Book Reviews


Scholars who conduct research on Southeast Asia Chinese realize that scattered epigraphic evidence and unofficial documents can make up for the scarcity in official archival documents and archaeological artifacts. They are also a source of primary data necessary for any rigorous academic investigation. Regrettably the colonial government and Chinese social organizations in the past were rarely aware of the need to preserve these materials. Even now, there exist no effective systems for the collection, organization and preservation of these historical materials. As a result, scholars are eager to salvage, collect, reorganize and conduct research on these documents. In recent years, some Chinese social organizations in Singapore and Malaysia which have an interest in the preservation of historical materials have opened up their treasured collections for academic research, some of which are subsequently collated and edited for publication. The Hok Tek Chi Loke Yah Teng Series, published in 2005, is one such publication of significance and value. This series is the first to be published under the “Singapore Chinese Heritage Studies Series” which is sponsored by the Fund for Research and Publication of Chinese Materials — a sum of $60,000 raised by the Hok Tek Chi Loke Yah Teng in collaboration with the Chinese Heritage Centre.

The Hok Tek Chi Loke Yah Teng Series includes a monograph, A History of the Hok Tek Chi Loke Yah Teng, 1824–2004, and three volumes entitled, Hok Tek Chi Loke Yah Teng Archival Collection. To quote from the foreword by Dr Ng Chin Keong, former Director of the Chinese Heritage Centre, they “chart the history and development of an important Chinese institution in Singapore. It is of immense historical value to the study of Southeast Asian Chinese and Chinese organizations, especially in their adaptations to the local contexts and their localization, from a migrant environment under colonial rule to new political and economic circumstances under the nation-state” (A History of the Hok Tek Chi Loke Yah Teng Association, 1824–2004: iii).

This is a noteworthy publication which covers a long period of history and records a wide range of events spanning 120 years from the 13th year of the
Guangxu reign (1887) to 2004. The first book on Loke Yah Teng’s history, divided into four periods, is a comprehensive and in-depth investigation of the development of the organization. The other three books, which make up the archival collection, include firstly, *Hok Tek Chi Loke Yah Teng Minutes of Meetings*, which covers the ninth to sixteenth year of the Republican calendar (1920–27). The second book, made up of two parts, consists of the *Minutes of Meetings, 1953–1959*, of the board of directors of the Loke Yah Teng from 1953 to 1959, and *The Resolutions Book of the Committee for the Relocation of the Loke Yah Teng Burial Grounds, 1957 to 1958*. The last book is the *Accounts Book* of the Dabogong Temple in 1887–1933. (It has been decided that a fourth volume of the collection on “Minutes of Meetings of the Board of Directors of the Loke Yah Teng from 1960 to 1970” will not be published as the material is deemed too recent.) These documents record the development of the organization and management of the Loke Yah Teng in the midst of political and social changes in Singapore from colony to independent nation-state. They throw light on the subtle relationships between Chinese *bang*-based social groups and the successive governments in different periods of time, and reflect the changes in the Chinese migrants’ identity and identification with the nation-state. Categorizing the materials as simply internal documents of a Chinese social organization does not do justice to the wealth of information they contain. These are historical materials that not only depict the development and changes of Chinese society in Singapore, but of Chinese societies in Southeast Asia as a whole.

Through the minutes, resolutions and accounts, the Loke Yah Teng makes an ideal case study of the interactions between the different *bang* in a Chinese migrant society in Southeast Asia during the colonial period in particular, when the Loke Yah Teng operated in an environment where relationships between different *bang* were complex and constantly changing. As Dr Zeng Ling, author of the book on history in the present series asserts, “the epigraphic and archival materials recording *bang* relations within and outside the Loke Yah Teng, and their transformations, will give one a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the *bang*-dominated social environments, the interactions between the different *bang* communities, and their transformations and consolidation during the colonial period in Southeast Asian history” (*A History of the Hok Tek Chi Loke Yah Teng, 1824–2004*: ix). Such materials also supplement information on tombstone inscriptions in the Loke Yah Teng provided by Tan Yeok Seong and Chen Ching-ho in *Xinjiapo huawen beiming jilu* (*A Record of Chinese Tombstone Inscriptions in Singapore*), compiled and edited during the 1970s.

Drawing on her experience in researching on the socio-historical aspects of Chinese society and Chinese social organizations in Singapore, Dr Zeng uses textual criticism and analysis by examining tombstone inscriptions, minutes of meetings, resolutions records, accounts books and commemorative magazines in