborated by other inmates. Triangulation of data is a necessary precaution since field research is always subject to problems stemming from invalidating or contaminating effects of the researcher's presence and
selective perception and interpretation (McCall, 1969: 128; Van Maanen, 1979). In his discussion of ‘Dirty Data,’ Marx (1987) has called attention to the difficulties in obtaining valid and reliable data, suggested some of the factors that bring about this data gathering problem and considered some of the implications of ‘dirty data’ for the study and understanding of society. Among the factors that induce ‘dirty data’ include, the subjects’ concern for privacy, suspiciousness of, or reticence towards, outsiders asking questions, a lack of reciprocity in the researcher-subject relationship, a desire to keep information from rivals or competitors, and a wish to put forward one's best face or group image (Marx, 1987). Indeed through the process of triangulation, I discovered how Brahim had used the interview sessions with me, a female researcher, to present his masculine identity, first by giving accounts of his role as a ‘skilled fighter’ in resisting the repressive prison institution and second by assuming the role provider of information (Giallombardo, 1966: 270), which affects the credibility of the data he had provided. This was succinctly expressed by Sugi:

In here, you don’t know nothing, nobody, so people gonna sell you incredible stories, how they killed the devil and waged wars on earth. In this hell hole men haven’t seen a pretty woman in a long time. Brahim will tell you anything so you keep interviewing him. You’re not the first counsellor he’s tried to dupe.

Presentational rituals which emphasised my femininity and the masculinity of my informants nevertheless are a double edge sword, which, in numerous instances, threatened prison security as well as the feasibility of continuing fieldwork in the prisons. Within the prison context, a scarce resource like femininity is a source of social capital for male inmates. During the course of fieldwork, numerous male inmates became “extremely friendly” to my informant Amy and even helped him
“smuggle contraband” because they wanted Amy to convince me to allow them to attend my interview sessions. Having been labelled by other inmates as “Amy’s woman” a problem emerges where any insults directed against me would be perceived as an indirect insult against Amy. In one instance, two inmates from the ‘Sio Ji Hio’ secret society had verbally insulted me, which translated into a brawl between Amy and the two inmates. Since Amy was from ‘Sio Kun Tong’ secret society and the two inmates who insulted me were from Sio Ji Hio, their insults were considered to be a “half personal problem since I was perceived to be Amy’s woman, but also a half gang issue since the members of Sio Ji Hio were perceived to be insulting the woman of a member of Sio Kun Tong.” According to officer Hadi, “Amy’s violent tendencies towards other inmates who spoke ill of me and his body language which is very relaxed, very calm, very attached can be classified an infatuation that could compromise my safety in the institution.”

This infatuation even translated into a picture of me that he drew from memory, which was discovered by Officer Hadi (Appendix C). Nevertheless, Amy was not an isolated case. After leaving Sembawang prison, I received a letter from Asid who confessed his “love” for me despite his acknowledgement that I had made it completely clear that my presence in the prison was to study the Omega secret society (Appendix C). An even more frightening experience was Zattar’s obsession with me which manifested after he was released from Admiralty West Prison. It culminated in Zattar sending me thirty smart messaging service (SMS) texts a day, which alternated between expressions of his interest in me, his anger that I did not respond to his invites, his
disappointment in my ungratefulness for the help he has given me, and his subsequent apologies for intruding into my life.

2.5. Methodological Dilemma: Ensuring the Quality of Data

Minority researchers conducting studies in their “own” communities may experience problems common to all researchers as well as dilemmas imposed by their own racial identity. A frequently voiced objection is that the “subjectivity” of researchers will lead to bias in data gathering and interpretation. This repeated concern of equating research conducted by minority scholars with subjective distortion disregards the fact that, like their colleagues in majority groups, minority researchers are trained in the methodological rigors of their disciplines. Subjectivity does not disqualify work as scholarship or science as long as data gathering procedures and values are both made explicit. As long as researchers follow established procedures and logically relate their conclusions to the data, they are systematically guarding against bias, whatever their backgrounds.

Reflecting on how information, context, and meaning are inseparably and dynamically linked, even the researcher’s recordings of observations, and attempts to communicate about what has been observed and recorded must be made only after paying careful attention to context as well as to information. I embarked on member checking to ensure the validity of the data. Member checking consists of taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account, which Lincoln and Guba (1985: 314) described as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” in a study.
A critical rationale behind member checking is that researchers are not passive recorders of the world around them that a gulf of antiseptic neutrality separates data collectors from their subjects. Much of recording is an expression of the researcher’s personality, habits, expectations, anticipations, anxieties, preconceptions, values; thus it is clear that no two recorders ever will be recording exactly the same things (Heisenberg, 1971). Recording is a creative activity, not a state of passivity. And what are recorded become the facts, the data, of science. Good science involves, among other things, good observing, good recording, and good communication among scientists about their data. I constantly examined myself for the bases of my selectivity, and the facts about myself that operate in their collection of data. As a sociologist, I was conscious not to allow analytical tools like race, gender, class from receiving attention at the expense of non-sociological perspectives in investigating why inmates join secret societies.

Member checking is also crucial in securing validity as I reflect on the problem of describing, that is, communicating to others the data that I have collected. According to Hunter and Foley (1974: 45), ‘most researchers tend to confuse between labelling and describing, where they are usually doing the former when they think they are doing the latter.’ To describe something is to set forth all the “facts” that you have been able to gather by observing and recording. Description is an analytical process in that it breaks things down into their most indivisible, basic parts and communicates what those parts are and how they fit together. Contrarily, labelling is a synthesizing process in that it wraps many things into one category. With member checking, the validity procedure shifts from the researchers to participants in the
study. With the lens focused on participants, I systematically showed informants the transcriptions and observational field notes and asked participants if the themes or categories make sense, whether they are developed with sufficient evidence, and whether the overall account is realistic and accurate. In this way, the participants add credibility to the qualitative study by having a chance to react to both the data and the final narrative to maintain a low level of abstraction.

2.6. Concluding Thoughts

The creation of a social science which has liberating rather than oppressive ramifications will require fundamental alterations in the relationships between minority peoples and conditions of research. Gestures of reciprocity do not, by themselves, alter the unequal nature of research relationships. Nor is having research conducted by insiders sufficient to alter the inequality that has characterized past research. Field research conducted by committed minority scholars may provide a corrective to past empirical distortions in that we are better able to get at some truths. However, our minority identity and commitment to be accountable to the people we study may also pose unique problems. These problems should serve to remind us of our responsibility as researchers and compel us to carry out our research with ethical and intellectual integrity. The effects of minority status on research relationships and data collection deserve serious consideration. My own experience in conducting field research among Malay secret society members may illuminate some of these issues as well as stimulate further discussions of insider research.
Basically I had to give inmates a survey form which aimed at finding out whether they thought existing rehabilitative programmes were helpful, whether they could understand what they programmes were trying to teach them, to rate the prison officers as teachers of these programmes. Inmates were simply asked to tick whether they ‘strongly agree’, ‘agree’, ‘disagree’ and ‘strongly disagree’. An important thing I found out was that inmates always had other suggestions that they noted about the programmes that had not been addressed in the survey forms. I realised that in designing a survey form, my lack of knowledge and exposure of the penal phenomenon could be a serious short-coming towards understanding prison life. I would not know what questions to begin asking.

Azar is 38 years old and he works as a tea-boy in Selarang Park Prison/Drug Rehabilitation Centre. He left DC Aikim, a Chinese secret society to join Omega in 1987 after he met Yan Bai, one of Omega’s leader in Old Changi Prison. He is an Omega fighter and he has been incarcerated eight times in his life, in the following order:

I. In 1985, 16 years old he was convicted of shoplifting and burglary and was sentenced to 2 years in Old Changi prison (OCP).
II. In 1987, at 18 years old he was caught for snatching a chain off a woman and was sentenced to OCP for 3 years.
III. In 1992, he went into Khalsa Crescent Drug Rehabilitation Centre (KCD) for drug consumption and spends a year in jail.
IV. In 1994, he absconded from his urine test and spends three months in Kaki Bukit Prison (KBC).
V. In 1995, he was convicted of drug consumption and possession and he was sentenced to 2.5 years in Moon crescent prison.
VI. In 1998, he was sentenced to 1 year in Selarang Park Prison/DRC (SPD) for drug consumption.
VII. In 2000, he was convicted for stealing motorcycle and drug possession and consumption and was sentenced to 4 years in Tanah Merah Prison (TMP).
VIII. In 2004, he absconded from his urine test and was sentenced for three years in SPD.

Some inmates are tea-boys. Tea-boys wear a t-shirt with the word ‘tea-boy’ printed at the back of the t-shirt and they are confined within the sphere of the kitchen. Tea-boys, selected based on good behaviour, perform duties in the kitchen, like cooking for the whole institution, serving drinks and food to officers and visitors, delivering meals to inmates’ housing units.

‘Bagaikan ayam berbual dengan itik’ is a Malay phrase which literally translates to ‘like a chicken conversing with a duck.’ In this context, this phrase alludes to two people who are unable to understand each other because each of them are speaking in a language that cannot be understood by the other.

White had committed his first offence when he was 21 years old for housebreaking and theft and served six years and two months at Old Changi Prison. He committed his second offence at 25 years old for attempted housebreaking and served 3 years and got 6 strokes of the cane at Admiralty West Prison. His third and fourth offence was for drug-trafficking and he has served at Admiralty West Prison. He is now 35 years old. White is someone with status. He is currently the Omega representative in Admiralty West Prison, selected because of his calm and collected demeanour and his ability to rationalize problems with both his gang members and prison officers has made him well-respected. Prison intelligence personnel will talk to White if they come across any problematic Omega members and it is White’s job “to take these boys in hand.”
Hantu is a prison slang which literally translates as ‘ghost’. Hantu refers to inmates who function as spies for the prison personnel and who rat on other inmates. The inmates who inform on the illegitimate activities of their fellow inmates to the officers are called ‘hantu’. They are called ghost because usually they never reveal their identity as ‘rats’ and they walk without inmates knowing that they are spies of the prison personnel.

‘Cap merah’ is a Malay term which literally translates to anything that is ‘branded red’. This phrase is a prison slang for things or resources that are obtained through illegal means.

‘Inmate numbers’ refer to the numbers printed on the t-shirt of the inmates and since inmates lose their names within the institution, this number was the only form of identification.

One of the reasons snowball is extremely useful is because I would otherwise have had to leave the selection of informants to the prison’s discretion. This was a limitation in Arumugam’s (1999) thesis where she noted that the prison had selected only the ‘kwai’ (goody-two-shoes) to participate in the study. Through snowball sampling, I was alerted to call on informants like White and Louise. I discovered through my interviews that White was an Omega representative and leader in Admiralty West Prisons which meant that White was placed in charge of Omega members in Admiralty West Prisons and he had to secure their good conduct as well. Louise is a high-profile prisoner who had to be transferred out of Tanah Merah Prison because he was too involved in secret-society activities in the prisons, strategizing fights, converting non-affiliated inmates to join Omega, and even rioting. Upon receiving their inmate numbers, I informally networked with some prison staff that I did get along with in order to interview these inmates. I was privileged to obtain an insight into their incarceration experience.

The inmates that I interviewed in Lloyd Leas Work Camp were basically a month away from their release and those I interviewed were on home-detention programmes, meaning that they had a curfew where they would have to report to work at a prison-approved institution at 8am and they had to be home by 6pm in the evening. A device attached to their leg acts as an alarm which will be activated should these inmates violate the rules of their curfew.

This excerpt was quoted and translated from Pak Hitam (pseudonym), a 75 year old inmate from Selarang Park Prison/DRC, one the most valuable and charismatic informants for this thesis. In addition to being a senior member of the Omega secret society, Pak Hitam is also considered an elder in the prison. Pak Hitam, without whose contribution this thesis would be qualitatively impoverished, has spent the greater portion of his life in prison. He is a unique individual who has witnessed the evolution of the structure of the prison, the socio-economic profile of inmates and the culture and dynamics of the inmate community from the time of Pulau Senang, where he was first incarcerated. He is accorded respect by both inmates and staff alike, and in the event of any ‘gang clashes’ in the prison, involving Omega members, Pak Hitam would be asked by prison staffs to “advise the boys.”

Al-Fatiha, (The Opening), is the first chapter of the Muslim holy book, the Qur'an. Its seven verses are a prayer for God's guidance and stress the lordship and mercy of God. This chapter has a special role in traditional daily prayers, being recited at the start of each unit of prayer, or rak'ah.

Al-Fatiha, “The Opening”

1:1 In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful:

Bismillāhi r-raḥmānī r-raḥīm

1:2 Praise be to God, the Lord of the Universe.
Al ḥamdu lillāhī rabbi l-ʿālamīn

1:3 The Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

Ar raḥmānī r-raḥīm

1:4 King of the Day of Judgment.

Mālikī yawmi d-dīn

1:5 You alone we worship, and You alone we ask for help

Iyyāka naḥbudu wa iyyāka nastaʿīn

1:6 Guide us to the straight way;

Iḥdinā ʿṣrāʾ ṣal mustaqīm

1:7 The way of those whom you have blessed, not of those who have deserved anger, nor of those who stray.

Ṣrāʾ al-laqīna anʿama ʿalayhim ġayril maġḏābi ʿalayhim walaḏ dāllīn

13 Ayat al-Kursi (or the Verse of the Throne) is verse 255 of the second chapter of the Holy Al-Quran, the chapter al-Baqarah. Below is the English translation of this verse:

“Allah! There is no god but He - the Living, The Self-subsisting, Eternal. No slumber can seize Him Nor Sleep. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is there can intercede in His presence except as He permitteth? He knoweth what (appeareth to His creatures As) before or after or behind them. Nor shall they compass Aught of his knowledge Except as He willeth. His throne doth extend over the heavens and on earth, and He feeleth No fatigue in guarding and preserving them, For He is the Most High, The Supreme (in glory).”

14 ‘Macam gigi gigit lidah’ is a Malay idiom that literally translates to ‘the teeth biting the tongue.’ This phrase is used to denote how close the relationship is between two people so that it is unthinkable deviousness for one to hurt or betray the other.

15 Within the prisons, there is a Prison Intelligence Department. Officers, referred to as ‘Intel’, are in charge of interviewing each inmate that enters the prison. Questions that are posed to inmates include, how many times they have been incarcerated, whether they are affiliated with any secret societies outside of prison, whether they know of secret society members. Intel will also enlighten inmates on the zero-tolerance policy on gangs in prison and their responsibility of alerting the officers should they witness secret society related activities sin prison. This data was provided by Ilham, an inmate unaffiliated with any secret societies.

16 When I requested seven chairs for my informants, I was brusquely told off by prison officer Tan that, “there is no need for inmates to have chairs since they are used to sitting, sleeping, even eating on the floor and that there is no need for me to be especially kind to these people.”

17 Amy’s mother died when he was 3 years old. His father re-married and his stepmother physically abused him. He later ran away from home with his eldest sister, who took care of him. At age 13 he
began to take drugs (cannabis, ganjah) and started drinking. At 15 years old, he fought with three Chinese boys in public and was placed in a boy’s home. He was caught for taking drugs at 17. At 18 years old he was caught for housebreaking, theft and dwelling and drug consumption. He became a young prisoner in Old Changi prison. He had two more convictions in a Drug Rehabilitation Centre. He had one conviction for housebreaking and theft and one conviction for rioting with weapon. This is his seventh time in prison for drug-trafficking. He is now serving time, 6 years, in Institution A2 in the Changi prison Complex.

18 The following excerpt is taken from Felix Padilla’s The Gang as an American Enterprise, (1992: 18):

**Tony**: I remember on many occasions my father would say to me, ‘Ok, Tony, let’s have a conversation,’ and you know what? He would be the only one to talk. You see, adults want you to think of them as authority figures that must be respected because they are adults and are supposed to know it all. That’s one main reason I don’t respect adults- I don’t respect authority figures.

**Felix**: Well I’m an adult. Why do you talk to me?

**Tony**: You’re different. You were up front. You came in and told me from the beginning what you were all about, the things you wanted to get from me and the other guys. So we did the initial interview, and now we are like friends. Other people try becoming your friends first as a way to get what they want. Another thing is that when we talk you listen.

19 *Erikson (1967: 373) states the following:*

…it is unethical for a sociologist to deliberately misrepresent his (sic) identity for the purpose of entering a private domain to which he is not otherwise eligible; and…it is unethical for a sociologist to deliberately misrepresent the character of the research in which he is engaged.

20 This included my name, my academic qualification, my current status as a Masters student, the National University of Singapore (NUS) as an institution that I represented, my relationship to the Singapore Prisons, my previous research in prison with “catamites,” the supervisor from NUS who is overseeing my study, the address and the phone number to my office and my supervisor’s at (NUS) should my informants, at any point, need to verify my identity.

21 For example, I was greeted with a rude shock, during my first interview session, at Sembawang Drug Rehabilitation Centre (DRC). The first interview session at each institution had been structured to familiarise the informants with the topic of my research, the nature of interview sessions as a mode of gathering data, issues of anonymity and confidentiality, and to obtain the informed consent of the inmates, however before I had the chance to do so at Sembawang DRC, the prison officer who had escorted the inmates into the interview room began with “this inmate cannot speak English and he cannot help you, this inmate works in the kitchen and he is too busy to participate and this one also, he is in the workshop and not conducive to be present during your interview timings.” Perceiving the act of the prison officer as a symbol of the prison’s “othering” of the researcher, of the institution’s suspicion of “outsiders,” and a signal for them to “obediently decline the offer of the intruder who wishes to dig up the secrets of an institution of which the former is not a part,” and acting on that cue, all except one inmate stayed on. In fact Asid had later revealed to me that prior to entering the interview room, the officer at Sembawang DRC had warned the inmates that “any complaints related to the researcher about the institution will result in a formal charge,” which was sufficient to silence the inmates.

22 Sugi is 25 years old. He is married with 2 kids, 1 boy and 1 girl. At 14 years old he was caught for housebreaking. At 15 he spend 30 month at Singapore Boys Home for gangfight. He escaped for two years while on work release scheme. He finished his sentence in 2000. In 2001 he was convicted for AWOL (Absence Without official Leave from serving his national service). In 2003 he was sent to
AWP because he AWOL more than 4 months. He spent 8 months in Queenstown remand Prison and was sent to Admiralty West Prison 2 months before release.

23 Brahim is 26 years old. Both his parents are drug addicts. He and his father lived with his paternal grandparents from the time he was 7 years old. He stopped schooling at primary 6. He started working at Centrepoint as a cleaner. Here he met and joined members of SALAKAO, 369, under the umbrella of Chap Puik Sio Kun Tong (18 Sio Kun Tong). He began underage drinking and took part in numerous gang activities like collecting protection money, being involved in gang clashes. In 2000, he began his National Service as a Civil Defence member. He could not take the hard and routine life and he AWOL (absence without leave). He was caught in October of 2000 and was sentenced to Detention Barracks until March 2001. Civil Defence personnel will be subjected to PCC- police court case if they AWOL for more than 120 days. In 2001, he was sentenced to Admiralty West prison (AWP) for AWOL and was released in October, 2002. His second PCC was for for AWOL at AWP, from December 2002 to June 2003. He was caught in June 2004 for theft, loitering with intent, possession of fraudulent items and for having sex with an underage girl. He was sentenced for 28 months at SPD.

24 In another instance, I had fallen sick and could not turn up for two interview sessions with Amy. Although I had called the prisons, informing them of my condition and had advised them to inform my informant as well, the prison officers had not done so. What transpired was a rumour started by members of the ‘Alif’ gang that I “had found another man, a better man, a more handsome, powerful man to study than Amy.” In order to salvage his masculinity against rumours that “his woman had left him,” Amy punched the rumour-monger from ‘Alif’ gang and was consequently placed in isolation for two weeks.

