

BOOK REVIEW

Socio-historical Development of the Kampung Cina Settlement in Kuala Terengganu, by Tan Yao Sua and Kamarudin Ngah, Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2013, 103 + x pages (ISBN 978-967-5832-81-9).

This historical monograph on the Kampung Cina (meaning literally, Chinese Village) Settlement in Kuala Terengganu provides a pleasant read, as it gives a compact and careful reconstruction of the historical context in which the settlement came into existence. The book includes many valuable historical and contemporary photographs of the settlement, some of which date back to the beginning of the twentieth century. All the transliterated words are accompanied by the corresponding Chinese characters, which help to ease the comprehension of older readers who are unfamiliar with the *Pinyin* system.

The well-structured contents are presented in nine short chapters, including the introduction and conclusion. Chapter Two discusses Terengganu and early Chinese maritime trade in Southeast Asia. It refers specifically to the two prehistorical Dong Son drums found in the state which suggest that its port polities had been part of the Southeast Asian trading networks since early times. The bulk of the chapter nonetheless gears towards providing an overview of the more than two millennia of historical development of Chinese maritime trade. In relations to Southeast Asia, the overview underlines how the Chinese maritime trading activities contributed to the emergence of coastal polities and trading ports in Southeast Asia which also provided the backdrop of the development of port towns in Terengganu.

Chapter Three combs through early Chinese records, in search for indications of Chinese knowledge or awareness of the presence of port towns in Terengganu. The task is complicated by the variable transliterations of place-names used by different authors, and the geographical uncertainty of the named locations in most texts. The likelihood of regular Chinese contacts with Terengganu at the latest by the thirteenth century is judged to be strong as evidenced not only by references in Chinese records to the name of the state, transliterated as Dengyanong (登牙侖) but also corroborated by the discovery of Song dynasty (960-1279) coins in Dungun. Yet the lack of mention of any Chinese settlements in Terengganu in any of these early Chinese records intrigues Tan and Ngah.

Chapter Four examines the background of the Hokkien-speaking Chinese pioneer settlers at the settlement. These settlers had originated from Zhangzhou Prefecture (漳州府) and later on, Quanzhou Prefecture (泉州府), both situated in the southern part of Fujian province. The authors note the age-old involvement of Hokkien people in overseas trading activities. They were among the earliest Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia. The significance of their trading activities for the

Melaka sultanate may be inferred from the fact that the first headman of the Melaka Chinese community during the latter part of the sixteenth century was from Zhangzhou, and one of the *Syahbandar* (harbour master) of Melaka was appointed to oversee Chinese traders among whom those from Zhangzhou were specifically mentioned. The discovery of ancient tombs dating back to the Ming era (1368-1644) indicates that the earliest settlers had resided in Terengganu from the first half of the seventeenth century, even though it cannot be confirmed that they settled at Kampung Cina. Tan and Ngah surmise that the genealogical dating of the oldest clan in the settlement, the Lim clan, would have provided corroborating evidence to such effect, had the two earliest, undocumented generations of the pioneering forefathers of the clan been taken into account.

Chapter Five highlights the position of Kuala Terengganu as the most popular international trading port between the Indian and Pacific Oceans among European traders throughout the eighteenth century. The authors point out that the Chinese constituted the leading “merchant class” in Terengganu (p. 41). While trade continued to thrive during the nineteenth century, Kuala Terengganu experienced a gradual decline in the face of the competitive rise of Singapore as an international trading port city, and the subsequent large-scale economic activities which developed along the west coast of the Malay Peninsula.

Chapter Six discusses early prominent Chinese leaders who were appointed by Terengganu sultans to official positions such as the Chinese *Kapitan* (Headman) and *Low Tiey* (Elderly man), as his intermediary with the local Chinese community. A Chinese Kapitan was vested with certain executive, administrative and judicial powers over his community, and was granted the special right by the sultan to issue token tin coins, *jokoh*, for business transactions. Tan and Ngah refer to a recently uncovered ancestor tablet stating the deceased as a Chinese Kapitan from 1734 to 1820 which, notwithstanding some doubt arising from the rather lengthy duration of the office, would have been an indication of the sizeable existence of the Chinese settlement by early eighteenth century.

Chapter Seven narrates the establishment and works of traditional institutions or organizations such as temples and clan-based associations in the settlement. Material evidence confirms their formation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in contrast with the early establishment of a temple in the more inland Tirok, which was in existence since 1762.

