

The Khoo Clan

The ancestor of Penang's great Khoo clan was, ironically enough, born with the surname Chan. The fourth son of a peasant, Chan Chian Eng was given away for adoption to a Khoo family in another village, and was subsequently renamed Khoo Chian Eng. This took place towards the end of the Yuan dynasty. Chian Eng's wife, surnamed Saw, bore him one son, who later settled in Sin Kang village.

All Khoos in Penang who belong to the Leong San Tong (literally, "Dragon Mountain Hall") clan originate from Sin Kang village in China. They can trace their lineage to their progenitor Khoo Chian Eng; to reach back further than that, they would have to refer to the Chan genealogy chart.

The old rules of the Leong San Tong Khoo clan association held that members of the Chan clan would be allowed to participate gratis in their festivities, whereas outsider Khoos would be regarded as gatecrashers. Strictly speaking, the seed of Khoo Chian Eng are forbidden to marry persons surnamed Chan.

As the family of Khoo Chian Eng prospered, his descendants of the third, fourth and fifth generations broke off to form their own sublineages. As a result, as many as 13 subclans were established, each with its own hall of worship. These branches held a reunion for the first time in history when 22 descendants of Khoo Chian Eng, of the 9th, 10th and 11th generations gathered in the winter of the year 1600 to arrange for the proper worship of their common ancestor.

In Penang the main Khoo clan temple is the Leong San Tong Khoo Kongsí at Cannon Square. The clan association committee consists of four sectional groups or "pillars", each comprising several branches or sublineages. The descendants of one sectional group consisting of five branches came together to build the Boon San Tong Khoo Kongsí, a grand temple in Victoria Street. Another five branches formed the Khoo Si Toon Keng Tong which occupies a shop lot in Beach Street. Each association has its own constitution and assets.

Emigration

As their clan village was not far from the port of Amoy, the Khoos emigrated by sea when times were bad in the hometown. Being among the pioneers of the early Chinese community in Malacca, several Khoos contributed to the founding of the Cheng Hoon Teng (Pure Clouds Temple) there, in the 17th century.

The Khoos were already in Penang during Captain Francis Light's time, and over a dozen names are inscribed on the foundation stone of the Kong Hock Keong (Goddess of Mercy Temple at Pitt Street) as founding donors. Several years later, the Khoos formed the largest group of donors, from a single clan to contribute towards the first Hokkien cemetery in Batu Gantung.

A record shows that in 1816, donations were collected by the Penang Khoos for their deity "Tua Sai Yah". In 1824, the clan made collections for the building of the deity's temple, Cheng Soon Keong, in their home village. This temple was dedicated to the clan's-patron saints. Ong Soon (The Noble) and Tai Sai (Great Duke), two great heroes in Chinese history.

The Great Duke was a general who lived during the Chin dynasty (265-420 AD) and The Noble was his nephew. In a famous battle, the Great Duke with only eight thousand fighting men defended China against an army of invaders one million strong.

The art of war

Taking advantage of natural geography, the Great Duke's small army used strategies of guerilla warfare to overcome their sizable opponents. To this day, the quotation "Grass and trees reveal your military prowess", often used to surmise political situations, is a reference to the Great Duke's military tactics which aroused paranoia among the enemy soldiers, causing them to imagine soldiers hidden in the "grass and trees". This famous saying is included in the verses carved on the front granite pillars of the Leong San Tong Khoo Kongsi at Cannon Square:

"Talking and joking" refers to a famous scene where the Great Duke was playing chess right up to the moment when the enemy was almost upon them. His indifference to the danger caused his own soldiers great anxiety, as they thought the front lines were being delivered to massacre. At the critical moment, however, the small army led by the Great Duke's nephew overcame the invading squads as they were crossing the river and threw the latter into confusion.

The all-seeing wisdom of the general is also depicted by the verses inscribed on bamboo couplets flanking the Tua Pek Kong altar on the southern side of the clan temple. These couplets, originally intended for the altar of the Ong Soon Tai Sai in the main hall, are relics which survived the Great Fire of 1902.

The two personalities Ong Soon and Tai Sai were deified according to folk tradition and are widely worshipped today, either as a pair (Ong Soon Tai Sai), or with prominence given to the elder general (Tua Sai Yah). The Great Duke's name was Cheah Hean and the nephew's name was Cheah Aun, the pair are also worshipped by the Cheahs in Penang as ancestors.

In addition to Ong Soon Tai Sai and Tua Pek Kong (God of Prosperity), the other deities worshipped at the Khoo clan temple are Poh Seng Tai Tay (God of Medicine), Mar Chor Poh (Patron Goddess of Sailors), Kuan Im (Goddess of Mercy) and Sam Kai Kong (Dukes of the Three Realms).

The Leong San Tong Khoos traditionally came together in a big festivity on the Fifth Day of the Fifth Month to worship Tua Sai Yah. It was on such an occasion in 1835 when 102 members of the Khoo clan in Penang, of the fifteenth to seventeenth generations, resolved to form an association and build a clan temple. At once 528 Straits Dollars were raised, and the project was inaugurated three days later.

[Ambitious design](#)

In 1851, a piece of land was bought at the present Cannon Square and the existing house subsequently served as the clan temple. It seems that this was formerly the site of a European factory. As the clan acquired greater wealth, the project of building a new temple on the scale of an Imperial Palace was set in motion in 1894 and completed eight years later.