25 Asid has been sentenced to Sembawang Prison/Drug Rehabilitation Centre for seven years for drug consumption. This is his third time in jail and all previous charges were for drug consumption as well. He has recently moved to Johor Bahru. His mother is a housewife and his father is retired. He grew up in a poor environment. He has three other siblings, a sister, a brother, a sister and himself, in order of birth. He now works in a pharmaceutical company, a family business in Johor Bahru that is owned by his third sister and her husband. Asid is a member of Omega and he has been for the past eight years. He is now part of the Omega Drug Wing in Malaysia. He has exploited his sister’s pharmaceutical company as a location to peddle drugs and to store stolen goods and drugs for Omega secret society, without the knowledge of his sister.
3. “A MALAY WAVE IN A CHINESE SEA”: THEORISING THE EMERGENCE OF THE OMEGA SECRET SOCIETY

3.1. The Study of Delinquent Groups in Singapore: A Review of the Conceptual and Theoretical Limitations of Existing Literature

Various conceptualised as ‘brotherhood, clan, secret society, triad, kongsi, and gang,’ sociological analysis of ‘delinquent groups,’ both within the prison context and that of larger society, have been since the nineteenth century, a focus of public fascination and academic debate. Empirical researches on various aspects of delinquent groups, whether on their emergence, structural organisation, ideologies, socio-economic function, have systematically constituted a platform to forward macro theorisations pertaining to the class, ethnic and political relations that characterises the society from which these delinquent groups emerged (Mahani Musa, 2003; Trocki, 1998; Chin, 1990, 1996; Jankowski, 1991; Taylor, 1990; Hagedorn, 1988; Vigil, 1988; Moore, 1978; Mak, 1973, 1981; Ianni, 1974; Short and Strodtbeck, 1965; Thrasher, 1963). Such a trend is discernible in an overseas context and ‘especially marked in the American academic tradition’ (Wacquant, 2002: 383). With the notable exception of Japan (Hamai and Ellis, 2006; Leonardsen, 2004; Komiya, 1999; Miyazawa, 1992; Bayley, 1991), the literature on crime in Asian societies, Singapore included, is not very extensive (Sheptycki, 2007: 103). A review of existing literature reveals the field of crime and deviance in Singapore, specifically pertaining to the study of delinquent
groups both within the prison and larger society, to be conceptually and theoretically underdeveloped. Such an assertion warrants justification and I shall subsequently provide a skeletal outline of the major conceptual and theoretical limitations that characterise Singapore’s literature on delinquent groups within the field of crime and deviance.

Researches on delinquent groups in Singapore exhibit a distinct pattern in terms of being predominantly confined, first with respect to the type of delinquent group focused upon, second, the time period during which systematic studies have been conducted on these particular delinquent groups, and third, the context in which these studies have been undertaken. With the exception of isolated sociological theses exploring the subculture of the ‘Marina Kids’ (Tan, 1992; Man, 1991) and ‘Mat Rokers’ (Noordin, 1992), systematic studies on delinquent groups within the Singaporean context are otherwise synonymous with the study of Chinese secret societies.¹ Systematic studies of Chinese secret societies saw a peak during the colonial period (1819-1942), initiated by British colonialists and their local protégés who extensively documented the ‘philosophical and ideological background, ritual items, seals, membership certificates, illustrations detailing initiation rites ceremonies and oaths of, and interaction between, the numerous Chinese secret societies’ in existence in Singapore (Trocki, 1990; Chen, 1987; Ward and Stirling, 1973; Blythe, 1969; Vaughan, 1969; Wynne, 1941; Pickering, 1878).

Ethnographies aside, there were as well numerous theoretically-inclined researches focusing on the socio-economic and political climate of Singapore and that of Southeast Asia to account for the emergence and functions of Chinese secret
societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Theoretically, a combination of the Marxist perspective and Durkheim’s structural-functional perspective has dominated explanations for the establishment and persistence of Chinese secret societies in Singapore. As the ‘hub of Chinese Diaspora, the direction of activity of most, if not all, Chinese secret societies in Singapore adapted to local conditions as organised bodies that enabled the Chinese Diaspora at the margins to enhance their economic survival and to overcome the inadequacy of legal norms in the larger social system’ (Musa, 2003; Ganapathy and Lian, 2002; Murray, 2002; Lim, 1999; Turnbull, 1996; Ownby, 1993; Trocki, 1990; Mak, 1973, 1981; Hobsbawn, 1959). The inability of the colonial government to provide adequate legal protection was a consequence of socio-cultural and physical barriers between the ruler and the ruled. In Singapore, the inadequacy of legal norms organisationally refers to the differentiated organisational effectiveness of the legal control agencies, and structurally, it refers to the differential accessibility of legal protection to general, private, commercial and illegal segments. The low rate of cleared-up criminal cases illustrates the inherent organisational problem of inadequate legal protection in the larger society. There is also a structural aspect to the inadequacy of legal norms in the system. Except for maintaining law and order, the legal control agencies in general do not extend their services uniformly to all segments of the system. Certain professions such as prostitution and unlicensed businesses are usually exempted from legal control services. Under such circumstances where the ruling British colonialists were unable to provide adequate legal protection, the indirect rule system or kapitan system, a form of political control
that gives a high degree of administrative and political independence to the ruled minority was implemented (Pereira, 2003; Mak, 1981).

Theoretically the Chinese immigrants were ruled almost entirely by their own leaders or *kapitans*. However the problem of low-level communication among the heterogeneous Chinese immigrants in terms of locality/speech that segregated the various Chinese groups from one another both socially and physically problematised the exercise of effective control of the Chinese by the *kapitans*. Consequently, there existed a need for a subsystem of indirect rule within the indirect rule system. This subsystem had to de-emphasise family and speech/locality ties, and also be able to overcome the communication barrier among speech groups. Chinese secret societies possessed these two requirements. Sworn brotherhoods which bind members of Chinese secret societies naturally de-emphasised dialect differences and consigned the clan system to a secondary position (Mak, 1981; Chu, 1947). But a de-emphasis on speech/locality does not provide an effective mechanism for removing the communication barrier among the various speech groups. To overcome this barrier, the gesture and communication symbols which helped identify members and the written passwords designed primarily for the poorly educated people proved functional (Chu, 1947: 75-98). The structure of the secret society played a determining role in the operation of an alternative system, that is, a brotherhood secret society would be the logical preference of ruling speech-bound Chinese immigrants, whether or not there were present other alternative systems such as a dialect association. Inadequate legal protection given by the larger society led to the implementation of indirect rule and such rule, when rendered inadequate by speech
heterogeneity, accounted for the emergence of local Chinese secret societies. Consequently, those categories of role player who have fewer opportunities than others in employing legal control services meant that some of them will turn to the use of alternative or non-institutionalised means. It is precisely these marginalised segments for whom secret societies perform an important function (Ganapathy and Lian, 2002).

Following the colonial period (1819-1942) in which there was a peak in the production of literature on Chinese secret societies, interest and research on delinquent groups generally, and on Chinese secret societies specifically began to wane. Despite the persistence of Chinese secret societies and the problems they spawned during the post World War II, pre-independence era (1945-1965), the problem of triads were nevertheless overshadowed by the numerous strikes, demonstrations and riots that transpired in Singapore between 1950 and 1965, provoked by the difficulties of Malayanisation, inter-ethnic strife, class struggle and communist insurgency. More importantly, in the wake of a traumatic separation from Malaysia that saw statehood rudely thrust upon Singapore, academic researches within the field of the social sciences became pragmatically geared towards addressing the processes of forging a new national identity through defining the role of citizenship, which served the imperative needs of the vulnerable city-state. Against the backdrop of a sudden expulsion from Malaysia that forced an independent Singapore into existence, academic researches in post-independent Singapore evidenced a preoccupation with ‘a post-war Singapore society fragmented along ethnic, linguistic, ideological, religious and political lines, with each group espousing
different sets of values, aspirations and norms that protected and enhanced their own interests’ (Hill and Lian, 1995: 19). At the expense of researches on delinquent groups, majority of academic researches in post-independent Singapore focused on ‘the ideology of survival and the difficult circumstances in which Singapore found itself as part of a nation-building exercise’ (Hill and Lian, 1995). Influenced by government policies, such pragmatism within the field of the social sciences to meet the imperative needs of the city-state undoubtedly induced the further marginalisation of researches on organised criminal groups in the Singaporean context.

As well, the historical context of colonial Singapore in which researches on Chinese secret societies are predominantly confined can be attributed to the dominance of a “law enforcement” or “social control” perspective” in post-independent Singapore (Pereira, 2003; Goh, 2002; Chua, 1980). Typically, the ‘law enforcement’ and ‘social control’ perspectives have uncritically asserted that the ‘transition from Singapore’s history of social disorder, marked by the pervasiveness of Chinese secret societies, to that of relative social stability can be attributed to the eventual independence of the island and the improvements made in the police force’ (Pereira, 2003: 195). In a similarly uncritical tone, Goh concluded that ‘the tough legislation in post-independent Singapore has enabled the police to keep the secret society situation under control and the support of various government agencies, together with the co-operation of the community as a whole, has further enhanced the effectiveness in isolating our youths away from gang and criminal activities’ (2002: 53). Both the ‘law enforcement’ and ‘social control’ perspectives ideologically assume that the convoluted set of social conditions that made Chinese secret societies
prevalent in colonial Singapore were unproblematically resolved after Singapore’s independence simply through improvements made in the police force. Among the complex social conditions which had triggered the emergence of Chinese secret societies include the lack of social integration among migrant workers in colonial Singapore, coupled with the capitalist and the British laissez-faire system which created an economically and politically dominant ruling class and a subservient working class.

Assuming that ‘tough legal measures’ could successfully eradicate the activities of, and deter individual from participating in, Chinese secret societies is neglectful of fragmented evidence pointing towards the resilience of Chinese secret societies to adapt to the suppressive measures undertaken by both the British colonialists and the government in post-independent Singapore. Despite the institutionalisation of the *Secret Societies Ordinance* in 1889, by the British, to abolish secret societies in the Straits Settlements, Lim affirmed that a loophole of the 1889 Ordinance which allowed societies formed for ‘recreation, charity, religion and literature’ to be exempted from registration had been exploited by criminal Chinese secret societies to reform in smaller groups (1999: 50). Concurring with Lim, Musa perceptively noted that following the introduction of the *Secret Societies Ordinance in 1889*, which only allowed clubs and organizations established for the purpose of recreation, welfare, religion, social work to persist as legal, Chinese secret societies began registering themselves as football clubs (Mahani Musa, 2003: 114). Despite the exhibited resilience of Chinese secret societies in manipulating and exploiting the laws, contemporary works on secret societies in Singapore remain a rarity possibly
due to overt optimism of the “law enforcement perspective” in eliminating secret societies.

Accordingly, a decade following independence and onwards, studies on Chinese secret societies remain rigidly historical. Contemporary systematic sociological analysis remains converged on the socio-economic and political circumstances during China’s Ch’ing dynasty in theorising the emergence of secret societies, the function of importing Chinese secret societies in Singapore to facilitate the survival of the Chinese diaspora in the local socio-economic and political climate, the political involvement of the secret societies in colonial Singapore and the subsequent suppression and criminalization of Chinese secret societies by the British and later, in post-independent Singapore by the People’s Action Party (Purcell, 1965; Blythe, 1969; Mak, 1973, 1975, 1981, 2002; Yen, 1986; Chen, 1987; Ownby, 1993; Trocki, 1993; Heidhues, 1993; Turnbull, 1996; Lim, 1999; Murray, 2002; Low, 2002; Craig, 2002; Goh, 2002; Pereira, 2003; Musa, 2003). Aside from a concerted effort on Chinese secret societies over other delinquent groups, specifically during the colonial as opposed to the contemporary era, the parochialism of research on delinquent groups in Singapore is as well marked by the exclusive context of the free community rather than the prison context, in which these researches have been undertaken.
3.2. Exploring Intra-Ethnic Relations within Chinese Secret Societies and Its Impact on Theorising the Emergence of Omega Secret Society

As discussed above, the localisation of the activities of Chinese secret societies in order to facilitate the survival of the Chinese Diaspora within the socio-economic and political climate of Singapore has been exhaustively examined. Seeking to focus on the position and functions of secret societies within local communities, Ownby et al (1993: 3-16) advocated that secret societies should neither be viewed in isolation nor on hindsight, but rather as one expression of a broader range of social practices that played an important role in the Chinese communities of Southeast Asia. Such an approach was put forth to avoid the reduction of secret societies and their members to any single definitive characterisation, not “primitive rebels,” not “criminal gangs,” not even “innocent practitioners of mutual aid.” In fact, as Ownby et al (1993) discovered, the attempt to re-conceptualise the most significant kinds of illegitimate Chinese collectives operating in South China and Southeast Asia, by dividing them into brotherhoods (hui), secret societies (kongsi) and criminal gangs, is beset with difficulties since such terminologies themselves fundamentally embody an element of localisation within different contexts. Here, the term kongsi constitutes a befitting example. Within the context of Thailand, Skinner, writing on the Chinese at one point offers a translation of kongsi as “company, public organisation, office” (Skinner, 1957: 376), but elsewhere equates kongsi with the branch of a secret society (Skinner, 1957: 141), and yet again as a subdivision within a large mining enterprise (Skinner, 1957: 110). The small-scale mining enterprises in West Borneo and Bangka were also known as kongsi. Some early colonial commentators viewed kongsi as
“public clubs” that functioned as something like what we would call voluntary associations (Trocki, 1990: 11). Carl Trocki perhaps best captures the range of organisational phenomena to which the term could apply: “Kongsi is a generic Chinese term for a range of social and economic configurations that includes everything from business partnerships to clan and regional associations to secret triad societies” (Trocki, 1990: 11).

The localisation of the activities of Chinese secret societies within the socio-economic and political climate of Singapore, while important, does not facilitate an appreciation of why ethnicity constitutes a salient ideology in the discursive construction of the two-fold aims underlying the formation of the Omega secret society, thus differentiating Omega from Chinese secret societies. Of particular interest to this thesis, to account for the salience of ethnicity as an ideology underlying the formation of the Omega secret society, is the neglected localisation of Chinese secret societies in terms of their membership composition and their ideological notions of ‘brotherhood and equality’. Espousing an ideology of ‘brotherhood and equality’ primarily functioned to facilitate Chinese secret societies to gain a foothold within the context of Singapore’s multi-ethnic community, inclusive of an indigenous Malay population and Indians emigrants. Here it is important to issue a caveat. Despite an emphasis on the notions of ‘brotherhood and equality’ among its members, Wynne (1941) had contrarily observed intra-ethnic distinctions between Malay and Chinese members within Chinese secret societies. According to Wynne, ‘the Malays were always exploited in the hands of the Presidents and Vice-Presidents of the Chinese secret societies, engaged to do the dirty
work that the Chinese did not want associated to their own Chinese societies. The differentiated status between Chinese and Malay members of Chinese secret societies was marked by a difference in the entrance fee of Chinese members, which was three dollars and sixty cents, compared to the one dollar and sixty cents paid by lesser members of Chinese secret societies, namely Malays’ (1941: 228). Despite the differentiated status between Chinese and Malay members of Chinese secret societies, Wynne perceptively noted that ‘in order for Chinese secret societies to safeguard their imperium in imperio within the context of a multi-ethnic, migrant community such as Singapore, it was crucial for Chinese secret societies to ideologically de-emphasise ethnic allegiance’ (1941: 254).

With respect to the adaptation of their membership composition in Singapore, Chinese secret societies shifted from a homogenous entity comprising exclusively of ethnic Chinese in terms of locality/speech to a heterogeneous organisation whose inclusive membership not only saw the breakdown of speech/locality ties among the ethnic Chinese but also the acceptance of individuals from other ethnic groups. Such an adaptation within the Singaporean milieu was necessitated by a myriad of structural factors. Citing the over-representation of Malays as police officers in Singapore as a primary factor, Musa (2003: 129) argued that having a Malay section within Chinese secret societies served a pragmatic function where Malays could be called upon to network with, and bribe Malay officers to establish cooperative relations with Chinese secret societies. Additionally, the affiliation of prominent members in the Malay community such as high-ranking police officers with Chinese secret societies simultaneously serves to influence Malays to join the Chinese secret
Influencing Malays to enter Chinese secret societies was crucial to strengthen the population of followers and the military capacity of Chinese secret societies. Situated within a frontier community of multi-ethnic migrants like Singapore, inclusive of Chinese of various dialects, Malay and Indian emigrants, and where numerous secret societies additionally existed and competed for members in order to flourish, Chinese secret societies had to adapt by espousing an inclusive membership. In another instance, Musa (2003: 220) has contended that the membership or cooperation of Malays and Indians in the Chinese secret societies is unavoidable as a result of ‘structural pressure’. Structural pressure refers to ‘the environment where the economic predominance of members of Chinese secret societies, marked by the ownership of provision shops, meant that Malays and Indians were dependent on the Chinese not only for jobs but also for rice loans and other provisions when facing economic distress’ (Musa, 2003: 130). In such an environment, the question of influencing Malays and Indians to join the Chinese secret societies is unavoidable. To facilitate the recruitment of, and the promotion of social cohesion among, members from an ethnically heterogeneous migrant community, Chinese secret societies in Singapore strategically invoked an accompanying ideology where ethnic allegiance and allusions among members are de-emphasised.

While the localisation of Chinese secret societies in terms of their membership composition and their ideology has been thoroughly analysed from a structural-functional perspective, the intra-ethnic interaction between Malay and Chinese members within Chinese secret societies has been sparsely documented in existing
literature and for the most parts, left unanalysed. Neither the authors of original ethnographies of Chinese secret societies in Singapore nor contemporary researchers who have extensively referred to the former’s works have probed into the facet of intra-ethnic relations within Chinese secret societies. Such neglect is a corollary of the historical predominance of an ethnocentric, subcultural framework which typically conceptualises delinquent groups as ‘ethnically or racially homogenous, static and closed’ (see Linton, 1943; Mak, 1973; Fine and Kleinman, 1979). Delinquent groups have often been treated as a membership category in which the criterion for belonging, whether structural (Valentine, 1986) or network based (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960), always maintains a homogenous ethnic or national composition (Thrasher, 1963; Mak, 1973, 1981; Ianni, 1974; Fine and Kleinman, 1979; Jankowski, 1991; Shelden et. al., 1997). Shelden et al. (1997: 75) assert that an inevitable consequence of assuming the homogeneity of members within delinquent groups is the systematic emphasis on inter-gang relationships and the obscuring of investigations into intra-gang dynamics. The pertinence of intra-ethnic relations within Chinese secret societies can be gathered from fragmented observations of some colonial authors. Wynne (1941: 216) aptly admitted that his ethnography of Chinese secret societies was contingent on ‘Malay members who unreservedly divulged the secret of the society, despite having taken the oath of fidelity, because the Malays felt that the Chinese oath was not binding for Mohammedans since it had not been sworn on the Koran.’ While the Chinese secret societies had extended memberships to Malays as a means of adapting to the local socio-economic and political structure of Singapore, Blythe noted that ‘Malays in Chinese secret societies
were merely tools, engaged to do any dirty work that the Chinese themselves did not want to do’ (1969: 263). Although Wynne and Blythe had aptly described a disjuncture in the degree of solidarity between Malay and Chinese members of Chinese secret societies, neither authors had analytically delved into the issue of intra-ethnic relations within Chinese secret societies. By virtue of his age, Pak Hitam was able to offer a historical perspective on the nature of intra-ethnic relations between Malay and Chinese members within Chinese secret societies in the early 1940s in Singapore. Interestingly, Pak Hitam asserted that the dynamics of intra-ethnic relations between Malays and Chinese in Chinese secret societies was fundamental to the establishment of the Red and White Flag Society (Bendera Merah Putih), of which he was a member. One of the earliest secret societies in Malaya, the Red and White Flag society emphasises an exclusively Malay Muslim membership and ethnic affiliation among ‘Malay Muslims’ as a prominent ideology for its formation (see Musa, 2003), a template which the contemporary Omega secret society models after. Pak Hitam succinctly narrates the following:

I joined *Merah Putih* in 1943. The purpose of *Merah Putih* was so that Malays would not be bullied by Chinese secret societies like *Ghee Hin, Toh Pek Kong, Naga Hitam* (Black Dragon) and many more. Although Chinese SS have Malay sub-sections but Malays are not treated as well as the Chinese. When Chinese join the SS, they pay one dollar more than Malays or *Keling* (Indians). Paying more meant that Chinese have more privileges, more help, and more opportunities. Only Chinese become leaders and they only help other Chinese to become rich. Meanwhile Malays get beaten up during fights with other gang members, with the police and get thrown in jail but they never get anything, not even dust. Omega has revived the spirit of *Merah Putih* and today it is in the Omega secret society that the salvation of Malay Muslims lies.
3.3. Applying Merton’s Social Structure and Anomie Paradigm to Explain the Emergence of “OMEGA, Only Malays Enter Gangster Association”:

The broad theoretical insights first articulated by Robert Merton (1938) in his seminal article, ‘Social Structure and Anomie’ (SS&A), have had far-reaching impact on the development of criminological theory and research (Orru, 1987). Merton’s classic (1938) essay, ‘Social Structure and Anomie’, is perhaps the most cited of all works in criminology, if not in sociology (Cole, 1975). Merton’s initial statement (1938) and his subsequent clarification of his arguments (1957, 1964, 1968) stimulated important and sophisticated theoretical contributions during the 1950s and 1960s (Cohen, 1955; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960). No review of criminological theory could afford to neglect the detail of his contributions, and edited collections of classics in criminology reprint his essay with regularity (Miles, 1975: 500-501; see also Jacoby, 1979; Cullen and Agnew, 2006). Nevertheless, over a half-century, Merton’s paradigm of social structure and anomie has evolved in important ways since its initial 1938 statement. The evolving character of the SS&A paradigm has proved to be central to its historical study by Stephen Cole. One can easily see, Cole notes that ‘the theory has been added to and modified. It has been a dynamic rather than a static theory, developing in response to its environment’ (1975: 185; see also Merton, 1964, 1995, 1997). Presently, I shall explore specific criticisms, or issues surrounding Merton’s SS&A paradigm. Using interview data as a way of clarifying key theoretical issues that continue to surround Merton’s paradigm, I shall offer revisions to be made in the SS&A paradigm so as to better appreciate the paradigm’s intellectual impact on theorising the emergence of the Omega secret society.
The paradigm of ‘Social Structure and Anomie’ is built on Merton’s conceptualisation of society as consisting of a cultural structure and a social structure. The cultural structure has two components. First, there are the ‘culturally defined goals, purposes and interests,’ which comprise ‘a frame of aspirational reference’ (1938: 672). Second, there are ‘institutional norms’ that define the ‘acceptable modes of achieving these goals’ (1938: 673). As Merton notes, ‘every social group invariably couples its scale of desired ends with moral or institutional regulation of permissible and required procedures for attaining these ends’ (1938: 673). The social structure, however, is salient because it determines people’s access to the institutional or approved ‘means’ of achieving value cultural goals. Eventually Merton (1997) would use the phrase ‘differential opportunity structures,’ following Cloward and Ohlin (1960), to capture this phenomenon. ‘Aberrant’ or ‘deviate behaviour (to use Merton’s [1938: 674-676] original language) is likely to ensue when individuals do not have the institutional means to reach culturally prescribed goals. In this situation, there is structural strain on the institutional norms, which lose their legitimacy and regulatory power. When this attenuation of normative regulation transpires, ‘anomie’ is said to occur, and people are free to ‘innovate’- to use the most expedient means, including crime, to pursue goals.

