

Kwanteebio and the Ethnic Chinese in Medan

Devin SUKARDI *

Flourished from plantation economy in the late nineteenth century, Medan, the capital of North Sumatra has developed itself into a cultural mosaic during the past one hundred and fifty years. Home to the Malay, Batak Toba, Javanese, Mandailing, Minang, Karonese, Acehnese, Chinese, Indian, and more ethnic groups, Medan thrived into a bustling commercial centre in Sumatra. The migration of labourers and traders during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was one of the factors that contributed to the formation of a multiethnic society in Medan.

Among the 2.5 million population (2020), the ethnic Chinese constitutes approximately 10 per cent of the city's demography. Medan is historically a city with a high concentration of Chinese population. In 1930, the ethnic Chinese stood for 35 per cent of the city's population. The burgeoning population was caused by the gradual influx of Chinese from plantations in the suburbs, such as Labuhan Deli, Belawan, or Bandarbaru. Trade characterises the way of living of the ethnic Chinese in Medan, especially for the Hokkiens and Hakka Chinese. An increasing trend of the

Chinese population also prompted the need of establishing organisations that unify the interests of the Chinese. In this report, I will demonstrate the presence of Kwanteebio 関帝廟, the oldest Chinese temple downtown—its historical background and its function in Medan Chinese society. To begin, I would like to introduce my experience visiting the temple during festive moments with my family.

New Year Blessing

“Ah Pin, give me some of your clothes. I



Photo 1. Medan Kwanteebio in the Late Nineteenth Century. According to Knapp [2010], It Has the Same Structure and Layout as a Southern Hokkien House.

Photo from De Andere Helft: Geloof en Gebruiken van onze Oostersche Stadgenooten [Jansen 1934: 58].

* Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University

shall take them to Kwanteebio and have them blessed,” said my mother two weeks before Chinese New Year in 2020. Every year, she would visit Medan Kwanteebio to offer a prayer for a prosperous year to come and have the inauspicious elements of the family members’ Chinese zodiacs corrected. On the first day of Chinese New Year, we would revisit Kwanteebio to pray for our well-being and safety for the rest of the year. I recall that everyone has a bundle of joss sticks in their hand, and the hall was filled with thick smoke that sends everyone’s prayers to the deities.

I never felt comfortable in that crowded temple with the suffocating smoke. I used to treat incense and smoke merely as tools to venerate these statues. However, recently I began to realise that the ethnic Chinese in my home community imagine the unseen world and the defied in a far more realistic way than we often visualise. The deities worshipped are not merely mythical protectors of ethics, morals, and virtues for the worshippers. Beyond that, the deities are binding elements that help maintain the harmony and interpersonal trust among the ethnic Chinese community in Medan and its surrounding territories. From this point, I started to realise the significance of this old temple. From what I have discovered through interviews, field trips, and archival research, the story of Kwanteebio tells us messages beyond its fact as a worshipping hall.

Anno 1884

Medan Kwanteebio is the oldest and inarguably the centre of Chinese deity worshipping in town. Located on *Kwanteebiostraat* or presently known as Jalan Irian Barat, the temple was founded in 1884. The temple was established under the initiative of Majoor Tjong Yong Hian 張榕軒 to promote the solidarity of the different groups of the Konghus or Cantonese [Buiscool 2019]. According to an inscription written by Majoor Tjong Yong Hian in 1885, the temple is dedicated to Kwantee Sengkun 閔帝聖君, Caibe Sengkun 財帛星君, and Hoktek Ciashin 福德正神, three familiar deities among the Chinese businesspeople in Medan.

Kwanteebio also enshrines Chinese popular deities, especially the gods worshipped by the Chinese originated from Chaoshan (Teochiu-Swatow) area. Lord Kwantee is naturally the temple’s prominent deity and placed at the centre of the worship hall. Other Taoist deities enshrined in this temple are Tjuse Nionio 註生娘娘 (goddess of conception and safe birth), the door god Be Bu 馬武 or Be Tjiong Kun 馬將軍. However, one could notice that upon the entrance of the temple, there sit a statue of Sakyamuni and the golden Phra Phrom or known as Si Bin Hut 四面佛 among the locals. At this point, one could see that the religious practice of Taoism and Buddhism among the Chinese people are commonly conducted

in one temple. Sometimes it is intriguing to know the inclusiveness of Chinese temples. I believe that on a personal level, one person might only believe in several deities as their guardians. A huge variety of deities enshrined in Medan Kwanteebio signifies that the worshippers are not from one background or belief.

