

Ipoh Is A Chinese Town

By Ian Anderson

As the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year) approaches our thoughts turn to the Chinese population of Ipoh and the Kinta Valley. Ipoh is a Chinese town or, to be politically correct, Ipoh is a Malaysian Chinese Town, although certain members of the community would not agree with either of these statements. Nonetheless, it is true, for the bulk of both Old Town and New Town were built by the Chinese. They built streets of shophouses, Clan Association, Hospitals and Schools and history reveals that in the great majority of these were Chinese miners, initially simple coolies, who made their fortunes here, becoming multi-millionaires, in the process. We call them the Pioneers.



Foong Seong Building

Tin Brought Fortune Hunters

Dialect Groups



But who were these Chinese and where did they come from? The best way to answer that is to consider them in dialect groups, distinguished by pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary, for a Chinese is not just a Chinese, but a proud member of one of the famous ethnic groups, and many still think of themselves that

way. Thus there are Hakka, Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hainanese and the Foochow, to name just a few. Even then it is not that simple as each dialect group also pays allegiance to a specific region. Thus, for example, we get Kah Yin Hakka who originate from an area known as the five counties in Guangdong and see themselves as distinct from others.

Fortunes to be made

But why did so many Chinese flock to Ipoh? Tin! It was the lure of money to be made from tin mining that brought the Chinese to Ipoh in huge numbers. It was the dream of them all, to come to Nanyang, the Southern Seas, make their fortune from tin, and return to their villages as rich men. Sadly, very few made it as life was tough here in those early days and many died here, while others just did not gather the riches they expected, and made their lives here rather than returning to a home with so many problems. However, there were many, particularly the Hakka that did achieve those vast fortunes and lived their lives of millionaires so different to the days when they had started out as coolies in the mines.

Chinese Occupations

But let us not misunderstand the situation; apart from the Hakka, the Jews of Asia, who over the past 1000 years had migrated from Northern China and known to be hardworking subsistence-farmers, there were very few Chinese in the mines; other groups preferring to support the tin ore fields in countless other ways. They became street barbers, rickshaw pullers, cooks or servants; opened coffee shops, brothels and opium dens; were tradesmen like goldsmiths, clog makers, tinsmiths; or professionals, engineers, insurance and banking. Cantonese women, however, formed the great bulk of Amahs for the Europeans and rich Chinese.

It is from those early days that Ipoh still celebrates Hakka Noodles and Yong Tau Foo, Teochew porridge and Bak Kut Teh, Cantonese Yee Mee, Hainanese Chicken Rice – Ipoh has them all!

The Early Towkays or Pioneers

But who were these Chinese immigrants that built Ipoh, the Towkays? Whatever dialect they spoke, they were entrepreneurs and philanthropists who cared for the people, their health and their education.

Towkay Leong Fee

One of the earliest of these was a penniless young man, a Hakka, named Leong Fee. He came to Ipoh in 1876, he was 19 years old. Surprisingly, he brought his family tablets with him and founded the Paloh (God of Prosperity) Temple to keep them in. There seems no doubt that he planned to stay! A successful miner who became exceptionally rich, he became very friendly with another

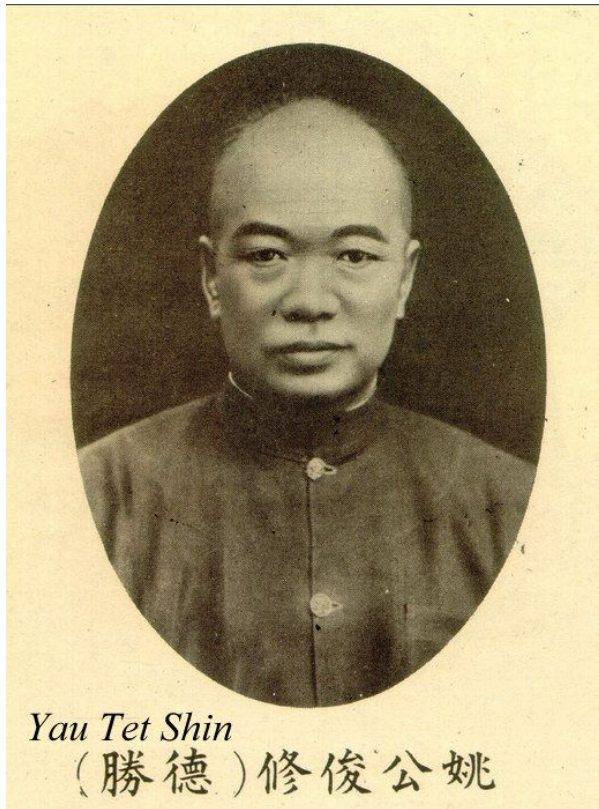


young coolie, Yau Tet Shin and, as they prospered, joined with him on several projects to improve Ipoh.

