



## Article

# Connecting the Chinese Diaspora: See Boon Tiong and His Temple Networks in Singapore and Malacca

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**Abstract:** This study examines the temple networks of the 19th-century Chinese community leader See Boon Tiong (薛文仲) in Singapore and Malacca in order to cognize his rising influence in both places. In the early years of his career in Singapore, See Boon Tiong expanded his social networks by founding the Keng Teck Whay (庆德会), as well as through his active involvement in the affairs of Chinese temples. In 1848, the Keng Teck Whay, represented by See Boon Tiong, precipitated the establishment of the Cheng Wah Keong Temple (清华宫) in Malacca and the organization of the “Wangchuan” (王船) Ceremony, thereby consolidating See’s leadership in the local Chinese community. This also provides insights into the process of the reconstitution of power by the Malaccan Chinese merchants in their hometown after forging social networks in Singapore. In the 1850s, See’s influence, exerted through these networks, further penetrated Cheng Hoon Teng Temple (青云亭) in Malacca, outstripping the authority and influence of Tengzhu (亭主) Tan Kim Seng (陈金声), and engendered the dominance of the Hokkien Zhangzhou (漳州) group to which he belonged. The biography of See Boon Tiong is a microcosm of the strategies which ethnic Chinese leaders in Southeast Asia in the 19th Century deployed to amalgamate and cement their power and influence in society. This also exemplifies the interplay and inseparability between the leadership of the Chinese communities in Singapore and Malacca, and highlights the influential role and agency of these power networks behind the temples in transforming the power structure of the Chinese community in that era.

**Keywords:** See Boon Tiong; temple networks; Singapore and Malacca; Chinese community



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## 1. Introduction

See Boon Tiong (1807–1888) was a prominent Chinese leader in Singapore and Malacca in the 19th century. After returning to Malacca, he became an important leader in the local Chinese community, serving as a Municipal Commissioner, Justice Peace, and Security Council member, and was influential in both places (Song 2006, pp. 60–61, 104–5; Kua 1995, pp. 211–12). Many temples’ inscriptions in both places contained records about him since See was actively involved in these temples throughout his life (Jao 1970, p. 24; Chen and Tan 1970, pp. 58, 284; Franke and Chen 1982, pp. 255–56, 301–7). For the early Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaysia, temples were not only places of worship but also spaces to deal with the affairs of the community. The temple grounds were spaces which served as an arbitration body among the groups (Yen 1986, pp. 12–13). For example, the Penang Kong Hock Kong Temple (广福宫), the Malacca Cheng Hoon Teng Temple, and the Singapore Thian Hock Keng Temple (天福宫) were all regarded as the highest institutions of the local Chinese community (Yen 1986, p. 11). Those who wanted to attain a higher position and prestige in the local Chinese community needed to

be active in temple activities to expand their influence (Chong 2007, p. 112). See Boon Tiong, as the leader of the Hokkien dialect group in Singapore and Malacca, actively donated to Hokkien temples in both places and was one of the founders of Singapore Keng Teck Whay, as well as Malacca Cheng Wah Keong Temple (Dean and Hue 2016, pp. 117–18; Franke and Chen 1982, pp. 256, 303). The temple networks of See Boon Tiong were the basis of his power and influence to gain higher control and status in the Chinese community. Unfortunately, despite the rich legacy of See Boon Tiong, which has been documented in historical records, only Kua Bak Lim (柯木林) (Kua 1995, pp. 211–12) and David Chng (庄钦永) (1984) have written briefly about his deeds. At present, there is no research on See's career development in Malacca and Singapore in the context of the supporting temple networks.

In the field of Chinese historical studies of Singapore and Malacca, there is no dearth of literature detailing the social development of the Hokkien group or leaders in these societies<sup>1</sup> from the perspective of Chinese temple networks (Lim 1975; Kua 1986; Chng 1990; Song 2015; Yon and Hau 2020). The leadership of the Hokkien group in Singapore and Malacca originated from the same leadership network, and many of them were active in Chinese temples in both Malacca and Singapore. The influential networks they forged in these temples could have had a transformative impact on the power structure of the Hokkien group in both areas. However, most of the current studies only link the rise in the power of individual leaders or groups to the creation of local temple networks (Chng 1990; Song 2015; Yon and Hau 2020). These scholars overlooked the involvement of these leaders in temples located in another region. This has led to the present studies falling short in outlining the growth of power networks of particular leaders or groups or even failing to identify and expound on the development of dialect group politics (帮权政治) in the two areas. For example, Wu Hua (吴华) (Wu 1975, pp. 60–64), in his account of Singapore Keng Teck Whay, only states that its members were involved in donations to Singapore Heng San Teng Temple (恒山亭), Thian Hock Keng Temple, Chong Wen Ge (崇文阁), and Cui Ying School (萃英书院). However, these members were also philanthropists, and some of them also served as directors in temples in Malacca, such as Cheng Hoon Teng Temple and Cheng Wah Keong Temple (Franke and Chen 1982, pp. 255–56, 301–7). It would be challenging to comprehend its development in both areas unless we delve into the temple networks which connect the two places. Therefore, the study of the temple networks behind See Boon Tiong is not only intended to enrich the understanding of his life and deeds but also to gain a deeper insight into the intrinsic links between the Chinese temples in Singapore and Malacca. This study also aims to examine the influence of the networks on the development of the Chinese communities of Malacca and Singapore in the 19th century.

Furthermore, in recent years, several scholars such as Kenneth Dean (2018), Jack Chia (2020), and Show Ying Ruo (Show 2021) have conducted studies on Chinese religious networks in Singapore, Malaysia, and other Southeast Asian nation states, focusing on the intrinsic connections and circumstances of specific groups and stakeholders behind Chinese religious organizations, particularly Buddhists, in constructing trans-regional religious networks. These studies are infused with a cross-regional perspective on Chinese religious networks, and there is no study that focuses on temple networks in one region. The studies cited above paid attention to the connection and mutual influence between these religious beliefs and southern China, underscoring the importance of examining the operations and missionary outreach of Chinese religious organizations and networks in ancestral hometowns in China in order to obtain a fuller understanding of how overseas Chinese temple networks came into being. This sheds light on the intrinsic connection between Chinese temples and the development of overseas Chinese societies, thus enabling present scholars to better explore and analyze the development model of the social influence which Chinese leaders forged through temple networks. However, the religious networks studied in previous literature are limited to the formation of network connections between different temples or religious sites due to the existence of a joint belief group. It does not include

an understanding of the presence of specific groups or leaders exerting and perpetuating their power through the changes in the leadership structure of various temples and the possibility of consolidating their social influence through these temple networks. For example, See Boon Tiong created his temple network in Singapore and Malacca by drawing on his group's power to exert and consolidate his influence on the Chinese community. This study draws on previous research to examine the connection of Chinese religious networks from a cross-regional perspective. At the same time, instead of examining these Chinese temple networks from the standpoint of belief groups, this study adopts a new perspective in uncovering the integrating power of specific groups or leaders in the temples in different places to discover how they influenced the Chinese community through temple networks.

