An Early Chinese Visitor to Kelantan

by

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At the end of the eighteenth century, about the time of the foundation of Penang and some thirty years before Raffles came to Singapore, a young Chinese merchant-sailor visited the various Malay countries of the Nanyang. His name was Hsieh Ch’ing-kao and he was a Hakka from the province of Kwangtung. He started young at the age of 17 in 1782 and by the time he was 30 in 1795, after 14 years of extensive travel in the Nanyang, he was forced to give up his business because he had gone totally blind. He had learnt some foreign languages, probably English, Portuguese and Malay, and lived most of his later life as an interpreter at the ports of Canton and Macao.

Hsieh Ch’ing-kao was an illiterate man and would have been forgotten by history like most of the Chinese of his class and profession who sailed the Nanyang. Fortunately for him and for us, he found men who were interested in his travels and willing to help him to record them. This he did some years before his death in 1821. The result of their collaboration was the book Hai-lu in three chapters which has come down to us. The language of this book is literary and obviously not in Hsieh Ch’ing-kao’s own words, but his account must have been very vivid for the rather unsuitable style of the book has not dimmed his descriptions for us.

Hsieh Ch’ing-kao had first started out on his own business in Chinese junks. When his ship sank during a storm, he was saved by a foreign ship and thereafter he worked and traded with the foreigners. Unfortunately, he does not say what foreign ship saved him or who the foreigners were. Only by careful reading of the text has it been possible to determine that the foreigners he worked with were either the Portuguese or the English. Of course, it is possible that he had experience travelling with both peoples. But most of the travelling was done between Malay countries and it is obvious from his descriptions that he knew the Malay peoples best and was particularly fascinated by them. And of the Malay countries he visited, he left the most information about the State of Kelantan.

We do not know when Hsieh Ch’ing-kao first visited Kelantan. Presumably he came often to the east coast of the Malay peninsula and knew the kingdoms of Sung-k’a (Singora), T’ai-ni (Patani), Ting-ka-lo (Trengganu) and Pang-hang (Pahang) and that of Kelantan equally well. He grouped them together and frequently referred to the similarity of these five countries. He also suggested that what he said about Kelantan applied to most of the other countries. Since all his travels were done during the years 1782–1795, his descriptions were based presumably on the visits he made during this period.

After placing Kelantan in relation to Patani, he began with a description of the town of Kelantan, presumably the Kota Lama not far from the present town of Kota Bahru. This is what he had to say about the town,

The king lived at the port. This port was where the morning market was held and where the ocean vessels were anchored. A circle of
bamboo clusters had been planted to make a stockade and planks were added to strengthen it. There was only one gate and the people lived outside the circle of bamboo. He went on about the government and the workings of the law in the kingdom.

The government was simple. The king sat in his hall every day with the chieftains, some called Wan and some called Tuan, all seated in a circle in the hall to discuss the affairs of state.

Disputants who came did not need to present petitions. Each man had only to bring a pair of candles and enter the hall with his body bent and carry the candles in front of him. When the king saw the candles, he asked what the matter was. After the accuser had put up his case, the king ordered a slave to summon the accused to come forward and explain his side of the question. The king would then in a few words determine who was right and who wrong and no one dared to disobey him.

Hsieh Ch’ing-kao was very interested in some of the judicial procedures adopted by the king when there was any uncertainty. He mentioned three kinds of tests of endurance employed for difficult cases. The first was the test by “immersion in water”. By this test, the two parties were ordered to bring a boy each to the river.
There, in the presence of the king and a "foreign monk" (probably an Imam), the two boys were each given a long bamboo pole and told to stay underwater as long as they could. While the boys were in the water, the monk recited incantations which gave added authority to the proceedings. Then when the first boy came to the surface, it could be declared that the party he represented was in the wrong.

The second kind of test was more exacting. This was the “hand thrust in oil” test and it was also held in the presence of the king and a foreign monk. First, a piece of iron was put into a pot full of boiling oil and then the monk uttered incantations beside the pot. The two parties were then ordered to put their hands into the pot and fish the piece of iron out. The man who could do so was considered the innocent party. This was obviously a fearful test and rarely resorted to. As Hsieh Ch’ing-kao put it, “As the country had such tests, disputants were never very stubborn.”

The third kind of test was really a duel with spears and this was employed much more frequently and even in lesser cases appearing before the chieftains. The problem in this test was to decide which of the two parties should be given the first throw of the spear. It was usually the king who had to decide this. If the man given the first throw missed, then he had to wait for the other to throw at him. Whoever was killed was the guilty one. Hsieh Ch’ing-kao did not record what would happen if neither made a kill. Grimly he noted that the test was so devised that no one could afford to miss, so “people rarely missed”.

In addition to the tests, Hsieh Ch’ing-kao also observed that punishments were light. For example, beating with the light and heavy bamboos, a common Chinese punishment, was not often used. Usually there was merely a fine and this was based on the wealth of the guilty person or his family. The fines themselves did not seem to have been heavy but the practice of doubling the fine for every day the fine was not paid made it quite terrifying. If the person could not pay or refused to pay, he would be arrested and indefinitely imprisoned. What happened after that, however, Hsieh Ch’ing-kao did not say.

As for the punishment for a wife’s adultery, it was truly severe. The husband had the right to kill her himself.