With four wives, two concubines and his dancing girls in his private club, Han Chin Pet Soo, he obviously enjoyed the girls. But it seems that these were not enough for him, as after he passed away, a three-year-old boy appeared at his first wife's doorstep. The man who accompanied the child said that the child was the product of Leong Fee's liaison with a "Mystery" lady but the lady had recently passed away. Mdm. Cheah took the child into her household. They named him Lincoln Leong Yee Khean (Liang Yi Chuan).



Towkay Yau Tet Shin



Born as a Hakka in 1859 in Guangdong, he started in Malaya as a mining coolie. He hated it and became a street hawker instead. He saved hard and started his own grocery shop in Ipoh eventually leasing mining land from the government. A successful miner, he then branched out into a variety of money-making schemes that included administering taxes for liquor, owning pawnshops and becoming the government contractor for opium dens, brothels and gambling houses. Incredibly successful he gave Ipoh its first theatre in 1891, a beautiful garden by the river (The People's Park), a new market, a Mandarin School and in 1909 built the first 300 houses of Ipoh New Town. In addition,

he was the one who donated great sums of money to build the Perak Kah Yin Association, The Perak Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the Perak Chinese Tin Miners Association and Min Tet Primary School

With three wives and 14 sons, it is said that the legend of the three Concubine Lanes came about as he gave one to each wife and in Chinese, they became known as First Wife's Lane, Second Wife's Lane, etc. The amazing thing about this man is that when he came to Malaya, he could neither read nor write!



圖全校學德明設附暨字館有原館會本
Kah Yin Association and Min Tet School



Towkay Leong Sin Nam



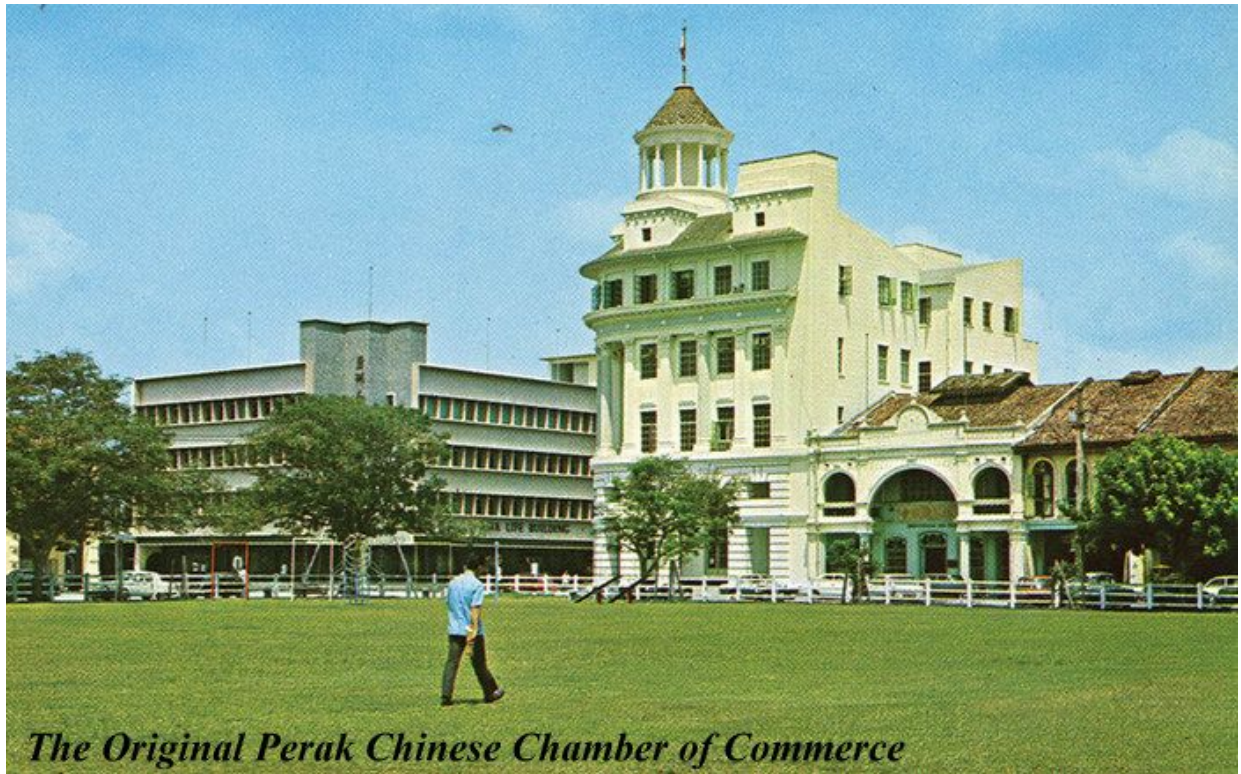
Following on from these Hakka ‘Pioneers came Leong Sin Nam, (LSN) born in 1880. He first arrived in Malaya when he was three years old, but returned to Guangdong, with his mother, in 1896 with his dead father’s remains. On the way, his mother also passed away and our 16-year-old had to take responsibility for the remains of them both! He remained in his village for the next two years, where it is recorded that he lived the high life and took up opium smoking. Recognising the dangers of his way of life, he returned to Malaya and Ipoh where he took up employment, initially as a mining coolie and then a clerk. Soon he was into mining on his own account and then expanded

into other business interests, including plantations.

