

# A CHINESE CLASSIC IN BABA MALAY



**Title:** *Chrita Dahulu-kala, Namanya Sam Kok, Atau, Tiga Negri Ber-prang: Siok, Gwi, Sama Gor di Jaman "Han Teow"* (Ancient Story Entitled Sanguo or the Three Kingdoms at War: Shu, Wei and Wu During the Han Dynasty)  
**Author:** Chan Kim Boon (1851–1920)  
**Year published:** 1892–1896  
**Publisher:** Kim Sek Chye Press (Singapore)  
**Language:** Baba Malay  
**Type:** Book (30 volumes); 4,622 pages in total  
**Location:** Call no.: RRARE 895.135 CHR  
**Accession no.:** B00607851E (v.24)  
**Donated by:** National Museum Singapore

Written in the 14th century and set during the last days of China's Han dynasty and the tumultuous Three Kingdoms period (circa AD 220–280), the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is a well-known Chinese classic of epic proportions and a cast of thousands. In the late 1800s, a Baba Malay version of this classic was published in Singapore – making this popular tale more accessible to the Peranakan (Straits-born Chinese) community.<sup>1</sup>

Titled as *Chrita Dahulu-kala, Namanya Sam Kok, Atau, Tiga Negri Ber-prang: Siok, Gwi, Sama Gor di Jaman "Han Teow"* (henceforth referred to as *Sam Kok*), the series consists of 30 volumes translated from Chinese to Baba Malay. The translation was done by Chan Kim Boon, an administrator at law firm Aitken & Rodyk,<sup>2</sup> with the help of two other people, Chia Ann Siang and Tan Kheam Hock.<sup>3</sup>

Published between 1892 and 1896 by Kim Sek Chye Press, the entire series totalled some 4,622 pages, and a single volume was sold at a \$1 each.<sup>4</sup> *Sam Kok* is most likely the earliest complete Malay

*Chrita Dahulu-kala, Namanya Sam Kok, Atau, Tiga Negri Ber-prang: Siok, Gwi, Sama Gor di Jaman "Han Teow"* – based on the Chinese classic text *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* – comprises 30 volumes in the series. Image source: National Library Board, Singapore.



(Above) The translator of the series, Chan Kim Boon (1851–1920) was also known by his pen-name Batu Gantong (literally "Hanging Rock"). All rights reserved, Chan, K. B. (1892–1896). *Chrita Dahulu-kala, Namanya Sam Kok, Atau, Tiga Negri Ber-prang: Siok, Gwi, Sama Gor di Jaman "Han Teow"*. Singapore: Kim Sek Chye Press.

(Above right) The original green cover of Volume 24 (of 30 volumes) in the *Sam Kok* series. Image source: National Library Board, Singapore.



translation of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, ahead of Indonesian versions from Java published in 1910.<sup>5</sup> The series was typical of Baba Malay materials in Malaya at the time, where epic stories were serialised into multi-volume publications. This facilitated a subscription-based model that spurred the growth of the fledgling Baba publishing industry in Singapore.<sup>6</sup>

The majority of the translated Baba Malay literary works were heavily illustrated to complement the storyline and heighten the visual appeal of the publications. These drawings, rendered in the style of traditional Chinese woodcuts, usually featured main characters and events in the stories.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, Chan encouraged communication between himself and the readers and even among readers themselves by publishing letters in English, Chinese and Malay containing comments on previous volumes of the book. He also shared his trials and tribulations in producing the books as well as his financial woes, photographs of himself and his assistants and other private information.<sup>8</sup>

Such translations of Chinese historical novels into Baba Malay first took place

in the 1880s in Batavia (now Jakarta). They were well-received by the Peranakan community there and soon made their way to Singapore.<sup>9</sup> The earliest translations in Singapore were undertaken by businessman Tan Beng Teck, who left for Japan and discontinued his translation works. Chan then took over, and even revised Tan's earlier works.<sup>10</sup>

Chan became a dominant influence in the small Baba Malay publishing industry, gaining prominence for his translation of three popular Chinese classics: apart from *Sam Kok*, he also translated two other Chinese classics, *Song Kang (Water Margin)* and *Kou Chey Tian (Journey to the West)*.<sup>11</sup> After his death in 1920, the translation of Chinese stories into Baba Malay declined,<sup>12</sup> due in part to the Peranakan community's increasing preference for English-language books.<sup>13</sup>

The son of a Penang trader, Chan was educated in English at the Penang Free School, and received private tuition in Chinese. He arrived in Singapore in March 1872, and built a career as an administrator at Aitken & Rodyk. The book-keeper and cashier, however, became better known for his translations of Chinese clas-

sics into Baba Malay, which he diligently worked on after office hours.<sup>14</sup>

It was Chan's publication of *Sam Kok* that brought him fame, primarily because it was a massive work that was serialised over 30 volumes. The series also included Chan's footnotes, which provided details of Chinese culture as well as notes on romanised Malay terms and names, to which Chinese text was added for clarification. Jokes and even a portrait of the author were included in the series.<sup>15</sup>

Chan was known by the pen-name Batu Gantong (literally "Hanging Rock"), which is the name of a cemetery in Penang. Some people believed that this was an allusion to his preference for his final resting place. Chan's home at 75 Lebu Muntri in Georgetown, Penang, has today become a tourist destination because of the fame that Chan had gained through his Baba Malay translations.<sup>16</sup> ♦ Mazelan Anuar

## Notes

- The term Peranakan generally refers to people of mixed Chinese and Malay/Indonesian heritage. Peranakan males are known as *babas* while the females are known as *nyonias* (or *nyonys*). See National Library Board. (August 26, 2013). *Peranakan (Straits Chinese) community* written by Koh, Jaime. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia.
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