Following the theories and methods of Historical Anthropology<sup>2</sup> (历史人类学) (Faure 2007; Zheng 2010), this study will focus on analyzing and interpreting the inscriptions of Chinese temples or institutions in Singapore and Malacca in the 19th century, supplemented by newspaper archives in English and Chinese. This study explores the operational patterns and significance behind the temples' rituals, donations, and management appointments, and uncovers the impact of the temple networks on the structure of the Chinese dialect group (Yan et al. 2020). This will shed deeper insight into the strategies employed by Chinese leaders such as See Boon Tiong to attain highly coveted leadership positions and expand their sphere of power and influence within the Chinese community at the time. This paper shall examine the biography and legacy of See Boon Tiong through three main sections. The first section will explore See Boon Tiong's early career in Singapore, focusing on his involvement in Chinese temples and organizations to comprehend his rise to power and influence within the local Chinese community. The second part will elucidate the role See Boon Tiong and his influence networks played in the establishment and development of Cheng Wah Keong Temple when he returned to Malacca. It shall also uncover the relationship between two temples (Cheng Wah Keong Temple and the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple) and the founding of the "Wangchuan" Ceremony. The third section will examine the influential position and power that See Boon Tiong held at Cheng Hoon Teng Temple and Keng Teck Whay in the 1850s, and expound the factors contributing to his continued leadership of the local Chinese community beyond the 1850s. Towards the end of the paper, a summary of See Boon Tiong's influence in Singapore and Malacca will provide a scholarly understanding of the influences of Chinese merchants in the nineteenth century and their attempts to assume leadership positions in the Chinese community through their temple networks, as well as uncovering the composition and influence of the Chinese leadership in Singapore and Malacca.

## 2. See Boon Tiong's Early Career in Singapore (1825–1848)

Born in 1807 in Malacca, See Boon Tiong moved to Singapore in 1825 and became one of the prominent Chinese merchants in the region (Song 2006, p. 104). Since See Boon Tiong was closely related to See Hoot Kee (薛佛记) and shared the same surname, many scholars have mistakenly identified him as the latter's younger brother, See Beng Kee (薛明记), both of whom were prominent figures in the Chinese community of Singapore in the early 19th Century (Wu 1975, p. 60; Chen and Tan 1970, p. 6; Li 2013, p. 26). On closer examination and research, one would also discover that the birth and death dates of See Boon Tiong (1807–1888) differed significantly from See Beng Kee (1798–1826), whose father, See Zhong Yan (薛中衍), died in 1804 (Chng 1984). This goes to show that See Boon Tiong and See Ming Kee are two distinct people, with probably no biological ties. Jerry Dennerline (2022, p. 11), in his most recent journal, regarded See Boon Tiong as See Hoot Kee's cousin and adopted brother. However, this may not be accurate, as some newspapers in 1888 clearly state that See Boon Tiong's parents were first-generation Chinese immigrants to Malacca to escape poverty (Malacca Weekly Chronicle and Mercantile Advertiser 1888a, 1888b, 1888c). On the other hand, See Hoot Kee's father, See Zhong Yan, was born into a wealthy family. Their family backgrounds are remarkably different; hence, it is highly

unlikely that See Boon Tiong and See Hoot Kee were first cousins. Some scholars believed that See Boon Tiong and See Hoot Kee were related not only because they were closely connected and shared the same surname but also because See Hoot Kee had another name called Wen Zhou (文舟), which is similar to the name of See Boon Tiong (文仲). However, since there is no direct evidence pointing to their biological ties as brothers, cousins, or even as adoptive brothers, David Chng (1984) contends that the two were not related, supplementing his claim with newspaper archives (aforementioned) which reported that See Boon Tiong's parents were poor. We are of the view that David Chng's stance is accurate. It is, of course, possible that See Boon Tiong shared a common lineage with See Hoot Kee, as they both trace their ancestry to Dongshan Zhangpu (东山漳浦), Zhangzhou in Fujian, China, although there is no way of acquiring the more specific geographical location of See Boon Tiong's family/ancestral hometown in China other than the knowledge that they came from Zhangzhou, Fujian Province. Nonetheless, in general, for most Hokkien immigrants, the presence of kinship ties is an important factor when considering where to migrate to; these immigrants often chose to migrate to places where they have relatives. Once they arrive at their receiving countries, they established clans for people with the same family name (surname clans/宗族) as a form of support system (Yen 2017, pp. 137–38).

When See Boon Tiong first arrived in Singapore, he started a joint venture with a Chinese businessman named Ching San (surname not found in records) (Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register 1831). The business partnership ended in 1831 when See Boon Tiong, together with See Hoot Kee, Lim Seng Chye (林生财), and Wong Chong San (黄崇山), established the firm "Boon Tiong & Co" (The Straits Times 1846; Song 2006, p. 39, 60–61). It was a Singapore-based trading company with significant commercial interests in Pahang, Kelantan, Pattani, and Songkhla, mainly operating in the sea transportation business. However, the rising influence of See Boon Tiong in the local Chinese community was mainly due to his involvement in the Chinese temple network. The period when See Boon Tiong migrated to Singapore coincided with a huge influx of Hokkien families from Malacca who subsequently dominated the Singaporean Hokkien community (Lim 1975, p. 6; Yen 2017, p. 48). In 1831, See Hoot Kee, a prominent landlord, founded the Heng San Teng Temple which is located in the grounds of the Singapore Hokkien public cemetery. The temple became the head institution of the Singapore Hokkien group that dealt with the affairs of the Hokkien community, including funeral rites for Hokkien families in Singapore (Hue et al. 2019, p. 86). The donation tablets documented that See Hoot Kee contributed the largest amount of money (764.25 Spanish pesos); he was also the first of the five directors of Heng San Teng Temple, successfully consolidating his leadership role as the head of the local Hokkien group (Jao 1970, p. 23). See Boon Tiong, although not a prominent figure in Heng San Teng Temple, also donated 60 dollars to the temple (Jao 1970, p. 24). See's donation was considered significant during that era. His position as one of the founders of Heng San Teng Temple shows that he already had some financial and social influence in Singapore.

In addition to donating to Heng San Teng Temple, the following year, See Boon Tiong, together with Yeo Kim Swee (杨金水), Chia Poh Eng (谢宝荣), Tan You Long (陈有郎), and others for a total of 36 Malacca-Hokkien-born Chinese members, established one of the first Chinese mutual aid associations in Singapore, Keng Teck Whay (Dean and Hue 2016, pp. 117–18). These 36 founders were closely associated with the Hokkien Zhangzhou and Quanzhou (泉州) groups in Malacca. Among all of the 20 surnames, many of them came from prominent Malacca Hokkien families (Song 2015, pp. 35–36). These include Chua Yean Ling (蔡延龄), grandchild of Kapitan (甲必丹), Chua Su Cheong (蔡士章); Tan You Long (陈有郎), brother of a prominent Singaporean pioneer Tan Tock Seng (陈笃生) (Kua 1995, pp. 206, 213). The founders of Keng Teck Whay were all Malacca local-born Chinese. Their families were among the first Chinese groups to settle in the region, most of whom intermarried with the natives, and their descendants were called Peranakan Chinese. The Peranakan Chinese formed their community in Malacca, and



most of them belonged to the merchant class, which dominated the political and economic activities of the local Chinese community for a long time. Apart from members of Keng Teck Whay, pioneers and community leaders in Singapore, such as See Hoot Kee, Tan Tock Seng, and Tan Kim Seng, also hailed from Malacca Peranakan Chinese families. These families formed a close-knit community in Malacca, and held a monopoly over the positions of Chinese Kapitan and Cheng Hoon Teng Tengzhu during both the Dutch and British colonial periods (Song 2015, pp. 35–36). It comes as no surprise, too, that the networks and family dynasties of the founders of Keng Teck Whay unanimously hailed from the upper class of the Malacca Hokkien Group at the time.