A special appeal of Merton’s work is the ‘esthetic style’ of the theory that makes it ‘fun to read and fun to play with’ and that encourages ‘a shift in perspective’ and ‘creativity’ (Stinchcombe, 1975: 28-29). Part of this esthetic is ‘the capacity of the theory to say with the set of statements something complex and realistic about individual people and what they are up to and something complex and realistic about
a social pattern’ (Stinchcombe, 1975: 27). Merton’s SS&A paradigm is a good example of a perspective for which there are numerous interpretations in the literature suggesting very different causal models. Baumer (2007) has demonstrated that ‘social structure and anomie’ was an ‘evolving paradigm’ that is capable of generating an array of theoretical and research ‘puzzles’ to be solved. For example, Baumer has highlighted the extensions of Merton’s paradigm by the latter’s former students Richard Cloward (the role of ‘illegitimate means’ in shaping the selection of deviant adaptations) and Albert Cohen (the importance of social interaction and subcultural formation). In this context, the key to Baumer’s article is not who correctly interprets Merton’s original statements of his theory, but how differential interpretations of this work might lead to interrelated but alternative lines of inquiry that nourish the development of the SS&A paradigm. Merton’s SS&A paradigm was never meant to be reified and paid homage but rather to be used as a conduit to grow scientific knowledge.

In the spirit of differential interpretations that characterise the SS&A paradigm, I shall subsequently expound an alternative application of Merton’s cultural/structural argument, as a comprehensive foundation for an inquiry into the emergence of the Omega secret society within the context of Singapore’s illegitimate society. While Merton was geared towards explaining the origins of crime and deviance, I am suggesting the potential use of Merton’s SS&A paradigm to understand the proliferation of criminality and deviance within the context of Singapore’s illegitimate society. Fundamentally, I am suggesting that the abovementioned application is possible because Merton’s conceptualisation of society
as comprising of a cultural structure and a social structure is applicable to the contexts of both ‘legitimate society’ and ‘illegitimate society’.

Such a parallel between the contexts of ‘legitimate society’ and ‘illegitimate society,’ as comprising of a cultural structure and a social structure, have facilitated the breadth of ideas contained in Merton’s SS&A paradigm to play a substantial role in shaping the field of deviance and criminology and to stimulate further theoretical developments (Rosenfeld, 1989; Messner, 1988; Bernard, 1987; Agnew, 1987; Cullen, 1984). The prominence of Merton’s SS&A paradigm has been solidified in contemporary criminological literature with two major perspectives resting much of their conceptual and theoretical foundations on Merton’s arguments: Messner and Rosenfeld’s (1994) Institutional Anomie Theory (IAT) and Agnew’s (1992) General Strain Theory (GST). Nevertheless, as suggested by the theoretical differences between the Institutional Anomie Theory (IAT) and Agnew’s (1992) General Strain Theory (GST), there remains considerable ambiguity about the precise causal configurations implied in Merton’s SS&A paradigm which has led some to suggest that Merton proposed two analytically distinct theoretical arguments (Featherstone and Deflem, 2003; Agnew, 1995; Messner, 1988; Cullen, 1984; Hilbert and Wright 1979). First, Merton’s theory has for several decades been described by some as an individual-level theory that emphasises, in various ways, the implications for deviance of goal blockage and other ‘strains’ experienced by individuals (Passas and Agnew, 1997; Agnew, 1987; Cullen, 1984; Kornhauser, 1978). In this first tradition, scholars emphasise social psychological processes and typically advocate strongly the use of individual-level data to test Merton’s ‘strain’ theory. Second, some have
argued that Merton’s theory is primarily concerned with societal cultural and structural imbalances, which somehow lead to societal differences in levels of deviance (Bernard, 1987; Messner and Rosenfeld, 1994, 2001). Scholars who have taken this view argue that individual-level studies are largely irrelevant to Merton’s ‘anomie theory’ and that, instead, a macro-level approach is necessary to test key arguments. In some of these cases, it is implied that the two unique components of his work call for unique analytical strategies, with a macro-level approach needed to test Merton’s theory of social organisation and an individual-level strategy to test the theory of deviant motivation (Messner, 1988; Messner and Rosenfeld, 1994). Such bifurcated interpretations of Merton’s theory have done much to stimulate significant theoretical advances in macro-level anomie theory and micro-level strain theory, respectively, and also have led to a large and growing research literature in each of these areas. But this unnecessary division of Merton’s theory also has several downsides. In particular, extracting two largely distinct theories from Merton’s work has limited the full potential contribution of his theory and has contributed to the neglect of the specific processes that translate macro-level societal features into different forms of behaviour among individuals (Baumer, 2007: 64).

The position advanced here is that, rather than representing ‘two analytically distinct theories’ (Messner, 1988; Featherstone and Deflem, 2003), Merton’s theoretical model is best described in contemporary language as one multilevel theory (Baumer, 2007: 64) of how macro-level social and cultural conditions increase the likelihood of deviance among individuals. Explicitly viewing Merton’s theory as an integrated multilevel model rather than two distinct theories reveals that the effects of
macro-level features may be conditioned by individual-level factors, and that the effects of individual-level factors may be conditioned by macro-level features. Moreover, explicating the theory’s multilevel scope illuminates the processes that link macro-level societal features to innovative adaptive behaviour by individuals. Within the milieu of the illegitimate sector of Singapore society, dominated by Chinese secret societies, members have expressed a consensus that participation or membership in Chinese secret societies symbolises an aspiration to gain access to ‘illegitimate opportunity and learning structures in order to realistically recognise the potentiality for personal progress in the illegitimate community through participation in the illegitimate network’ (Ganapathy and Lian, 2002: 144). Here, I would like to issue a caveat. Identifying pecuniary success as the core cultural goal that motivates individuals to enter Chinese secret societies is not meant to paint a unitary illegitimate society where members bind together in a common cultural commitment to the above-mentioned goal. Like Merton, I am not proposing that cultural goals within illegitimate society involve only the pursuit of pecuniary success; many goals, including different varieties of success goal, might exist.³ In the context of Singapore’s illegitimate society, the conceptualisation of ‘cultural goal’ in terms of pecuniary success reflects the perspective of the informants, who were, or are still, members of Chinese secret societies. Fundamentally, the motivating factor underlying membership in Chinese secret societies is the accompanying cultural message that participation in Chinese secret societies ensures that members are able to pursue and expect pecuniary success. As Jimy⁴ noted:
Kita sarung baju Cina (We join Chinese SS) because we are promised money. We deal with drugs, smuggle cigarettes, alcohol, run brothels, karaoke, gambling houses, tattoo shops. We collect protection money from owners of bars, coffee shops. Chinese SS started early and they know how to make money illegally, how to invest their illegal money into legitimate businesses. Chinese SS have many kantow (opportunities to make money), that’s why they recruit easily. Where there’s Chinese, there’s money. Chinese are business-minded, unlike Malays. Of course, I strive to be famous in the underworld like Jamal Kastam, Salim Babu, Ali Perompak. I want to be Gi Na Tao (leader) in the SS. Malays are dependent on Chinese even in the underworld. To rise, Omega had to work with Sa Kong Sa. Chinese had to teach the Malays how to survive in the underworld.

Accompanying the ‘cultural goal,’ Cloward and Ohlin have asserted that ‘the most crucial elements of the culture of illegitimate society are the imposed prescriptions, norms, or rules of conduct to guide the behaviour of members and to define the activities required of a full-fledged member’ (1960: 13). In their conceptualisation of a ‘criminal subculture,’ Cloward and Ohlin (1960: 13) assert that all cultures provide their members with appropriate beliefs, values, and norms to carry out required activities, and the prefix ‘sub’ merely focuses attention on the connection of subculture with a larger environing culture from which it has become partially differentiated. The beliefs, values and norms that are provided by ‘criminal subcultures function to buttress, validate, and rationalize the myriad of activities that are prescribed to members of the subcultures, in other words, serving as the primary identifying and organizing elements of criminal subcultures’ (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960: 14). This corresponds to the second component of Merton’s concept of ‘cultural structure,’ the ‘institutional norms’. Jointly, the goal underlying individuals’ participation in the illegitimate society and the prescribed set of norms for directing and controlling the behaviour of its members correspond to Merton’s cultural
structure within the legitimate society. Cloward and Ohlin has correspondingly
highlighted the similarities by noting that ‘the capacities of participants to conform to
the norms of their criminal subcultures seem to be neither less nor greater than the
abilities of other persons in our society to conform to the dictates of the groups to
which they belong. The strategic difference lies in the nature of the norms to which
these delinquents conform as opposed to the more conventional norms to which non-
delinquents usually conform’ (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960: 36; see also Elliott and
Merrill, 1941). As Chiang⁵ from Ang Meng Tong succinctly assert below:

All SS (secret society) got rules members must follow so the underworld can
run smoothly. We have to take orders from the tiang (heads) otherwise we get
beaten. During the initiation we take oaths. Before we proceed (riot), we must
have permission of the head. We can’t be eating the flesh of our own brothers.
We cannot pao toh (betray) our brothers to the police or their enemies. We
can steal, rob, beat up, blackmail, and threaten anyone except our brothers.
We must maintain secrecy of our SS. SS give you business, but you must
share your profits with your family members. If family in trouble, we must
fight for them. We cannot take drugs in case the territory we are protecting
gets ambushed. If we do drugs and fail to protect our territory, we get beaten,
demoted in rank and have to pay for the losses. You peng, you die.

To account for the emergence of the Omega secret society parallels, but not in
entirety, Merton’s primary aim of explaining “how some social structures exert a
definite pressure upon certain persons in the society to engage in non-conforming
rather than conforming conduct” (1968: 186). I shall subsequently shed light on this
parallel. The emergence and expansion of the Omega secret society is contingent on
the ‘non-conforming’ conduct of individuals, specifically the most abysmal act that
can be committed within the illegitimate society, that is, the act of peng or switching
one’s oath of allegiance and secrecy from one secret society to another. An over-
representation of members in the Omega secret society comprise of Malays who peng from Chinese secret societies. The punishment of death that confronts any individual, who switches his oath of loyalty and secrecy from one secret society to another, evidences the gravity of such an act within the illegitimate society. Presently my objective is to analyse the structural circumstances in which individuals would be likely to deviate from the culturally approved value of maintaining their oath of loyalty to their secret society, within the illegitimate society.

Using Merton’s analytical scheme, I shall proceed to apply the SS&A framework in a trenchant way to illuminate the character of Chinese secret societies that dominate Singapore’s illegitimate society. In the same way American society is depicted in SS&A, Chinese secret societies which dominate Singapore’s illegitimate society have developed a peculiar cultural structure in that the society ‘places a high premium on economic affluence and social ascent for all its members’ (Merton, 1938: 680, emphasis in original). Ian corroborates with the following excerpt:

Everybody I know join Chinese SS for the money. Chinese have all the business connections to see themselves through. They have friends in powerful places, including powerful businessmen, government officials. Their connections with overseas secret societies link them to a lucrative drug trade. Many of the leaders cannot read or write but they drive Mercedes Benz, Jaguar, and they live in private properties. When we join them, that’s what they promise us…money. Regardless of race, religion, age, anyone can have access to all the businesses and all the opportunities to make money as long as they work hard and remain loyal.

Central to Merton’s SS&A paradigm was the sociological idea of a continuing interplay and frequent tension between the cultural structure and the social structure (the distribution and organisation of social position and statuses). The essential
contradiction of the USA, however, is that its unequal system of class stratification differentially limits access to the legitimate means required to achieve this universal goal of pecuniary success. Given that success goals are universalistic and access to them is most constrained for those in the lower strata, the logic of SS&A suggests a strong class-crime/deviance association (Cullen and Messner, 2007: 25). It is not success goals or poverty per se that are criminogenic, but rather the malintegration of the cultural and social structures.\(^7\) As Merton (1938: 680, emphases in original) famously wrote:

> It is only when a system of cultural values extols, virtually above all else, certain common symbols of success for the population at large while its social structure rigorously restricts or completely eliminates access to approved modes of acquiring these symbols for a considerable part of the same population, that antisocial behaviour ensues for a considerable scale …The same body of success-symbols is held to be desirable for all. These goals are held to transcend class lines, not to be bounded by them, yet the actual organization is such that there exist class differentials in [their] accessibility…

This ‘resultant stress,’ Merton asserted (1938: 682), ‘leads to a breakdown of the regulatory structure’—that is, a ‘lack of coordination’ between means and ends ‘leads to anomie.’

While I concur with Merton that anomie and thus deviance or non-conforming conduct are produced by the inconsistency between cultural prescriptions to seek economic ascent and the social structure’s differential provision of legitimate access to this goal, the critical role of class in Merton’s SS&A paradigm constitutes the single impediment in explaining the emergence of the Omega secret society. Herein ends the parallel I draw from Merton’s SS&A paradigm. Merton’s basic structural concept of differential access to opportunities which is closely tied to class structure...
reflects a bias that is induced by his biography (Cullen and Messner, 2007: 26). Nevertheless, Merton’s conceptualisation of differential access to opportunities as a class-related phenomenon cannot adequately account for non-conforming behaviour among Malay members of the illegitimate society, who by and large share a common identity with their Chinese and Indian counterparts as occupants of the lower strata of legitimate society. Although members of secret societies are generally lower-class members of legitimate society, Malay members of Chinese secret societies have suggested that the differential access to opportunities among members of Chinese secret societies, which dominate Singapore’s illegitimate society, is contrarily a race-related phenomenon. Opportunities within Chinese secret societies include access to illegitimate economic opportunities and learning structures (see Chapter 1). The concept of race, which Merton has neglected in his class-biased SS&A paradigm (see, for example, Hirschi, 1969; Tittle, 1983; Dunaway et al., 2000), plays a central role in explaining the tension between aspirations for upward mobility being normatively defined as accessible to all members of Chinese secret societies, and structural differentials in the probability of actually realising those aspirations. Pola recounts his experience as an ex-member of the Chinese secret society, Ang Su Tong:

Malays in Chinese SS are like bullets, used to fight, to protect Chinese territory. Malays never see the fruits of their blood, sweat, their jail sentence. Only Chinese boys are given opportunities to set up businesses like karaoke, tattoo shop, coffee-shop, clubs. Malays never get a cent from the Chinese. Malays are never Gi Na Tow (leaders) in the underworld. It’s like Malays are a separate gang within Chinese secret societies, second-class members. The brotherhood is a fucking lie. Where’s the promise that every member has equal opportunity to the businesses and to the money? I fight for the Chinese, break my bones, risk my life, yet Chinese boys get a chair. Omega’s different. When there’s a riot, even leaders come down to fight. Even Yan Bai and the other leaders slog it out in jail and get killed. If a member needs money to
get married, to help a family member get married, to bury their dead, or for legal fees, rest assured they get help. That is brotherhood and equality.

Within Chinese secret societies, goals of success, especially economic, are only ideologically held up as a legitimate expectation for all its members, regardless of age, race and religion, as suggested in the above excerpt. The core cultural message is that it is legitimate for all members of Chinese secret societies to pursue and expect economic success. Ideologically, as asserted by leaders of Chinese secret societies, neither a rigidified class structure nor issues of ethnic subordination are of any significance within Chinese secret societies. Instead, ‘formal criteria’ are commonly emphasised for all members of Chinese secret societies as the individuals strive to better themselves, in a bid to rise upward and onward within illegitimate society. ‘Formal criteria’ conceptually refers to achieved status or the measure of an individual’s ability, which must be contrasted with the concept of ‘operative criteria.’ ‘Operative criteria,’ contrarily refers to an individual’s ascribed status either in terms of ‘race’ or ‘class’ (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960). Despite their ‘efforts, allegiance to rules and regulations, and their willingness to risk limbs and life,’ however, Malay members of Chinese secret societies find themselves restricted to rank and file positions and deprived of access to both illegitimate economic opportunities and learning structures. Regardless of the ideology of equality and brotherhood that is disseminated to all members of Chinese secret societies, Malay members of Chinese secret societies perceive themselves to be in reality socio-economically marginalised vis-à-vis their Chinese counterparts. Malays perceive their ethnic identity as the sole, visible barrier that produces a discrepancy between the expectation induced by entry
into Chinese secret societies and the possibilities of realising those expectations. Such a perception culminates in Malay members of Chinese secret societies harbouring the inevitable sentiment that their failure within the context of Singapore’s illegitimate context is a result of the implicit ethnic discrimination practiced by the Chinese leaders of Chinese secret societies.

