

Poh Hock Seah: Guardians of the Flame

The Poh Hock Seah (literally "Precious Luck Association") is an exclusive association formed 100 years ago, as the successor to the Hokkien secret society called Khian Teik Hoay (literally, "Establishing Virtue Society").

The Hock Teik Cheng Sin Temple at Armenian Street, which served as the former secret society head quarters, is today the home of the Poh Hock Seah. The temple's principal deity is the Tua Pek Kong, and for that reason it is often called the "Tua Pek Kong Temple". In that connection, the Khian Teik triad is also referred to as the "Tua Pek Kong Society" in Western sources.

To this day, the section of Armenian Street between Cannon Street and Beach Street is called Pun Thau Hang or "Tua Pek Kong Street".* Another name for the street is Khian Goan Kay, referring to the Khian Teik triad's place of origin.

As the dominant Hokkien secret society of 19th-century Penang, the Khian Teik struggled with the Cantonese-dominated Ghee Hin society for control of the opium trade and other lucrative concerns. While the Ghee Hin occupied the areas north of Chulia Street, the Khian Teik controlled the eastern waterfront area along Beach Street from Armenian Street right up to Jelutong. The procession routes of the Poh Hock Seah to some extent still reflect the past territorial influence of the Khian Teik triad.

When secret societies were officially abolished in 1890 the assets of the Khian Teik society were transferred to legitimate institutions such as the Hock Teik Cheng Sin Temple and the newly-formed Poh Hock Seah.

Unfortunately, due to the clandestine nature of the Khian Teik, all its documents have been destroyed. Even the Hock Teik Cheng Sin Temple, which housed the society, has no foundation stone recording the circumstances of its establishment.

The Poh Hock Seah, formed by a council of Straits-born Chinese, was registered in 1890, the year of the Khian Teik society's dissolution, with the objective of looking after the interests of the Hokkien community. The association's first chairman was Cheah Teik Soon (after whom Teik Soon Street was named), a long-standing trustee of the Cheah clan association.

In this case, the Straits-born Chinese manoeuvred the take-over of not only the role, but also the assets and tradition of worship originally controlled by the China-born merchants. As Tua Pek Kong (God of Prosperity) is regarded as the patron saint of merchants, controlling the worship of this deity provided a great source of prestige and influence. The deity's patronage was so coveted by Hakka and Hokkien merchant communities that it became a source of major disputes between these two dialect groups -- but that is another story.

The annual flame-watching or "Cheah Hoay" ceremony of the Poh Hock Seah is carried down from the days of the Khian Teik society. It was originally a private divination ritual for the Hokkien merchant community. When the Poh Hock Seah was formed, the ceremony became an annual reunion for the Seah members. To this day, only Poh Hock Seah members are allowed to participate directly in the ritual. However, all who wish to observe it may do so from a distance.

There are presently four associations located at the Hock Teik Cheng Sin temple, three of which look after the deities housed in that temple. The Poh Hock Seah is responsible for the rituals of the temple's principal deity, Tua Pek Kong. The Cheng Hoe Seah provides a town base for the deity of the Snake Temple in Sungai Kluang, Cheng Sooi Chor Soo. The Tong Kheng Seah looks after the worship of Seng Leong Tai Tay, to which a public temple in Jelutong is dedicated. While the Tua Pek Kong is open to public worship, the two latter deities in the temple are reserved for the private worship of the Seah members.

According to certain sources while the Tua Pek Kong was the public symbol of the Khian Teik, the society's principal deity was really the Seng Leong Tai Tay, the Chinese God of Agriculture, who is believed to have brought the human race to a civilized state by inventing agriculture. The deity portrayed wearing a skirt of leaves, is also empowered with the curative values of the vegetal world, and is thus attributed with great healing faculties.

This deity is installed in the central hall on the second floor of the Tua Pek Kong temple. It is said that secret society members who fell ill or were wounded would be taken to this hall to consult a medium of the Seng Leong Tai Tay who would then prescribe herbal medicine.

A fourth association, the Hokkien Kongsu, also uses the temple's premises. The Hokkien Kongsu controls five public temples in Penang, including the Jelutong temple and the Sungai Kluang temple previously mentioned. These four associations maintain the continuity of the temple's use as a base for Hokkien leadership.

The houses between the Tua Pek Kong temple compound and Armenian Street belong to the Poh Hock Seah. Besides the gate entrance, there is a secret side access from Armenian Street to the second floor of the temple through the meeting room of the Hock Teik Cheng Sin temple committee.

The altar on the left side of the main Tua Pek Kong hall is dedicated to two early leaders of the Khian Teik society, represented by their ancestral tablets. One of them is Khoo Teng Pang, who supposedly founded the Khian Teik society. According to the Poh Hock Seah secretary, Mr. Lim Hun Swee, these ancestral tablets were discovered hidden in the attic of one of the association houses several years ago, when the roof was being repaired.

