

# CHILDREN OF THE MONKEY GOD

THE STORY OF A CHINESE HAKKA FAMILY  
IN SARAWAK, BORNEO  
1850-1965

BY

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### **Front Cover**

The photograph is a family portrait of the author's paternal grandparents together with six of their children. It was taken in either 1923 or 1924.

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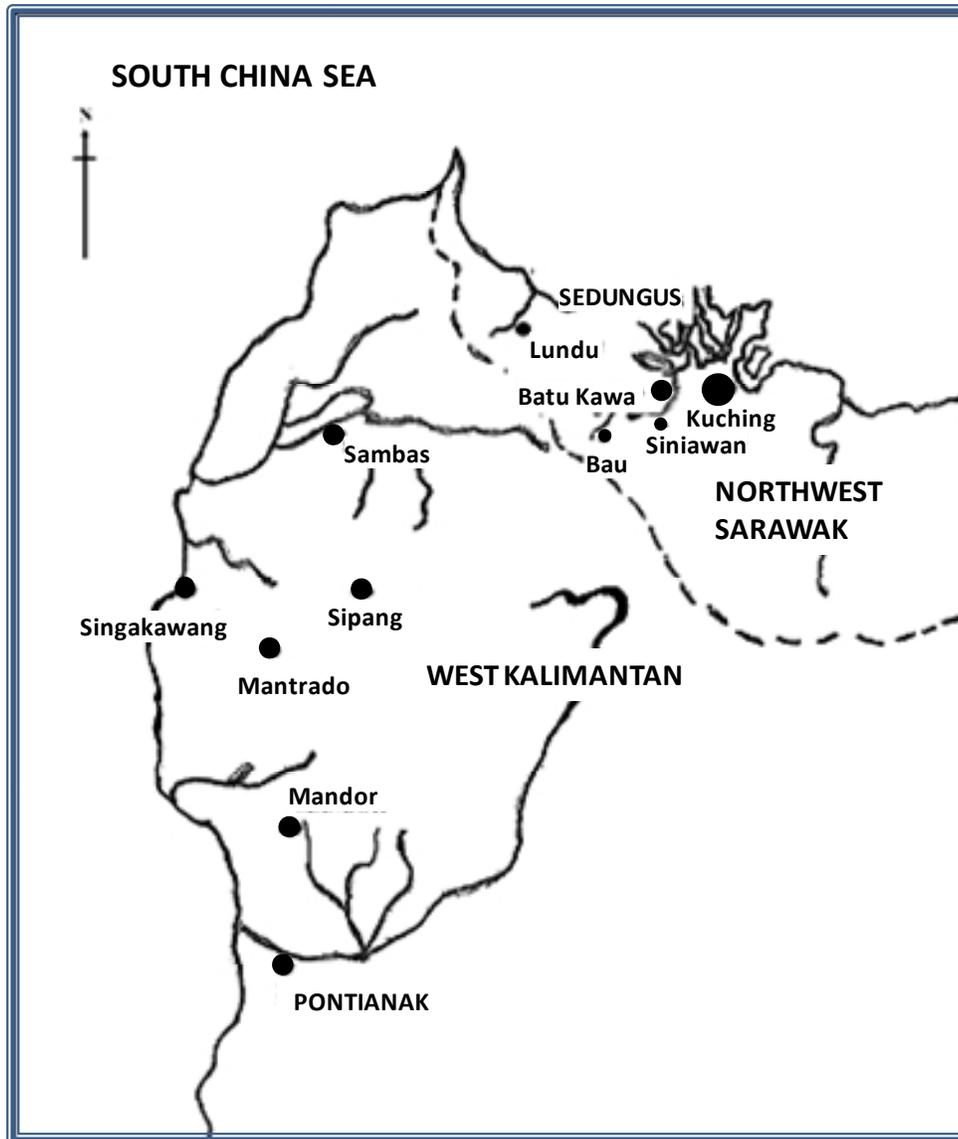
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**MAP 1: China and Southeast Asia**



**Map 2: Northwest Sarawak and West Kalimantan**  
 Showing Points of Interest in the Story

**Legend**

● Cities and Towns

- - - - National Boundaries



# THE GREAT GRANDFATHER

“An attack by the Rajah is imminent. He will do so with numerous Iban troops. Stay alert at all time. Stay sober. Post guards everywhere.”