The emergence of Omega, therefore, must be analysed as a result of Malays perceiving their socio-economic marginalisation in relation to their Chinese counterparts, subsequently experiencing anomie and posing a collective challenge to the legitimacy of the established rules of conduct that are binding to members of Chinese secret societies. In his writings on SS&A, Merton’s precise debt to Durkheim went beyond the use of the term ‘anomie’. Experiencing a disjuncture between the ideology of equality and brotherhood within Chinese secret societies and their empirical experience, Malay members of Chinese secret societies rationalise their decision to switch loyalties from Chinese secret societies into Omega as inevitable and justifiable. Interactions among Malays which find them being unjustly deprived of access to illegitimate opportunities and learning structures, despite their potential ability to meet the ‘formal criteria’ of evaluation, encourage the withdrawal of sentiments of the established system of norms endorsed by Chinese secret societies. The most significant step in the withdrawal of sentiments supporting the legitimacy of conventional norms is the attribution of the cause of failure to the social order rather than to oneself, which is summed up by Pak Hitam:

Malays have always retaliated against their discrimination in Chinese SS. Red and White Flag had existed during colonial Singapore. Their purpose was to stop the Chinese SS from bullying the Malays, extorting money from the
Malays, beating up the Malays, converting Malays from Islam into their wretched, idol-worshipping religion. There were many others like Selimpang Merah, Adik-beradik Selarang. All of them shared the same sentiments and aims as Omega. If the Chinese really practiced brotherhood, then Malays would not peng. Chinese say there is equality but Malays fight and die first and Malay see the prison bars first but they never get the ranks, or the money. Since Chinese treat Malays as second-class members, our loyalty to them is no longer binding. Omega rewards their members for the hard work. There are no second-class, third-class members. You work you get the rewards and the ranks. That’s why Malays die for Omega. Samad gila, Jumat Botak, these men smuggled drugs to build the society and they die willingly to help the Malays. Because we never shortchange our people. We practice equality; we don’t make use of people. We do it all for Malay Muslims, so they will no longer be oppressed.
With the exception of isolated sociological theses exploring the subculture of the ‘Marina Kids’ and ‘Mat Rokers’, systematic studies on delinquent groups within the Singaporean context is otherwise, synonymous with the study of Chinese secret societies. A few local studies on the phenomenon of delinquent groups in Singapore (Mak, 1981; Man, 1991; Noordin 1992) have conceptualised their analysis within a subcultural and “strain” theoretical framework. In line with the subcultural tradition, Man’s exploratory study of the ‘Marina Kids’ began by providing an ethnographic description of the ‘Kids’ culture as an expression of their frustration and discontent with the mainstream society which they are unable to communicate verbally in order to justify conceptualising them as a delinquent subculture’, followed by detailing ‘the members’ experience of educational marginality and alienation from, hence insufficient control by, the family, as a basis for theorising a combination of strain as well as control theory respectively to account for the emergence of the subculture’ (1999: 7). Dissatisfied with ‘the social control perspective which cast the Marina Kids as the folk devils of society by directing advocates of this theory to look out for behaviour which could be deemed as delinquent’, Tan (1992: 3) proposes adopting a verstehen approach, which emphasises the attempt to see the world through the eyes of the research subjects in order to grasp the construction of meanings, motives, and intentions behind their actions in order to debunk the label of ‘delinquents’ attached to the ‘Marina Kids’. In a similar spirit, Shirlene Noordin (1992: 60) argues that adopting a phenomenological approach in studying the phenomenon of ‘Mat Rokers fundamentally exposes the imprecision of the concept of subculture that has been extensively used in sociological theories, particularly those of deviance and delinquency and encourages the deconstruction of commonly held stereotypes in order to appreciate that the subcultural response, the group’s identity and values of the Mat Rokers which, although may be an inversion of middle-class values, need not necessarily be delinquent.’

2 These different positions seem to be held strongly by their proponents. A good contrast of the ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ interpretations of Merton’s theory and on how it should be tested can be found in a published debate between Thomas Bernard and Robert Agnew during the late 1980s (see Agnew, 1987; Bernard, 1987). Bernard argued strongly that Merton’s theory ‘makes assertions about aggregates or groups rather than about individuals… [and therefore]…can be directly tested only by deriving aggregate predictions and testing these predictions with aggregate data’ (1987: 263, emphasis in original). Agnew disagreed with this assessment, and argued that individual-level variables play a central role in Merton’s theory in ‘explaining why cultural and social structural characteristics influence delinquency… [and therefore]…that tests with individual-level data are relevant (1987: 281, emphasis in original).

3 As Merton noted:

the cultural structure hold out goals of success of varying kind…but especially I elected to examine in this paper economic success…In this case, I elected to focus on economic success, but that was a decision. It doesn’t for a moment…. [as] SS&A in 1938 makes clear, mean that the argument-the interpretation of the theory-holds only for economics.

4 Jimy is from the Sio Kun Tong secret society. He is 31 years old. Jimy was convicted on a few criminal charges including, cheating his employer, embezzling company funds, supplying stolen goods to his employer’s company, drug possession and driving with a fake license. He was sentenced to seven years in prison and he is currently institutionalised in Admiralty West Prison. This is his fifth time in jail; previous convictions include theft and drug-related offences.

5 Chiang is 29 years old and he is from the Ang Meng Tong secret society. This is his fourth time in prison. He was convicted for theft and credit card fraud and is sentenced to five years in prison. Previous convictions include breaking entry into a warehouse, peddling drugs and vehicle theft. He is a corrective training (CT) prisoner which means that ‘she’ has been sentenced for five years and will not be given the one-third reduction in ‘her’ sentence like other prisoners. She will serve the whole five years.
Ian is 35 years old. He was transferred from Tanah Merah Prison to Selarang Park Prison/Drug Rehabilitation Centre because he had initiated a riot with a rival gang. Ian was from the 24 secret society, specifically Ghee Hai Kim before he switched loyalties into the Omega secret society. This is his sixth time in prison. He was convicted of stealing a motorcycle. His previous convictions include drug possession, drug abuse and peddling drugs.

This is a proposition Merton (1938: 680-681, emphasis in original) seems to embrace in his original essay:

Poverty is not an isolated variable. It is one in a complex of independent social and cultural variables…Thus, poverty is less highly correlated with crime in southeastern Europe than in the United States. The possibilities of vertical mobility in these European areas would seem to be fewer than in this country, so that neither poverty per se nor its associations with limited opportunity is sufficient to account for the varying correlations. It is only when the full configuration is considered, poverty, limited opportunity and a commonly shared system of symbols, that we can explain the higher association between poverty and crime in our society than in others where rigidified class structure is coupled with differential class symbols of achievement.

Cullen and Messner (2007: 25) began their inquiry on social class by asking Professor Merton to comment on how his early life experiences might have played a role shaping his theorising: ‘The issue of the concept of class played a critical role in SS&A. Do you think that that has relevance to your history of growing up in the Philadelphia-benign slums…?’ Merton reflected that the experiences affected him ‘in the most indirect way’. Merton continued:

Remember the period of history we are dealing with. Know the crucial decade obviously for me with regard to sociology was the latter part of the 20s through the 1930s. You can imagine that in the Great Depression-though it obviously had a differential impact on the already poor-that a sense of differential access as I was to turn to-opportunity-was so intensified that…[it] couldn’t help but be a learning [experience] (Cullen and Messner, 2007: 26).

Pola is 27 years old and he was formerly an Ang Su Tong member, before he switched loyalties to omega. He became a secret society member at an early age of 11 years old. He had spent the bulk of his youth in a Boys’ home because he had played truant in school, he had been caught smoking, drinking alcohol, and smoking ganja and marijuana while underage. He became a secret society member at an early age of 11 years old. He had AWOL (Absence without Official Leave) from National service in 2001 and 2005 and had been sentenced to detention barracks and later in Queenstown Remand Prison. Recently, he was convicted for peddling drugs and has been sentenced to five years in prison. He is currently serving in Sembawang Prison/Drug Rehabilitation Centre.

The founder of Omega is Yan Bai. Omega was established on the 23rd of September, 1989 in Chia Keng prison. Yan Bai was assisted by six other members/inmates at that time. After their release, the members still maintained the grouping that they had started in prison. Most of the senior Omega members had been incarcerated already. ‘Jailbird’, one of the six member who assisted Yan Bai was killed during a riot. Most are serving their Criminal Law Detainee sentences now, with Yan Bai being the most recent to get caught. Yan Bai had fled to Indonesia and Malaysia to evade the authorities. In 2003, he was finally caught in Johor Bahru and he is currently serving his sentence in Tanah Merah prison.

Adik-Beradik Selarang literally translates to ‘Brothers of Selarang’. Selarang refers to Selarang Park Prison/Drug Rehabilitation Centre. Adik-Beradik Selarang was started by a group of Malay prisoners in the late 80s. These Malay prisoners were all from various Chinese secret societies, who found themselves abandoned by members of Chinese secret societies upon incarceration. They were deprived legal assistance although their imprisonment was a result of protecting the interests of the Chinese secret societies. Additionally, no financial assistance was given to their families by the Chinese secret
societies, as they had been promised, should they be incarcerated in the ‘line of duty to their secret societies.’ So these disenfranchised Malays band together in order to survive incarceration. They organised themselves so that those who had been released would carry out operations, including cutting prison gates and smuggling in drugs to those Malays who were still going through their sentence. They will communicate through letters. They will pack tobacco very tightly into a cylindrical shape so that it will be easy to throw through the prison gates. Officers know about it but the Malay one will let the whole thing pass. Also, they raised money through small-scale, illegal businesses to financially aid the families of the incarcerated Malays. Adik-Beradik Selarang, maintained an ethnically exclusive Malay membership, however they never managed to rival the economic dominance of Chinese secret societies. This story had been related to me by Azar.
CHAPTER 4

4. PRISON’S SPOILT IDENTITIES: RACIALLY STRUCTURED REALITIES WITHIN AND BEYOND

In the previous chapter, I have demonstrated how the integration of the concept of ‘ethnicity’ into Merton’s SS&A paradigm provides a comprehensive foundation for an inquiry into the emergence of the Omega secret society. While class as a variable has been instrumental to understanding the socio-economic and political marginalisation of Malays in the legitimate society (see Yusof, 1986; Li, 1989; Pung, 1993; Rahim, 1998, Stimpfl, 2006; Lian, 2006), ethnicity seems relevant to understanding the marginalisation of Malay members within the context of Singapore’s illegitimate society. As suggested in the interview data, Malay members within Chinese secret societies perceive themselves to be socio-economically marginalised vis-à-vis their Chinese counterparts. At a macro level, the symbiotic relationship that exists between the police and the institutionalised Chinese secret societies in the context of Singapore’s illegitimate society impedes Malays in Omega and members of all non-institutionalised secret societies from seeking redress for their socio-economic marginalisation within Chinese secret societies (see Chapter 1; see also Ganapathy and Lian, 2002). Within the social disciplinary framework of policing, the police must be understood as an extension of the state’s “microphysics of power” (Foucault, 1979), whose function is directed at reproducing social order in the criminal underworld. Through rich empirical data, Ganapathy and Lian (2002)
have shown that, in order to sustain the symbiotic relationship between the police and the institutionalised Chinese secret societies, the police specifically exercise their *gaze* on non-institutionalised secret societies. This *gaze* includes subjecting non-institutionalised secret societies to ‘stop and search practices, detention without trial, detention in police stations, questionings, status degradations ceremonies.’ Citing the example of the non-institutionalised, all-Indian, ‘Satu Hati’ gang, the authors have showed that the social disciplinary framework of policing effectually renders the former to exhibit traits akin to a ‘retreatist’ gang.

In light of existing research, I am interested in pursuing the strategies undertaken by members of the Omega secret society to transcend the doubly marginalised position of Malays, within Chinese secret societies and as a result of the symbiotic relationship between the police and the institutionalised Chinese secret societies in Singapore’s illegitimate society. The prison, I discovered, plays a crucial role in ensuring the formation, continued existence, and expansion of the Omega secret society. Nevertheless, as I shall subsequently demonstrate, prevalent conceptualisations of the prison as a ‘total institution,’ or ‘a complete and austere institution’ are limited in their capacity to explain why the prison milieu is conducive for members of Omega to strategise their continued existence and expansion. Conceptualising prisons as ‘total institutions,’ besides suggesting a physical separation between the prison and the ‘free community’ (Clemmer, 1958), has concurrently translated into an intellectual separation. By intellectual separation is meant, prison sociologists tend to find recourse in a deterministic structural-functional analysis in their research and observations of institutions, which
subsequently leads prison literature to emphasise the internal conditions of imprisonment as a stimulant of various kinds of inmate behaviour (Irwin and Cressey, 1962: 142). Intellectual separation here highlights the inescapable failure of prison sociologists to realise that like other aspects of our social reality, inmate culture and social structure cannot be understood without an examination of the social conditions, at a particular point in history, within which it exists. Numerous authors have astutely argued that the insistence on a physical cum intellectual separation between the prison institution and the free community is not only erroneous but has simultaneously resulted in the conceptual and theoretical underdevelopment of prison literature pertaining to delinquent groups (Quinney, 1970; Vigil, 1988; Hagedorn, 1988; Moore, 1978; Jankowski, 1991; Padilla, 1992; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). Prior to offering an alternative conceptualisation of the prison which could facilitate an understanding of the centrality of the prison to Omega secret society, I find it necessary to first delve into existing literature on the prison.

4.1. Cultures of Confinement: A History of the Prison

Michel Foucault has written of a ‘great confinement’ of the poor that peaked between 1650 and 1789, as punishment of the body was replaced by a regime of surveillance in the prison. Yet even a cursory look at modes of punishment beyond the ‘Age of Enlightenment’ shows that the 19th and 20th century, rather than the 18th, was marked by the incarceration of vast masses of people, to such an extent that Alain Besancon has characterised the period as ‘the century of concentration camps.’ Foucault’s vision of herding paupers and vagrants into countless new hospitals and
prisons not only confused intended policies with actual practices, thereby overstating the extent of incarceration in France before 1789, the philosopher seemed to miss the world around him. Over the course of the 20th century, confinement spread across the world to become the only recognised form of punishment alongside fines and the death sentence. Countries differing widely in political ideology and social background replaced existing modes of punishment, from exile and servitude to the pillory and the gallows, with the custodial sentence. Prisons now span the globe, from communist China to democratic Britain, as ever large proportions of humanity find themselves locked behind bars, doing time for crime. Rates of incarceration have varied over the past century, but the trend is upwards, as new prisons continue to be built and prison populations swell in the America’s, Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

While the prison has become ever more entrenched on a global scale, it also represents an incontrovertible failure, in theory and in practice. While their proposed missions have varied—from retribution and incapacitation to deterrence and rehabilitation—prisons from the very beginning resisted their supporter’s intended purposes, generating wretched institutional conditions where humanitarian goals were heralded. The great expectations placed on prisons to perform often-contradictory goals (how is punishment compatible with reform?) stand in stark contrast to the climate of violence within its walls. A chasm separates proclaimed intentions from actual practices: monuments of order on paper turned into squalid places of human suffering confined by walls of bricks and mortar. Envisaged as a haven for repentance—‘a machine to grind rogues honest’ according to Jeremy Bentham—prison is often no more than an enclave of violence, producing caged misery at worst,
enforced lethargy at best. Contrary to the workhouse or the lunatic asylum, the prison is a failed invention of modernity that has yet to be dismantled. Prisons do not reform criminals, do not reduce re-offending rates, and do not address the social problems conducive to crime (Ignatieff, 1978); if anything, incarceration produces violence and generates crime by meeting harm with harm. In the meantime, the prison has become all the more insidious as it has become firmly established, rarely challenged by political elites and ordinary people alike.

Since the appearance of *Discipline and Punish*, Marxist historians interested in the evolution of prisons have wrestled with the challenge Foucault's book presents to their theoretical assumptions. Explicitly taking *Discipline and Punish* as his point of departure, Michael Ignatieff (1978) manages to integrate Foucault’s advances into more traditionally Marxist approaches. Ignatieff (1978: xiv) attempted to explain how at the ideological level, the revolutionary panoptical penitentiary, which was ‘directed at the mind rather than the body,’ could be perceived as a progressive step. While accepting Foucault's critique of the liberal view of incarceration, Ignatieff sought to push liberal ideology as far as he could so that an opening can be breached for a Marxist critique of it. Dissatisfied with a straightforward explanation that ties the emergence of the penitentiary to the needs of the capitalist mode of production and the interests of the capitalists (Rusche and Kirchheimer, 1968), Ignatieff confronts the liberal position on its own grounds, questioning explicitly the moral advance of the bourgeois system of treating criminals. Specifically, Ignatieff addressed the ideological and political dimension of punishment. It is inevitable that a study of prison discipline necessarily becomes a study of the moral boundaries of social
authority within a society undergoing capitalist transformation (Ignatieff, 1978: xiii). Rather than simply looking at the machinations of the capitalist class, Ignatieff devoted the bulk of his study to the intellectual justifications of the humanity of incarceration by the bastions of order even as the disturbing details of prison life intruded into public consciousness in nineteenth-century England. Ignatieff concluded that the continued legitimacy afforded the prison system derived not from its inherently humane qualities, but from the imperatives of domination in bourgeois society. He concluded, as Foucault did, that the panopticon instituted a technology of power that was its own political justification, belying its humanitarian claims.¹

Foucault deserves credit for having transformed the history of the prison from an obscure field of institutional history into a thriving and exciting area of cultural studies. But too many of his followers have taken on board his vision of the prison as the perfect realisation of the modern state. Archival evidence allows us to move away from official rhetoric and lofty ideals towards the messy realities of incarceration, which on the contrary highlights the very limits of the state. As Carlos Aguirre has pointed out in a recent book on the prisoners of Lima, the constant lack of financial resources, poor strategies of personal recruitment, lack of control over prison guards and corruption inside the penal system meant that the authorities who operated the prisons had great discretion in dealing with prisoners and often did not support the main goals of prison reform. Entirely absent from ambitious explanatory schemes about the panopticon are the prisoners themselves. Just as the continued use of violence by prison guards created penal realities that had little to do with grand designs on paper, prisoners were never the passive victims of a great ‘disciplinary
project’. As David Arnold notes in his paper, prisoners were seldom entirely compliant; in the long history of the colonial prison, there were many ways for prisoners to evade or resist the restrictions prison authorities sought to impose on them. Emile Durkheim observed long ago that the core problem of the prison as a form of discipline resides in the lack of inclination among the majority of prisoners to participate in the process of ‘reformation’. Society colonised the prison and undermined discipline to a much greater extent than discipline ever managed to move out of the prison to order society (Lincoln, 1961; McGee, 1981; Scraton and Chadwick, 1991; Salvatore and Aguirre, 1996; Singh, 1998; Beckford, Joly and Khosrokhavar, 2005).

4.2. **Distinguishing Between the Concepts ‘Prison in Society’ Vs. ‘Society in Prison’ and Examining their Theoretical Implications**

Conceptualising the prison as an institution in, but not of the society in which it exists, henceforth known as ‘prison in society,’ was historically influenced by early anthropological perspectives in criminology. Empirical studies of the prison community were typically ethnographies of a microsociety, where the prison was compared to a primitive society, isolated from the outside world, functionally integrated by a delicate system of mechanisms, which kept it precariously balanced between anarchy and accommodation (Stastny and Tyrnauer, 1982: 131). In line with the ‘microsociety model of the prison,’ much in vogue among American sociologists of the time, Hans Reimer following his self-imposed incarceration in mid-1930s, confined his observations to inmate life, describing an essentially autonomous
community outlined by a social hierarchy, mores, attitudes, and a mythology. Grosser (1960: 1) described inmate society as “analogous to other types of social organisation,” a “social microcosm” with its own language, leaders, laws, rites and rituals, which is in perpetual conflict with “the prevailing order of society, personified by the institutional personnel.” The members of this society are incarcerated criminals who speak in “the pungent argot of the dispossessed” and have their own vocabulary for everything from sex roles to dispositions vis-à-vis the official administration (Sykes and Messinger, 1960: 11; Tittle, 1964). The culture concept was basic to these early prison studies (Stastny and Tynanuer, 1982: 131). Not only the sociologists, but others who wandered into the field from adjacent disciplines were captivated by it. Thus, McCleery (1960), a political scientist working in Hawaii in the immediate post-war years, continued the tradition of comparing prisoners to primitives.³

An implicit assumption and limitation in the ‘prison in society’ concept or prisons as autonomous socio-cultural systems, well-reflected in most early researches, is that institutional features of prisons are so influential and pervasive that they operate as the primary determinant of inmate adjustment (Goffman, 1961: 12; Adams, 1992: 279). The aforementioned assumption imparts a canonical quality to sociological theorisation of informal inmate culture and social structure as an inevitable consequence of “prisonization”. “Prisonization” conceptually refers to ‘the process by which a new inmate takes on the norms, customs, values, and culture in general of the penitentiary and learns to adapt to the prison environment’ (Clemmer, 1958: 298). Lacking analytical depth, the inmate social system, its code, and some of the inmate roles, conceptualised as antithetical to the formal prison administration
although inevitable in the context of every custodial institution, have systematically been theorized as an inescapable corollary of the “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes, 1958). Concepts of “pains of imprisonment” and “prisonization” are premised primarily on the questionable sociological conception of the prison as a ‘total institution,’ meaning an artificially created social enclave in which people are subjected to a de-personalising and totalitarian regimen.