As members of the Malacca Peranakan Hokkien community, these early immigrants uprooted themselves from Malacca and moved to Singapore, a foreign land, with the aim of expanding their family's influence. These migrants formed a fraternity with their compatriots to maintain relations and to further develop the common interests shared among the upper-class families. The members of the fraternity took a blood oath in front of The Three Divine Officials (三官大帝) in Keng Teck Whay, and each of them contributed 100 dollars to the organization's fund (Dean and Hue 2016, pp. 115–16). Membership is exclusive, as Keng Teck Whay only receives the direct descendants of these founders as members of the fraternity (Song 2006, p. 39; Wu 1975, pp. 61–62). Although, on paper, Keng Teck Whay was not an association based on lineage or clan, it was founded with the sole intention of jointly safeguarding the commercial interests of these Malacca Peranakan families. The founders of Keng Teck Whay forged a kinship bond by swearing in front of the deities, and their descendants have maintained this "family kinship" for 150 years (Dean and Hue 2016, p. 115). As was the case in southern China, the family or lineage clan was the most basic unit that governed the Chinese diaspora community in Nanyang (南洋). Chinese leaders relied on the socio-economic clout of their families to expand their influence in society; the closely connected families would form alliances to further expand their social and economic network (Yen 1986, pp. 67–72). To successfully gain a foothold and influence among the Singapore Chinese diasporic community, the Malacca Hokkien merchants from the Peranakan community who arrived in Singapore chose to establish virtual kinship ties to ensure continued cooperation and mutual assistance among these families. The males from the Peranakan Chinese community were known as baba, and hence, Keng Teck Whay was named "Baba Kongsi" (峇峇公司) by the locals, which signaled its position in the Singapore Chinese community (Wu 1975, pp. 61–62).

David Chng (1984) argues that See Boon Tiong was from a low-income family, and he built his fortune from almost nothing after he arrived in Singapore. However, considering that it was only six years before See Boon Tiong moved to Singapore in 1831, it would have been difficult for him to be involved in the founding of Heng San Teng Temple and Keng Teck Whay in his twenties without a significant amount of wealth and prestige. Therefore, it is more likely that See Boon Tiong was from the upper (or at least, upper-middle) socio-economic class of the Hokkiens rather than from a low-income family background. Although newspaper archival records indicated that See Boon Tiong's parents were poor (Malacca Weekly Chronicle and Mercantile Advertiser 1888a, 1888b, 1888c), it was likely that his parents amassed a substantial amount of wealth after migrating to Malacca. By See Boon Tiong's generation, he already had the requisite capital to pursue a career in Singapore. It should not be forgotten that the See clan had a strong presence in Malacca. They were more inclined to expand their influence rather than settle down and make a living in Singapore, as See Boon Tiong and See Hoot Kee showed during their tenure as leaders in Singapore. From this perspective, we can better understand why See Boon Tiong was motivated to form a solid social network despite moving to Singapore for only a few years.

The network founded by See Boon Tiong was an interpersonal network encompassing the members of Keng Teck Whay in Singapore. For example, the business activities of See Boon Tiong were closely connected with Chinese merchants such as Chia Poh Eng, Yeo Kim Swee, and Tan Coon Suey (陈坤水) (Song 2006, pp. 60–61; Singapore Chronicle

and [Commercial Register 1833](#)), all of whom were co-founders of Keng Teck Whay. One member, Tan Coon Suey, was expelled for breaking the organization's rules by marrying the wife of his confederate, Khoo Gui Lang (许贵郎), in 1831 ([Kua 1995](#), p. 80; [2019](#), p. 7). Nonetheless, this did not affect his cordial relations with the other members, and with See Boon Tiong in particular. Both Tan and See became administrators of the estate of the deceased merchant Lee Meng Kow in 1833 ([Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register 1833](#)). At that time, See Boon Tiong was only 26 years old. This illustrates how See was already making an impact and building up his reputation and influence among Singapore's Chinese business elites at a young age.

As well as forging connections with members of Keng Teck Whay and other Chinese merchants, See Boon Tiong was also acquainted with James Fraser, a European architect based in Singapore, and A.L. Johnston, a prominent local businessman and high-ranking official of the colonial government. Johnston's political position in the government brought about more intimate contact between See and the British colonial administrators ([Wright and Cartwright 1908](#), p. 717). Between 1843 and 1845, See Boon Tiong was invited to attend meetings held by the colonial government, where he represented the Chinese community to discuss issues pertaining to the rebuilding of pig farms and the land regulations implemented by the government ([The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser 1843a, 1845](#)).

See also played an active role in assisting the colonial government in their projects. In 1843, See responded to the British government's call for a donation of 10 dollars to fund the construction of a new Christian church in Singapore ([The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser 1843b](#)). Apart from See, there was only one other benefactor from the Chinese community, Hoo Ah Kay (胡亚基) from the Cantonese community, who donated 5 dollars ([The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser 1843a](#)).

Among the Singapore Chinese community, See donated 224 dollars for the founding of Thian Hock Keng Temple in 1840, the temple that replaced Heng San Teng Temple as the highest socio-cultural and religious institution of the local Hokkien community. The number of causes supported by See by the 1840s had increased manifold compared to a decade earlier ([Chen and Tan 1970](#), p. 58). We can deduce that See Boon Tiong was actively involved in activities initiated by local Chinese temples as well as causes initiated by the colonial government in order to gain more attention and prestige in the local community.

However, despite his achievements in Singapore, See Boon Tiong's influence in the local Chinese community was only second to See Hoot Kee, Tan Che Sang (陈送), and Tan Tock Seng. This is evident from his lower rank/status indicated in the archival records of Chinese temples. Firstly, his donations to the temples never made it to the top of the list<sup>3</sup> ([Jao 1970](#), pp. 23–24; [Chen and Tan 1970](#), pp. 58, 284), meaning that there were many other benefactors who donated larger amounts. Furthermore, See was not elected to be the leader in any Chinese temple or local clans and community organizations, pointing to the likelihood that many people held a higher status than him in the Singapore Chinese community. In the Singapore Chinese community at that time, the more donations one made to Chinese temples, the more attention one received, and thus the more prestige one gained; correspondingly, the more prestige one had, the more power and status one enjoyed in the Chinese community ([Chong 2007](#), p. 112). The above illustrates that although See Boon Tiong was indeed a leader of the local Chinese community, he was yet a part of the top echelons of leadership. The colonial government was also aware of See Boon Tiong's limitations, which explained why he was never given a prominent role in the civil service despite his close relations with colonial officials. Keng Teck Whay, of which See Boon Tiong was a member, was not powerful enough to influence the entire Singapore Chinese Hokkien community because of the members' low economic clout. The donations of Keng Teck Whay's members to the founding of Heng San Teng Temple, Thian Hock Keng Temple, and later to the Chong Wen Ge, Cui Ying School ([Jao 1970](#), pp. 23–24; [Chen and Tan 1970](#), pp. 58–64, 284–87, 292–94), show that although they participated in the funding, none of them were strong enough to constitute a strong influence within these temples or

organizations.<sup>4</sup> See Boon Tiong and the group behind him had not attained the status of top-tier leadership in the Singapore Chinese community. Perhaps See Boon Tiong realized that his social development in Singapore was stagnant and even deteriorating, which led to his announcement in 1846 that he was retiring from Boon Tiong Company, along with See Hoot Kee ([The Straits Times 1846](#)). He returned to Malacca two years later, and his return to Malacca became a significant turning point in his life.