“Tragically they didn’t. Most of them were too drunk with rice wine to heed the words of the Monkey God and they were mercilessly slaughtered as they lay in a stupor following a wild night of celebration.” Ah Kung said.

These words of the past came to me as I sat next to the mound of impoverished clay soil housing the remains of Ah Tai<sup>1</sup>. It was the annual festival of Ching Ming, the day when the deaths were remembered and honoured with prayers, food and drinks.

It was a small and simple grave, a far cry from some of the bigger and more ornate graves seen in the Chinese cemeteries of suburbia Kuching. Covered by partially trimmed *lallang*, a local weed with long, narrow razor-sharp blades, and with its ebony-hued ironwood burial tablet already rotted to a small splintered stump, the only other indication that it was a grave was the tortoise-shaped mound protruding from the ground.

The food consisted of a bowl of steamed rice, a

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<sup>1</sup> *Ah Kung and Ah Tai are terms for ‘grandfather’ and ‘great grandfather’ in the Hakka dialect. The Hakka are a diverse dialect group of people found mainly in the Guangdong and Fujian provinces of southern China.*

poached chicken, a braised duck, a thick slice of plain-boiled belly pork and a bowl of mixed fresh fruits. The drinks were held in two porcelain cups - one containing rice wine and the other thick brown tea. Once the food and drinks had been properly laid out and the customary invitation to our venerable ancestor to eat had been carried out, I sat next to these ancestral offerings for the duration of twenty to thirty minutes.

This was the normal length of time considered to be adequate for the offerings to be consumed by the spirit guest, although confirmation of this still needed to be sought. This was done by the simple expedient of tossing two twenty-cent coins into the air and the question respectfully posed as to whether the said venerable ancestor had finished his meal. A resultant two heads or tails would be an answer in the negative while a head or tail combination would be an answer in the affirmative.

As I sat waiting amidst the heavily-scented smoke of the burning joss sticks which, mercifully, kept at bay the numerous mosquitoes hovering in mid-air, I reflected on my grandfather's words, telling of an event that took place in 1857, more than one and a half centuries ago. (Keeping the mosquitoes at bay was, of course, a side-effect of the joss sticks, its main purpose being to alert the gods and friendly spirits to the devotions carried out by the devotees.)

It was, after all Ching Ming, a time of remembrance.

Close to four thousand Chinese gold miners were killed on that fateful day in 1857. My great grandfather and his youngest brother were among the few lucky ones who managed to survive the massacre of Sir James Brooke, the first White Rajah of Sarawak, Borneo.

He and his brother managed to slip unnoticed behind

the enemy's line and escaped by swimming downstream with the currents of the Sarawak River. Perhaps instinct and an uncanny sense for survival guided them in taking off north into the very area from whence the enemy had originally mounted their attack. Perhaps it was pure luck in merely running through the first available opening in the enemy's dragnet.

But above all, it was, according to my grandfather, because they heeded the warning of Sun Wukung and, staying sober and alert, they were able to make good their escape.

The remnants of the rebel force made a desperate bid to retreat south to their headquarters in Bau, still a good seven kilometres away. Tragically, they were either finished off by the pursuing Rajah and his men in Bau or by the Dutch troops waiting on the other side of the watershed border that Dutch Borneo shared with Sarawak.

"He killed a Manchu officer, you know, and that's why he had to flee China," my grandmother whispered to my eldest aunt.

My grandmother must have thought that all the children were already asleep when she spoke these words. My brothers and cousins were definitely somewhere far away in a dreamland of their own. I could even hear some of their snores as the eight of us lay on our lumpy kapok-stuffed mattresses in the small living room of my grandfather's shop-house in Padungan Road.