A number of publications have defended the notion that behaviour patterns among inmates develop with a minimum of influence from the outside world. This ideological assumption is concisely encapsulated by Goffman’s assertion that ‘in our society total institutions are the forcing houses for changing persons, a natural experiment on what can be done to the self and therein lies its special sociological interest’ (1961: 12). The oppositional inmate code, which governs inmate-staff interactions, was seen as a functional response to confinement, allowing inmates to “reject their rejectors” (McCorkle and Korn, 1954) and to salvage a sense of self-worth in the face of intense pressures to the contrary. Cloward (1960: 21, 35-41) stresses both the acute sense of status degradations which prisoners experience and the resulting patterns of prison life, which he calls “structural accommodation.” Like others he makes the important point that the principal types of inmates, especially the “politicians” and the “shots” help the officials by exerting controls over the general prison body in return for special privileges. Similarly, he recognises the “right guy” role as one built around the value system described by Sykes and Messinger (1960), pointing out further that it is tolerated by prison officials because it helps maintain the status quo. Cloward’s principal point is that the patterns of behaviour among inmates
arise from the internal character of the prison situation. McCleery (1960: 58, 60, 73) also stresses the unitary character of the culture of prisoners, and he identifies the internal source of this culture in statements such as: “The denial of validity to outside contacts protected the inmate culture from criticism and assured the stability of the social system,” “a man’s status in the inmate community depended on his role there and his conformity to its norms,” and “inmate culture stressed the goals of adjustment within the walls and the rejection of outside contacts.” Operating on the ‘prison in society’ premise is analogous to a mould that shapes much of the theorising centred on the question of why delinquent groups and the informal inmate culture and social structure of the penitentiary is there in the first place for prisoners to be socialised into. Specifically, ‘prison in society’ influences theorisations to emphasise not the conditions determining degree of socialization into the informal inmate culture and social structure, but rather for those explaining why the culture is there to be socialised into.

Theorisation of the emergence of delinquent groups within the prison institution reflects a degree of myopia. The crux of prison literature has framed the emergence of delinquent groups as an adaptation to ‘the pains of imprisonment within a complete and austere prison institution which assumes responsibility for all aspects of the individual, his physical training, his aptitude to work, his everyday conduct, his moral attitude, his state of mind’ (Foucault 1979: 235). ‘The peculiar nature and form of social processes and social relationships within a unique prison community, which is, to an unusual degree, separated from life outside-where such a separation is, in fact, part of the very purpose of imprisonment’ (Mathiesen, 1966: 362) is a crucial
foundation and determinant of the myopic scope of theorising delinquent groups within the prison setting.

Thematically, the threat and reality of physical violence which abounds in prisons as a consequence of material and psychological deprivations are oft-cited to explain the emergence of delinquent groups in prison. Imprisonment entails the symbolic feminisation of male inmates by subjecting them to a quality of life redolent with restrictions, demanding their subordination to officialdom, and depriving them of resources to present their masculinity. In order for male inmates to salvage some semblance of masculine pride and dignity, to the extent that the context of incarceration might permit, accommodations via adjustments are necessary. In lieu of the “pettily circumscribing and gratuitously demeaning prison environment, reminiscent of the way children are treated by indifferent or suspicious adults,” rape, defiance against the custodians of control, sports and the construction of the ‘ideal type’ masculine physicality have been exhaustively explored as tools in the performance of masculinity (Lockwood, 1980; Sabo and Runfola, 1980; Messner, 1989; Sabo and Panepinto, 1990; Sabo and London, 1992; Messerschmidt, 1993; Toch, 1998: 171; Sabo et. al, 2001; Kupers, 2001; Lorber and Martin, 2001). Such performances of masculinity allow male inmates to attain status among peers and imperviousness or autonomy from staff, which corresponds to the crucial lines of interest for male inmates. The crucial lines of interest for male inmates specifically pertains to their resistance of the ‘mortification of the self’ and ‘to resist their symbolic feminisation’ within the prison milieu (Strong, 1943: 564).
Delinquent groups safeguard their members against the threat and reality of physical violence in prison. Drawing strength in numbers, the delinquent group successfully ‘deflects vulnerability which attracts predation and fear that invites exploitation which is functional within a prison setting’ (Jacobs, 1974; DiIulio, 1987; Hassine, 1996: 23). The highly open or visible situation of the prison constitutes a fertile environment exploited by members of delinquent groups to embark on “impression management” the process of “expressing attributes that is required of a performer for the work of successfully staging a character,” (Goffman, 1959: 208). Members of delinquent groups specifically embark on the ‘performance of masculinity through intimidation, violence directed toward non members and exhibiting disproportionate resistance to authority and rules of the institution (Jacobs, 1974; Mosher and Tompkins, 1988; Lyman, 1989; Ross and Richards, 2002). In addition, an important function which gangs play is the psychological support they provide for their members. Within the organisational framework of delinquent groups, members are allocated definite roles and can aspire to successive levels of status through display of manly virtues like of bravery or fearlessness, toughness, physical prowess and loyalty to one’s group members, which allows them to assert their masculine self (Mosher and Tompkins, 1988: 69; Ross and Richards, 2002: 129).

Within the context of the Singapore prisons however, the concept of ‘prison in society’ which emphasises the prison’s isolation, its self-sufficiency, and its unitary ruling power, in other words, its total character- has consequently failed to be interactionist. By failure to be interactionist is meant that, ‘prison in society’ is conceptually incapable of appreciating how the determinants of inmate adjustment
could be influenced by the backdrop of the socio-economic and political relations between the Malays and Chinese in larger society or Singapore society. Such a limitation renders the concept of ‘prison in society’ unable to appreciate how the solidarity among Malay Muslim inmates and prison personnel towards the Omega secret society is in actual fact an elicited reaction to the discourse of ethno-racialisation, perpetuated by the Malay Muslim Omega members. Chief Ezad, a senior prison guard in Selarang Park Prison articulates illustrates below:

I hate to admit it but the prison is over-crowded with Malays from Chinese secret societies. Ultimately the Chinese SS is for Chinese boys. Malay boys are the pariah members. When I ask the Malay boys why the end up in the hole, the reason is always riot, smuggling drugs, selling drugs for the Chinese SS. And they are so proud of being exploited and even try to recruit other Malays to be pariahs like them. Omega boys in here always warn the Malay IDs not to be tricked into being slaves for the Chinese. Chinese try to get the Malays down everywhere, be it in the PAP or in Chinese SS. If I see the Malays in Chinese SS trying to get close to any IDs, smuggling things for the Chinese, I charge them. In here, I cut the Omega boys some slack. We Malays have to stick out for one another. I close one eye when Omega members try to get food or stuff to their brothers. Omega tries to help the Malays in the underworld and I respect them because they try.

The discourse of ‘ethno-racialising’ the marginalisation of Malay members of Chinese secret societies in prison as a ‘Malay’ problem rather than as a ‘gangster’ problem is contingent on a parallel, drawn by Omega members, between the socio-economic marginality experienced by Malays in Chinese secret societies and the processes of racial dominion of the Malays by the Chinese in the broader context of Singapore society. Through the discourse of ethno-racialisation, Malay Muslim Omega members, who are a subset of the ethnic minority in Singapore, make sense of the marginalisation of Malay members of Chinese secret societies by importing their
definition of the socio-economic and political relations between the Malays and Chinese in Singapore society into the prison context. Fundamentally, the discourse of ethno-racialisation perpetuated by Omega members, evidences a “racially structured social reality.” Within the Singapore prisons, this “racially structured reality” which is rooted in larger society, ‘shapes and dictates situations of race and ethnic contact, engenders beliefs about the nature of race, and determines the social relations’ (Back and Solomos, 2000) between Omega members and Malay Muslim inmates and prison personnel who are unaffiliated with any criminal groupings on the one hand, as well as the social relations between Malay Muslim inmates and prison personnel and the Malay members of Chinese secret societies. By defending the notion that behaviour patterns among inmates develop with a minimum of influence from the outside world, both “pains of imprisonment” and “prisonization” conceptually lack the analytical depth needed to comprehend the empirical phenomenon in the Singapore prisons. As exhibited in the Singapore prisons, the discourse of ethno-racialising what it means to be ‘Malay’ and the inherent attributes of ‘Malayness’ perpetuated by Omega members is dependent on deeply entrenched relationships of cultural domination of the Malays by the Chinese in larger society. Within the prison, the socio-economic marginalisation of Malay members of Chinese secret societies triggers among Omega members, an existing racially constructed reality that confirms and broadcasts the dominion of Malays by Chinese within and beyond the prison. As Pak Hitam affirms,

The flag, secret society and logo of Omega are symbols of jiwa Melayu⁵ established for the purpose of fighting against the oppression of the Malay people by the Chinese infidels and the Malay dogs in baju Cina⁶, inside the prison and outside. The flag of Omega, a symbol of bravery and devotion, ever ready to sacrifice possessions, blood and life to stop the Chinese infidels
from *pijak kepala Melayu*. The Malays are everywhere oppressed by the infidel Chinese, the secret society in prison, the secret society outside, the Chinese *PAP*, and worst by Malay traitors who commit themselves to serving the Chinese interests. Not me, my allegiance I have pledged to the brotherhood of Omega and to all Malays. I live, bleed and die for Omega. Omega forever.

As reflected in the above data, ‘prison in society’ which was not only fundamental to early prison studies but even persisted and thrived, encompassing within it reference to the collective contemporary theoretical proponents of the prison as a ‘total institution’ or ‘complete and austere institution’ (Goffman, 1961; Foucault, 1979) is conceptually erroneous. Imprisonment, as reflected in the above excerpt, does not simply entail a process of “border crossing into a social world that is organized differently and centred around a different culture than the everyday world left behind, a passage that is acknowledged by the prison culture distinction between the world of ‘the joint’ and the outside free world” (Jones and Schmid, 2000: 1). As a “total institution”, the prison denotes a place of “residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (Goffman, 1961: xiii). From this definition, ‘total institution’ suggests both the physical and social separation of the inmate society from the free community. While the physical separation of the ‘total institution’ from the free community is self-explanatory, the ‘social separation’ of the ‘total institution’ from the free community requires clarification. ‘Total institution’ ideologically assumes that the ‘mortification of self’ resulting from entry into a ‘people-processing institution’ produces two homogeneous groups of people, namely prison personnel and inmates. ‘Mortification
of self’ suggests that upon entry into the prison, every individual becomes a ‘tabula rasa’, divorced from the dynamics of socio-economic and political relations that exist, and of which they are a part, within larger society, in order to fulfil their specific roles as ‘custodians of control’ and “docile bodies”\(^{12}\) respectively (Sykes, 1958; Sykes and Messinger; 1960; Goffman, 1961; Garabedian, 1963; Giallombardo, 1966; Atchley and McCabe; 1968; Foucault, 1979; Cordilia; 1983; Jones and Schmid, 2000). ‘Social separation’ of prison inmates and personnel from larger society, based on the above explanation, assumes that it is possible for both inmates and prison personnel to shed their social identities in the larger society, based on ‘race,’ ‘ethnicity,’ ‘class,’ ‘gender,’ and ‘religion,’ upon entry into the prison context, since the identities are theoretically mutually exclusive. Contrarily, as exhibited in the Singapore prisons, the marginalisation of Malays in Chinese secret societies, marked by the over-representation of Malays in prison, triggers a context where Omega members are able to appropriate those ‘spoilt images’ of the Malay secret society members in Chinese secret societies to confirm the networks of marginalisation which suppress Malay culture in the wider Singapore society. Through the discourse of ethno-racialisation perpetuated by Omega members, the racialised ‘spoilt images’ of the Malays do cross over the prison boundary, which ensues in a solidarity between the Malay Muslim inmates and prison personnel in verbally ostracising and discriminating against Malay members of Chinese secret societies who are seen to compound the ‘spoilt identity’ of Malays. The discourse of ethno-racialisation thus suggests how the dysfunctional prison community reflects the processes of socio-economic marginalisation of Malays.
vis-à-vis the Chinese within the dysfunctional Singapore state as Hattan\textsuperscript{13} succinctly argues below:

Malays in Chinese SS are bullied. They are the shield of the Chinese, sent to fight and riot to protect Chinese territory. But money goes to Chinese people not to the Malays. Malays are used to recruit Malay boys into the gang and the lives of these Malay boys are ruined. Malays everywhere are bullied by Chinese. In Singapore, the PAP also makes use of Malays. PAP takes in Malays to rule over Malay people but Malays have no power. Malay MPs work from under the armpits of the Chinese, *bagai lembu cucu hidung*.\textsuperscript{14} Even MUIS listen to the Chinese to make religious decisions about organ donation. That shows you how oppressed the Malays are when the Chinese are making decisions about Islam. PAP say they are not biased to any races, Chinese SS say they got brotherhood. All are fucking lies. In the end they yellow skin people stick together and the brown skin people must fight them to overcome oppression.

Emphasising the disjuncture between the concept of prison as an institution in society and the empirical phenomenon in the Singapore prisons highlights how the limitation of the concept of ‘prison in society’ has induced the emergence of a new concept, ‘society in prison’. Conceptually, ‘society in prison’ better appreciates the complex factors underlying informal inmate culture and social structure. To begin with, ‘prison in society,’ is proposed in this paper as a novel and useful concept for two reasons. First, ‘prison in society’ encompasses various similar conceptualisations of the prison like Goffman’s (1961) ‘total institution,’ Foucault’s (1979) ‘complete and austere institution,’ and adaptations of Roland’s (1939) ‘segregated communities’ and Etzioni’s (1957) ‘closed institution’. The commonality of the various aforementioned terms converge on their emphasis of the ‘total character of the prison symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the free community that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls or barbed wire.’
Second, and more importantly, I will argue that theoretically, both the ‘deprivation’ model and ‘importation’ model, which have been developed to account for the adaptive nature of inmate social structure and culture, are fundamentally similar in that they are both based on the ‘prison in society’ concept. Inmate culture and social structure, which the ‘deprivation’ theory proposes are entirely developed within the ‘total institution’ as an adaptive response to the deprivations of imprisonment, while the ‘importation’ theory supposes as being affected by the experiences and values of prisoners prior to their incarcerations, have been typically viewed as antithetical (Irwin and Cressey, 1962; Wellford, 1967; Schwartz, 1971; Thomas and Foster, 1972; Thomas, 1975; Hawkins, 1976). I argue instead that, proceeding from an initial underlying assumption of prison as a ‘total institution,’ both the ‘deprivation’ and ‘importation’ theoretical frameworks has effected a ‘structural-functional’ explanation for the inmate social structure, its associated culture, patterns of inmate adaptation to the imprisonment and matters of prison power, administrative organization or specific phenomenon occurring within the prison. From the structural-functional perspective, interest in the prison centred on first, the social structure of the prison as a whole, and second the ways in which beliefs, norms, and behaviour of both inmates and guards was related to their present predicament rather than the possible influence of life before confinement. In accordance with the structural-functional perspective, ‘much of inmates’ behaviour, according to the deprivation’ theory could be interpreted or understood as attempts, conscious or unconscious, to meet and counter the problems posed by the deprivations of prison life (Sykes and Messinger, 1960: 13-18). Among the deprivations of prison life include, loss of
liberty, goods, services, heterosexual contact, autonomy and security and also psychological threats to their self-conception or sense of worth, such as being reduced to childhood’s dependence or being forced into homosexual liaisons’ (Sykes 1958: 63).

While the ‘deprivation’ theory clearly evidences a narrow, structural-functional explanation of inmate culture and social structure, a reflection of its irrefutable continuity with the concept of ‘prison in society,’ the influence of the ‘prison in society’ concept over the ‘importation’ theory has been, consciously or otherwise, neglected. A key factor for this neglect is the common notion that inmate culture and social structure, which the ‘deprivation’ theory proposes is entirely developed within the ‘total institution’ as an adaptive response to the deprivations of imprisonment, while the ‘importation’ theory supposes as being affected by the experiences and values of prisoners prior to their incarcerations, are antithetical (Irwin and Cressey, 1962; Roebuck, 1963; Thomas and Foster, 1972; Ditchfield, 1990; Adams, 1992). I contrarily argue that viewing the ‘deprivation’ and ‘importation’ theories of prisonization as dichotomous results from mistaking the former as based on the concept of ‘prison in society’ and the latter as suggesting that the socio-economic and political dynamics within larger society could be replicated within the prison or possibly affect inmate culture and social structure. Such a misinterpretation derives from ‘proponents of the importation theory urging researchers to focus on pre-institutional behaviour patterns since criminal dispositions and behavioural patterns prior to incarceration possess strong explanatory power in accounting for inmate behaviour’ (Roebuck, 1963: 193). Rather than premised on the permeability of
the prison to the socio-economic and political dynamics of the free community, ‘importation’ theory merely suggests that, where relevant, inmates may draw on or modify a subset of their pre-incarceration values and experiences to adapt to the conditions of a ‘total institution’. Thomas and Foster (1972: 231) state that “the quality of the adaptive normative system which evolves in response to various pressures and problems of imprisonment has its origin in the pre-prison experiences and socialisation of inmates.” Regardless of the innovative proposition of the ‘importation’ theory that inmate behaviour was probably conditioned by prior criminal patterns, the crucial issue remains, even for these theorists, as to how these general tendencies, such as the vaunted loyalty among thieves or the instrumental use of violence, might be reinforced or called into play by the realities of prison life. This limitation, Sykes (1995: 82) supposes is the result of a persistent notion that the inmate social system would very likely come into existence almost without regard to inmates’ criminal histories, an idea influenced by assumptions about the power of totalitarian systems to shape behaviour and the limited possibilities of dealing with the threats posed by imprisonment.

Elaborating on the limitations posed by the ‘prison in society’ concept to existing ‘deprivation’ and ‘importation’ theorisation of the adaptive nature of informal inmate social structure and culture constitutes a platform to introduce and show how the concept of ‘society in prison’ may redress the inadequacy of the abovementioned theoretical frameworks. The concept of ‘society in prison’ has been formulated based on the empirical data I have gathered. ‘Society in prison’ conceptually denotes first the prison as a community, pointing to the existence of a
‘prison culture’ (Clemmer, 1958), comprising a set of attitudes and a way of doing things in which both prisoners and prison officers have roles. Second ‘society in prison’ suggests that ‘prison culture’ is inseparable from and influenced by the religious, social, ethnic and gender dynamics that exists within the larger, external society. Here it is important to issue a caveat. Conceptually, ‘society in prison’ does not view the prison as an exact copy or a representative model of larger society. Nevertheless, ‘society in prison’ appreciates that certain social processes and dynamics, whether related to race, religion or gender, existing in the larger society are observable within the prison institution and changes in these processes and dynamics could affect the prison community and culture. ‘Society in prison’ critiques, on ideological and empirical grounds, the antithetical conceptualisation of prison as a “total institution”, where “total institution” denotes ‘closed, single-sex societies separated from society both socially and physically’ as theoretically sterile since it formats a core set of assumptions and expectations about prisons whose meaning do not originate in prison or with prisoners. Both the ‘deprivation’ and ‘importation’ models, which theoretically emphasise inmate culture and social structure as directly related to surviving the deprivations of incarceration, are dissatisfying because both theoretical frameworks have limited efforts to develop a broader understanding of prison culture.

Viewing prisoners as isolated individuals who may or may not become socialised into an inclusive inmate culture through participation in primary groups is no longer useful in describing the contemporary prison. New analyses of prison organisation must shake loose from the “total institution” model of imprisonment.
with its emphasis on individual and small group reaction to material and psychological deprivations (Jacobs, 1976: 476). Such a critique is based on a review of studies on the prison that have pointed to a disjuncture between official rhetoric, lofty ideals and problems associated with incarceration like prison violence and the practice of racial discrimination among prison personnel. A re-examination of the prisoner-of-war camp literature will help to elucidate the ‘society in prison’ perspective. Descriptions of prisons as diverse as Andersonville (McElroy, 1879) and the camps of Gulag Archipelago (Solzhenitsyn, 1974) have pointed to broad cleavages among inmates based upon pre-institutional allegiances to social classes, and upon participation in subcultures and formal organisations. At Andersonville, the “N’Yaarkers” brought with them solidarity based upon common cultural antecedents and an intact military formal organisation. In the Gulag, the common criminals found a latent solidarity which served as a basis for collective action in their roots in a criminal subculture and exploited this solidarity in the brutalisation of a weaker class—the politicals. Empirically, the boundaries of most prisons are shown to be porous as guards collude with prisoners, ideas and objects moved in and out of confinement, and, more generally, social, ethnic and gender dynamics existing in larger society are replicated inside the prison, undermining the notion of the social exclusion of prison community and prison culture from larger society (Quinney, 1970; Salvatore and Aguirre, 1996; Singh, 1998; Beckford, Joly and Khosrokhavar, 2005; Dikotter and Brown, 2007).

