

Khoo Thean Teik

It is curious to note that the man society leader should have been born with the name "Heavenly Virtue". Khoo Thean Teik was one of the most powerful and notorious Hokkien leaders of 19th-century Penang. During his lifetime, he amassed large properties, of which the Thean Teik Estate still bears his name.

While still a youth he became one of the founding directors of the Khoo Kongsi in 1851, which suggests that his father could have been a powerful figure in the Khoo dan. When Khoo Thean Teik was first arrested for fighting in 1858, the Hokkien community went on strike to pressure the colonial government into releasing him.

Around 1860, at the age of 34, Khoo Thean Teik took over as Elder Brother of the Khian Teik secret society. In 1867, a major gang war erupted between the Khian Teik and Ghee Hin triads, involving the Malay Red Flag and White Flag societies. The episode which completely held up the town for ten days has gone down in history as the Penang Riots.

In 1868, Khoo Thean Teik was arrested for having planned and instigated the riots. Though he was sentenced to death, the colonial government, with their skeleton police force, dared not carry out the execution, and so commuted his sentence to life-imprisonment. He was released after seven years and thereafter, to all appearances, stayed on the right side of the law.

Khoo Thean Teik was undeniably a gangster; but even gangsters grow old and are tormented by their sins. During his later years, after securing his position in the world, Khoo Thean Teik became not only a businessman but also a philanthropist. He traded through the companies Khoon Ho and Chin Bee, and also controlled a chunk of the flourishing trade in immigrant labour

In 1878 he became founding director of the Boon San rong Khoo Kongsi to which he belonged as a descendant of the Hai Jee lineage. From then on, he made lavish donations to many temples and charities.

The next year he became a principal donor to the Temple of the City God (Seng Ong Beow) dedicated to the government of the Nether-world, perhaps as a step to appease the souls of those slain during the long feud between the Khian Teik and Ghee Hin gangs. The temple is located in Jelutong, which had previously been the site of major triad clashes.

In 1889, Khoo Thean Teik in league with Chung Keng Kooi, leader of the Hai San secret society, secured the monopoly for tobacco, liquor, opium and gambling farms in Perak. That year he donated a bell to the Snake Temple.

By 1881, already a respected pillar of society, he became one of the founders of

the Penang Chinese Town Hall. In 1866, he donated heavily to the Batu Cantong and Batu Lanchang cemeteries, and to the Pulau Tikus Hokkien cemeteries in 1890. The abolition of secret societies in the Straits Settlement took place one year before his death in 1891.