I was never a light sleeper. Sleep never came to me easily. Perhaps it was the street noise that continued until quite late into the night. Perhaps it was the soft street lights that intruded into the living room through our open windows, making certain that the room was never enveloped

in complete darkness. This low visibility of the room made it possible for me to play my nightly games with the denizens who had made the wooden ceiling of the shop-house their habitat. Nightly, a black, jagged palm-sized knot imbedded into the ceiling and situated right on top of my sleeping space, would turn into a terrifying fire-breathing dragon, a giant lizard or a soaring eagle. Eventually I would drift into sleep. For years that dark knot kept me awake but it also helped me to drift into sleep.

The words of my grandmother, Ah Por (Hakka for grandmother), however, had fired my curiosity on a rebellious great grandfather who had to flee China for his life. Years later I questioned myself on whether I had really heard those words clandestinely whispered in the dark. My elders never talked to me about this flight of my great grandfather from China and I never asked them about it. To do so would have revealed to them that I had been eavesdropping on them, on words not meant for the ears of young children. Yet questions remained.

Ah Tai was certainly no different from the hundreds of thousands of Chinese migrants who left the shores of Southern China in the mid-19th century to seek fortune and work overseas. China was at that time ruled by a repressive Manchu dynasty that had already lost its claim to govern because of the withdrawal of its 'mandate of heaven' to rule by the gods. It was a regime that had come to the end of its dynastic tenure and, like all the other preceding dynasties in their death-throes, it was coming apart at the seams with devastating effects. Widespread civil wars, social unrests, chaos, poverty and hunger were the order of the day, and to escape these horrors, hordes of poor and displaced Chinese migrants left the country, leaving behind wives, parents, children and other family members to seek a better life overseas.

The gold fields of Dutch Kalimantan on the southern hub of the Borneo Island were one of these destinations, and that was where Ah Tai and his brother were headed. Was it work and fortune he sought or was it a desperate flight from the Manchu authority? Or was it perhaps a combination of all these factors?

Whatever the reason for their decision to leave China, the gold fields of Kalimantan beckoned, and Ah Tai and his younger brother arrived in Dutch Kalimantan sometime in the late 1840s to 1850, barely twenty years of age.

Like most Chinese migrants intending to go back to China in “silken robes” and with money in their pockets after the necessary stint of work or business undertaking overseas, they, like millions of others, in fact, stayed on in the adoptive country, never to return to China again.

The anguish my great grandfather must have felt at having to leave his family and country behind was never conveyed to us. Although the Hakka are known to be a down-to-earth people, and therefore not easily given over to sentiment, there could have been no doubt that he and his youngest brother must have felt great remorse at having to leave behind their parents, brothers, sisters and other relatives. Some migrants left even their wives and children behind, perhaps never to see them again.

Thus, Ah Tai and his younger brother never went back to China and never saw their family members again. I have, over the years, come to the conclusion that the reason they never went back was not because they didn't want to, but because they were unable to. The soft words I thought I had heard being whispered by my grandmother to one of her daughters might not have been my imagination after all. My great grandfather and his brother might well have been involved in some act of rebellion against the Manchu

regime, and that being the case, might have really gone to Borneo to escape their clutches. They would have been wanted men in China, a strong enough deterrent against them ever wanting to return to their homeland.

Ah Tai died in his mid eighties in 1918, two years after the birth of my father. According to my grandfather he died a debilitated old man. Bed-ridden for the last few years of his life, his body was a mere shell of the robust man he once was. It was a body ravaged by the opium he was addicted to for almost his entire life. The hard, lonely life of a gold miner in the gold fields of Kalimantan was enough to turn him and thousands of other migrants into life-long addicts of that pernicious substance. And who could blame them? For opium was a soothing balm that took away all the aches and pains caused by the performance of hard uncompromising menial work, the day-to-day bane of millions of 19<sup>th</sup> century Chinese migrant coolies all over the world. It was no different with the migrant miners of Dutch Kalimantan, as they tried to eke out a living in the gold fields of a hostile country far away from their homeland.