Kwanteebio as Symbol of Unification

As mentioned earlier, the foundation of Medan Kwanteebio was initiated by Majoor Tjong Yong Hian, a Kwangtung-born Hakka subject. The temple's construction apparently was a project involving donators from Medan and its proximities, for instance, Penang. Cheong Fatt Tze 張彌士, a Kwangtung-born Hakka based in Penang, donated one thousand silvers. The Tjong Brothers, Tjong Yong Hian and Tjong A Fie 張阿輝, who eventually became the Chinese captains and majors in the East Coast of Sumatra, contributed one thousand and ten silvers combined (photos 2, 3). So far, I could not yet identify other donators and their affiliations, such as birthplace or dialect group. Nevertheless, the underlying motivation of the construction of this temple was told as an effort to promote solidarity and harmony among Cantonese subjects. But who are the Cantonese? Are they simply the Cantonese-speaking people born in Kwangtung, or perhaps people from different dialect groups like Hokkien,

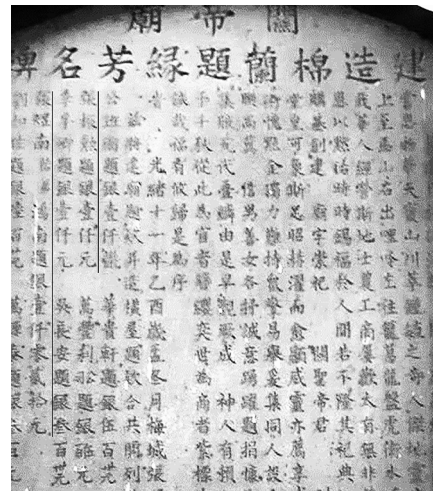


Photo 2. List of Contributors who Financed the Construction of Medan Kwanteebio. Names of Cheong Fatt Tze, Tjong Yong Hian, and Tjong A Fie Are Engraved on the Founding Plaque. Courtesy of Ms Henny Angkasa, Medan.

Teochew, or Hakka born in the soil of Kwangtung?

Before Chinese nationalism sparked in the early 20th century, the Chinese overseas community certainly was a divided family with different loyalties. A part of it was affiliated to anti-Qing secret societies, while others might have sworn their allegiance to the Qing Emperor. My high school teacher once said that Chinese people regard harmony highly, but on some occasions lacking cooperation, as expressed in the Chinese idiom *yi pan san sha* 一盤散紗. By the time Medan Kwanteebio was erected, cleavages and confrontations among Chinese subjects were issues that caused social unrest. Queeny Chang, the eldest daughter of Majoor Tjong A Fie, recalled



Photo 3. Main Donators of the Kwanteebio's Construction: (from left) Majoor Tjong Yong Hian, Majoor Tjong A Fie, Cheong Fatt Tze.

Portraits from KILTV-Leiden Digital Library and Tjong A Fie Mansion Museum Archive, Medan.

in her autobiography *Memories of a Nonya* [1981: 152] the antagonism between Chinese dialect groups and described how his father had succeeded in stabilising the situation:

The Sultan's private coach, which two years before sent us on our trip to China, brought us back to Medan where a large section of the Hakka and Hokkien community had gathered at the station to greet the son-in-law (here, Queeny Chang's husband) of their Chief (here, Majoor Tjong A Fie). Through our union, the former antagonism that existed between these two dialect groups had come to an end.

Kwanteebio was founded not only as a place of worship. It was established by the local prominent Chinese like Tjong Yong Hian and Tjong A Fie with solid intention

to unify the Chinese subjects beyond their birthplaces, dialects, or professions. Lord Kwantee, to whose honour this temple was built, hence became the righteous witness of solidarity, trust, and camaraderie among Chinese subjects who share similarities and differences. Kwanteebio is not only a place that offers spiritual consolation, but most importantly, for the elites, it was a place to manoeuvre the social and political life of their Chinese subjects. We came into a concession that a prestigious Chinese temple like Kwanteebio was built and financed by the so-called "respectable Chinese" at the time. These respectable Chinese were trusted by the colonial authorities to supervise their Chinese subordinates, including the underground organisations as well.

