The Dragon of Chini and Recent Discoveries under the Lake

by

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LAKE CHINI in Central Pahang is a place of considerable interest. Not only does it have a romantic background of legendary 'monsters', submerged cities and sacred crocodiles but it is also a place of great natural charm.

I shall not here describe the lake's location for this was mentioned in detail in the July 1960 issue of the journal in Mr. K. E. Southwood's account of an attempt to locate traces of old irrigation canals in the area, which was unfortunately unsuccessful.

The approach from the broad Pahang River up the narrow six mile Sungei Chini is in itself a pleasant journey on a sunny day. The sun filters down through the high jungle trees which meet over the narrow channel. Many varieties of bird fly above the high banks including, at times, the biggest kingfishers I have seen. There is something of the atmosphere so well caught by the camera in the Japanese film 'Rashomon' and equally a touch of Maeterlinck. Ahead of the traveller lies the lake itself which has had its share of publicity in the popular press and in an imaginative account written by a Mr. Wavell of Radio Malaya.

Public interest was also much stimulated about a year ago following an
On Lake Chini. (The Author is in the foreground).

account of the appearance of the Chini 'monster' to a geological prospecting party. The phrase 'eyes like red tennis balls' seemed to be a piece of imaginative writing until I had later spoken to the people concerned and realised that it represented what they had indeed thought they had seen.

The peace and beauty of the lake are of great appeal. Although there are very large areas under reeds and perupok there are appreciable areas of open water across which Bukit Chini dominates the horizon. The country surrounding the lake is hilly and thickly covered with jungle. There are a number of small islands on which searches have been made in vain for any permanent remains of settlement.

There are many fish in the lake which in the evenings in places seems to bubble with feeding fish. They vary from the tiny *ikan kawan* and the *ikan loma* to the bigger catfish, carp and pike.

One can see the russet coloured eagle, the *Lang Tembikai*, the grey sea-eagle and the hornbill. On one weekend visit a flock of no less than seventeen hornbills, who had been holding a convention on Pulau Balai flew slowly overhead. It is the home of the kingfisher and drongo, and for a time each year come the egret and the heron.

There are many crocodiles in the lake. The aborigines who live there say that they do not harm people and regard them as *Keramat*, or sacred. When skin-diving there and having drifted well away from my course into the treacherous mud banks and perupok, I have been to some extent prevented from panic by recalling the words of the aboriginal headman. 'Tuan,' he had said, 'these crocodiles never eat people. You see, they were once people themselves'.

It is interesting to note how the theme of the sacred crocodile runs through the legends of Pahang. The late Dr. Linchan had spoken to me enthusiastically of the likelihood of there having been an ancient settlement by the lake and has written on the subject in the Royal Asiatic Society's Journal of December, 1947.

An eminent Malay Scholar, Dr. Linchan has also made many contributions of importance in the field of Malayan archaeology, and persons interested in the crocodile beliefs will find much of interest in his writings on this subject.

On one of my visits to the lake this year a crocodile hunter from Johore appeared on the lake in a flimsy canoe. He told me that he had read about Chini's crocodiles in the Press and had come to catch a couple. The aborigines were less concerned about this than I expected. 'Never mind' they said. 'He'll never see one. The crocodiles know he has come.'

Nor indeed did the Malay hunter see one, although the beam of his searching light swept across the water all night. I was glad he had not found any, for his only companion was a young boy and his sole armament two long wooden spears. Perhaps the crocodiles were as kindly as the *orang asli* believe.

Before I leave the fascinating world of legend I must say a little about the so called 'monsters'. It is the last time I shall use the term for it is completely at variance with the expressions the aborigines use and seems unfair to the animal itself whom they regard as a kind of guardian of the lake.
To them it is the ‘Naga’—a Sanskrit word meaning dragon but applied to a huge type of legendary snake. The word has a wide application in Malay from patterns on cloth, boats or buildings to the animal kingdom. They also term the animal ‘Nenek’ which has the meaning of grandparent or ancestor.