### 3. The Important Role of See Boon Tiong in the Construction and Development of Malacca Cheng Wah Keong Temple (1848–1854)

Around 1848, See Boon Tiong, who had just returned to Malacca, along with Tan Coon Suey, initiated the establishment of Cheng Wah Keong Temple, of which they were both directors (董事) ([Franke and Chen 1982](#), p. 303). The Cheng Wah Keong Temple is a temple for the Zhangzhou people to worship Zhu Wangye (朱府王爷), a deity initially introduced to Malacca by fishermen from Zhangzhou ([Middlebrook 1939](#), p. 98). Initially, it was enshrined in an atap house (wooden house). Worship to Wangye was prevalent in the Zhangzhou and Quanzhou areas of Minnan (闽南) (Southern of Fujian), China, where the Minnan immigrants came south and brought the statues of their native gods with them to be venerated, in order to obtain the gods' blessings and to ward off evil spirits ([Ong 2009](#), pp. 294–97). Even today, Wangye's beliefs are still generally prevalent in southern Fujian. Although the god Wangye may have originated in mythology, and there are several versions of its origin, Wangye was typically regarded by the Minnan people as the protector of the region ([Tan 2020](#), p. 18). When the Minnan people migrated to a foreign land, they needed spiritual support. In addition, early Malacca was plagued by diseases, and the statue of Zhu Wangye, who was brought in from southern Fujian, could score a sense of intimacy with the Minnan immigrants, who naturally regarded the Wangye as a god who blessed them with safety and good health ([Ong 2009](#), pp. 291–92).

However, in the early days, the Malacca Minnan community's socio-economic clout was not strong, and so the gods had to be accommodated in modest wooden houses as makeshift shrines. By the late 1840s, devotion to Zhu Wangye was gaining recognition among the local Hokkien leadership. By this time, the economic clout of Hokkien merchants had grown substantially, and they could afford to build a dignified temple for Zhu Wangye. More importantly, the cholera pandemic, which swept through Malaya in the 1840s, inspired the Malaccan Hokkien community to build a temple to Zhu Wangye and to promptly organize a religious procession, with faith that the ritual cleansing event would banish the pestilence and safeguard the peace of the region ([Tan 2020](#), p. 18; [Dennerline 2022](#), p. 19). This is because the religious rituals of Zhu Wangye comprised not just attending the temple liturgies. Nonetheless, according to the tradition in the southern Fujian region, local believers would regularly hold processions in honor of Zhu Wangye, with the intention of providing the local people protection and deliverance from evil spirits, putting an end to pestilence, and to bestow divine blessings of peace and prosperity. These ritual activities are collectively known as the "Wangchuan" Ceremony (see below for details) ([Tan 2020](#), p. 18). By this time, See Boon Tiong and Tan Coon Suey became directors and were prepared to construct a new temple, the Cheng Wah Keong Temple, for Zhu Wangye. The construction of Cheng Wah Keong Temple received the full support of the Malacca Hokkien leaders. Besides the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple's Tengzhu, See Hoot Kee, donations poured in from at least 14 Keng Teck Whay members who were based in Singapore ([Franke and Chen 1982](#), pp. 303–5). The total contribution from the Singapore-based Keng Teck Whay members amounted to 617 dollars, which was more than 40% of the total amount raised (1497 dollars). Furthermore, two of the directors of Cheng Wah Keong Temple mentioned above and one of its premiers (总理), Tan Koh Teou (陈国朝), were founders of Keng Teck Whay ([Franke and Chen 1982](#), p. 303). Therefore, the contribution and investment from Keng Teck Whay's members was very significant.

The founding of Cheng Wah Keong Temple was only the first of several fundraising drives. Three years later, the temple launched a donation drive for the construction of a

wooden Fairy Boat (仙舫) to give thanks to the gods and to bestow blessings on devotees (Franke and Chen 1982, p. 307; Soo 2017, p. 79). By this time, See Boon Tiong and Tan Coon Suey had stepped down as directors, but the “general chairman” (总会首) was still selected from among the founders of Keng Teck Whay. See Eng San (薛荣山) assumed the position of chairman, which is indicative of the dominance of the See clan over temple affairs (Franke and Chen 1982, p. 307). Eight Keng Teck Whay members, including See Eng San, contributed 89 dollars, accounting for 35% of the total funds raised (350 dollars) (Franke and Chen 1982, pp. 305–7). The spirit and cultural significance behind the making of the Fairy Boat are closely related to the “Wangchuan” Ceremony. According to the folk traditions from the Minnan counties, temples dedicated to the Wangye deity, such as Zhu Wangye, would regularly construct a large wooden king’s boat, called “Wangchuan”, and hold “Wangjiao” (王礁), a religious ritual to invite the god Wangye to descend from heaven to earth (Li 2013, pp. 16–25; Soo 2017, p. 79). The devotees would eventually take the “Wangchuan” to the seashore and burn it, a symbol that Wangye has expelled the evil spirits responsible for plagues and the other demons tormenting the community after visiting the area to achieve the final goal of exorcising the demons for the people (Ong 2009, pp. 294–97; Li 2013, pp. 13–16).

Whether in the southern Fujian or in the Chinese diasporic communities, the conduct of the “Wangchuan” Ceremony could be considered one of the most significant religious rituals for the Hokkien people; the main event may last several days and involve carrying the Wangye statues in procession (Tan 2020, p. 19). Almost all devotees of Wangye participate in the procession, for it is believed that individuals who do not participate in the event would fail to receive blessing from the gods and are excluded from the ritual circle of the religious beliefs, a situation which was hardly acceptable (Faure 2007, pp. 193–217; Dean and Zheng 2009, p. 16). While the early devotees of Zhu Wangye in Malacca were unable to host a procession for the god from their native traditions due to financial constraints, the sacredness of “Wangchuan” was imprinted on the collective memory of the believers. Hence, the construction of the Fairy Boat by Cheng Wah Keong Temple was for this purpose. The Fairy Boat enshrined at the altar was not “Wangchuan”. Three years later, the wish to make a “Wangchuan” was fulfilled when Cheng Wah Keong Temple hosted Malacca’s first “Wangchuan” Ceremony, which continues until today (Li 2013, p. 13; Soo 2017, p. 79). After the beginning of the first “Wangchuan” Ceremony in the mid-nineteenth century, it was held once every five to eight years until 1880; by then, other Wangye deities in Malacca, such as Chi Wangye (池王爷) from Yong Chuan Tian Temple (勇全殿), Li Wangye (李王爷) from Ching Hau Kung (清侯宫), Wen Wangye (温王爷) from Wah Teck Keong (华德宫), and Bai Wangye (白王爷) from Yu Hua Gong (玉华宫) started participating in the processions, transforming the “Wangchuan” Ceremony into a large-scale Chinese religious celebration co-sponsored by the five Wangyes (Li 2013, pp. 13–15). This also demonstrates the growing strength of the Wangye religious beliefs in Malacca and mutual friendship and collaboration among the followers of the deities.

It is worth noting that See Boon Tiong and Tan Coon Suey presented a plaque inscribed with the phrase “Deter Southern Barbarians” (威震南蛮) when Cheng Wah Keong Temple was being built in 1847 (Franke and Chen 1982, p. 301). The plaque’s phrase refers to Zhu Wangye’s local patrols, which shook the southern state (from the perspective of Chinese people, Malacca is referred to as the “Southern State” because it is located south of China) (Li 2013, p. 26). These significant events—the plaque in 1847, the completion of Cheng Wah Keong Temple in 1848, the making of the wooden Fairy Boat in 1851, and finally, the “Wangchuan” Ceremony in 1854—point to the collective effort of the Malacca Hokkien community, under the auspices of the community leaders, especially the leaders of Zhangzhou, in recreating the traditional “Wangchuan” Ceremony in Malacca. In this series of preparations, See Boon Tiong, who has just returned to Malacca, and the Keng Teck Whay members under his leadership, are said to have been instrumental in initiating and promoting this event. According to Song Yanpeng (Song 2015, pp. 66–69), between 1845 and 1846, Malacca Tengzhu See Hoot Kee worked to re-establish the authority of the



former Chinese Kapitan of Malacca through the restoration of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple and the consecration of Kapitan Li Wei King (李为经) and Tay Hong Yong (郑芳扬). Around 1843, See Hoot Kee of Zhangzhou took over the position of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple Tengzhu from Tan Kim Seng of Yongchun<sup>5</sup> (永春); Tengzhu was the highest position of supreme leader of the Malacca Chinese community in the 19th century (Song 2015, pp. 59–63).

