

BOOK REVIEW

Khoo Salma Nasution, *The Chulia in Penang: Patronage and Place-Making around the Kapitan Kling Mosque 1786-1957*. Areca Books: Penang 2014. ISBN: 978-967-5719-15-8. Publisher price: RM135.00

© 2015 University of Malaya. All rights reserved.
Malaysian Journal of Performing and Visual Arts, Volume 1, 2015

A recent entry from the publisher's website reads, "Areca Books is delighted to announce that *The Chulia in Penang: Patronage and Place-Making around the Kapitan Kling Mosque 1786-1957* by Khoo Salma Nasution has won the Colleagues' Choice Award"¹. *The Chulia in Penang* was shortlisted and selected out of 175 books in Adelaide last July. It also made it to the ICAS Best Study in the Humanities 2015 shortlist. Winning the award is an important step in recognizing the book as one of "the best English-language books and dissertations in Asian Studies of the past two years, focusing on the humanities and social sciences"².

Khoo Salma's initial effort in producing this book went as far back as the early 1990s with her first book, *Streets of George Town* (1993), and after years of evidence gathering, 40 interviews with local people, several drafts and essays, *The Chulia in Penang* finally took off in 2014. In the two decades of writing, Khoo Salma and her husband worked together with local authorities, with some funding from UNESCO-LEAP grant to recover and restore the Tamil Muslim heritage in George Town. Her heartfelt determination is driven by the fact that "the evolution of Tamil Muslim identity is an important key to understanding the entire process of ethnic construction in Malaya during the colonial period – a process which still continues today"³.

The Chulia in Penang is a 560-page long hardcover book organized thematically into six major sections, each relating to a specific phase in history, as drawn out in the book's Table of Contents page. The book opens with a foreword by Emeritus Professor Rajeswary Ampalavanar Brown of International Business, Royal Holloway, University of London who provides an introduction and a comprehensive summary of the book, and finally an overall evaluation which deems it as "almost an encyclopaedia on the Chulias, with evocative images that sharply capture their Indianness and Islamic Cosmopolitanism...It is an excellent book which deserves to be at the top of the league in diasporic studies"⁴.

The book measures 10 x 8.2 x 1.5 inches, with a vintage coloured photograph of Kapitan Kling Mosque dating back to the 1960s. The back cover provides a two-paragraph synopsis of the book, with an excerpt from Professor Raj Brown's foreword of the book. I personally feel that the back cover of the book could have been better designed. The small white typescript printed against black background, especially the italic fonts, makes reading quite strenuous. The picture of a lone Chulia boy in sarong, measuring 6.5 cm seems to be out of place, as though it is there to fill in the empty space. The white edges of the photo are still noticeable and not neatly trimmed. The graphic work of the back cover could have been better thought out.

Section One: “A New Port for the Chulias” illustrates the Chulia’s involvement in the region’s maritime trade from ancient times up to the late eighteenth century, during the first arrival of the British in Penang in 1786. It provides a general background of Chulia traders and their trade connections, their demographic and spiritual information and their disputes.

In Section Two: “From Seafaring Merchants to Settlers”, Khoo Salma documents the significant events relating to the development of the Chulia from 1830 – 1867 and how the events affected the treatment of the British towards their Indian Muslim subjects. Among the important events mentioned are the 1830 Penang’s demotion from its Presidency status, the 1857 Indian Rebellion, and the transfer of the Straits Settlements from India to the Crown in 1867. The section continues with more information on the Marakkayar traders; the hybrid community called Jawi Peranakan and their legacy; and ends with cultural insights into the Awal Muharram celebration and performances of *boria* and *bangsawan*.

Section Three: “Mosques, Endowments and Community” is perhaps the most important section of the book in terms of Chulia identity, explanation of the *waqf* (Islamic endowment) concept, legislation, and the transformation of the Kapitan Kling Mosque from its original form into its pre-war form in 1925. From this section onward, the Chulia are now referred to as Tamil Muslims to denote Muslims who originated from Tamil Nadu, thus making identification more specific and differentiating them from the Gujaratis, Pakistanis, Punjabis and so on.

Sections four (“Social Movements and Modernity”), five (“The Port Cluster”) and six (“War and Politics”) each looks at the development of the Tamil Muslim community in the modern era, fashioned by twentieth-century worldviews, print-media, religious trends, leadership, nationalism, political ideologies, business networks and post-WWII conditions up to 1957 when Malaya achieved independence from the British.

The language of the book is formal, objective and concise. Though highly academic, the book is neither complicated nor verbose. The author presents facts, backed by voluminous endnotes to facilitate further explanation and references. I find the amount of research invested into the content alone to be most impressive. It contains extensive in-depth information on the Tamil Muslims of Penang, supported by a total of 209 illustrations, some of which are in black and white while others in either vintage-hued colours or sepia-toned. The rare maps of George Town are procured from museums and local authorities. The images are of different sizes, well placed and arranged, followed by detailed descriptions of each. Some of them are acquired by the courtesy of private collectors and family documents. Two of them are very rare images of Japanese occupation in Malaya dating back to 1944 (pages 446 and 450). The author supplies readers with 14 pages of general bibliography, and another 14 pages of index.

In her preface, Khoo Salma confides that she has no access to the Tamil language and it impedes her understanding of the Tamil Muslims in greater depth, yet despite that, her work is a stepping stone for future research. Where the setbacks are concerned, Tamil-speaking researchers can fill the gaps.

The book makes references to Pakistani Muslims and the Jawi Peranakan as if they are Chulia. They should have been considered separately, and some distinctions should have been made. Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar, for example, the “Sheriff of Penang, deputy registrar and receiver of the Kapitan Kling Mosque in 1904”⁵ was a prominent Pakistani Muslim who did not speak Tamil. He cannot be considered a Chulia, a term that “was generally used in early censuses to differentiate South Indians from North Indians”⁶. Additionally, the Jawi Peranakan are described as “local-born Muslims of mixed-parentage (usually by a foreign father), many of them being second or third generation Tamil Muslims”⁷. This is true for most cases of Penang Jawi Peranakan. However, their ancestry also includes a long line of people of North Indian, Afghanistan and Pakistan origins, all of whom are non-Tamil speaking. As a matter of clarification, the Jawi Peranakan have quite often been confused for the *Mamak* community.

For easy referencing purposes, the book could include a chronology of events chart at the end of every chapter. This will be useful for readers who need instant reference. *The Chulia in Penang* is highly recommended for historians, cultural/ political researchers, teachers, sociologists, scholars of heritage studies, students and the interested public.

Endnotes

¹ <http://arecabooks.com/the-chulia-in-penang-wins-icas-award/>

² *The Star*, Nation, Friday July 10, 2015, by Cavina Lim, quoted from <http://arecabooks.com/the-chulia-in-penang-wins-icas-award/>

³ Preface to *The Chulia in Penang*, page xxii.

⁴ Foreword to *The Chulia in Penang*, page xx.

⁵ *The Chulia in Penang*, p.246.

⁶ Ibid. p.8

⁷ Ibid. p. 8

Yau Sim Mei, Department of English and Literature,
International Islamic University Malaysia