It is not to be feared, but to be respected. That it exists they have no doubt and after talking to them at length it is difficult to doubt the Nenek’s existence.

A local headman, with whom I discussed it, is small of stature, slim and erect. He is accustomed to hunt with the blowpipe. He walks in the jungle with the quick brisk step of a New Yorker in the stone jungle of that city.

I had decided that the snake, if it existed, was possibly a python. ‘No, no’, he said. ‘I know python. I eat python. Yesterday I put three darts in one, but my stupid son-in-law made the poison too weak and it got away. The Nenek is different. There are two kinds. One has a head with two bumps on it and the other a smaller head like a fowl’.

He went on to describe its tracks in the mud, about 10 inches in width and even ‘the noise it makes’.

He pointed out too where it is thought to live. The place is in the same area of open lake as the batu Keramat or sacred stones. ‘Once a year’ he said ‘when the white rocks float (timbul), the Nenek moves to the other end of the lake’. This I take to mean that when the water level drops, so that the batu Keramat become visible, the fish on which the animal may feed move away and the Nenek follows.

I myself saw no trace of the Naga during several visits to the lake, but to the aborigines it is a very real feature of their lives and many of them are said to go regularly to pay their

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*The Author searching in the mud of Lake Chini for fragments of porcelain and pottery.*
Glazed stoneware circular lid, possibly dating from 14th/15th century.

respects, on entering or leaving the area, to the white submerged rocks near which it is said to live.

Perhaps in a journal of the Historical Society there has been in this brief account rather too much of the legendary. Legend may well play a greater part in history than historians may care to admit, but, I shall make amends by giving a factual account of a number of interesting finds. The evidence for these is tangible and is in my possession until the National Museum can accommodate it.

I have tramped the perimeter of most of the lake, dug, grovelled in the glutinous mud, swum with a schnorkel and collected a representative selection of sherds of pottery and artefacts, some of which are illustrated in this journal.

Like most things Malayan, the evidence is a mosaic of different cultures and races which have blended into the everchanging pattern that underlies the national heritage. Therein lies a great deal of its charm and interest.

Perhaps the most interesting finds have been a small number of chipped tiny scrapers made from fragments of the tough volcanic glass called obsidian. Through the courtesy of the Federation's Department of Museums, these have been sent to the University of Cambridge for scrutiny and have been confirmed as microliths.

Although evidence of what has been led a 'flake and blade' culture is plentiful in China, India, Ceylon and Indonesia there is, as far as I am aware, only one reference to its occurrence in Malaya and that is on slight evidence at Tanjong Bunga in Johore by M. W. F. Tweedie's Stone Age Malaya M.B.R.A.S. October, 1953).

The evidence from Chini is indeed small but may well be significant. Until the obsidian flakes are returned it is only possible to include a picture of a small piece of chalcedony, which is of the flint class of stone, and which has been chipped to form a small pointed scraper of much the same type (see Plate 4).

The next most interesting pieces are fragments of cord-marked coarse grey pottery which are illustrated. They appear similar to the type of sherd found in Sieveking’s remarkable excavations at Gua Cha in Kelantan. There is also a handsome small stone age quadrangular adze of the type associated with this type of neolithic pottery in Malaya, China, Indo China, Indonesia and other areas.

I have collected too, a good number of stoneware fragments and it was with considerable pleasure that I found this small adze, the top of which at first sight I mistook for yet another piece of grey stoneware. It is unusual to find such an artefact on an open site:

Fragments of a Celadon Chinese Bowl possibly 15th/16th century.
After this evidence of the Stone Age we come to a wide variety of stoneware fragments, ranging from soft white stoneware to well-fried grey ware and a variety of red stoneware. Some of the shapes of these broken pots are very pleasing.

Stoneware fragments are difficult to date or to place, but there is interesting evidence that some of the Chini stoneware is of Chinese origin.

So we come through the past to the fragments of a glazed stoneware lid of a small round box. This may be seen in Plate 5. The finding of it took altogether three days as it is composed of eleven fragments. It seems to be of Siamese origin and is perhaps from the Sawankhalok Kilns. The brown glaze, Chrysanthemum pattern and crude dragon-type design seems to point to this origin and to date it about the 14th to 15th century.