Cheng Hoon Teng Temple was the highest institution and the most important temple in the Malacca Chinese community; the title of Tengzhu was used to refer to the chairperson of the temple. Cheng Hoon Teng Temple is the oldest Chinese temple in Malaysia, founded around 1673 by Kapitan Tay Hong Yong (Tan 2020, p. 14). The temple was dedicated to both Mazu (妈祖) and Guanyin (观音). The temple also played a vital role in functioning as the political command center for the Chinese community, with the pavilion director usually also serving as the Chinese Kapitan (Dean 2018, p. 105). When the British government abolished the Kapitan system in the early nineteenth century, the local Chinese community elected the Tengzhu of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple as the supreme leader of the Malacca Chinese community, as evidenced by the temple's authority in the area (Song 2015, pp. 59–63). Indeed, in the early days of dialect group politics in the Chinese community, the temple management committee was comprised of wealthy Hokkien merchants from the Malacca Peranakan community; the leader who dominated the temple naturally became the supreme leader of the local Hokkien community (Song 2015, pp. 59–63; Dean 2018, p. 105). Thus, the struggle of See Hoot Kee to take over the position of Tengzhu in the 1840s demonstrated the power struggle of the local Hokkien leaders based on their different geopolitical groups. See Hoot Kee's contribution to Cheng Hoon Teng Temple was mainly for him to consolidate his position in the leadership hierarchy of the local Hokkien community. Thus, a traditional liturgy, such as the "Wangchuan" Ceremony led by the Zhangzhou community, was essential for him to build up his prestige as Tengzhu at the grassroots level of the Chinese community.

According to Clause 8 of the *Gaguo Qingyunting Tiaoguibu* (呷国青云亭条规簿), "both the chiefs of the Gan Dong Zhu Wangye (Cheng Wah Keong Temple) and the chief of the Yi Li Wangye can throw themselves over the chiefs, who are the chiefs of the furnace and must not be shirked," (干冬朱王爷、怡力王爷公, 皆能掷过诸里长为炉主头家, 不得推诿) indicating that Cheng Hoon Teng Temple has the authority to set the rules for the leadership structure and succession (Chen 1903). The superior–subordinate relationship between the two temples is distinct. Cheng Wah Keong Temple could be viewed as an extension of the power and network of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple in Malacca. The establishment of the former could not be dissociated from Tengzhu See Hoot Kee. Following their retreat from their ventures in Singapore in 1846 (see above), See Hoot Kee and See Boon Tiong devoted themselves to developing the community in Malacca. The importance of Cheng Wah Keong Temple lies in its "Wangchuan" Ceremony, which is not simply a religious ritual but has the power to integrate the community. According to the theory of historical anthropology, religious activities such as the "Wangchuan" Ceremony bring together the area's people where the gods visit, creating a "ritual alliance" (仪式联盟) within the community (Zheng 2010, pp. 35–37).

The concept of a "ritual alliance" was conceived by a group of scholars who conducted field research in southern China to study the formation of social and organizational power networks by local communities through religious rituals. The appearance of ritual alliances originated from groups of villages that performed daily rituals, shared a higher-order temple with a temple committee, and organized annual or longer temporal cycles of processions of deities from the temples through each village in the alliance (Dean and Zheng 2009, pp. 10–11). Hence, the religious processions caused a bond to develop among those who participated in the ritual activity, and excluded those who did not, which, in turn, further strengthened the group's cohesion within the "ritual circle" (Zheng 2010, pp. 35–37; Faure 2007, pp. 193–217). Kenneth Dean and Zheng Zhenman (Dean and Zheng 2009, pp. 16–17) contend that the temple committee and "ritual alliance" formed a

second government in these villages, as the ritual activities are more effective than the local government in organizing and mobilizing households due to the need for religious rituals by the villagers. The “Wangchuan” Ceremony in Malacca not only meets the criteria for integrating the community into a “ritual alliance” through the religious processions, it is also a collective memory and traditional religious activity of the Minnan people (Ong 2009, p. 294).

Thus, in the Nanyang (Southeast Asia) region, due to the heterogeneity of the Chinese diasporic community (comprising people from diverse dialect groups), the “Wangchuan” Ceremony does not attract the entire local Chinese community to participate. Nonetheless, members of the Malacca Hokkien community, who are exceptionally familiar with the religious belief, will be quickly integrated into the ritual activities by forming a “ritual alliance”. The Zhangzhou group, especially See Boon Tiong, who led the event, showcased its prominent position, albeit subtly. In contrast to the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple, which only celebrated its religious rituals in the temples, the Wangye procession of Cheng Wah Keong Temple, initiated by the Malacca Zhangzhou Group, was able to influence and mobilize the entire Hokkien grassroots community to form a “ritual alliance”, and quickly established the social status of Zhangzhou leaders. One of the purposes of the religious procession activities held in the villages in Southern China was to lead the temple committee to display its martial prowess and strength of numbers in processions while also demonstrating its relative status and seniority by claiming privileged positions in the “ritual circle” (Dean and Zheng 2009, p. 19). Such ceremonies, which were planned and executed by See Boon Tiong and his social networks, were the best way for the Malacca Zhangzhou group to consolidate their leadership position and authority in the community.

The leadership of See Boon Tiong in Cheng Wah Keong Temple was a strategic starting point for him to ascend the leadership ladder and attain a higher position and status in the Malacca Chinese community in the 1850s and 1860s. However, See Boon Tiong did not ascend that ladder on his own; he harnessed support from Keng Teck Whay in Singapore. The members of Keng Teck Whay had been involved in the donation of the Malacca Poh San Teng Temple (宝山亭) since 1831. Although the members numbered 12, (or 20%) out of the 56 donors, their contribution was only 73.40 dollars, or 18% of the total 408 dollars (Franke and Chen 1982, p. 276), indicating their modest financial standing. Since 1848, their donations to Cheng Wah Keong Temple had overwhelmed the other Hokkien groups and leaders (see above). However, their contributions to Chinese temples or other institutions in Singapore at this stage were still insignificant (see above). This reflects the fact that although the group was founded in Singapore, some of its members, such as See Boon Tiong, See Eng San, and even Tan Coon Suey, had shifted the center of their philanthropic activities and beneficiaries to their hometown, Malacca, by the end of the 1840s, which was the primary reason for their prolonged dominance of Cheng Wah Keong Temple. The dominance of Cheng Wah Keong Temple by the Keng Teck Whay group coincided with the return of See Boon Tiong and See Hoot Kee from Singapore between 1846 and 1848, and undoubtedly indicated that they would be able to penetrate the network of influence in the temple of Malacca. See Hoot Kee died in December 1847 (*The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* 1848), but this did not affect the rapidly rising influence of the Keng Teck Whay group in Malacca, as evidenced by the continued development and construction of Cheng Wah Keong Temple. In the 1850s, See Boon Tiong’s social influence in Malacca was not undermined by the death of his most important partner, See Hoot Kee. He was able to subtly counter the power of the new Tengzhu Tan Kim Seng (who was re-elected as Tengzhu after the death of See Hoot Kee) and rose to become one of the top leaders of the local Chinese community.

