

## **Book Review**

### ***A Case Study on Qingyun Ting: The Oldest Chinese Temple in Malaysia,***

by Chan Yann Sheng, Published by Chan Yann Sheng,  
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Centuries ago when the Chinese, particularly those who were from the southern part of China, travelled to Peninsular Malaya, they brought along their rich and varied custom and culture, including religious beliefs. Soo Khin Wah in his book *Tour of Inspection by Imperial Decree – Tee Ong Yah and the Wangkang* demonstrates that different dialect groups brought different deity. The diversity of Chinese folk belief hence flourished. When some of the Chinese immigrants decided to settle in this resource-rich land, among other essential things, places of worship were built to cater for spiritual needs; some still standing today. Cheng Hoon Teng (青云亭) Temple in Melaka is the oldest Chinese temple in Malaysia. It is argued that its establishment began not later than 1673 C.E.

A book entitled *The Oldest Chinese Temple in Malaysia - A Case Study on Cheng Hoon Teng Temple* by Chan Yann Sheng is an extensive study aiming to tackle various aspects of this Chinese temple. This work is written in Chinese and comprises six

chapters. After the introduction, chapter two deals briefly on the historical development of Cheng Hoon Teng. Chapter three and chapter four discuss about the social function and the temple's root in China respectively. Before drawing a conclusion in chapter six, chapter five illustrates the architectural style of the temple.

It is obvious that the author presents his work mainly by researching abundant internal data dating from 18th century to present day. These first hand data, which are not normally open to the public, clear up some doubt in the line of the temple's history. Apart from this, the author has carried out some interviews in the hope of complementing certain gaps left by these written data. However, narration of history does not seem to fit well in this work, as the author himself realises that some are just hearsay rather than fact.

The author has executed a remarkable endeavour by turning these first hand data into very useful statistic in a glance; twenty-three of them altogether. Even though some are reproductions, surely they are not mere blind copy but the results of tedious field work. For example, chart 3 is a full list of antiquity found in Cheng Hoon Teng and it may become a formal record. Chart 2 is a record of the temple's expansions whereas chart 5 lists out previous chairmen of the temple. One may easily figure out the historical development of Cheng Hoon Teng through these carefully designed charts.

The methodology extends to chapter 3 where the historical functions of Cheng Hoon Teng are discussed. In the past, Chinese temples did not only serve as places of worship, but also as social firms. In *Penang – Rites of Belonging in a Malaysian Chinese Community*, Jean DeBernardi deems that “under British rule, Chinese immigrants to Penang localized their diverse community by developing institutions for self-government, including the Kong Hok Palace – a temple that served as a community tribunal and council”. No doubt the subject refers to a Chinese temple in Penang, but it is nothing different from that in Melaka. As a matter of fact, since the Dutch era, Chinese “captain” (甲必丹) – a person in charge of Chinese community – had been stationed in the Cheng Hoon Teng to handle social welfare of the Chinese. Chan's work clarifies this well by showing appropriate citations which reflect the social conditions of this community. From the first hand data quoted by Chan, one may interestingly find that the Cheng Hoon Teng was not just a temple, but it also functioned as registry

of the history of local Chinese. An extended question remains intriguing: why did the Chinese forefathers call Cheng Hoon Teng a *teng* (亭) or pavilion rather than using characters that directly refer to temple such as *miao* (庙)?

Other major findings made by Chan can become contributions to the study of Malaysian Buddhism. One of the findings is the discrepancy of abbot's lineage. Chart 19 successfully traces all abbots in the exact order as well as rectifies certain misinformation. However, note that the generation name mentioned in page 126 should be *waizi* (外字, addressing name) instead of *neizi* (内字, given name). Anyway, chart 21 lists out monks who put up at the temple and the duration of their stay, this surely will help any future researcher who wants to trace the activity of certain monk, especially the renowned one. From the data collected by Chan, one may find that abbots and monks were confined to Cheng Hoon Teng's convention. This again prompted the thought that Cheng Hoon Teng's main role as a temple is somehow weakened. Unfortunately, Chan's work does not deal with this.

A few choices of words are debatable. Chan uses the term *qiaosheng* (侨生) to refer to the Straits Chinese. This is somewhat ambiguous and may cause confusion. If *Baba* (峇峇) and *Nonya* (娘惹) are deemed irregular, *haixia huaren* (海峡华人) is worth considering. Another word is *mingzhi* (冥纸) which is used by Chan to refer to papers offered to the deities. Paper Offering is a common practice in Chinese folk belief. However, in terms of form and design, there is a distinction between papers offered to the deities and those to the ancestors. *Mingzhi* literally means "nether world paper" hence it is a form of paper offered to the deceased. Those offered to deities is normally called *jinzhi* (金纸), or literally "gold paper". On the other hand, Chan occasionally mentions that Cheng Hoon Teng is a *sanjiao heyi* (三教合一), literally means "unification of three teachings (religions)", temple. However, the concept of three religions, namely Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, in one is often misused. The very strict sense of *sanjiao heyi* could be found in Lin Zhaoen's 林兆恩 (1517 – 1598) *Sanyi Jiao* (三一教), a form of religion founded by Lin which is based on the syncretism of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Even if we ignore the fact that Cheng Hoon Teng had and still has Buddhist abbot, it is closer to Chinese folk belief than *sanjiao*