

The Early Hokkiens in Penang

By : David Tan

The Chinese from Sek Tong had settled on the island as early as 1793, David Tan writes in the second of a 3-part article.

According to a letter dated June 28, 1793 by Captain Francis Light, there were two houses and a shop on the island owned by a Chinese by the name of Cheah Hun Eam (popularly known as Cheah Eam or Chee Earn), a Hokkien from Sek Tong district in Zhang-zhou.

Malaysian Chinese History and Relic Survey (MCHRS) deputy director Ong Seng Huat told The SunIsland in an interview that the historical document is the earliest showing that as early as 1793, there was already a Hokkien settlement on the island.

Also present at the interview was Cheah Kongsı chairman Cheah Jin Teong, a fourth-generation descendant of Hun Pam. Jin Teong is also the son of the late Cheah Seng Khim, a businessman-cum-politician who was elected Tanjung Bungah assemblyman in the 1955 general election.

"It (the letter) also shows the Hokkiens in Penang were the earliest wealthy Chinese settlers on the island because the property owned by Cheah was worth 2,700 Spanish dollar, more than half the amount invested in the construction of Kong Hock Keong temple, which was about 4,000 Spanish dollars," Ong added.

Ong is also the vice-chairman of Federation Of Malaysia's Taoist Organizations (FMTO) and a director of the Centre for Cultural and Religious Research, an organisation funded by FMTO.

Ong said Hun Ram first arrived at Bagan Dalam in Province Wellesley. Later he sailed to Penang island.

"Hun Eam and his clansmen eked out a living as fishermen in Pagan Dalam. It is not certain how long they remained on the mainland, but shortly after arriving they moved to the island.

"The move was an important decision because by moving to the island, Hun Pam provided his clansmen with better work opportunities in George Town, which was then gaining importance as a centre of commercial activities," Ong said.

He said at first Hun Eam and his clansmen rented a building in Armenian Street to serve as their kongsı where the settlers could also worship their patron saints Hock Haw - two ancient warriors from Tang Dynasty who had died in Sek Tong.

"It is not certain which year they started to rent the building," Ong said.

"But according to the defunct Nanyang Annual Report, a publication in the 1920s by Japanese historians, Hun Eam and his clansmen rented the premises in 1801.

In 1820, Hun Earn and Hun Eam and his clansmen bought their first landed property, which was called Jee Lye Hock Haw Kongsí, on the island.

Although Hun Eam wanted to build a temple for his clansmen, he did not choose Jee Lye Hock Haw Kongsí as the site.

Until his death in 1845, Hun Eam still could not find a suitable site for the temple.

It was not until 1858 that his wife, Ong Sin Neoh, bought over the rented premises on Armenian Street and constructed a new temple at a cost of 12,367 Spanish dollars.

Construction work on the new temple, which was called Cheah Kay Sek Tong Seah Hock Haw Kong Kongsí, began in 1858 and was completed in 1873.

She had acquired the Armenian Street property, which remains until today as the clanhouse, because the premises had good feng shui and was located near the jetty.

That a woman could have supervised the completion of a temple at that time was remarkable, considering the fact that Chinese clans were male-dominated," he added.

Ong said Hun Earn's son, Cheah Choo Yew continued the work of his father in servicing the needs of the Sek Tong Cheah dan in Penang.

"In 1909, Choo Yew acquired 12ha in Mount Erskine and transformed it into a cemetery for the Cheah clan from Sek Tong. The cemetery was named the Cheah Sek Tong Family Cemetery.

"In 1912, Choo Yew paid 3 Straits dollars, a small fortune in those days, for a huge tree to be transported from another state in the peninsula so that he can use it to make 100 large tables and 400 chairs for the cemetery.

"Each table measured 4.5m by 0.9m. Choo Yew wanted to show the public the numerical strength of the Sek Tong Cheah clan in Penang," said Ong.

He said Choo Yew's advice to his clansmen was that if they wanted to compete with others, they must always make sure they emerge as victors.

"Choo Yew would tell them that if they are not confident in competing, then they should not do it at all," Ong said.

He added that in 1919, Choo Yew established a primary school at the Cheah Kay Sek Tong Seah Hock Haw Kong Kongsu.

"The school operated until 1942 when its operations were disrupted by World War II. After the war, the school was not revived," he added.

Ong added that Choo Yew used to own the land in the vicinity of what is now the Guillemard Reservoir and 9 the Federation School for the Deaf at the Vale of Tempe.

"These property were part of what was known as the Rockhill Rubber Estate at the turn of the century," he added.

Ong said the most famous son of Choo Yew Was Seng Khim, the MCA politician who had almost become Penang's first chief minister.

"Seng Khim was related to Gerakan founder Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu through his cousin sister, Cheah Swee Hoon, who had married Chong Eu's father Dr Lim Chwee Leong.

"After the 1957 Alliance victory in the legislative council elections, Seng Khim and Tan Sri Wong Pow Nee were elected as state executive councilors.

Seng Khim held the transport and local government portfolio, while Wong headed committee.

"At that time, Chong Eu declined an offer to be the chief minister and so Seng Khim and Wong fought for the post.

"On July 16, 1957, a meeting chaired by Chong Eu was held at the Umno building on Jalan Macalister to choose the new chief minister.

"When Tunku Abdul Rahman found out from Chong Eu that both Seng Khim and Wong each had received 6 votes, he told Chong Eu: 'To save all the trouble, you might as well take the post yourself.' For undisclosed reasons, Chong Eu cast his decisive vote for Wong, dashing Seng Khim's dream of becoming the chief minister," said Ong.

Meanwhile, Jin Teong, 67, the son of Seng Khim, recalled that the Sek Tong Cheah clan also founded the Poh Teik Seah (PTS) within the premises of Cheah Kay Sek Tong Seah Hock Haw Kong Kongsu, an organisation established to look after the sin khok (new guests) from Sek Tong.

"PTS helped the new comers to adjust to the environment of Penang and provided them with a place to sleep.

"When they needed letters to be written to their relatives in China. the kongsi's clerk would help them.

"Early in the morning, the sin khek would gather at the kongsi, waiting for their employers to escort them to work at fruit and rubber plantations and at charcoal farms in Sungai Pinang.

"It was important that the workers were escorted because they could be kidnapped on their way to work if they go on their own.

"Once kidnapped, they would be sold as slaves for between 29 and 50 Straits dollars," Jin Teong said.

Jin Teong, who has one son and four daughters, is now retired.