

The Great Migration

Part 1

by Ian Anderson

Image courtesy from www.ipohworld.org



A Chinese junkship edges in to the Perak shoreline.

From China to the Mine

In the early days immigrants came to Malaya or Nanyang (the Southern Seas) as it was known, by Junk from China with no idea of what to expect when they arrived. The passage was dangerous and the boats were overcrowded. Many died on the voyage. Large official junks took them to Penang, but even in those days hundreds came as illegal immigrants, in smaller trading junks, that landed them by arrangement into even smaller sampans just clear of the mangrove swamps, as close to the Perak coastline as possible. Here an even greater ordeal began.

They would find themselves in a humid, terrifying tangle of roots and tributaries the like of which they had never seen before with the strangest fish skipping across the mud and of course vicious mosquitoes that bit every exposed area of flesh. Eventually they would reach the shore and the comparative safety of a small village of atap huts on stilts above the ground; their first contact with Malaya. Here they would be allowed to rest overnight before a longer

sampan trip upriver until they reached another village.

Then their problems really started for from now they would have to walk barefooted through steaming jungle and then primary forest, led by an almost naked native they could not communicate with. He would be carrying a long knife and blowpipe, weapons they had never seen before. With no idea of their destination, or what was in store for them when they got there, terrified of the tigers, snakes and other wild animals, they would stick close to him too frightened to even think of running away. After several days of sleeping rough, eating whatever the blowpipe could kill, themselves almost eaten alive by fat leeches and the ever present mosquitoes. they would arrive at a small clearing, some small huts and a group of fellow Chinamen, one of whom would obviously be the boss.

Squatting in the open with a welcome bowl of rice and many mugs of tea, they discovered that they had arrived at what was a new tin mine – and they were to be the miners.

Introduction to the Kongsis

Since the new miners had left China they had worn the same singlet and pants. There would have been no room onboard the small junk for such luxuries as baggage.

Consequently after so many difficult days at sea, in the sampans and villages and latterly struggling through the forest they would have been in a worse state

than the lowest beggar.

However, after their meal they would be told to line up and an overseer would provide them with their kit: A mosquito net; a coolie hat to keep the rain off and the sun out of their eyes; two singlets and a pair of pants; a "Good Morning Towel;

and for many what would have been their first pair of shoes – a pair of wooden clogs. If they were lucky and the owner of the mine was a generous man (and there were not too many of those) they would also be given a portion of black tobacco. Thereafter they would have to work until they had paid off the cost of their new kit plus the money that the mine owner had paid the junk captain for their passage. Thereafter the cost of replacements would be taken from

their meagre wage of a few cents a day. Many would have to work for 100 days to pay off this huge debt to the Towkay.

Then it would be time to wash up with water from the nearest river or well, change into their new clothes and

take their turn with the owner of a glittering razor to have their heads shaved in traditional style. Now there was time to find their way around their new home, the kongsi. Here they would find the old hands playing cards and smoking by the light of a single oil lamp. Behind the solitary rough-hewn wooden table would be a raised bench along the wall which



First sight of the kongsi.

they would soon discover was their allocated sleeping place, head to toe. Spare clothes and later, personal possessions, when they had some, would be kept under the bench. The lamp would be extinguished and miners old and new took up their sleeping positions. Soon they would fall into the sleep of the exhausted serenaded by the thousands of mosquitoes struggling to find a way to make contact with these new arrivals at the kongsi.



Their working place for the next 100 days.