Ah Tai died without leaving behind a photograph or even a hand-drawn portrait. Perhaps there was a portrait or two that were either lost or damaged with the passage of time. They might even have been destroyed. Ah Kung might not have been too happy to have a portrait of his father's emaciated image in the house. Perhaps it was too depressing to be constantly reminded of the ravaging effects that opium addiction had had on his father. All that remains of Ah Tai and his brother are two barely marked graves on a piece of land bought by Ah Kung in Sarawak, on the island of Borneo at Sungai Tiram, near Mt Santubong.

In actual fact, Ah Tai's grave faces directly into the southern face of Mt Santubong – assuming an unmoving, confronting and uncompromising stance that some family

members would claim to have an adverse and everlasting influence on the future generations of his line. According to my grandmother, Ah Por, it was bad ‘feng shui’<sup>2</sup> to have his grave situated thus. She never stopped chastising Ah Kung for the strong-willed, stubborn, and difficult children she bore as a result of an ancient grave incorrectly sited. The spirit or soul of a dead person should not be permitted to assume such a stubborn stance against a mountain, especially not a mountain like the legendary Mt Santubong, she said. It was a stance too presumptuous and arrogant to take, even for a venerable ancestor. This trait would surely flow through the family line and be passed on to future generations, as had already been indicated on numerous occasions, she added.

Ah Kung however, with his strong bias for strong-willed and proud offsprings, was not overly concerned with Ah Por’s claim of adverse feng-shui, however. He took her chastisement in good spirit whenever she decided to let off steam at him for our misbehaviours, merely smiling his all-knowing smile without uttering a word. After all, he was the one who chose the site of the grave and what my grandmother claimed was a negative thing might not have been so to Ah Kung.

Although Ah Tai worked and lived for most of his life in Sarawak, he and his brother did not start off as gold-miners there. A few months after they left their village in the province of Guangdong, China on board a Chinese junk, they arrived in Sinkawang, Kalimantan, the southern half of Borneo Island belonging to Indonesia. They would have

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<sup>2</sup> *Feng shui (pronounced “fung shui”) is the ancient Chinese art of geomancy involving the placements of objects and articles together with the use of space in order to achieve harmony with the environment.*

boarded the Chinese vessel most probably between the months of October to February, when the north-easterly winds of the monsoon would be at their strongest and, therefore, most favourable for the merchant vessels of Guangdong and Fujian, the two neighbouring provinces of South-eastern China.

In the port-town of Singkawang, they would have found a huge, well established community of Chinese gold miners made up of Hakka folks from the towns, villages and hamlets of Huichui, Haifeng, Lufeng, Kityang, Taipu, to name a few. They would have come across many of their own Hakka clansmen of the Huichui speech group as well as other Hakka members of various mining organizations called the “Kongsi” in Hokkien<sup>3</sup>. Also known as “Kongtse” in Hakka, the Kongsi were self-funding, independent organizations that had been largely responsible for the Chinese gold-mining activities in Kalimantan since the mid-18th century.

They would have already heard tales of these organizations back in their village in China from clansmen and relatives who, after a stint with the Kongsi, would have not have held back in their boasting about the fabled riches of West Kalimantan. In all probability, these returned adventurers would not have related to the hot-headed and impressionable youths of their villages the hardships, pains and tribulations they had gone through as Kongsi members, or very little of these, at the very most. Instead, they would

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<sup>3</sup> *People of the Fujian province, on the south-eastern coast of China. Calling themselves “Hokkien” in their own native dialect, they are also known as “Fujianese” in mandarin and are the dominant Chinese dialect group in Taiwan and Singapore.*

have filled their heads with stories of the fabulous riches of the West Kalimantan gold fields and the adventures to be had there, very much in the same vein as the returned old-timers of the gold rushes in USA, South Africa and Australia. The desire to boast, the need to put on an appearance of success and, above all, the supreme importance of not losing face in public meant that deeds of romance, adventure and success would mainly be the ones told. Not that these youngsters needed much encouragement, anyway. The dire financial situation that my great grandfather and many other Chinese like him, young and old, found themselves in, would see hundreds of thousands of them departing in droves from the shores of China in the decades to come.