Oral tradition has it that this palatial temple, like the Tower of Babel, provoked the wrath of Heaven by its ambitious design. On the 29th night of its completion, the glorious temple caught fire and was razed to the ground. The present clan temple built on a supposedly more modest scale, was completed in 1906 at the cost of over one hundred thousand Straits dollars.

Leadership

With the purchase of the site, the Khoo Kongsì was established in 1851, with a founding council of ten "senators" and four "directors". The council comprised representatives of each of the 13 branches, with succession passing from father to son. These representatives, nominated for their seniority, wealth and influence in the community, tended to be businessmen and landowners.

In the beginning, the clan association leadership to some extent simulated the traditional leadership of a clan village. The directors took part in the active management of the association while the senators acted as trustees and arbiters for internal matters of the Khoo clan. To bring disputes between clan members before an outside authority - in this case a British magistrate - would cause the clan to lose face. Therefore, such disputes were, as far as possible, settled by the clan's senators.

Khoo Teng Pang, the alleged founder of the Khian Teik secret society, was appointed senator on the original council, while Khoo Thean Teik, the second leader of Khian Teik, was appointed director. Another founding senator was the landowner Khoo Soo Hong, after whom the nearby Soo Hong Lane was named.

At the beginning of this century, the affairs of the Khoo Kongsì devolved to the Straits-born Khoos. A picture taken just after the Khoo Kongsì was built shows the trustees dressed in Manchu fashion, while a picture taken several decades later reveals the trustees in western attire. The association's links with the

underground society had been shed in favour of a line-up of respectable English-speaking Babas oriented towards the colonial government of the day.

Clan welfare

The Khoo Kongsí has a social welfare arm called the Toon Boon Tong which occupies the lower floor of the clan temple. Founded in 1884, its objectives were to make Funeral arrangements, take care of the welfare of member Khoos, encourage membership to the parent association, unite clan members and solve internal quarrels. The funeral procession of a deceased member would be organised with the banners and lanterns of the clan association, and fellow members would be penalized for non-attendance.

The Toon Boon Tong encouraged members of the Khoo clan to hold functions such as marriages at its premises, which includes a meeting room, a large reception hall and kitchen. It also had a welfare programme to help any Khoo, or wife of a male Khoo, who was over 60 years old and indigent. One of the Kongsí properties, No. 44, Acheen Street, was used as a home for aged and handicapped Khoos

The society upholds the principle of "ghee" or brotherhood, and this is symbolized by three figures on the society altar - the sworn brothers Kwan Kong, Liu Pei and Chang Fei from the novel "The Three Kingdoms".

During the Second World War, bombings destroyed some of the temple roof decorations, as well as over 20 of the surrounding clan dwellings. The clan association was forced to pay "war reparations" to the Japanese and accept Japanese war currency which devalued after the occupation years.

When peace came, an action group was formed in 1945 to repair and restore the temple and surrounding houses. The undertaking was finished in 1959, and the Khoo Kongsí threw a big party to which all the Penang societies and Khoos from all over the world were invited. The party lasted for seven days and seven nights. The names of all the important people who attended were inscribed in the hall of the Toon Boon Tong at the southern chamber of the lower Floor.

Today, the Toon Boon Tong is not as active as it used to be. The Khoo Kongsí itself has only three annual gatherings a year: Cheng Beng (Chinese All Souls' Day), when the descendants come to the clan temple to worship their ancestors; a reunion ceremony during Tang Che (Winter's Solstice), and an awards ceremony usually held at the end of the year to honour Khoos who have graduated from a tertiary institution or who have gained public recognition. The theatrette is only used to stage Chinese opera once a year during the Month of the Hungry Ghosts (the seventh month of the lunar calendar).

The clan association served as an early banking and money-lending institution for its members. A finance scheme was created which offered interests on fixed

deposits. This scheme was closed in 1969 when new laws were introduced by the government to regulate the banking industry. Those early deposits appear to have been well- invested, as is testified by the vast properties owned by the Khoo Kongsı today.

In 1921, the clan association bought a 379 acre estate in Ayer Itam from the descendants of Khoo Thean Teik. In the middle of the estate is an old villa which used to belong to Khoo Thean Teik, and which has now been converted into a cemetery pavillion. The road that leads from Jalan Air Itam into the estate is named Jalan Thean Teik.

The Khoo Kongsı was also the first clan house to start a proper school for its members. This was the Sin Kang primary School founded in 1906 as one of the first Chinese schools in Penang. In the beginning, it was housed in the newly completed clan temple. All subjects were taught in Hokkien, and teachers were hired from China. When more space was required, the school moved temporarily into the Chong Hwa Confucian School building at Maxwell Road. Then in 1914 it moved to four terrace houses at Victoria Street, near the junction of Malay Street Ghaut.

Before the war, the school offered para-military training but the leader of this division, suspected of political dissidency was consequently exiled. The military training was terminated and the dummy guns stored underneath the theatrette in the Khoo Kongsı square have since disappeared.

The Victoria Street School was closed during the war and the building rented to a merchant; unfortunately the premises could not be recovered after the war. So, in 1953 another school was built, in Thean Teik Estate next to the present Khoo cemetery. The school was completely managed by the clan association to provide free education for all clan children until it was nationalized and opened to the public in 1959.