The Chinese in Medan was a diverse community before the unifying idea of *Zhonghua*

中華 began to dominate in the late-Qing and early Republican era. However, it should be noted that the generalisation of the Chinese as a single group constituting the Foreign Orientals (*Vreemde Oosterlingen*) has started far before Chinese nationalism sparked. Local Chinese chiefs were, therefore, appointed middlemen to maintain peace and order of the Chinese subjects. As the Hokkiens, Cantonese, or Hakka were generalised as 'Chinese' by the colonial authority, it could be assumed that the Chinese community leaders had to treat and solve any disagreements among the sub-ethnic groups as problems of the 'Chinese.' The establishment of temples or organisations beyond sub-ethnic groups is one of the solutions. Hence, Kwanteebio was a projection of the Chinese leaders' authority to stabilise any turbulence in the community of their subjects. Queeny Chang, however, failed to address further her father's political intervention and the role of Kwanteebio in unifying the Chinese society back then. The presence of Medan Kwanteebio as a social and political arena during the colonial era is to be studied further.

Kwantee and the Ethnic Chinese in Medan

During the past one hundred and thirty years, Lord Kwantee has been worshipped by people in Medan seeking clues for righteousness and justice. From the Chinese *majoors* such as Tjong Yong Hian and Tjong A Fie, Kwantee

is venerated by business people, lawyers, or scholars. Some people also believe in the spirit of Kwantee, to my surprise, to cure an ill body. Queeny Chang [1981], in her autobiography, also introduced an anecdote of her younger brother's experience with Kwantee:

The spirit of Kwan Ti had entered the body of the medium and had given fu (hu-po). The fu was burned and the ashes, mixed with water, was given to my little brother to drink.

Nowadays, when people have their freedom to choose what to see and what to believe, I have always been contemplating how the worshipping of popular deities would last until the next decades and centuries. Would the younger generations share the reality in mythical imagination that their parents had? Would people from my generation pass down the view of heaven, earth, and the underworld, which we inherited from our ancestors?

Kwanteebio now became a souvenir from the pioneers, and the spirit of its founding is standing between memory and forgetting. My previous visit to Kwanteebio brought me the realisation that research on Chinese *kapitans* shall not be concentrated merely on their properties or legacies that vividly demonstrate their business acumen. My research will study further the social and political functions

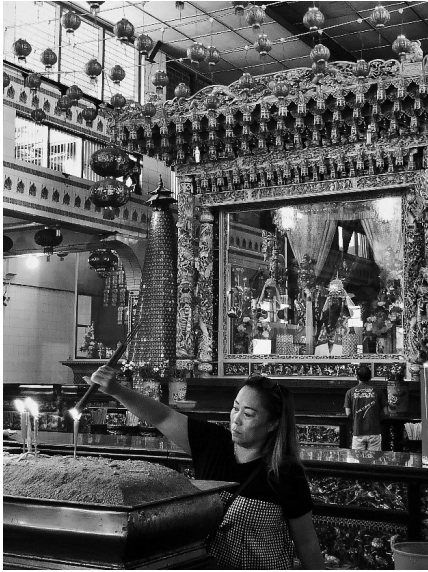


Photo 4. A Lady Burning Joss Sticks in Front of the Altar of Lord Kwantee.
Photographed by the author.

that Chinese temples in Medan performed during the Dutch colonial era. The correlations between Medan Kwanteebio, the Tjong brothers and Medan Chinese are yet to be explored further.

References

- Buiskool, Dirk Aedse. 2019. *Prominent Chinese During the Rise of a Colonial City: Medan 1890–1942*. Doctoral Thesis, Utrecht University, Utrecht.
- Chang, Queeny. 1981. *Memories of a Nonya*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions.
- Jansen, Gerard. 1934. *De Andere Helft: Geloof en Gebruiken van onze Oostersche Stadgenooten*. Medan: Köhler & Co, pp. 59–64.
- Knapp, Ronald. 2010. *Chinese Houses of Southeast Asia: The Eclectic Architecture of Sojourners and Settlers*. Singapore: Tuttle Publishing.

妖怪ではない「カッパ」

—岩手県遠野市の「民話」文化の古層に向かって—

森内 こゆき*

「妖怪の研究してるんだよね、カッパ好きの女の子がいるよ！」
遠野に着いて、宿泊施設を運営する女性に開口一番にこう言われた。筆者はカッパに会いに訪れる人がいるとは、さすが「民話のふるさと」遠野だな、と思った。日常生活で

は「カッパ好きの女の子」にはなかなか出会えないであろうし、驚くべきことであつたに違いない。しかし、筆者は遠野までの道中ですでに不思議な出来事に巻き込まれており、このとき地に足のつかない感覚だったので、「カッパ好きの女の子」への理解が追いつい

* 京都大学大学院アジア・アフリカ地域研究研究科