‘Society in prison,’ rather than focusing solely on internal and external determinants of prison adaptation patterns, contrarily draws upon a long tradition of
interpretive sociological theory and ethnographic research that connects human action and inter-subjective meanings. Little systematic attempt has been made to incorporate the significance of racial, political, and religious stratification within the free community in fostering a holistic understanding of prison organisation. This is because the concept of ‘prison in society,’ has systematically allowed both the ‘deprivation’ and ‘importation’ theories to ascribe inmate social structure and culture and various phenomenon within the prison as a functional response directed specifically at coping with the incarceration experience. Conceptually, ‘prison in society’ has “a unique attractiveness” as a basis for theory because it is such a complete conception of action “that we need ask no more questions about it” (Coleman, 1986). By the same token, a theory of prison disorders that focuses on the obvious and proximate factors related to management controls is easier to document than one which probes the less obvious and more remote factors that may move an inmate, or a group of inmates, to commit violent acts in prison (Jacobs, 1976). This element of rational choice in the ‘deprivation’ and ‘importation’ theories of imprisonment, induced by the concept of ‘prison in society’, assumes that individual action is instrumental, namely that it has to be explained by the actors' will to reach certain goals, thereby ensuring that both theoretical explanations are “final” or are without “black box” frustrations.

Contrarily, the concept of ‘society in prison’ subscribes to the notion that action can be non-instrumental, as most sociologists have recognized. W.I. Thomas (1931: 42) introduced the concept of “the definition of the situation” to express the idea that social action is not simply a response to the environment but rather an active
effort to define and interpret the context in which we find ourselves, assess our interests, and then select appropriate attitudes and behaviours: “Preliminary to any self determined act of behaviour…Facts do not have a uniform…If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” Inmates in the ‘society in prison’ approach are seen as more actively engaged in social life and social action as interpretive processes. The traditional concept of “prisonization”, despite the elemental truth it contains, is an inadequate framework for understanding how inmates experience prison. The research on prisonization, including both the deprivation and importation models derived from it, begins with the premise of a rather monolithic “prison culture” to which inmates are exposed by virtue of their imprisonment and into which they are gradually but inevitably socialized as they progress through their prison careers (Jones and Schmid, 2000: 4-5). Schutz (1972), through his distinction between Weil and Wozu motive, and Weber, through his distinction between instrumental and axiological rationality, have stressed that action is not always instrumental, which the concept of ’society in prison’ aims to explore.
1 In *A Just Measure of Pain*, Michael Ignatieff (1978: 210) wrote the following excerpt:

The persistent support for the penitentiary is inexplicable so long as we assume that its appeal rested on its functional capacity to control crime. Instead, its support rested on a larger social need. It had appeal because the reformers succeeded in presenting it as a response, not merely to crime, but to the whole social crisis of a period, and as part of a larger strategy of political, social, and legal reform designed to reestablish order on a new foundation . . . it was seen as an element of a larger vision of order that by the 1840s commanded the reflexive assent of the propertied and powerful.

2 Empirical studies of the prison community can be said to have begun with Hans Reimer’s self-imposed incarceration in the mid-1930s. A student of E.H. Sutherland, then chairman of the Department of Sociology at Indiana University, Reimer spent three months in a state penitentiary and two weeks in a county jail as an incognito participant-observer studying prisoners. “The study arose,” Reimer wrote, “from an initial interest in the various plans and theories of inmate participation in the administration of penal institutions” (Reimer, 1937: 151).

3 In *Communication Patterns as Bases of Systems of Authority and Power*, Richard McCleery (1960: 57) wrote the following excerpt:

Both lived in a society confronted by a hostile and mysterious universe. Lacking any understanding of the forces that moved their worlds, prisoners, like primitives, invented a class of devils, evil spirits, or rats to explain the appearance of arbitrary forces. Accepting a “devil theory” to account for such forces, inmate society, like its primitive counterpart, was easily dominated by a “priesthood” skilled in manipulating…The “myths” of inmate society attributed a certain dignity and freedom to the inmate class while holding officials in contempt.

4 In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prisons*, Foucault (1979: 236) writes the following:

“In prison the government may dispose of the liberty of the person and of the time of the prisoner; from then on, one can imagine the power of the education which, not only in a day, but in succession of days and even years, may regulate for man the time of waking and sleeping, of activity and rest, the number and duration of meals, the quality and ration of food, the nature and product of labour, the time of prayer, the use of speech and even, so to speak, that of thought, that education, which, in the short, simple journeys from refectory to workshop, from workshop to cell, regulates the movements of the body, and even in moments of rest, determines the use of time, the time-table, this education, which, in short takes possession of man as a whole, of all the physical and moral faculties that are in him and of the time in which he is himself.”

5 ‘Jiwa Melayu’ is a Malay phrase that literally translates to ‘Malay soul’, which is a term used to describe an individual. To say that an individual possesses and exhibits ‘jiwa Melayu’ is to assert that he champions the ‘Malay cause’, meaning to fight against the oppression and exploitation of the Malays, whether in the context of the legitimate or illegitimate society.

6 ‘Baju Cina’ is a Malay phrase which literally translates to ‘Chinese shirt’. ‘Baju’ or shirt in Malay refers to secret societies, while ‘Cina’ refers to ‘Chinese’, hence ‘baju Cina’ or ‘Chinese shirt’ directly refers to Chinese secret societies, established by the Chinese and Chinese dominated.

7 ‘Pijak kepala’ is a Malay idiom literally translating to ‘stepping on someone’s head’, which mean ‘to be dominant over someone else’. ‘Pijak kepala Melayu’ corresponds to ‘stepping on the head of the Malays’ which means to ‘be dominant over the Malays’.
PAP is an abbreviation for the People’s Action Party, which is currently, and has been since independence, the ruling political party in Singapore.

Despite the efforts to provide as accurate a translation as possible from the original interview, paying special attention to syntax and semantics, this author feels compelled to include the ideology of the Omega secret society, so poetically articulated by Pak Hitam, for the benefit of those who speak the Malay language in order to appreciate the emotions and sentiments in his words.


The category of total institutions has been pointed out from time to time in sociological literature under a variety of names, and some of the characteristics of the class have been suggested, most notably perhaps in Howard Roland’s neglected paper, “Segregated Communities and Mental Health,” in Mental Health Publication of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, No. 9, edited by F.R. Moulton, 1939. The term “total” has also been used in its present context in Amitai Etzioni, “The Organizational Structure of ‘Closed’ Educational Institutions in Israel,” Harvard Educational Review, 27 (1957), 115.

‘Mortification’, resulting from entry into a ‘people-processing’ institution, is deprivative of the ‘personal front’ through the regimentation of personal appearance, rules of behaviour, and dispossession of personal paraphernalia, upon which the ‘presentation of self’ (or the expression of a unique self-identity) is contingent (Goffman, 1961).

In Discipline and Punish (1979: 136), Foucault writes, “a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved.” Although Foucault (1979) argues that the imposition of power in the process of disciplining and inmate management is not merely a top-down exercise and that coercion is not so manifest, it is important to recognise the agency/structure dichotomy underlying Foucault’s argument which poses a limitation in his analysis. Although Foucault recognises that inmates disciplined themselves, he accords primacy to structural factors as the impetus in orientating inmates’ actions, specifically the panoptic effect of the prison in eliciting the input of the inmates in the imprisoning of themselves. Foucault recognises that power would not exist without resistance. However his analysis of the penal process remains restricted to the exercise of power by the authorities which fails to pay attention to how inmates themselves construct and conceive of their actions.

Hattan is 38 years old and is a member of Omega. At 14 years old he was placed in a Perak House, a boy’s home for committing snatch theft. At 16 years old, he was caught for drug consumption and was sentenced to a Drug Rehabilitation Centre in 1983. He was again caught for drug consumption in 1985, 1989. In 1989, he was sentenced to Chia Keng Prison and it was here that he joined the Omega secret society. In 1992, he was back in prison for possession of heroin. In 1993 he abscond a urine test and was jailed again. In 1998, he was caught driving without a license. In 2004, he was caught for snatch theft and was sentenced to 5 years in Admiralty West Prison.

‘Bagai lembu cucuk hidung’ is a Malay idiom that literally translates to ‘a cow jerked round by its nose-ring.’ Fundamentally, as suggested by the literal translation, this idiom has a derogatory connotation, referring to people who are dominated.
Prison culture “consists of the habits, behaviour systems, traditions, history, customs, folkways, codes, the laws and rules which guide the inmates, and their ideas, opinions and attitudes towards or against home, family, education, work, recreation, government, prisons, police, judges, other inmates, wardens, ministers, doctors, guards, etc” (Clemmer 1958: 294)
Juxtaposing the ‘society in prison’ concept with the normative conceptualisation of ‘prison as an institution in society’ and pointing out the ways in which the former addresses the limitations of the latter, are both vital to grasping the nature and impact of Omega’s proselytising strategy within the prison context. Empirically, Omega’s proselytising strategies results in a solidarity being established between ‘Malay-Muslim’ prison personnel, and inmates who are unaffiliated with any criminal groupings and who have been proselytised from Chinese secret societies, in perpetrating overt discriminatory treatment and verbal and physical abuse towards Malay members in Chinese secret societies. Interestingly, Omega’s proselytizing strategies do not impact upon the Indian and Chinese inmates or prison personnel. Omega’s proselytising strategies, which exclusively elicit the solidarity of ‘Malay-Muslim,’ male inmates and prison personnel challenges two aspects of prison literature, that are normatively based on the concept of ‘prison in society’. First, the solidarity between ‘Malay-Muslim’ prison personnel, and inmates who are unaffiliated with any criminal groupings and who have been proselytised from Chinese secret societies, opposes the conceptualisation of prison population as a dichotomy of inmates versus guards, whose interaction revolves around relationships of force and dominion. Secondly, such solidarity between ‘Malay-Muslim’ prison
personnel and inmates challenges the hypothesis, drawn within the framework of the ‘deprivation’ model of imprisonment, that delinquent groups in prison are perceived as an adaptive response to the pains of imprisonment and a ‘currency’ for prison survival. The salience of the ethnic identity of both the perpetrators and the recipients of, discriminatory treatment problematises an acceptance of a structural-functional framework for explaining a supposedly ‘homogenous set of values, norms and attitudes that influences inmate subculture and inmate behaviour within prison society’ (Sykes, 1958, 1995; Sykes and Messinger, 1960). Conceptually, ‘prison in society,’ which espouses an introverted outlook, is limited in its capacity to account for the solidarity between ‘Malay-Muslim,’ male inmates and prison personnel. By ‘introverted’ outlook is meant a perspective that analyses the culture of delinquent groups as a product of the internal structure of prisons rather than as a possible consequence of the relationship between inmate culture and social structure and the social, historical, political, and economic contexts within the ‘free community’ (see Mathiesen, 1966; Goldstone and Useem, 1999). Presently, I shall delve into the three-pronged discourses that members of the Omega secret society embark upon in order to elicit the solidarity of ‘Malay-Muslims’ to lend support to Omega secret society and also to show how Omega’s proselytising strategies empirically reflect the ‘society in prison’ concept.
5.1. Racialising the Prison as a Malay Institution: Highlighting the ‘Equality’ and ‘Brotherhood’ of Chinese Secret Societies as Ideological

A stark feature of Singapore’s prison population is the over-representation of Malays in the prison population, and a majority of the incarcerated Malays expressed an affiliation as members of Chinese secret societies. The over-representation of Malays in prison, compared to their Chinese and Indian counterparts, serves as a favourable environment for Omega members to disseminate a discourse that racialises the prison as a “Malay” institution. Racialising the prison as a ‘Malay’ institution is rationalised as a counterpart of the ideological notion of ‘brotherhood’ in Chinese secret societies. By discourse that racialises the prison as a “Malay” institution is meant that the over-representation of Malays in the prisons is rationalised by Omega members as a result of confining specifically Malay members of Chinese secret societies to rank and file positions. By being confined to rank and file positions such as ‘Gi Na Kia’ (fighters’) or ‘Gina’ (recruit), the responsibilities of the Malays centre on protecting the myriad of illegitimate economic structures and investments belonging to, or that come under the protection of the Chinese secret societies. As occupants of the lower strata of the hierarchy of Chinese secret societies, the position and duties of Malay members of Chinese secret societies simultaneously exposes the Malays to the gaze of social control agents like the Criminal Investigation Department and the Suppression of Secret Societies Branch. Unlike the Malays, Chinese are over-represented as leaders within the hierarchy of Chinese secret societies and their responsibilities within the secret society are conceptualised
differently as opposed to individuals who occupy the lower strata of Chinese secret societies. Chinese members occupying leadership positions are entrusted with behind the scenes direction of criminal operations and the management of various illegal businesses. Additionally, Chinese leaders are also financed by the secret society to establish and run a myriad of legitimate businesses. Nevertheless, unlike their Chinese counterparts who are provided access to the illegitimate opportunity and learning structures of Chinese secret societies to derive pecuniary success and realistically recognise the potentiality for personal progress in the illegitimate society, Malays are socio-economically marginalised by virtue of their ethnic identity. Ajak\(^3\) affirms:

> In Chinese SS, *Chong* (leader) always say all brothers. Fucking bullshit! Malays in Chinese SS are like fucking dogs only do the dirty jobs. I was from Sio Kun Tong. We Malays break our bones, our necks, our head, for the Chinese to protect the territory, smuggle and sell drugs. Yet Chinese boys get all the money from the business that we defend. Chinese boys work behind the scenes as big bosses and they never get caught. It’s we fighters who get caught by the police. When we get caught we get thrown in jail, no lawyer or bail money is given to us. That’s why prison is crowded with Malays who are scapegoats of the Chinese. We always work for Chinese bosses and for every bone Malays get, the Chinese gets pounds of meat.

The prison institution, where Malay inmates are over-represented, constitutes a fertile milieu that Omega members exploit to function as a stronghold that facilitates the establishment, continued existence and expansion of the Omega secret society in illegitimate society. Perpetuating a discourse that highlights the prison as an ethnic enclave of Malays functions to induce Malay members of Chinese secret societies who are deprived of access to both illegitimate economic opportunities and learning structures to be conscious of their socio-economic marginalisation vis-à-vis
the Chinese members. Prison as a ‘Malay’ institution is discursively rationalised by
Omega members as proof of Malays functioning as scapegoats in Chinese secret
societies and the disparity that exists with respect to the distribution of illegitimate
opportunity and learning structures between the Malay and Chinese members in
Chinese secret societies. By capturing and highlighting the differential treatment
between Malay and Chinese members of Chinese secret within the discourse of prison
as a ‘Malay’ institution, Omega members are fundamentally challenging the
normative conceptualisation of Chinese secret societies. Omega’s discourse
challenges, as ideological, the notion of Chinese secret societies as a brotherhood that
de-emphasises ethnic allegiance and allusions among members and maintains equal
distribution of illegitimate opportunity and learning structures among members based
on merit. Citing the structurally disenfranchised position of Malays members, Omega
members have alternatively conceptualised Chinese secret societies as comprising of
a principal, Chinese population and a peripheral, Malay population. By virtue of their
ethnic identity, Malays are relegated as an adjunct of the principal population and this
is evidenced by their socio-economic marginality within Chinese secret societies.
According to Omega members, the Chinese recruit Malays, for a small wage, to
specifically serve ‘fighters’ for Chinese secret societies. In this way, the Chinese are
able to maintain their control over their illegal operations and businesses while
evading the gaze of the social control agents and avoid imprisonment. Such a
rationalisation strengthens Omega’s assertion that the notion of brotherhood and
equality in Chinese secret societies is ideological. The socio-economic
marginalisation of Malays that permeates Chinese secret societies is succinctly summed up by Remy below:

It’s really like a gang within a gang. Headmen always send Malays to fight. Malays get stabbed first, break their heads first, die first. Because Malays are brave, the Chinese give employ us to serve as fighter. The Chinese don’t dare to fight. The Chinese only want to run their business, so they hire us to do the dirty job. They give us a bit of money and that’s it. It’s like Malays are employed by the Chinese, but Malays aren’t really what you would consider a brother in Chinese SS. They pay us to risk our life and limb. Malays are paid to be punching bags.

5.2. ‘Ethno-racialization’: Marginality of Malay Members in Chinese Secret Societies as ‘Malay’ Marginality

To elicit the solidarity among ‘Malay-Muslims’ to lend support to Omega and to perpetrate overt discriminatory treatment and verbal and physical abuse towards Malay members in Chinese secret societies as a form of deterrence, a separate discourse is initiated. Omega members strategically interpret the marginality of Malays in Chinese secret societies through a lens and discourse that exacerbates the ‘racialisation’ or essentialisation of ‘Malays’ as a socio-economic and politically marginalised “race”. The discursive construction of the marginality of Malays in Chinese secret societies as ‘Malay’ marginality, by members of Omega, is contingent on two factors. The first is the over-representation of Malays members of Chinese secret societies in the prison population, as has discussed above. Second and more importantly, is the parallel drawn between the structural marginality of Malays within Chinese secret societies and the socio-economic and political marginality of Malays in relation to the Chinese in Singapore. To comprehend why the socio-economic marginalisation of Malay members of Chinese secret societies is able to trigger
Omega members to initiate a discourse that ethno-racialises ‘Malays’ (read: race) as ‘marginal’, it is imperative to invoke the concept of ‘society in prison’. The over-representation of Malays ‘gangsters’ in prison provokes ‘race consciousness’ and elicits a ‘discourse of racialization’ with respect to the inherent traits of the Malay ‘race’ and of ‘Malayness’ as socio-economically marginalised. Prison as a ‘Malay’ institution triggers a parallel between the marginalisation of Malays in Chinese secret societies and the socio-economic and politically marginalised status of Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese in Singapore. ‘Race consciousness’ refers to the myriad of factors that are capable of both influencing an individual’s conception of himself as well as his status in the community and enforcing social distance from the ‘other’ (Park, 2000). Numerous factors can trigger ‘race consciousness’. These include ‘stereotypic behavioural traits ascribed to a particular race, essentialised “ethnic” differences that maintain in-group identification, the status ranking of a particular race in a social system relative to the position of ‘others’ reflected in terms of criteria like education, income, or a permanent physical trait that increases an individual’s visibility and makes more obvious his identity with a particular ethnic or genetic group’ (Goldberg, 1992). Employing the marginalization and cultural deficit thesis, numerous studies have extensively explored and documented the socio-economic and political marginality of Malays in larger society (Bedlington, 1974; Nurliza Yusof, 1986; Li, 1989; Rahim, 1998; Stimpfl, 2006). Chek, a Malay member of the Chinese secret society, Lokuan, succinctly exemplifies such a discourse in the excerpt below:

Omega bastards run a campaign in the fucking prisons. Omega will *kutuk* (chastise) Malays in Chinese SS as betraying the Malay race, because we carry Chinese flags. Omega say Malays are oppressed in the underworld and
legitimate society. Chinese SS employ Malays to fight and go jail. For one cent the Chinese give Malays, they are making a hundred times more. Malays are like dogs, afraid of their Chinese masters. Same as outside Malays in the government like lembu cucuk hidung \(^4\) to the PAP. PAP tell Malay leaders to nod, they nod. PAP tell them to kowtow, they kowtow. Even in the underworld, Malays are willingly undermined by Chinese, instead of trying to change the situation. Everywhere Chinese dominate the Malays, in politics, in the underworld. Even in prison Chinese are officers and Malays are guards. Omega will ask the officers to cut them some slack. Malay officers and Malay inmates will get angry because Malays in Chinese SS embarrass the Malay community. They shout vulgarities at us, call us *Melayu sial* (cursed Malays). If Omega smuggle *cap merah* (contraband) for their brothers, it’s ok. If we do it, we get sent to *PC* \(^5\). If Omega fight with us, Malay guards turn a blind eye. Omega is strong because their ideology penetrates the mind of the weak.

