

Book Review

Tan Yao Sua and Kamarudin Ngah, 2013. *Socio-Historical Development of the Kampung Cina Settlement in Kuala Terengganu*, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, ISBN 978-967-5832-81-9, 103 pp.

Sharon A Carstens,

Portland State University

Most Chinese Malaysians today view Kuala Terengganu as something of a backwater, known more for some nearby distinctive Peranakan type settlements than for its contribution to Chinese Malaysian history. The authors of this study seek to remedy this situation, tracing the origins of Chinese residence here back to the 17th century, and arguing that (presumably apart from Malacca), "the east coast states were the earliest destinations of sustained Chinese immigration to Malaya" (32). One reason this early history has been largely overlooked is that while early Chinese records document Chinese contacts with this area back to the 13th century, they make no note of Chinese residents in the Terengganu port. Nevertheless, European descriptions of a thriving Chinese trading settlement in the early 18th century suggest to these authors that Chinese residence in the Kuala Terengganu port dates back to sometime in the 17th century. The nine chapters of this brief study describe the historical background to Chinese maritime trade in Southeast Asia, the appearance of Terengganu in early Chinese records, the pioneer settlers and their

trading activities, prominent community leaders and organizations, and the decline and revitalization of Kampung Cina from the 1970s until today. The information presented is meticulously referenced, and the provision of maps, genealogical charts, and numerous photographs, both old and new, add a significant dimension to this narrative.

The coast of Terengganu, situated between Arab and Indian lands to the west and China to the east, was both a stopping off point and a collection site for special local products for diverse maritime traders over many centuries. It is unclear that when or why Chinese traders first began to settle in this port. The authors speculate that early Qing bans on private maritime trade may have spurred Chinese overseas settlement for traders who were afraid to return to China (34). A more likely explanation is that as trading concerns expanded, Chinese traders moved back and forth, with some stationed overseas to protect business interests (36). And as businesses grew, other Chinese arrived to service those who stayed in the port. The authors claim that Zhangzhou traders were the first pioneers, but that subsequent immigrants from Tongan county in Quanzhou prefecture eventually displaced the Zhangzhou merchants as the dominant group. Unfortunately, this is one of the few places in the book where documentation seems missing and evidence of community leadership discussed below might suggest otherwise.

Information on the Kampung Cina settlement throughout the 18th and 19th centuries comes mostly from European records. In 1719, the English trader Hamilton observed that Chinese made up half of the residents of the port town, exporting gold and pepper and also involved in sugar cultivation. The authors speculate that Chinese migrated inland from Kuala Terengganu when the port had "reached maximum threshold level" (43) but they provide no further specific evidence of the origins of these interior settlements. Challenges to Chinese trade

and residence in the 19th century Kuala Terengganu came both from Malay political instability and the expansion of trading activities in Singapore and Kota Bharu. During the second half of the 19th century, Chinese traders were allowed to use their own tokens, suggesting that localized trade had become more important as international trade declined. Three influential merchant clans are documented for this period, two from Zhangzhou and the most powerful from Tongan, Quanzhou. The authors say that the dearth of Chinese records and limited feedback from current informants who were interviewed deprived them of "a better understanding of the development of the settlement, especially in relation to the crucial process of transformation from sojourners to settlers among the Chinese traders at the Kuala Terengganu port town." (49)

Important leadership positions for Terengganu Chinese included those of Chinese Kapitan, who served as the headman and representative of the Chinese community, appointed by the Sultan; and the Low Tiew, the court interpreter, who acted as a liaison between the palace and the local Chinese community. Not only were all six Chinese Kapitans and the four Chinese Loyw Tieys from the Hokkien dialect group (52) but most were also of Zhangzhou origin, including four Kapitans and all of the Loyw Tieys. This suggests that Chinese from Zhangzhou maintained the key Terengganu leadership positions throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Loyw Tieys, who were all from the Lim clan, are said to have first settled in an interior area, giving them close experience with Malays. Descriptions of their dress and food styles suggest a Peranakan identity, although a photo of Loyw Tiew Lim Koan Siew shows him in Chinese Mandarin dress (57). A footnote mentions a source that describes some other Malay influenced practices, and it would have been interesting to learn more

about the cultural character of Chinese residents in this settlement in earlier days.

Chapter seven describes some of the traditional Chinese organizations in the Kampung Cina settlement, including temples and dialect associations of the Hokkien and Hainanese. The temples served not only as places of worship but as social welfare facilities for the new immigrants. This was especially important for members of minority dialect groups, such as the Hainanese, who organized a common meeting place as early as 1821. By contrast, the Hokkien dialect association did not come into existence until 1940, when it focused on supporting Chinese education. No mention is made of the former Zhangzhou/Quanzhou divisions described in earlier chapters and it would be interesting to know what came of this. Also, were temples and dialect associations only formed by Hainanese and Hokkien? What about other dialect groups in Kuala Terengganu?

The authors maintain that prior to the 1970s, a lack of good roads isolated Kuala Terengganu from the rest of west Malaysia, allowing Kampung Cina to continue to play an important commercial role in the domestic Terengganu economy. But with the development of modern transportation, new commercial centers developed in other parts of Kuala Terengganu town, gradually displacing Kampung Cina's position. Here again, more details would have been helpful. Were Chinese businesses shifting geographically because access to Kampung Cina was difficult by road? Or were new Malay businesses, supported by the NEP, now replacing Chinese businesses? As cinemas closed and commercial banks relocated, the building in this historic area began to deteriorate and disappear. This was partially remedied in 2005 when the Terengganu state government gazetted the area as a heritage site, supporting the restoration of some of the 100 years old Chinese shop

houses, even though the construction of the artificial Heritage Island in 2009 destroyed the waterfront landscape of the old settlement.

This brief study of Kuala Terengganu's Kampung Cina provides a welcome contribution to our understanding of the origins and development of Chinese settlements on west Malaysia's east coast. Although the authors felt frustrated by the relative lack of local sources and local memories that might have further fleshed out their study, perhaps this first step in compiling a local history will stimulate others to investigate and expand upon details and issues that further illuminate the history of this Chinese Malaysian community.