Chapter Eight looks at how the various historical changes in the regional trading dynamics and the advent of land transportation (which impacted negatively on the use of waterways as the means of transportation at the Terengganu River estuary) had led to the gradual loss of economic vitality and demographic decline of the settlement. Various attempts at reviving local economic development and cultural restoration are on course.

The authors have mobilized a comprehensive range of historical sources and research techniques such as archeological, archival, genealogical, historical, ethnographic and oral history approaches, in order to piece together the socio-historical development of Kampung Cina at Kuala Terengganu. Their postulate of the development of the historic settlement as being spurred by the age-old Chinese maritime trading activities in the region, at the site of a once flourishing international trading port, is convincing.

With its establishment dating back to at least the first half of the eighteenth century, it is noteworthy that the settlement has been in continuous existence for more than three centuries, or even pushing back an additional half a century before that. Its history highlights the fact that Kuala Terengganu was once an internationally well-known port of call, notwithstanding the better known height of prosperity attained by the maritime entrêpot economies of Kedah, Melaka, and Johor-Riau before it.

A lingering question after reading the book is the extent to which the Chinese settlers were historically involved in pepper cultivation in Terengganu. Tan and Ngah report that a Qing dynasty document entitled *An Eye-Witness Account of a Maritime Country* (《海国闻见录》) written in 1730 mentions Terengganu as being known for the export of superior quality pepper, but identifies the people of Terengganu as from the Malay race, and that there was no mention of any Chinese residing in the state (pp. 30-31). This omission from the document, however, obviously cannot be taken as indicative of their absence, as another contemporary travelling narrative of Captain Alexander Hamilton who called at *Trangano* in 1719 clearly indicates their presence. Hamilton's account states explicitly that the local Chinese were involved in the *export* of pepper and gold. Their role was mainly as maritime traders, with no mention of any engagement in pepper planting (p. 40), despite a fleeting reference to their involvement in sugar cane cultivation. But Carl Trocki (1997: 89) cites the same passage to infer that the Chinese would have been involved in pepper cultivation even though he acknowledges that Hamilton "does not actually say whether these were produced by Chinese labour". In order to comprehend this element of ambiguity, it is worth citing in full what Hamilton has said in his accounts (1930: 83):

The Hills are low, and covered with ever-green Trees,
that accommodate the Inhabitants with Variety of delicious
Fruits, such as Lemons, Oranges, Limes, Mangoes, Mangostans,
Rambostans, Letchees and Dureans: And in the Vallies, Corn,
Pulse, and Sugar-canes. The ground is cultivated by the Chinese,
for the lazy Malayas cannot take that Trouble.

The Product of the Country is Pepper and Gold, which are
mostly exported by the Chinese. About 300 Tuns are the
common Export of Pepper, and we have it almost for one half
of the Price that we pay for Malabar Pepper.

One would deduce from the text that if the ground was cultivated by the Chinese and that the "Malayas" could not be bothered about doing so, then the Chinese would logically be the ones who produced the pepper rather than the latter. This inference would not be far-fetched as there was precisely an increased prevalence of Chinese settlers as planters (and miners) in the region during that time. In effect, Trocki (1997) cites the accounts of Hamilton in the context of his study of the historical emergence of Chinese labourers' settlements in Southeast Asia from the end of the

seventeenth century, possibly through locally based Chinese merchants as intermediaries. These Chinese labourers were recruited to settle in various parts of Southeast Asia during this time to work either as miners of gold or tin, or planters of gambier, sugar cane and pepper.

Andaya and Andaya (1982), citing an unnamed Thai chronicle, state that the Terengganu ruler encouraged the settlement of Chinese pepper planters, and that by mid-eighteenth century, pepper plantation there was largely a Chinese domain (p.94). Pepper production, as noted by Tan and Ngah, rose from about 300 tons at the beginning of the eighteenth century to more than a thousand tons calculated based on the stated maximum production of 17,000 *pikul* (one pikul is equivalent to 62.5 kg) annually towards the end of the century. While it is unclear as to whether the bulk of the pepper cultivation was in the vicinity of the Kampung Cina Settlement, this historical information would be an important piece of zigsaw in completing our historical understanding of the nature of early Chinese settlements in Terengganu.

References

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