#### 4. See Boon Tiong’s Temple Networks and His Rising Influence (1854–1888)

The career and achievements of See Boon Tiong from 1848 to 1862 could not be ascertained from local Chinese inscriptions other than those in Cheng Wah Keong Temple. Fortunately, there were relevant reports in English newspapers from that period which

documented his deeds and contributions. In 1849, when the Malacca Resident Councillor, Mr. Blundell, stepped down from his post, See Boon Tiong and a group of Malacca leaders presented a thanksgiving letter to him. In that letter, out of all the ethnic Chinese in that list, See Boon Tiong's name was placed right at the top, followed by Tan Coon Suey, Chua Yean Keng (蔡延庆), See Eng Wat (薛荣樾) (second son of See Hoot Kee), and others ([The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser 1849](#)). Two years later, the Malacca Chinese community sent another thank you letter to the outgoing Governor of the Straits Settlements, Mr. W.J. Butterworth. In this letter, See Boon Tiong's name was also listed at the top as the chairman (馆主) of Malacca's Hokkien Huay Kuan (福建会馆). Chee Eam Chuan (徐炎泉) and Khoo Eng Chean (许永占) were listed below See Boon Tiong, and many Chinese leaders' names were not included in that letter ([The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser 1851](#)). Both letters aptly indicate that See Boon Tiong was at least one of the top leaders of the Chinese community in Malacca at the time, and had a higher status than the chairman of Hokkien Huay Kuan, Chee Eam Chuan. The influence of See Boon Tiong could also be inferred from the inscriptions of the "Monument to the Restoration of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple" in 1867 (重修青云亭碑记), where See Boon Tiong was one of the eight directors of the temple. He contributed 800 dollars to the restoration of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple in 1862<sup>6</sup> ([Franke and Chen 1982](#), p. 256). Despite the time lapse, the members of Keng Teck Whay were still influential in the Malacca temple. Out of a total of 133 people, 6 of them gave 3,752 dollars, which accounted for more than 20% of the total (17,635 dollars) ([Franke and Chen 1982](#), pp. 256–58). See Boon Tiong and Chee Eam Chuan, both of whom had links with Keng Teck Whay, were the directors. Lee Tin Guan (李珍元) and See Eng San were the premiers, and Chee Eam Chuan's name was at the top of the list, preceding Cheng Hoon Teng Temple Tengzhu Tan Kim Seng ([Franke and Chen 1982](#), p. 256).

Chee Eam Chuan was the son of a wealthy Malacca Zhangzhou businessman, Chee Kim Guan (徐钦元). Chee Kim Guan was one of the founding members of Keng Teck Whay who maintained close contact with See Boon Tiong ([Dean and Hue 2016](#), pp. 117–18). According to the letters of Keng Teck Whay in 1857 which we discovered, Chee Eam Chuan was one of its members. Up till the time when Tan Kim Seng took over the Tengzhu position from See Hoot Kee, Chee Eam Chuan's name was listed below the Tengzhu's name in the fundraising records of the temples in Malacca ([Franke and Chen 1982](#), pp. 285, 303), implying that the position of chairman of Hokkien Huay Kuan was lower than that of Tengzhu. However, the inscriptions of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple in 1867 indicated a reversal of power: although Tengzhu Tan Kim Seng made the highest donation of 3200 dollars, his name was placed below Chee Eam Chuan, who gave only 2000 dollars ([Franke and Chen 1982](#), p. 256). Besides, the position of Tan Kim Seng was being referred to as one of the Directors without explicit mention of his Tengzhu title ([Franke and Chen 1982](#), p. 256). This detracted from the conventions of the Malacca Chinese temple's inscriptions, especially Cheng Hoon Teng Temple. The information in the inscription implies that Tan Kim Seng's Tengzhu status was inferior to that of Chee Eam Chuan, the chairman of Hokkien Huay Kuan, thereby suggesting that an erosion of authority and prestige of the Tengzhu position had taken place by then. Back in 1848, when Tan Kim Seng had just taken over as Tengzhu of See Hoot Kee, Chee Eam Chuan, in his capacity as the chairman of Hokkien Huay Kuan, erected a monument of merit for the first Tengzhu, Liang Mei Ji (梁美吉), together with the elders of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple ([Jao 1970](#), p. 30). As Liang Meiji passed away in 1839, it seemed that Chee Eam Chuan had no intention of showering him with the highest honors. Instead, it points to the influence of Hokkien Huay Kuan (through Tan Kim Seng) on Cheng Hoon Teng Temple ([Song 2015](#), pp. 56–57). Chee Eam Chuan, See Boon Tiong, and See Hoot Kee were all leaders of the Malacca Zhangzhou community, and although Tan Kim Seng, who hails from Yongchun, had amassed great wealth, he was no match for the former in terms of the power wielded over the entire group. This was the most probable reason for Tan Kim Seng's reluctance to participate in Malacca's temple activities and why he chose to focus on Singapore ([Wong 1963](#), pp. 32–33). With their shared background from

Keng Teck Whay, the See and Chee families controlled Cheng Wah Keong Temple and Poh Onn Kong Temple<sup>7</sup> (保安宮), respectively (Franke and Chen 1982, pp. 286–88, 303–8), and their influence extended to Cheng Hoon Teng Temple. Out of the eight directors of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple in the 1860s (Franke and Chen 1982, p. 256), half were from the See, Chee, and Chua families<sup>8</sup> of Zhangzhou, all three of which were prominent surnames in Keng Teck Whay<sup>9</sup> (Dean and Hue 2016, pp. 117–88).

Although in the 1850s and 1860s, Chee Eam Chuan, the chairman of the Hokkien Huay Kuan, would have been more prominent than the Tengzhu, Tan Kim Seng, in Malacca, this did not translate to him wielding the highest prestige and sway over the Hokkien group and Chinese community in Malacca. The thanksgiving letter published by the English press in 1851 lists Chee Eam Chuan as the second most important Chinese leader, after See Boon Tiong in Malacca (*The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* 1851). This clearly indicated that the latter enjoyed higher prestige than the former. Records from 1857 which listed their positions in Keng Teck Whay documented Chee Eam Chuan as the “nephew” (侄輩) of See Boon Tiong. According to the Chinese Confucian ethic of the order of seniority (长幼有序的辈分伦理), it was not possible for Chee Eam Chuan to surpass the personal clout and prestige of See Boon Tiong because of the latter’s seniority. The name of See Boon Tiong was placed below Chee Eam Chuan in the inscriptions of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple in 1867 because the Chinese community at the time still emphasized the ancient Chinese idea of social hierarchy (Teoh 1997, pp. 14–16). The placement of Chee Eam Chuan and even Tan Kim Seng’s name right in front was to emphasize the fact that they held a high position in Chinese institutions. This was a normal phenomenon which was consistent with numerous Chinese inscriptions. However, the British had no idea of the social hierarchy of the Chinese community, so the thanksgiving letters were listed in the order of the leader’s power and prestige, highlighting See Boon Tiong’s status as the most influential leader in the Malacca Hokkien community. In contrast, Tan Kim Seng rarely participated in local activities during his second term as Malacca Tengzhu, including not donating to the Poh Onn Kong Temple in 1856 and 1862. Tan was also absent during the founding of Geok Hu Keng Temple (玉虛宮) in 1864 (Franke and Chen 1982, pp. 286–88, 317–19). As See Boon Tiong was the highest ranking leader in the local Chinese community, he attracted the attention of the British colonial government, who appointed him as a Security Council member and Municipal Commissioner in 1860. See also became the first Chinese Justice Peace of Malacca in that same year (*The Straits Times* 1863; Song 2006, p. 105; Lai 2017; Lin 2022). The British government would only confer official positions on the leaders of the Chinese community, particularly Kapitan or Justice Peace, which was equivalent to bestowing on these leaders the rightful authority over the Chinese community (Wong 1963, pp. 30–31). This attests to See Boon Tiong’s leadership position in the Chinese community in Malacca.