Singkawang, where Ah Tai and his brother landed, was one of the ports of West Kalimantan traditionally called upon by Chinese junks trading with the Nanyang, the Chinese name for the Malay Archipelago. Situated by the western coast, it was a port of call of these junks as they followed the north-east winds of the monsoon in the later or the early part of the year, and returning to China in the middle of the year with the south-west monsoon winds at their backs. Like many pioneer towns established in the Nanyang over the years, Singkawang's two rows of wooden shop-houses filled with all sorts of Chinese goods and paraphernalia would have oozed a familiarity that would have reminded them of the provincial towns of their homeland.

Moving among their own clansmen in this outpost far away from China would have, somewhat, soothed their longing for family and home. A further reminder of home was the immediate area surrounding Singkawang. For, as far as the eye could see, numerous Chinese farmers and vegetable gardeners worked tirelessly to supply the towns,

the mines, the villages and their inhabitants with native and Chinese vegetables, rice, chicken, ducks, geese, pigs and pond fish.

However, not far beyond that tamed and cultivated landscape rose the wall of the tropical rainforest; a constant reminder that they were still far away from their native village of Guangdong. They had now before them the fabled tropical rainforest of Borneo – that seemingly endless mass of ancient vegetation. It was a landscape extremely dense and highly inaccessible, consisting of myriad inter-twining creepers, heavy musty-smelling undergrowth and strange-shaped buttresses with formidable giant trunks that seemed to stretch forever into the sky. Every plant, every shoot, every vine and every tree seemed to carry on its branches thick green leaves and foliage of all shapes and sizes. A thick, green canopy enveloped everything. Although it acted as some sort of filter and, therefore, respite against the harsh tropical sun, the high humidity was still quite unbearable. To these two “sinkheks” or new ‘guest people’ from China this vast and old tropical jungle was an alien world all of its own – seemingly hostile, unworkable and uncultivable.

From Singkawang, my great grandfather and his younger brother would have been taken to another Hakka town called Sipang, some twenty kilometres directly east of the port-town, to be formally initiated into the mining Kongsì of Shum Tio Kau (The Three Creeks) before they could be formally accepted as members.

Sipang was, and had been for quite a number of decades now, the headquarters of the Shum Tio Kau. In Sipang they would not have felt out of place, as some of the members of this organization would have been clansmen and kinsmen hailing from the same district in Guangdong, if not the same village – the result of decades of recruitment carried out by that organization among their own kind in that

part of southern China. Ah Tai and his youngest brother would have been their latest recruits and they would have been encouraged to join, their trust and confidence perhaps bolstered by the knowledge that members of the Chu clan were one of the dominant clans, if not the dominant clan, involved in the running of the Kongsì.

As “sinkkehs” they would have been initially boarded in the quarters of the Kongsì. Their initiation as members of the Kongsì would have involved them in the taking of an oath of loyalty before the shrine of the deity of the Chinese immigrants, namely, Tai Pak Kung, centrally located in the main hall of the Kongsì building. This hall not only served as a meeting place of the members but also a function area where guests were welcomed and entertained, as well as a place for other social activities such as gambling and the holding of religious festivals, of which there were many. These were keenly looked forward to – especially by the bachelor members of the Kongsì – as the fares served would be better and more bountiful and the rice wine would flow more freely.

They were the “sinkheks” because, ironically, they were the latecomers. Other Hakka miners had already come before them. In actual fact, they were preceded by the first group of miners by more than a hundred years. Mining activities in West Borneo started in 1740 when a group of 20 Chinese miners were recruited from Brunei by the sultan of Montrado to work in his gold mines. So successful were they that more miners were recruited, this time from the Guangdong province of China.

Word soon spread around the hamlets, villages and towns of that part of the province that gold was to be found in Borneo, and what started off as a trickle of human traffic became a deluge. Other mines were opened in competition to that of Montrado. The local chiefs of Pontianak, Sambas,

Singkawang and Moro joined in the mining activities by ceding mining areas to other groups or clans of Chinese. Consisting mainly of male members, these groups of Chinese mining workers started to organize themselves not only into cogent work-forces but, more importantly, into self-governing associations or societies – bodies that had their roots and origins in the kinship and clanship organizations of rural China.