The origins of contemporary discourse of ethno-racialisation in Singapore may be traced to three aspects of British colonial presence in the late nineteenth century. First, the British conception of race was influenced by Social Darwinism, most obvious by the turn of the twentieth century when scholar-administrators like Hugh Clifford, Frank Swettenham and Richard Winstedt were influential figures in determining policy on local development. Social Darwinism connected the idea of a fixed hierarchy with that of progress (Malik, 1996: 91) – people at the top of the hierarchy arrived there on merit, because of their inherent superiority in the struggle for existence. For this group of scholar-administrators, it was doubtful that the Malay “race” could fully attain the benefits of civilization (Maier, 1988: 51-7). Second, because the British colonists saw the potential for appropriating the natural sources of Malaya and the need to import labour to realize this potential, Darwinism was applied to rationalize how such labour could be exploited and best utilized: docile Tamil labour was ideal for the plantations, the self-reliant Chinese would be effective in commercial activities, and the indolent Malay peasant was best left alone in the *padi*
fields (Lian, 2006: 222). Capability, as far as the British colonists were concerned, was determined by the contribution that non-White labour could make to the colonial economy. Differential abilities could easily be explained by racialising the local population in Social Darwinist terms. The British practice of the racial division of labour, despite its diminution over the post-independence years, has left a lasting ideological impression in Singaporeans, and has influenced race and ethnic relations. A good example is the way Malay members in Chinese secret societies discursively constructs the marginalisation of the Omega secret society within the context of Singapore’s illegitimate society. Omega’s socio-economic marginality within Singapore’s illegitimate society is discursively ‘ethno-racialised’ as the result of Malay cultural values and Malays being “fatalistic of their subordinate positions” “weak,” and “incapable of surviving against the rigorous, business-minded Chinese” who are instead “very vocal about what they want,” “hardworking and competitive” and “willing to die in order to get what they want”. Third, the British administrative practice of ascribing the local population with racial identities- official classification in census and identity cards- has been maintained by the post-independence government of Singapore.

Malays continue to be a marginal group in Singapore society in terms of all relevant socio-economic criteria. Although the continuing marginalization of the Malays in significant measure is attributed to the meritocratic, market-driven society of Singapore, Rahim (1998) alleges that the culture-deficit hypothesis continues to be used by many in Singapore to explain Malay marginality as well as to place the blame for this marginalisation on the Malays themselves. Consider the way Razi debunks
the cultural-deficit thesis as ideological, in light of Omega’s ability to overcome the
doubly marginalised position of Malays, within Chinese secret societies and as a
result of the symbiotic relationship between the police and the institutionalised
Chinese secret societies in Singapore’s illegitimate society:

Malays in Chinese SS always say Malay gangs are useless. Money-making is
in Chinese blood. Chinese SS have protocol, standard procedures. When
Chinese started their SS, Malays were still in their boats, working as poor
fishermen. Omega has proved otherwise. We are organised, we have members
in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. We have a drug network and
we know how to make money. We establish territories that belong to us, we
protect businesses. All we needed was to break out of the iron fist of the
Chinese that kept us down and discriminated against us. Malay people need to
start believing in what we Malays can achieve. We proved Malays are not
useless, disorganised, or just a bunch of drug addicts. We show you how
Malays can climb up the ladder to be drug lords, to have an international
business, to be recognised as a secret society. We’re all Malays.

To expose the ideology of the cultural-deficit thesis, Rahim has demonstrated
the salience of historical, ideological, and institutional factors in contributing towards
the socio-economic marginality of the Malay community. While multiracialism at the
cultural level is encouraged in Singapore, the empirical evidence presented in the
study does suggest that multiracialism and equal opportunity, particularly at the
institutional level, are far from satisfactory. Government policies such as the ethnic
residential quotas, population policies based on 'maintaining the racial balance',
educational programmes such as the Special Assistance Programme (SAP) and the
exclusion of Malays from 'sensitive' units in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) are
some of the more obvious illustrations of the dereliction of the multiracial and equal
opportunity ideals in Singapore. Rahim specifically focused on the shortfalls of the
educational system that she alleges disadvantages Malays and reinforces the culture-
deficit hypothesis. The Malay ethnic self-help organization, Mendaki, as well as Malay PAP Members of Parliament, have not been successful in alleviating the Malay situation. The rhetoric that Singapore is a meritocratic society where equal opportunities are available to all has also served to add legitimacy to the cultural deficit thesis which infers that Malays have not been able to make it in a meritocratic society because they have not worked hard enough and thus have only themselves to blame. The author states that individuals with or in government cannot vigorously push Malay interests, or they will lose whatever input channels they possess. Malays are thus expected to be content with their marginality and grateful about the absolute gains achieved. Malays are therefore expected to tolerate their socio-economic and educational marginality as a permanent fixture with stoic resignation. This basically sums up the argument by Rahim (1998), on the reasons behind the near political nonexistence as well as the educational marginality of the Malay community in Singapore. The cultural deficit thesis underlines the persisting socio-economic marginality of certain ethnic communities, as a result of their inept cultural values and attitudes. Such communities are afflicted by inertia, complacency, unstable family units and an overwhelming desire for immediate gratification. It is important to note that Rahim (1998) strongly advocates the idea that the marginality of Malay community is due to the institutional and structural factors in the political and educational system, rather than the cultural deficit thesis championed by the dominant ethnic Chinese community.

Clearly the logic behind the discourse of ethno-racialising the marginality of Malays in Chinese secret societies as Malay marginality counters is only possible by
bringing the concept of ‘society in prison’ to the forefront and recognising ‘Malays’ as ‘politicised’ prisoners as opposed to ‘political’ prisoners. ‘Political’ prisoners conceptually refer to ‘prisoners who have been incarcerated for a variety of politically motivated acts’ (Berkman and Blunk, 2001). On the other hand, more pertinent in the context of this study, ‘politicised’ prisoners conceptually refers to prisoners whose phenomenological definition and interpretation of any empirical phenomenon in prison is done in reference to themselves as ‘ethno-racialised’ members of a particular ‘race’ group and as members of a particular ‘race’ who ‘ethno-racialises’ the “other”. ‘Politicised’ prisoners embark on “reality construction,” a process through which human actors make their experiences of the world around them orderly and understandable (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 112). The following excerpt by Pak Hitam is most illuminating:

The PAP is the biggest Chinese SS. PAP and Chinese SS work the same way, that’s why they support each other. PAP and Chinese SS both take in Malays but they place Malays right at the bottom. Both say there is equality, one has brotherhood, but at the end of the day, the Chinese are still at the top. Yes, there are Malay MPs (members of parliament) but what do they do? They agree with whatever the PAP say. PAP pressure MUIS to allow organ donation, MUIS follow. As Muslim, we cannot donate our organs. Malays who try to stand up for Malays are kept down, fired. Same thing, Malay leaders in Chinese SS who try to help Malays go up kena hentak kaki (are immediately oppressed). If the Malays are happy in Chinese SS, then we wouldn’t have the KTM movement. Malays know they are marginalised so they wanted to create a separate wing in Kun Tong, called Kun Tong Melayu (KTM). The Chinese leaders immediately beat up the Malays and stopped giving them money and ostracized them. The Malays relented. The one or two Malay leaders in Chinese SS are like the Malay leaders in PAP. Both are quiet because they are happy that they have made it. They don’t help Malays, even if the rights of Malays are being violated. Malays are not army quality but civil defense. Malay inmates never get tagging and counselling. Malays take order from Chinese, in prison, outside of prison, in the underworld. Omega wants to stop this domination of Malays by Chinese.
The way Pak Hitam has rationalised the institutionalisation of Chinese secret societies in Singapore by the People’s Action Party, the dominant political party in Singapore and one that is dominated by ethnic Chinese, reflects a politicised perspective. The institutionalisation of Chinese secret societies by the People’s Action Party is marked by the symbiotic relationship that exists between the police and the Chinese secret societies. This politicised perspective emerges saliently when Pak Hitam draws a parallel between the structure of the People’s Action Party and that of the Chinese secret societies, namely their multi-ethnic composition, the ideology of PAP’s equality which parallels the ideology of brotherhood in Chinese secret societies and the socio-economic marginalisation of Malays within both institutions.

Categorising Malays as ‘politicised’ inmates must be contextualised as a corollary of Singapore’s ‘multiracialism’, promoted by the corporatist state, in larger society. The corporatist state is one dominated by bureaucrats and technocrats and is depicted as an autonomous agency seeking the stability, unity and development of society through efficient management (Brown, 1994: 70). Such a state is not subject to challenge from popular or particularistic demands; instead it co-opts various groups in society whose co-operation is necessary for the realization of state goals. The legitimacy of the corporatist state is maintained through a nationalist ideology that portrays the nation as a consensual and organic community (Lian, 2006). For this reason, the PAP government has assiduously sought to depoliticize ethnicity but ironically, racialises society through the ideology of multi-racialism. Singapore’s “multiracialism” is a variant of “multiculturalism”, both empirically and theoretically
(Pereira, 2006), which is of direct relevance to this paper. “Multiculturalism” refers to a system that ‘celebrates ethnic differences’ and a “multiculturalist state” will have ‘state sanctioned multiculturalists policies to preserve and protect the cultural rights of different groups in a particular society, including minority groups’ (Wieviorka, 1998 quoted in Pereira, 2006). The key difference between Singapore’s ‘multiracialism’ and ‘multiculturalism’ lies in the Singapore government’s interchangeable use of the terms “race” and “ethnicity” (Pereira, 2006).

The discourse of ‘ethno-racialization’ constructed by Omega members about the Chinese secret society within the prison context is a reflection of the Singapore government’s failure to distinguish between race and ethnicity, often using them interchangeably. In Singapore, multiracialism is not simply the official name of the government’s ethnic policy, but it is simultaneously “a fact, and an ideology” (Hill and Lian, 1995: 93; Benjamin, 1976: 115-6). Multiracialism, as an ideology, is committed to the equal treatment of all races in Singapore. As a fact and an ideology, the state assumes that Singapore is constituted by different “races” (Benjamin, 1976: 115). This translates to the overall pervasiveness of the so-called CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) model is of direct relevance to this paper, despite the myriad of consequences entailed by Singapore’s ‘multiracialism’. The CMIO model is an exemplary case of ‘ethno-racialization’, where each racial community’s ethnicity is not only assumed to be unique and particularistic, but also serves an ascriptive function in Singapore society (see Benjamin, 1976; Hill and Lian, 1995). Consequently ‘Chinese’, ‘Malay’, ‘Indian’ and ‘Others’ are assumed to be ‘races’ with a distinctive and identifiable culture, language, and to an extent possessed a
common religious affiliation; hence, the ease with which multiculturalism is officially and simultaneously regarded as multiracialism. Singaporeans, inmates included, have therefore come to accept the CMIO model, which is essentially racial, as a reference point in their relations with the state if not in their everyday lives in relation to other ethnic groups (Lian, 2006).

5.3. ‘Gendering of the Race’: Managing the Spoilt Identity of the ‘Malay race’

The marginality of Malays in Chinese secret societies is akin to the marginalised position of Malays in Singapore society. The parallel drawn between the marginality of Malays in the illegitimate context and the socio-economic and political marginality of Malays in larger society, not only forms the basis for identifying ‘what is a Malay’ or attributes of ‘Malayness’ but it also induces the discourse of ‘ethno-racialization’ of the Malay race as a ‘feminine race’. By ‘feminine race’ is meant that the Malay race is essentialised as ‘weak, marginalized and subordinated’. This is in opposition to the Chinese race which is conceptualised as ‘masculine’, to be read ‘strong and superior’. Drawing the abovementioned parallel facilitates a discourse that imputes essentialised traits of Malays in Chinese secret societies upon the Malay “race.” Consequently Malays are essentialised as a ‘minority group, a weak race, poor in money, poor in education, and poor in intellectual equipment’ (Zainal Abidin quoted in Lily Zubaidah Rahim, 1998). Zattar exemplifies such a discourse in the excerpt below:

Malay boys in Chinese SS are bullied. Just look at them in prison. Malays are washing the Chinese kong (drinking mug). The Chinese leaders ask the Malays to fold the shirts of the Chinese boys. Because the Malays know that
on the outside, it is the Chinese who are the bosses so they have to kiss the Chinese ass. In prison, Chinese boys don’t want to get into trouble so they ask the Malays to be the taxis. Fuck, the Malays are treated like slaves. They get bossed around because the Chinese got the power and the money.

Adopting a ‘relational perspective’ of race and ethnic relations, the discursive ‘gendering of the Malay race’ as feminine, to be read as ‘weak’ and ‘under control’ serves to exacerbate the “spoilt identity” (Goffman, 1963) of the Malay race. The ‘relational perspective’ of race and ethnic relations “has been derived from an extension and modification of Erving Goffman’s work on the sociology of stigma” (Waxman, 1977). *Stigma* represents a set of virtuoso variations on a grand theme announced first in the author’s *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. In *Stigma*, Goffman deals with the problem of the permanently discredited (or discreditable), those with some attribute that leads them to be “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one.” In order for interaction to proceed smoothly, the several participants must have a socially accredited identity acceptable to the others. The mutual acceptance of identities forms the basis of the “working consensus” on which the interaction is based. Although the concept of “spoilt identity” proves particularly useful, the development of the concept within the parameters of prison as a ‘total institution’ and its application solely to individuals who by virtue of being incarcerated is deprived of personal paraphernalia on which the ‘presentation of a unique self’ is dependent, has limited the implications of the concept for understanding the process of racialisation and race and ethnic interaction. The discourse of ethno-racialisation, which refers “to a political and ideological process by which particular populations are identified by direct or indirect reference
to their real or imagined phenotypical characteristics in such a way as to suggest that the population can only be understood as a supposedly biological unity” (Cashmore, 1988: 246), suggests that the concept of “spoilt identity” is applicable to making sense of collective identity. The concept of ‘spoilt identity’ is not necessarily limited to individual identity. In order to understand the traits and the culture of marginality commonly associated with the Malays, it is imperative to take into consideration the way Omega members have constructed a parallel between the marginalisation of Malays in Chinese secret societies and the extent to which the Malays are stigmatised by the Chinese, the socio-economic and politically dominant ethnic group in Singapore. This discursive ‘gendering of the Malay race’ is not adequately accounted for by the cultural deficit thesis perspective because it ignores the interaction between the Malays and the Chinese. That is, it fails to take into consideration the stigma of socio-economic and political marginality against the Malays which sets the process in motion and keeps it from being broken (Rahim, 1998). However, a situational perspective is not adequate either. This perspective fails to account for the evidence that many of the traits associated with the culture of marginality associated with the Malays have been internalised and will not rapidly disappear with a change in situation. Stimpfl (2006), for instance, describes how the professional middle class Malays, being socially and economically distant from the general Malay community and being ethnically different from the non-Malay community, suffers from a social phenomenon of double alienation. The profound level of alienation has rendered the Malay middle class socially vulnerable and susceptible towards uncritically accepting the cultural deficit thesis which gratifies their ego for having extricated themselves
from the negative cultural attributes afflicting the Malay community. Adi echoes such
a sentiment in the excerpt below:

Omega members make use of skin to gain the support of Malay inmates and
guards. Malay inmates and guards are damn nasty to us because they are
influenced by these Omega bastards. When I was in Sembawang, warders
allowed Omega to gather for their anniversary. They let Omega members
group and if a fight happens between Omega and 369, Omega usually go off
easy. Omega members are put in one workshop together but 369 are broken
up and worst, not offered jobs. Warder ever told me straight to my face, that
we Malays in Chinese SS embarrass the Malays and have no backbone.
Omega is poor but at least they are brave enough to stand as Malays to fight
the Chinese. Omega portrays Malays in Chinese SS as magnifying the
reputation of Malays as marginalised. The secret society underworld is seen as
simply another context of being oppressed by the Chinese. Chinese think
badly of Malay because Malays don’t have the pride in themselves.

The excerpt above shows that the discourse of ‘ethno-racialization’ in prison,
is capable of essentialising or naturalising the already “spoilt identity” of the Malay
race in larger society, thus exhibiting the usefulness of ‘prison of society’ concept.
The mutual acceptance of identities is rendered the foundation of interaction with the
“orientational other,” referring to ‘the others in communication with whom an
individual’s or a group’s identity is basically sustained and/or changed’ (Kuhn, 1967).
The ‘powerlessness’ that characterise the Malays in Chinese secret societies is
transposed to the Malay race. The above discourse is a reflection of the ethno-
racialization of Malays as ‘unable to compete with Chinese, unable to achieve in
education and work, suffering from social malaise, incapable of operating
successfully and independently in a modern productive society’ is accepted by
Malays and non-Malay alike (Stimpfl, 2006). This ‘ethno-racial’ discourse of
‘gendering the Malay race’ prompts the harsh treatment of Malays in Chinese secret societies by the Malay inmates and prison personnel.

5.4. **“Who Is Malay? Situational Selection of Ethnic Identity”**

The socio-economic marginality of Malays in Chinese secret societies parallels the socio-economic and political marginality of Malays in larger society, which not only elicits but also reinforces the “spoilt identity” of the ‘Malay race’. Through the discourse of ‘ethno-racialization’, ‘race consciousness’ with respect to the “spoilt identity” of the Malay race is firmly entrenched. Faris (1937) argues that ‘if there is a group consciousness, a feeling of ’we’, then undoubtedly there will be sanctions directed against members of the same group which manifest attitudes that are ‘deviant’ because they amplify the ‘deviant’ status of the members of the same community. As such, it is inevitable that Omega members turn to some of the same strategies used by other stigmatised persons in an effort to deal with Malay members of Chinese secret societies who are perceived as reinforcing ‘Malayness’ with ‘powerlessness, subordination, weakness and marginality.’ Within the prison context, the sanction that emerges includes the overt discriminatory treatment of Malay members of Chinese secret societies, rationalized through the discourse of social exclusion. Malays in Chinese secret societies are ‘deviant’ because they exacerbate the “spoilt identity” of the Malay race. This directly translates into the racialisation of Malays in Chinese secret societies, where the ‘deviant’ becomes the object of naturalization, racialization and discipline in order to justify subjecting the former to
physical and verbal abuse. Naim stated that Malay guards and inmates would often hurl verbal abuse at Malay members of Chinese secret societies as follows:

What’s become of you Malay infidels? You bloody idol-worshippers bring shame to Islam. Omega say you pray to Chinese Guan Ti (God of War), Toa Pek Kong (God of Fortune) during the Chinese seventh month. You drink blood during your initiation, you eat pork, you do lion dance, attend songka (Chinese funerals). You people won’t smell heaven. You will rot in hell, that’s all your flesh is good for, hell-fire.

Religion, specifically Islam, constitutes the third strategy employed by Omega members to effect the proselytization of socio-economically marginalised ‘Malay-Muslims’ from Chinese secret societies into Omega and to elicit the solidarity of unaffiliated ‘Malay-Muslim’ prison guards and inmates to lend support to Omega. In Singapore, the ethnic identity of the Malays is equated with religious affiliation to Islam, where Islam is seen as both critical and non-negotiable for in-group identification and for defining ‘Malayness’. A Malay is a Malay because he is Muslim, a Chinese is a Chinese because he is not (Nagata, 1974). Invoking this conflation of Malays as Muslims, members of Omega strategically emphasise the religious nature of Omega’s cause, the religious elements in Omega’s initiation rites and the religiosity of Omega members to elicit the solidarity of ‘Malay-Muslim’ inmates and prison personnel. To deter unaffiliated ‘Malay-Muslims’ from joining Chinese secret societies and to proselytize Malay members of Chinese secret societies into Omega, members of Omega perpetuate a discourse that Malay members of Chinese secret societies, by entering into, participating in the various rituals, and conforming to the myriad customs of Chinese secret societies have fundamentally renounced Islam to become “kafir”\textsuperscript{12}. The basis of the solidarity exhibited by the
‘Malay-Muslim,’ inmates and prison personnel towards Omega is drawn from their overlapping social identities in terms of race, religion, and sex, which the former believe is not shared in entirety by Malay members of Chinese secret societies. As a result of conflating Malays as Muslims in Singapore, labelling Malay members of Chinese secret societies as “kafir” serves to “other” or dissociate the former from being identified as either Malay or Muslim. Such a discourse functions to garner the solidarity of ‘Malay-Muslims’ in ostracising such “infidels” and to lend support to Omega secret society whose members are perceived to be guardians of Islam. This is encapsulated by Pak Hitam in the excerpt below:

How can the Malays in Chinese SS call themselves Malay Muslims? They eat pork, they don’t fast. During their initiation ceremonies, Malay members are also expected to pray to the Chinese God of War, Kwan-Ti, and the Malays are also required to attend songka (Chinese funeral rites), pray to the ancestors. These people have become idol worshippers, infidels and they cannot call themselves Malay Muslims. Omega members swear allegiance to each other while holding the holy Quran. The Quran binds us as brothers. Anyone who regards himself Malay Muslim must lend support to Omega, the defender of Islam and Muslims. We die as tentera fisabillilah, army for Islam. We help Malay Muslim independent (those unaffiliated with any secret societies) who are bullied by Chinese SS. We fight to protect them. If Chinese hang (threaten) them, beat them up or ask them to sleep near toilet, they come to us and we take care of the bullies.

