



# Leong Fee and the Hakka Tin Miners' Club

by Ian Anderson

Some of you may have noticed an elegant and attractive three storey town house at the far end of Treacher Street near the Kinta River. It stands out, a rose among thorns, and if you have ever glanced up you will have seen it is aptly named, Han Chin Pet Soo or in English, Han Chin Villa... But who built it and why is it there?

The story starts in 1876 when a young man, Leong Fee (pic, right), aged 19, and 16 other immigrants, arrived at a gathering of Malay huts, between the river and the jungle, then called Epoh. Here they settled to make their way in life. It is said they were "the only Chinamen in Ipoh".







Leong Fee, also known as Liang Pi Joo, was born in Mei Xian district, Guangdong Province, China, in 1857, arriving in an old freighter at Weld Quay, Penang in 1876 to seek his fortune in Nanyang (the Southern Seas) as Malaya was known to the Chinese. Here he worked, as a cook and hawker for some 6 months before moving to Ipoh the same year. He came by river from Penang, via Telok Mak Intan (now Teluk Intan). He brought with him the spiritual tablet of the deity Tua Peh Kong and first founded the Tai Pak Koong or God of Prosperity Temple alongside the Kinta River, to give thanks for their safe arrival, for the journey had been arduous and at times dangerous.

While prospecting for tin he initially worked as a clerk, becoming a well-known and successful miner by the late 1880's, with sufficient money from his Ipoh mine at Ampang to make a trip back to China. He returned to Ipoh in 1889. In 1893, in the wake of the 1st June 1892, "Great Fire of Ipoh" he erected some of the first brick houses in Leech Street.

That same year he formed the Han Chin Tin Miners' Club in a double-storey shophouse where the Villa stands today. The club membership was restricted to Hakka miners and it was a place where they could connect with their colleagues and friends from home or have a meal. Lodging house facilities were also available where relatives and friends could stay. They could also legally play

mahjong as in 1897 they received a copy of a memo from the District Magistrate, Kinta to the Assistant Magistrate Ipoh, dated 1st February 1897. It reads: "The members of the Chinese Club, Ipoh have permission to gamble in their house pending the issue of a formal licence. Sd/- Cecil P. Villy".

The club was run at Leong's expense until his death in April 1912, when his son Leong Yin Khean aka Liang En-Chuen, together with Lim Chang Jiu, Leong Jin Yuen, Leong Moon Chow, Leong Rui Dian, Pan Jing Ting and Sze Hua continued to sponsor the club. In 1927, Leong Yin Khean purposely devalued the land and sold the house to the club members at less than the market price.

In 1929, the building was renovated and extended into a three-storey villa with an added balcony and it stood proud among its neighbours just as it does today. On the 5th May 1930, the 37th anniversary of the club, the members held a house-warming party for their revamped building. It was lit and decorated by electricity, probably the first time that this had been done as electrical distribution only came to Ipoh that same year.

All went well until 1941 when the Japanese invaded and in the confusion, the building was illegally sold without the knowledge of the members. The villa was lost to them until 1945 when they were able to prove they were the rightful owners and the building was returned. In the 1960's another small renovation took

place when the front windows were changed and air conditioning was installed therein. The elegantly curved bay windows had gone forever.

But what is inside? On the ground floor there is a dining/meeting room just inside the front door with a picture of the founder prominently displayed, the 1030 art deco lamp providing illumination and traditional Chinese, inlaid Mother of Pearl furniture. Towards the rear of the property are two single (servants?) bedrooms and a kitchen. The first floor has a gaming room with Mahjong tables and a large open balcony. At the top of the stairs are several opium beds. Finally the second floor features two double bedrooms, a landing and another balcony.

Of course with the end of the great tin mining era, the number of miners gradually reduced and today there are insufficient members to be able to maintain the building. Consequently the termites have taken over the timbers while the pigeons have made the balconies and bedrooms their home. The famous buildings' future has therefore been in doubt for many months. But there is good news for the club members recently voted to lease the building to a group dedicated to restore it, with a view to making it a tourist attraction. Maybe those curved bay windows will be put back at last. Let's hope so!