These societies had always been of vital importance in the vast countryside of China, where little or no reliance could be placed on a rapacious central authority consisting of an emperor and his rather large retinue. Among these were the eunuchs, mandarins, minor court officers, functionaries and other hangers-on, too often more concerned with their own pleasures and survival than with the welfare of a hamlet or a village located thousands of miles from the seat of the central government.

To prevent their own hamlets or villages from descending into a spiralling cycle of chaos, anarchy and self-destruction, the people of these communities, whether large or small, had little option but to come together to organize themselves into self-helping, self-supporting and sometimes into self-governing bodies. Often headed by a committee of elders, these organizations would be responsible in the overseeing and organizing of tasks relating to areas of self-defence, as well as that of other cultural, social and economic activities; in particular in the irrigation and distribution of water.

The functions, objectives and nature of these organizations made it imperative that mutual loyalty and trust became the mainstay of their survival and, more often than not, this would mean heavy reliance being placed on their own kinsmen and clansmen. This was easier to achieve in those communities where the majority of the residents

carried the same surname than in those where the people merely spoke the same dialect or sub-dialect. The latter categorization into dialect and sub-dialect is important in drawing attention to the fact that the Hakka people are not mono-lingual or even mono-cultural by nature, and that within this big group of people there are sub-groups of Hopo, Taipu, Fuichui, Kiaying, Sin-On to name a few. However difficult it was to achieve, the ensuing galvanization and assimilation of kinsmen and clansmen into pockets of self-governing communities of peasants or miners for a long stretch of time would eventually result in the development of extremely strong bonds between people carrying the same surname or even speaking the same dialect.

All migrating people, especially when travelling in groups, take along with them to the adoptive country the social, cultural, religious and economic practices of their mother country, despite the effect this has in making them objects of racial prejudice and ridicule. The Hakka were no different from other migrants in continuing with the practices of their forefathers when they first arrived on the shores of West Kalimantan. Here in the jungles and gold fields of Borneo they would have encountered almost the same situation that they and their forefathers before them had experienced for centuries in China – the necessity to fend for themselves in the face of an unhelpful, uncaring and self-absorbed central government.

And while the Malay overlord who had granted them the mining concession would have to be acceded to, he was not, however, the emperor or even his appointed or official representative. Moreover, he did not command from them the same sort of loyalty as that of the Chinese emperor and while most migrating Chinese of that era would still consider themselves loyal subjects of the emperor, or at least

until he had lost the ‘mandate of heaven’ to rule, there were in West Kalimantan no officers or representatives of the imperial court who could exact any form of loyalty from them. That is not to say that they would discard their allegiance to the throne the moment they landed on the soils of West Kalimantan. Far from it, they still considered themselves subjects of the Ching Dynasty and, as a token of that loyalty they and their children would continue to wear the pigtail or queue until the overthrow of that regime in 1911 by the republican movement of Dr. Sun Yat Sen, himself a Hakka and the “Father of Modern China”.

Thus in West Kalimantan in the period between the mid-18th to early 19th century, there were mainly the local Malay chiefs to deal with in the negotiating of mining concessions and licenses. They were also mainly the people responsible in the granting of trade agreements for the sale and purchase of grains and other produce and most importantly, opium, although this hold that the local overlords had over them would wane in the passage of time as the Hakka miners prospered and grew in the years to come. Other than that, they were left pretty much to their own devices and, as we will see, this would eventually result in the formation of their own self-supporting and self-governing organizations – the Kongsis. The formation of these organizations would also mark the beginning of a new era in which they would eventually become masters of their own destiny.

In retrospect, it is doubtful that the formation of the Kongsis by the Hakka could have occurred in China, or perhaps anywhere else in the world, during that particular period of the mid-18th century. The socio-political and economic conditions for their birth in West Kalimantan could not have been more conducive, and it is arguable whether these conditions were ever fully present in China or