The above excerpt concisely illustrates how religion is used in the discourse of ‘Malay-Muslim’ inmates and prison personnel as a way of “othering” Malays in Chinese secret societies, by showing how the latter’s membership in Chinese secret society is incongruent with the ‘Malay-Muslim’ identity. This is geared towards managing the “spoilt identity” of the Malays. In Singapore society, an ‘ethno-racial’ discourse conflates Malays as Muslims (Rahim, 1998; Stimpfl, 2006) and the
forbidding of ‘idol-worship, consumption of pork and alcohol’ in Islam is of direct relevance to the process of “othering” Malays in Chinese secret societies as “non-Malays.” In order to racialise Malays in Chinese secret societies as “others” and to deny them the ability to identify themselves as Malays, the Malay, Muslim Omega members employ a religious rhetoric to obstruct the in-group identification of the former as Malays, where the Malay identity is synonymous with Islam. Being the objects of racialization also justifies the perpetration of physical abuse against the Malays in Chinese secret societies by the Malay, Muslim inmates and prison personnel, as illustrated below by prison guard, Arman.

La Illaha IllAllah, Muhammadun Rasul Allah, I hate to see what has become of these Malay boys in Chinese SS. They have discarded Islam to be part of Chinese SS. Omega members informed me that they pray to Chinese God of War. They go for Chinese funerals, they celebrate Chinese festivals. Blasphemy! They shame Islam and the Malay Muslim community. Their loyalty is displaced. I go down hard on them. I remind them that they’re hell-bound. I scold them if they try to influence independent Malays to join their blasphemous cause. They accuse me of siding with Omega members, closing one eye when Omega members smuggle food, or recruit people. Well, the way I see it, I’m just helping my Muslim brothers. To hell with the Malays in Chinese SS, who have forsaken Islam.
1 Rather distinctive trends and convergences can be observed, I believe, in the use of concepts such as culture and society. Significant changes have occurred in the meanings of these terms and in the way they are interconnected. For a comprehensive account of these changes, please see Schrag, Clarence (1961) “Some Foundations for a Theory of Correction,” in D. Cressey (ed.), The Prison: Studies in Institutional Organization and Change. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, pp. 309-357.

2 To be sure, the personnel from the Singapore Prison Headquarters had deemed my inquiry into the statistical division of inmates according to ethnic groups and within ethnic divisions, the statistics of those who are affiliated with secret societies, as “out of bounds.” Such statistics had been deemed confidential and I was not allowed access to them. In order to get around this, I had to rely on the information related to me by the Housing Unit officer of each of the prisons I visited. The Housing Unit officer was in charge of particular blocks in the prison and had access to the statistics of the inmates within their institutions. Ten of the Housing Unit officers that I had spoken to enlightened me on some of the statistics I was inquiring into. The Housing Unit officers agreed that Malays were over-represented in the prison population and that the majority of these Malays were affiliated in some way to secret societies.

3 Ajak is 28 years old. At 14 years old, he had left school to join the group 18 (Sio Ku Tong). In 1995 he committed motor-vehicle theft and spend 18 months in jail. It was at this time that he left the Sio Kun Tong secret society to band together with Omega. In 1998 he spent 8 months in jail for theft. In 2000, he spent 4 years in jail and took 12 strokes of the cane for forgery of checks, two robberies, and driving with a fake driving license. In 2000-2001 he was caught for rioting in prison and was placed under ZTP (Zero Tolerance Policy for Gangs), which meant he was isolated from the rest of the inmates because he was believed to be an active gang member even in prison. In 2005, he was sentenced to 40 months in prison for breach of trust when he embezzled the fund of the company he was working for.

4 ‘Lembu cucuk hidung’ literally means ‘a cow that is pulled by the nose’, an individual who is extremely powerless to resist and is extremely obedient.

5 PC is an abbreviation for ‘punishment cell.’ This equates to solitary confinement.

6 In their article, “Thoughts on Class, Race and Prison”, Berkman and Blunk (2001) clearly conceptualises ‘politically motivated acts’ which includes “charges of resisting U.S. war crimes through violent and illegal means”, “declaring war on government leaders for the racism and neglect that permeate the schools, the labour market, the welfare system and social services of the Third World, and poor white neighbourhoods” and ‘waging war on the government leaders who cause human devastation through their policies and yet aim to rectify the situation by declaring war on the victims of their own making (the “war on drugs”)’.

7 The story of KTM or Kun Tong Melayu is related to me thus by Naim. Naim’s information has been triangulated and it was corroborated by other inmates. In Singapore, Chap Puik Sio Kun Tong or the 18 group is one of the biggest Chinese secret society and Sio Kun Tong is reputed to have the most Malay members. In fact, the population of Sio Kun Tong had expanded so much, that the leaders of Sio Kun Tong had created a branch of it called Salakao or more commonly known as 369. I have been told that adding 3, 6, 9 equates 18 and this is evidence of the relation between Salakao and Sio Kun Tong, the numerical value that designate their secret society. In the early 90s, a few of the well-established Malays in the 18 group, such as Jamal Kastam, Salim Babu, Ali Perompak, Jamak came together and decided that to start a Malay wing, called Kun Tong Melayu. Only Malays would be in this wing and they would be financed differently, with their own resources. The Chinese leaders disagreed and a riot ensued. The Malays were cut off. Finally the Malays relented and resumed their membership in Sio Kun Tong.
This translates to the “Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, Article 152, where the state guarantees that the economic political and cultural rights of the minority racial or ethnic groups will be protected” (Government of Singapore, 1999 quoted in Pereira 2006: 9).

The “problems” or unintended consequences of Singapore’s ‘multiracialism’ have been addressed in other studies (see Benjamin, 1976; Siddique, 1990; Purushotam, 1998).

In prison, some members of each secret society will work under the ‘financial’ category. There are a myriad of jobs within the ‘financial’ category. Some will be in charge of collecting money from their brothers who work in the workshops. With this money or gang fund, some members will be in charge of purchasing canteen. Canteen refers to all the products like chocolates, tidbits, biscuits that can be purchased at a shop within the prison, a privilege extended only to inmates who work. These collated canteens, called akong, will be distributed to the brothers who are either in isolation or to be used to recruit inmates into the gang. In order to distribute the akong or to pass messages about the gang to other members, taxis are needed. Teaboys or cookies function as taxis. ‘Cookie’ denotes inmates who, selected based on good behaviour, are placed in charge of general maintenance around the prison. They usually perform odd-jobs, including sweeping the prison offices like the records office, the meeting room, officers’ rooms, clearing the rubbish, fetching inmates from the records office to interview rooms since all interviews with inmates conducted by visitors are conducted outside the housing unit. Generally they work in the prison offices, under the direct supervision and instruction of officers. Inmates who are tea-boys are a separate group from ‘cookie’. Tea-boys wear a t-shirt with the word ‘tea-boy’ printed at the back of the t-shirt and they are confined within the sphere of the kitchen. Teaboys, selected based on good behaviour, perform duties in the kitchen, like cooking for the whole institution, serving drinks and food to officers and visitors, delivering meals to inmates’ housing units. These are the people who hide the akong in the laundry and they can function as taxis because they are allowed to move about in the prison.

The initiation rites into Chinese secret societies have been related to me thus by Amy:

If you want to join Chinese SS, you need a headman to jamin you. Jamin is like he will be in charge of bringing you into the society and he will be responsible for your actions. In a way, its like if you do something wrong, he will have to answer for you, vouch for you, back you up, or beat you up. When you join, the first thing is they have to test whether you are squeamish and whether you got guts. So the first test I had to go through was I had to kill a dog and remove its heart. Second test was harder. It was like an initiation into fearlessness. The headman picked a guy, either an enemy or a rival gang member, and I had to go and beat that guy up for no good reason. The headman wanted to see if I was a good fighter, if I was brave but more importantly to see if I was daring enough to do it. People usually would be too afraid to just get into mindless violence. Once I did those two tests, I was taken to a Chinese temple. There were six people in the temple and they had handkerchiefs over their mouths like a mask. They just sat there through my initiation. I had to recite some oath in Hokkien, took three joss sticks, bow three times to Guan Ti, God of War with a black face. After that, I was offered alcohol and pork and I ate and drank.

Kafir (Arabic: کفار kāfir; plural کفار kuffār) is an Arabic word literally meaning “ingrate”. In the Islamic doctrinal sense the term refers to a person who does not recognize Allah or the prophet-hood of Muhammad (i.e., any non-Muslim) or who hides, denies, or covers the truth. In cultural terms, it is seen as a derogatory term used to describe an unbeliever, non-Muslims, apostate from Islam and even between Muslims of different sects. It is usually translated into English as “infidel” or “unbeliever.”

“La Ilaha Illallah” is the most important expression in Islam. It is the creed that every person has to say to be considered a Muslim. It is part of the first pillar of Islam. The meaning of which is: “There is no lord worthy of worship except Allah.” The second part of this first pillar is to say: "Muhammadun Rasul Allah," which means: “Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.”
CHAPTER 6

6. CONCLUSION

I began this thesis by seeking an explanation for the three empirically-defining features of the Omega secret society which differentiates Omega from the oft-studied Chinese secret societies in the Singaporean context. The three features included ethnic affiliation among ‘Malay Muslims’ as a prominent ideology underlying Omega’s formation, the ethnically exclusive composition of its members, and the prison as a stronghold that facilitates the formation, continued existence and expansion of the Omega secret society.

To account for the emphasis on ethnic affiliation among ‘Malay Muslims’ as a prominent ideology underlying Omega’s formation and Omega’s ethnically exclusive membership meant that I was in direct pursuit of a theoretical framework in which I could situate the abovementioned empirical being investigated. To this end, the breadth of ideas contained in Merton’s (1938) ‘Social Structure and Anomie’ paradigm has played a substantial role. Nevertheless, while Merton has provided an invaluable foundation, his framework is not without limitations. Specifically, Merton’s assumption and proposition of an inverse class-crime/deviance relationship, embraced in his original essay is problematic (Cole, 1975: 211). Using empirical data on the Omega secret society, I have challenged the core assumption of Merton’s paradigm. As Merton revealed, a central norm of the scientific enterprise is ‘organised scepticism’ on matters of ‘fact,’ whether this was toward knowledge
claims in the larger society or in the scientific community (Cullen and Messner, 2007: 95). Consistent with this norm, I have integrated the concept of race into Merton’s SS&A paradigm to suggest a different causal model, albeit one with the capacity to explain the emergence of the Omega secret society within Singapore’s illegitimate context. On one hand, integrating the concept of race into Merton’s SS&A paradigm has specifically facilitated an appreciation of Omega’s emergence within the context of Singapore’s illegitimate society. On the other hand, by integrating race as an analytical tool, I have enhanced the efficacy of Merton’s SS&A paradigm to grasp deviance as a product of race, and not simply class, relations, as well as to move beyond explaining deviance solely within a legitimate context. While this thesis pertains specifically to the empirical phenomenon of the Omega secret society in Singapore, the value of a reconceptualised understanding of Merton’s SS&A will undoubtedly prove constructive for researches in other contexts, beyond Singapore, as well as in other illegitimate contexts.

Explaining the solidarity expressed by the ‘Malay,’ ‘male,’ ‘Muslim,’ inmates and prison personnel in perpetrating verbal and physical abuse and overt discriminatory treatment towards Malays in Chinese secret societies requires the contextualisation of such acts against the backdrop of socio-economic and political relations between the Malays and Chinese in larger society. The socio-economic marginalisation of Malays in Chinese secret societies parallels the socio-economic and political marginalisation of Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese in Singapore society. Triggered by the over-representation of Malays members of Chinese secret societies in prison, Omega members strategically initiate a discourse that draws the
abovementioned parallel and ethno-racialises the culture of marginality as an attribute of ‘Malayness.’ The marginalised position of Malays in Chinese secret societies is essentialised as an embodiment of the marginal status Malays are seen to occupy whether in or outside of prisons. Since Malays in Chinese secret societies reflect ‘what it means to be Malay’, it is as well that the discourse of ethno-racialisation suggests that ‘Malayness’ is embodied in the former. As a result the characteristics of Malay members of Chinese secret societies are as well imputed onto the Malay ‘race’. This is reflected in the way Omega members account for the marginality of the Malays through the discursive ‘gendering of the Malay race’ as effeminate (read: weak, subordinated). The way Omega members rationalise the marginality of Malays in the discourse of ethno-racialisation echoes the cultural deficit thesis employed by ‘the People’s Action Party to justify the marginalisation of Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese in Singapore’ (Rahim, 1998). The People’s Action Party is the dominant political party in Singapore comprising mostly Chinese. Fundamentally, the marginality of Malays in Chinese secret societies is perceived by the rest of the Malay inmate population as both triggering and bolstering the discourse of ethno-racialising ‘Malays’ as inherently ‘weak, incapable of surviving in a modern society and subordinate.’ This perception is crucial in eliciting the solidarity between the ‘Malay,’ ‘male,’ ‘Muslim,’ prison personnel and inmates in perpetrating overt discriminatory treatment and verbal and physical abuse against Malays in Chinese secret societies who are perceived as exacerbating the spoilt identity of the Malays as persistently marginalised whether within or without the prison.
Thus far, this thesis has demonstrated how the empirical phenomenon within
the prison is intertwined with the socio-economic and political relations between the
Malays and Chinese in Singapore society. The porous boundary of the prison walls
constitutes a platform to propose a re-thinking of the existing conceptualisation of
prison as a ‘total institution’ and its implications for the theoretical frameworks that
explain inmate culture and social structure. Rather than subscribing to the notion of
‘prison as a total institution in society,’ I have suggested that the empirical
phenomenon observable in the Singapore prisons can be better appreciated using the
concept of ‘society in prison.’ Conceptually, ‘society in prison’ suggests that the
prison structure does not simply consist of an unproblematic division between the
large managed group, conveniently called inmates, and the custodians of control. As
well the usefulness of ‘society in prison’ lies in its recognition that inmates do not
become “docile bodies” upon entry into the prison, divorced from the socio-economic
and political relations of which they were a part, including their social identity as
members of a particular race vis-à-vis the other races. In the discourse of ethno-
racialisation, an unmistakable parallel is drawn between the social exclusion of
Malays in Chinese secret societies and the marginalised position of Malays vis-à-vis
the Chinese in Singapore society. The discourse of ethno-racialisation unequivocally
proves that the dynamics of race and ethnic relations within larger society continue to
influence empirical phenomenon within the prison walls.

While the processes of marginalisation occurring in larger society has
typically preceded analysis of phenomenon occurring within the prison, the novelty of
this thesis lies in the antithetical suggestion that the empirical observations within the
prison and within the illegitimate society could instead elaborate on the processes of social exclusion occurring within the milieu of larger society. In this thesis, the processes of social exclusion I have focused on pertain specifically to members of certain ethnic groups. Despite the physical boundaries separating prisoners from the non-incarcerated population, it is fallacious to believe that that the social processes within the prison are canonical products of the ‘pains of imprisonment’. Social processes within the prison, as the Singapore case has shown, in fact reflects on the social dynamics including race and ethnic relations, political relations, gender relations and class relations occurring within larger society. As this thesis has shown, the discourse of the inmates, which are less readily policed by the state and the custodians of control, inevitably comes closer to representing the reality of social exclusion in Singapore. The relationship between power and resistance behind prison walls has long animated sociological discussions of imprisonment. In this thesis I advance a fresh understanding of resistance that recognizes the multi-faceted dimensions of prisoner agency while acknowledging the dangers in simply valorizing the strategies of the confined to subvert penal power. For me the importance of resistance is that it makes explicit the connections between everyday actions and broader inequalities. By shifting my conceptual focus from ‘prison in society’ to ‘society in prison’, a new analytical dimension of informal inmate culture and social structure has been realized and which suggests immense possibilities for prison literature.
7. Bibliography


114. Maier, Hendrik (1988) In the Center of Authority. Ithaca: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program.


IV. APPENDIX A – INDEMNITY FORM

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS
Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate we thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you of any kind and we thank you for considering our request.

NAME OF FACULTY:
National University of Singapore, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,
Department of Sociology

PROJECTED START DATE OF PROJECT:
17 February 2006

PROJECTED END DATE OF PROJECT:
December 2006

SUPERVISOR RESPONSIBLE FOR PROJECT (If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either):
Dr. Narayanan Ganapathy
NUS Department of Sociology 11 Arts Link #03-06 Singapore 117570
Telephone No: 65-6874-3826
E-MAIL: socng@nus.edu.sg

NAME OF STUDENT RESEARCHER:
Nafis Muhamad Hanif
Matriculation No: HT050923X
E-MAIL: g0500923@nus.edu.sg
**What is the Aim of the Project?**
This project is an Honours Thesis written in fulfilment of the Masters in Social Sciences Honours, M.A.Soc.Sci Degree.
This project is an exploratory study that aims to document the lived experiences, the problems, the culture, the coping mechanism, strategies of integration of inmates from a sociological perspective. This study aims to investigate the relationship and the social interactions between the prison structure and personnel with the prison population within the broader context of prison management and discipline.

**What will Participants be Asked to Do?**
This project involves an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops.
In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you are reminded of your right to decline to answer any particular question(s) and also that you may withdraw from the project at any stage without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

**What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?**
The results of the project may be published and will be available in the library but every attempt will be made to preserve my anonymity.
You are most welcome to request a copy of the results of the project should you wish. The data collected will be securely stored in such a way that only the student researcher and the supervisor in-charge of this project will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for a period of time, after which it will be destroyed.
CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;

2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;

3. The data will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for a period of time, after which it will be destroyed;

4. This project involves an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops and that in the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that I feel hesitant or uncomfortable I may decline to answer any particular question(s).

5. The results of the project may be published and will be available in the library but every attempt will be made to preserve my anonymity.

I agree to take part in this project.

...........................................................................................................
(Name of participant in block letters)

...........................................................................................................
(Signature of participant) ...................................................
(Date)
### V. Appendix B – Secret Writing Codes

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#### Example:

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VI. APPENDIX C – PRISONERS’ LETTERS

EXPERIENCE, TRUTH FIRST

TO: NARS
FROM: LEEK XCK
DATE: 10 JUNE 2004

TRUTH IS NOT A MYTHICAL
IT’S A LEADER OF TRUTH
IT’S NOT A COMMUNITY
IT’S OUR PASSION FOR EXISTENCE
FOR WE OBEY IT UNTIL IT TAKES US HOME
IT’S AN OBSESSION
TRUTH WILL NOT LIE ANYTIME, ANYWHERE, ANYWHEN
TRUTH CAN’T BE BROKEN, IT IS AN ENDLESS ENDLESS
TRUTH MIGHT BE UNHAPPY AND BECAUSE OF BECAUSE
BY OPENDAWN...
20 JUNE 2004

NUS TC INTERVIEW '06
EXPERIENCE, TRUTH FIRST
June 4, 2006

To: McAle

The Woman in My Dreams

Good day to you Mr. McAle. It is honor to be amongst those who are involved with the 'Black lawyers' in this wonderful country. It is a privilege to share our experiences and to see the progress that has been made over the years. We have faced many challenges and obstacles, but we have persevered and overcome them with determination and resilience. We have stood together and have fought for our rights and freedoms, and we will continue to do so. We have been part of a movement that has changed the course of history, and we are proud to have been a part of it. We will continue to fight for justice and equality, and we hope that you will support us in our endeavors. We believe that everyone deserves a fair trial and equal treatment under the law. We thank you for your time and for listening to us.

Yours sincerely,
[Signature]

My experience, truth first.

*These people change jobs, names and families
with a beautiful mind, anyway see u...
VII. APPENDIX D – Publications

*International Journal Publication:*


*Conference Oral Presentation:*


The presentation entitled, Secret Societies in Singapore Male Prisons was published in the conference booklet pg. 119