The burgeoning career of See Boon Tiong in Malacca was influenced by his network of temples, the source of which was Keng Teck Whay. These influences were not restricted to Cheng Wah Keong Temple from the 1850s onwards, but also expanded to include Cheng Hoon Teng Temple, Poh Onn Kong Temple, Poh San Teng, and Geok Hu Keng Temple<sup>10</sup> (Franke and Chen 1982, pp. 256, 278, 286–88, 317–19). The temple networks’ “siege” of Tan Kim Seng eventually brought about a dramatic change in the power structure of the Malacca Hokkien Group. Dozens of Keng Teck Whay letters from 1857, which have been preserved till this day, reveal that members of Keng Teck Whay who returned to Malacca identified “Boon Tiong as the senior in Malacca, and he needed to be made the eldest” (呷中文仲官先辈, 务必立他为长者), which explains one of the reasons why See Boon Tiong was given the prestige of being the highest ranking and most respected Chinese leader in Malacca. The content of the letters confirmed that it was not until 1857 that Keng Teck Whay elected See Boon Tiong as the head of the Association in Malacca to facilitate the delegation of duties. See Boon Tiong was elected as a leader because he already enjoyed a lofty reputation, which was a stark contrast to Tan Kim Seng’s inability to exercise the power he wielded even though he obtained the position of Tengzhu. The content of the



letters also mentioned that See Boon Tiong later proposed the use of the grounds of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple to continue the legacy and custom of celebrating the birthday of the Three Divine Officials of Keng Teck Whay in Singapore, which was also unanimously agreed upon by everyone, reflecting its dominant position in Cheng Hoon Teng Temple. Cheng Hoon Teng Temple and Keng Teck Whay were established by people from different ancestral hometowns and they honored different deities; in fact, the former did not worship the Three Divine Officials (Purcell 1948, p. 84; Yen 1986, p. 11). However, See Boon Tiong explained that he wanted to loan its venue temporarily, and he did not even mention that he needed to seek permission from the temple leaders. The applause of the members also seemed to show it was common practice to share temple venues. From this, it could be inferred that the management of the affairs of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple had been taken over by Keng Teck Whay, to the extent of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple being subsumed under the management committee of Keng Teck Whay.

These events demonstrate that in the 1850s and 1860s, See Boon Teong wielded a great deal of influence over the Chinese community in Malacca, and his reputation surpassed that of the Tengzhu, Tan Kim Seng. After the demise of See Hoot Kee, although the Zhangzhou leaders were no longer able to take up the post of Tengzhu, the influence network formed by See Boon Tiong's group in the local Hokkien temples succeeded in curtailing the extent of influence which Tan Kim Seng could wield in these temples, and in so doing, diminished his prestige in the local Chinese community. Understandably, the authority of the Cheng Hoon Teng Tengzhu was at a low ebb during Tan Kim Seng's tenure, so he was seldom active in Malacca. See Boon Tiong, who enjoyed much prestige in the local community, replaced the "power vacuum" left by Tan Kim Seng. See Boon Tiong's career trajectory reflected the control and dominance which the local Zhangzhou community had over the leadership of the Malacca Hokkien community in the mid-nineteenth century. Even if Tan Kim Seng had taken over the post of Tengzhu, he would not have been able to reverse the disadvantage he encountered in Malacca. The embarrassing situation faced by Tan Kim Seng is most likely related to the unacceptance of his top leadership position by the Malacca Hokkien community. As mentioned above, the families that dominated the Malacca Chinese community in the early days were the Peranakans from the Zhangzhou and Quanzhou groups, including See Hoot Kee, and the founders of Keng Teck Whay all came from the same groups. They were ostensibly not receptive to prospect of having the Yongchun group, represented by Tan Kim Seng, dominating the local Hokkien community. Perhaps this is the reason which led to the earlier case of See Hoot Kee taking over the post of Tengzhu from Tan Kim Seng. However, the rejection of the Yongchun group by the Zhangzhou and Quanzhou groups changed after several years. With the death of Chee Eam Chuan and Tan Kim Seng in the late 1860s, Tan Beng Swee, the son of Tan Kim Seng, took over as Tengzhu, and the power and authority of the Tengzhu was restored. The fact that Tan Beng Swee's (陈明水) name was listed as the first name on the list of benefactors for Poh Onn Kong Temple in 1866 and Poh San Teng Temple in 1888, whereby he was also referred to as Tengzhu (Franke and Chen 1982, pp. 278, 290), attested to the transformation in the attitude of the Hokkien community in Malacca, where they finally accepted that the Tengzhu position could be helmed by someone with Yongchun ancestry.

Between the 1860s and 1870s, the influence of See Boon Tiong in Malacca showed no signs of dissipation or diminishment. During this period, See cooperated with Singapore's opium farmer Cheang Hong Lim (章芳林) to monopolize the Malacca opium revenue farms. In 1875, he worked with Chan Tek Chiang (曾德璋) and Tan Tek Guan (陈德源) to mediate and reconcile a fight between two Chinese secret societies in Malacca (Chng 1984). These incidents point to the reality that See Boon Tiong still had a strong influence over the local Chinese community. However, the petition and thanksgiving letters sent by the Malacca Chinese community to the British officials in 1873 and 1875 indicated that See Boon Tiong was no longer the most powerful Chinese leader in the area, as his name, although still at the front of the list, was listed after Chua Yean Keng, See Moh Guan (薛茂元) (fourth son of See Hoot Kee), and Chan Tek Chiang (Straits Times Overland Journal

1873; *The Straits Times* 1875). This suggests that his influence had diminished by then. By then, See Boon Tiong was approaching 70 years of age, and he was probably no longer that keen in expanding his social network. Despite his old age, See actively developed his business activities in Negeri Sembilan, including investing in tapioca plantations and tin mining (Wright and Cartwright 1908, p. 717; Khoo 1972, pp. 145–46). However, See Boon Tiong remained active in temple activities in Malacca. For example, the Poh San Teng Temple inscriptions of 1888 and 1891 contained records of donations from See Boon Tiong (Franke and Chen 1982, pp. 278–81). The inscriptions from the year 1888 showed that See Boon Tiong, along with Chua Yean Keng, See Moh Guan, Chan Tek Chiang, and nine other leaders, contributed a total of 120 dollars, second only to Tengzhu Tan Beng Swee (Franke and Chen 1982, p. 278).

In See Boon Tiong's twilight years, his eldest son, See Cheow Keong (薛长泉), who was based in Singapore, continued his father's legacy and influence by donating to Malacca temples such as Cheng Wah Keong Temple, Cheng Hoon Teng Temple, and Kwan Yin Tang Temple<sup>11</sup> (观音堂). He also succeeded his father as the director of the Cheng Wah Keong Temple and a member of Keng Teck Whay (Wright and Cartwright 1908, p. 717; Franke and Chen 1982, pp. 259, 308, 347). Thus, even though the core of See Cheow Keong's career was in Singapore, he had to maintain the temple networks forged by his father, See Boon Tiong, in both Singapore and Malacca in order to ensure the continuity of his family's influence in both places. It was not until the early 20th century that See Tiang Lim (薛天林), the son of See Cheow Keong, established the Tiang Lim Brothers Company in Singapore and continued to operate their family properties in Malacca and Negeri Sembilan (Wright and Cartwright 1908, p. 717), continuing the business empire of his family. However, the names of See Boon Tiong's third generations were no longer inscribed in the archival records of Malacca's temples, which suggests that the family's influence in Malacca had ceased by then. Their focus has shifted to social development in Singapore.

