

The History of Penang Koay Clan

The Penang Koay clan jetty settlers are descendants of the Hui minority people of Arabian and Middle East origin in China, according to Chinese history scholar Dr Ong Seng Huat.

He said the group had evolved a unique identity of their own, and that their presence in Malaysia showed that not only the Han Chinese but also the minority Hui had migrated here to continue their unique culture.

“Although there are some contradictions in their historical and heritage status, they are part of the Chinese culture which is very diversified and unique,” said Ong, who based his research on Koay genealogical records.

He said during the Yuan Dynasty, the ruling Mongolians segregated the people into different categories and status such as Mongolians, Arabian and Middle Eastern (Hui), Northern Chinese (Han) and Southern Chinese (Nam Man or “southern barbarian” for those living south of the Yangtze River).

He said the Koay clan were the descendants of an Arabian bureaucrat for the Mongolian regime who adopted the Chinese name of Guo Te Guang (Koay Tek Kwan).

His grandson Guo Zhong Yuen (Koay T'ng Hui) led an Arabian clan to settle in Bai Qi Pu (Pek Kee) village, Quan Zhou prefecture, Hui Aun district in Fujian province - considered the place of origin of the Penang Koay clan jetty settlers.

At Bai Qi Pu, the clan brought with them 30 chapters of the Quran, set up a mosque and the descendants opened nine settlements with 13 clan villages.

In order to be accepted into mainstream Chinese, the descendants established a link to the great Tang Dynasty general Cuo Zhiyi (Koay Chu Ghi), a Han Chinese whom some scholars claimed to have Turkestan blood in him.

“Koay helped the Tang Dynasty in deflecting foreign invasion and suppressing internal rebellions by Han extremists using the support of the Turkestan army, therefore he is worshipped as a hero and legendary Figure by many Chinese.”

“The Koay clan jetty settlers here are not blood descendants of the great general but it is an acceptable practice to make official such a connection because according to Chinese culture, the identity of a clan is not based on blood link but by cultural and ritual practices,” said Ong.

He said due to some Hui people's support for the Ming dynasty in putting down a rebellion in Fujian, the Hui's village at Bai Qi came under attack by Han

extremists.

For survival, the Koay clan suppressed their Hui identity and intermarried with Han women.

But during the period of the 8th to 10th generation descendants of the Bai Qi Koay clan, they realised that generations of integration with the Han had caused their own culture and religious identity to be lost.

They tried to revive the old tradition by encouraging the Han-nised descendants including non-Muslims to adopt values and cultural elements of the Muslims in their daily life as a matter of showing respect to their Muslim ancestors and brothers.

“As a result, the clan evolved a unique culture that is a harmonious integration of Muslim and Confucian elements in their lifestyle,” Ong added. He said the Koay descendants who came to Penang in the late 19th century had worked as traders, port coolies and boatmen as well as in the charcoal business.

They rented four houses and lived together as a clan commune at Noordin Street and in the 1950s, they established a jetty at the end of Weld Quay- Jalan C.Y. Choy which was the last clan jetty to be built.

On the proposed development involving Koay Jetty, Peng Aun Jetty and Prangin Estate, the Penang Heritage Trust is appealing to the government for a review of the scope of the development so as to avoid involving the jetty settlements.

PHT president Dr Choong Sim Poey said clan jetties were an important part of Penang’s cultural heritage and suggested they be made more conducive with the improvement of infrastructure, sanitation and generating new businesses to make the area more economically viable.

Penang Local Government, Environment and Traffic Management Committee chairman Datuk Dr Teng Hock Nan said recently that the three settlements had to give way for a new transportation hub that would include the Light Monorail Transit (LMT) system, ‘park and ride’ facilities as well as Phase Two of the Jelutong Expressway.

He said the residents were mainly Temporary Occupation Licence (TOL) holders and had been living there without adequate water and electricity supply as well as without a sewerage system.

Dr Teng said from the total 8.8ha of land, 5.72ha would be used to build housing units, which would be offered to these affected residents and others in the vicinity and also to the Noordin Street Ghaut Fire victims.

Part of the land would also be given to the Penang Development Corporation to build commercial space to be sold to those affected by the Komtar project.

On calls to preserve the Koay Jetty and Peng Aun jetty, Dr Teng said the state would talk to the local residents to get their views and feedback on the matter.

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