There are many fragments of Chinese type porcelain. A small 16th Century Celadon bowl is shown in the illustration (Photo 5). There are some small fragments of celadon types and of typical Ming blue and white export wares. It is usually not possible to collect these unless the water level in the lake is low enough.

Dutch porcelain is represented too and a number of pieces of fairly modern type.

Cord Marked Pottery found in Lake Chini.

so that the Chini adze is not only a very pleasant and satisfying stone age tool, but also has the distinction of being found at ground level. It lay on the clay at the edge of a small island with only a thin coating of mud on its body. It may indeed have lain there since the third or fourth century B.C. and is a tiny signpost on the path of the Austro-Asian people in their migration from the Continent of Asia to Indonesia and the South.

There are a few other interesting small fragments of worked stone and one weathered stone scraper, which may well be considerably older than the neolithic. This gave Dr. Solheim, who will be well-known to readers for his help to Malaya in the Johore Lama excavations, considerable pleasure. To him the neolithic items are 'too modern', for his particular interest lies in the older era of the Palaeolithic.

Through the courtesy of the Museums Department, both Dr. Solheim and Mr. Matthews spent a weekend with me at Chini and gave much help with advice and suggestions.

Neolithic Quadrangular Adze (Right & Left) small Microlith chipped out of Chalcedony (centre).
Altogether, although small, it is a quite representative selection from Malaya’s past. Unfortunately, as the rock outcrops just below the soil of the hills and islands, it is more than likely that these potsherds and artefacts I have described once were in the soil at a higher level than at present. Beneath them is rock and below them towards the lake is mud that goes perhaps fifty feet or more in depth.

It is likely that what has been found is the last surface evidence of the people of the past and that, as the soil was washed away by flood or tropical rains, the remainder lies buried in the mud below the calm water.

Some day it may be possible to put a drill through the mud and thus to ascertain Chini’s past history of flood and inundation.

It is not possible in this brief account to do more than outline the material found there. There seems little doubt, however, that Chini has a long history of human settlement. This may well have been ended by a major flood, for the Pahang River during the monsoon is said to flow up the 6 mile Chini valley and into the lake itself.

The inadequate account I have given here is not intended to be an authoritative statement. The latter must await professional and expert opinion but, until then, I believe anything that stimulates Malayan interest in the archaeological, historical or cultural field is not without some value. The field is immense and as Tunku Abdul Rahman has said ‘Today, living as we do in the dignity and self-respect of our own birth-right, we know we are free to renew our ancient ties of cultural understanding and to people our own stage again with the true genius and spirit of Malaysia.’

Perhaps with the growth of interest in Malaya’s national culture and history, which the new museum will undoubtedly stimulate, it will be possible to have some work done at Chini under expert direction. Perhaps then some evidence of the old settlement’s location may be found—if it does not lie too deep under the water and the ubiquitous mud. Until then the secret of Chini’s vanished glories, guarded by the valiant but amiable Neneh, rest in peace. They are symbolised by the beautiful pink lotus blossoms, paying their mute tribute on the surface of the tranquil lake.

Note.—The Neolithic period of the Stone Age is that in which the Austro-Asian people are thought to have migrated from Continental Asia to Indonesia.

This migration is thought to have occurred between 2,500 and 1,500 B.C. The culture of the neolithic period in Malaya is typified by the ground and polished quadrangular adze and by cord-marked pottery. According to Tweedie, the Neolithic period in Northern Malaya persisted until at least as late as the third or fourth century B.C.

The Neolithic or New Stone Age is, of course, the most recent of the Stone Age Periods. Earlier than the Neolithic is the Mesolithic—perhaps from 5,000 B.C. to 2,000 B.C. It is to this period the microlithic type of small chipped stone tool is ascribed.

Fragments of Earthenware and Stoneware Jars found by the Author on the edge of Lake Chini.