Hsieh Ch’ing-kao was also particularly impressed by the problem of royal succession in Kelantian. He was struck by this chiefly because it was so unlike that known in China. He said,

At the death of the king, either a son or a younger brother succeeded him. But although there might be a royal will, it was necessary to wait and see on whom God’s choice would fall—only after that was the succession settled. Thus even if the heir had ascended the throne but proved not to be the one whom God preferred, the people would not obey him. He would have to give way to the one among his brothers or uncles or nephews whom the people honoured and himself retreat to a lower position. Otherwise, even if he did continue as ruler, his word and law would not be effective.

But of the people, Hsieh Ch’ing-kao did not have much to say. He noted that most of the people were fishermen who did little except fish and seemed to suggest that most of the coastal Malay people lived that way. But he did give a fuller description of the tribes who lived in the hills.
He did not name them but presumably they were some of the aborigines whose descendants, the Temiar, may still be found in Kelantan to-day.

The natives living in the hills either cultivated land or gathered wood and were especially poor. They wore no dress above nor trousers below, but merely covered the lower half of their bodies with strips of bark from some large trees. Also, they did not have houses but lived in caves or in small plank huts on the trees.

He was specially impressed by their ability to use the spear which everybody carried, but made no mention of the use of blowpipes. He also found it curious that the Malay people ate only with their right hands and generally thought lowly of their left. In his own words.

If the left hand was used to take food to offer to any one of these people, the person would be angry and regard it as a sign of grave disrespect.

The people of Kelantan were very fond of festivities and every year there was a sort of fair when there would also be a gathering of chieftains from far and near to pay tribute to their king. An open space was found outside of the stockade and on the great opening day, the king would come and order the feasting and theatrical entertainment to commence. He would then receive the gifts of local produce brought by people from all parts of the kingdom. The Chinese living there also went to the fair and mixed freely with the Malays. There was much gambling and opium-smoking and, in fact, Hsieh Ch'ing-kao thought that there was more opium smoking in Kelantan than anywhere else in the Nanyang. This festivity lasted for a month and all kinds of people and all classes participated in it.

There are several references to the Chinese in Kelantan. That they mixed well with the Malay people the author seemed to have taken for granted. But there was no intermarriage so that the Chinese there "rarely married". If they did, they married Siamese women. Of the Chinese, he said,

Each year several hundred people went there from China. The people of Fukien lived mostly at the port while those of Kwangtung lived mostly in the hills. In the hills the people washed for gold while at the port they traded in merchandise and cultivated pepper.

When their ships arrived, they were taxed according to the size of the ships and the weight of the cargo. Large vessels with heavy cargo paid up to five or six hundred silver dollars while small light ones paid two to three hundred. The passengers arriving in the country for the first time paid one silver dollar each on landing. But those who stayed on in the country paid one silver per person per year.

There was a curious discrimination between the Chinese who lived at the port and those who went inland to the gold mines. This was when the people were contemplating their return to China. Those from the hills had to see the king before they left for China and each of them was made to pay an ounce of gold. As for those who lived at the port, no such payment was necessary. In practice, however, this payment for an "exit permit" was often waived. For example, if the man was old and unlikely to work for his living again, he had to pay only half the usual amount. And if he were really poor and the Captain China, "the headman of the Chinese", petitioned for him, he might well be exempted altogether.

Hsieh Ch'ing-kao was struck by the bathing habits of the local Chinese
which he noted were acquired from the Malays.

The Chinese who came here always bathed in the river and used a small wooden bucket to carry up the water which they then poured over themselves from the head down. They did this with dozens of buckets and did not stop until the hot air in their heads had rushed out. Each day they bathed two or three times. If they did not do so, they would fall ill.

When they had lived there for some time they could reduce the number of baths they had but still bathed daily.

He explained that this curious behaviour was a method of preventing malaria and was even convinced that for illnesses due to “wind and heat”, frequent pouring of water down oneself was a sure cure—“there was no need to resort to medicine and acupuncture”.

Finally, Hsieh Ch'ing-kao made some interesting remarks about the geography of Kelantan. Having noted that it was roughly halfway between Patani and Trengganu, he observed that some of the best gold mines of Patani were far more easily accessible from Kelantan than from Patani itself. The journey to the mines of A-lo-shuai (Ulu Sai, now Ulu Talubin, in the hills on the Siamese-Kelantan border) took more than ten days from Patani but only three to four days from Kelantan. Hence most of the Chinese who worked at Ulu Sai travelled via Kelantan.

The two main gold-bearing areas of Kelantan were the region of Sokor in central Kelantan and the region of Galas (Pulai) near the Pahang border where the Chinese were the dominant miners. Sokor was only three days’ journey from Kelantan and Hsieh Ch'ing-kao called it Song-ko while he specially noted that the Galas region which he called Ya-la-hsu(?) was directly adjoining the gold mines of Pahang in the area he called Ma-ku. If he was thinking of the Raub region (or Semangko which might have been abbreviated to Ma-ku), the two areas were not really “adjoining” but it does mean that there was easy communication between them over the Tahan ranges and across the Pahang valley. It is interesting that in a later section on Selangor, Hsieh Ch’ing-kao also noted that there was some connection between the inland mountains of Selangor and the mountains of Kelantan.

It is unfortunate that Hsieh Ch’ing-kao tells us nothing about the history of Kelantan itself. But the material about the Chinese confirms what we know about the Chinese gold-miners of Kelantan at the end of the 18th century. We can see that there were the large numbers of Chinese described in other sources as having participated in the dynastic struggles of Kelantan. His account is the last that we have of the Chinese there before their mistimed political interference caused them to be driven out of Sokor.