## 5. Conclusions

The life of See Boon Tiong was inseparable from the temple networks he forged in Malacca and Singapore. In the earlier stage, he was one of the founders of Heng San Teng Temple and Keng Teck Whay and was one of the pioneers and leaders of Singapore's Hokkien community. Around 1848, due to the change in leadership in the Hokkien community in Malacca, the Keng Teck Whay group, led by See Boon Tiong, successfully ventured into Malacca and established and continued to lead the development of Cheng Wah Keong Temple, which contributed to See Boon Tiong's rise to power and his prestige in the Malacca Hokkien group, and consolidated his leadership position in the local Chinese community. After the 1850s, See Boon Tiong became the head of the Keng Teck Whay in Malacca and the director of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple. He was appointed Justice Peace and Municipal Commissioner by the British government, which confirmed his supremacy in the Malacca Chinese community. During the era where Tan Kim Seng was the Tengzhu in Malacca, See Boon Tiong, tapping on his network among Singapore and Malacca Chinese temples, managed to override the Tengzhu's authority and maintained the Zhangzhou Group's dominance over the Malacca Chinese community. This cemented See's prestige and status in the Chinese community in Malacca in the 1850s and 1860s, surpassing the authority of the Cheng Hoon Teng Tengzhu as the most powerful Chinese leader in the region. During this time, the seat of power and prestige was transferred from the Tengzhu to Malacca Zhangzhou leaders, including See Boon Tiong and Chee Eam Chuan, both of whom shared a common background of being members of Singapore's Keng Teck Whay. See Boon Tiong's position was recognized and upheld by both the Chinese community and the British government, and he became, by default, the supreme leader of the Chinese community in Malacca. With the demise of Tan Kim Seng, the original power and supremacy once held by the Tengzhu was reinstated, and the influence of See Boon Tiong faded in his twilight years. The social network developed by See Boon Tiong in the Singapore and Malacca Chinese communities is an epitome of the mode by which Chinese leaders assumed a

higher position in their respective dialect group community in the nineteenth century. It also demonstrated the mutual influence and inseparability of the leading forces of the Hokkien leadership in Singapore and Malacca.

The rising influence of See Boon Tiong is seen in the context of the temple networks, not only for better comprehending his deeds and the internal relations of the temples under him, but also to provide a new perspective to understand the *modus operandi* of the sources of power in Singapore and Malaysia Chinese communities. From the growing career of See Boon Tiong, it is evident that the power of the temple networks was an essential basis for establishing the prestige and status of individuals in the Chinese community, and that the intricate web of power behind the temples drove the power structure of the dialect group towards further development and changes. Therefore, if we desire to understand the situation of the leadership of the Chinese communities in Singapore, Malaysia, and even other Southeast Asian Chinese communities, we should not be simply looking at records, such as referring to the person who assumed the position of Tengzhu of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple, without any further examination. As this paper has shown, it is imperative to uncover and comprehend the networks of power and influence behind the Chinese temples and institutions. In the case of the Singapore and Malacca Chinese communities in the nineteenth century, scholarship has generally only focused on the influence of the Malacca Hokkien leaders in Singapore. However, the growing career of both See Hoot Kee and See Boon Tiong reveals that many of the Malacca Chinese merchants who made their fortunes in Singapore eventually chose to return to their hometowns in Malacca to carry out social development activities. This restructuring of power correspondingly brought about considerable transformation in the Chinese leadership in the two cities. Chinese inscriptions from the 19th century show that in addition to See Boon Tiong and Keng Teck Whay, many other Hokkien leaders were active in Chinese temples and organizations in Malacca and Singapore. We may comprehend the internal factors and trends of the development and change of the power of the Chinese communities only if we uncover and examine the temple networks constructed by these Chinese leaders.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaysia were made up of different dialect groups originating from different ancestral hometowns in China. Thus, various Chinese communities in these places were formed based on dialect groups. As the majority of the ethnic Chinese population in Malaysia and Singapore was from the Hokkien dialect group, the highest institution of the Hokkien community in both places, namely, the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple and the Thian Hock Keng Temple, would also be the supreme institution of the entire Chinese community. The highest ranking leaders of the Hokkien community, such as Cheng Hoon Teng Temple's Tengzhu, would also assume the role of the highest ranking leader of the local Chinese community. For more information on the Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese dialect groups community, see (Yen 1986) and (Chong 2007).
- <sup>2</sup> Historical Anthropology began in 1990 with a group of historians conducting historical and social research in the South China regions such as Guangdong and Fujian provinces. David Fare and Zheng Zhenman (郑振满) were among the leading figures.

Subsequently, Professor Kenneth Dean adopted this theory for his historical research in China and extended it to Chinese Studies in Southeast Asia.

- 3 See Boon Tiong donated 100 dollars towards the founding of Chong Wen Ge in 1867, and his donations to Heng San Teng and Thian Hock Keng Temples are listed above. The number of his contributions to these three temples did not make it into the top ten of the name list.
- 4 10 members of Keng Teck Whay contributed to Heng San Teng in 1830, and 16 contributed to Thian Hock Keng Temple in 1840. However, their contributions only accounted for 12.4% (\$664) and 5.2% (\$1642) of the total funds raised. Later inscriptions from Chong Wen Ge in 1867 and Cui Ying School in 1861 recorded that only 6 and 3 members donated, respectively. As such, it can be deduced that their influence has diminished significantly. For the details, see (Wu 1975, pp. 60–64).
- 5 Song Yan Peng (宋燕鹏) found the records of the donation tablet of Poh Onn Kong Temple in 1841, which documented Tan Kim Seng as Tengzhu. However, around 1843, See Hoot Kee had taken over the Tengzhu position. The Tengzhu genealogy did not mention Tan Kim Seng at all. On the contrary, it states that See Hoot Kee took over the post after the death of the first Tengzhu, Liang Meiji (梁美吉).
- 6 The inscription of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple in 1867 described how the temple began to raise money for its restoration in 1862, but it was not until five years later, in 1867, that the donations monument was erected.
- 7 The inscriptions of Cheng Wah Keong Temple in 1887 still showed that See Boon Tiong's eldest son, See Cheow Keong (薛长泉), was one of the directors of the temple, indicating the long-standing dominance of the See family in the temple. For Poh Onn Kong Temple, the inscriptions in 1856 and 1862 showed that the directors of the temple were Chee Eam Chuan and Chee Rui Xing (徐瑞兴), respectively, both of whom were from the Chee family.
- 8 These four were See Boon Tiong, Chee Eam Chuan, See Moh Guan (薛茂元), and Chua Yean Keng.
- 9 The pioneers of the See, Chee, and Cai families are See Boon Tiong, See Eng San, Chee Kim Guan, Chee Kim Sam (徐钦三), Chee Tiong Why (徐长怀), and Chua Yean Ling.
- 10 Chee Eam Chuan dominated the affairs and running of Poh Onn Kong Temple in the 1850s. See Boon Tiong donated 100 dollars to Poh San Teng Temple around 1888. The new members of Keng Teck Whay, such as Tan Cheng Xiang (陈呈祥), See Yuan Zhen (薛元珍), and Tay Wen Lan (郑文兰) contributed to the founding of Geok Hu Keng Temple in 1864. These donations shed insight into the temple networks of Keng Teck Whay in Malacca.
- 11 See Cheow Keong donated 180, 100, and 200 dollars to Cheng Wah Keong Temple, Cheng Hoon Teng Temple, and Kwan Yin Tang Temple in 1887, 1894, and 1896, respectively.

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