As his business interests grew, so did his philanthropy. He took on major business and social projects far too many to list here, but we cannot forget his huge input into education and many schools, both Chinese and English have much to thank him for. One outstanding example of his support for education is that he even lent his bungalow in Gopeng Road to the Perak Girls' School when he heard they were short of classrooms. But he never forgot his homeland. He was a great supporter of the revolutionary Dr Sun Yat Sen and while living in Ipoh, held several government posts in China. Locally, in 1937, he was the Chairman of the Perak Overseas Chinese Disaster Relief Fund and personally made huge donations to this and other funds to support the Chinese people.



In 1939, when his health was failing, his doctor suggested opium, but he declined as he remembered that the drug almost ruined his life when he was just 16 years old. He passed away in 1940.



The Original Perak Chinese Chamber of Commerce



Perak Chinese Chamber of Commerce, now

Towkay Dato' Seri Lau Pak Khuan



Dato Seri Lau Pak Khuan (1894-1971)

Born in 1894, again in Guangdong, young Lau came to Malaya in 1912, taking up employment as a “pushcart” boy in the mines. From this humble beginning, he rose to become one of the most important businessmen in Malaya with 20 mines to his name. Chronologically later than Leong Sin Nam, he followed on many of the good works of his senior, while creating his own. For example at the age of 26, he joined the Perak Chinese Chamber of Commerce where LSN was the second President, becoming President himself in 1947. He held the post for 33 years and as LSN aged, Lau Pak Khuan took on many of the former’s projects and positions

at home and in China.

Such was his reputation, he was well known to the Japanese and as they invaded he had to flee the country, aided by the British Government, for to stay would have led to torture and execution. His family went into hiding close to Papan.

After the Japanese surrender, he returned to Ipoh and continued with his many many branches as well as taking government posts. Then in 1952, he was instrumental in forming Kinta Valley Home Guard as protectors of the tin mines. The first Chinese to be awarded Dato’ Seri in Malaya, he was also bestowed the Order of the British Empire (OBE) by Her Majesty the Queen and made Justice of the Peace by the Sultan of Perak.

Lau Pak Khuan was an amazing man who did so much good for the people at home and abroad and it is impossible to single out any one aspect of his life although it is recorded that it was

pressure from him that brought an integrated sewerage system to Ipoh and you cannot get much more important than that!

Towkay Foong Seong



Foong Seong was again born in Guangdong in 1897 with a Cantonese father. He came to Ipoh in 1912 and started working for his uncle, repairing bicycles. Once he had some savings he set up Foong Hup Seong Foundry in Lahat Road, Ipoh. An enthusiastic engineer, he designed a 120 horsepower diesel pump to solve the flooding problems, which also became a much sought-after device for other gravel pumps across Malaya.

Although never a mining coolie, like his Hakka associates, he went into mine ownership and by 1930 owned many mines in the Kinta Valley and

in due course used his wealth for the good of the people. He also founded the Cheng Shan Primary School, was appointed the President of the Perak Ku Kong Chow Association and Vice President of the Perak Chinese Maternity Hospital. He was also awarded Justice of Peace.



Today, the Foong Seong Villa stands as a tribute to the man who built it and which at one time had a hall to encourage an interest in one of his hobbies, Chinese opera. An artistic man who spent his leisure hours with Chinese calligraphy and poetry, he passed away at the age of 100.

Dato' Peh Seng Koon



Dato Peh Seng Koon (1900-1978)

A Hokkien, born in China in 1900, Seng Koon migrated to Singapore and took employment as a clerk. From this humble beginning, he was eventually appointed General Manager of the same company in Ipoh. He started his first rubber plantation in 1934 and went from strength to strength in the industry.

He was one of the founder members of the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) in 1949, serving the MCA for 30 years becoming Director on its Board. Besides, Perak MCA Chairman and a Central Committee Member. A well-known philanthropist, being the President of Poi Lam High School, Deputy Chairman of the Yuk Choy High School and the Perak Girls

High School, forming the Society for Poetry Appreciation.



But his philanthropy did not stop there but spread, like others, into hospitals, trade and industry. He is well remembered for his post-war work to improve the welfare of the Hokkien people in Malaya and China. With an eye to a new school, in 1928 the Association, under the guidance of Peh Seng Koon, purchased 12 acres of rubber estate along Tambun Road. However, this was judged to be unsuitable, as it was too far away from town and up a hill. How times have changed!

Our Apologies

For those Chinese whose ancestors are not mentioned here we apologise, there is just insufficient space to feature them all even if they played a part in building up the “Town that Tin Built”.