

The Early Haicheng People

During the 19th and 20th centuries, many Chinese Fujian[Hokkien/Hokien] people in Singapore and Malaya were known to have come from Haicheng[Haiteng/Haiting]. These included celebrity pioneers such as Tan Tock Seng, Gan Eng Seng, Lee Chin Tian, Lim Chwee Chian, Lim Boon Keng, Khoo Seok Wan, Chia Ann Siang and Yeo Cheng Hai. Lim Chwee Chian and Yeo Cheng Hai were both founding members of the predecessor of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. At that time, 'Haicheng' referred to Haicheng County(Xian[Kuān]), a substantially large region in Fujian province.

According to the Dictionary of Historical Names of Places published by the China Social Sciences Publishing House in 2005, Haicheng County was first set up in 1565 during the Ming Dynasty as one of the ten counties of Zhangzhou[Changchow/Chiangchew/Tsiangtsiu] Prefecture(Fu[Hu]). The nine other counties included Longxi[Lengkay/Lingkhe], Zhanpu[Chiangpor/Tsiangpoo], and Changtai (Tiongtai/Tióngthài). The county municipal office was located at the mouth of the Jiulong Jiang River[Kiuleng Kang/Kiú-ling Káng], where Haicheng Town is found today. In the ensuing centuries, Haicheng County was put under different governing administrations. In 1928, it was run by the Fujian province government. In 1960, most areas in Haicheng County merged with Longxi County to become Longhai County. From then on, Haicheng County fell into oblivion.

Fujian is mostly mountainous, and always short of fertile land for agricultural farming. In ancient times, Fujian people living along the coast needed to seek food and living by venturing into the sea. As time passed, these people went from clam digging to deep-sea fishing, and a prosperous maritime trading eventually emerged. Large ports like Fuzhou[Hokkchew/Hoktsiu] and Quanzhou[Chuanchew/Tsuantsiu] developed in the Song and Yuan Dynasties became well-known and frequented by foreign traders.

After the implementation of the sea ban in the Ming Dynasty, maritime trading became illegal. But this did not completely deter the coastal people from taking risks. Due to its peculiar geographical environment, the Jiulong River estuary was an ideal location for carrying out smuggling activities. Waterways run naturally from hilly hideouts to hide boats that traded with the foreign merchant ships docked in the waters just off Xiamen[Amoy/A'men] Island. Ports of various sizes soon mushroomed in the estuary, and the area later evolved into a vibrant bank of active businesses involving coastal villagers, pirates, local and foreign traders, and even conspiring government officials. The prosperous ports were later collectively hailed as the Crescent Harbour, which left its mark even in poems and songs.

Thus, Haicheng Town was established, on the one hand, to strengthen provincial control over smuggling activities, and on the other, to legislate profit sharing as the money generated was too large an amount to be ignored. Haicheng County became a kind of special economic zone in southern China at that time. Haicheng's prosperity further encouraged more villagers from inland places such as Xin'an[Sinuann/Sinkang], Xiayang [Ayeyeo] and Qingjiao[Tshingtsiau/Tshinnta], to migrate to the south sea(Nanyang). The place names of "Haicheng 海澄" and "Zhangzhou Haicheng 漳州海澄" started to spread across Southeast

Asia. Haicheng people were found documented in the official archives, historical materials of clan associations, and inscribed on the tombstones in cemeteries.



A Haicheng grave in Bukit Brown (photo credit: Bukit Brown Documentation Project)



Another Haicheng grave in Bukit Brown (photo credit: Mr Walter Lim)

But Haicheng County is now an obsolete name. "Haicheng" alone is identifiable only on the Haicheng Town on the modern map of China in Zhangzhou Prefecture. In the same vein, "Zhangzhou" appears as the modern Zhangzhou Precinct, a municipal district much like the Xiamen and Quanzhou Precincts, as well as Zhangzhou city, the municipal city of Zhangzhou Precinct like Xiamen City and Quanzhou City.



The bigger map in the diagram shown above was re-sketched from page 74 of the Golden Jubilee Memorial magazine published by the Chang Chow General Association in 1979. It shows the large geographic scope of Haicheng County during the Ming and Qing eras. It relates to the marked inset in the smaller map in the upper-left corner of the diagram which is a section of the present Fujian map. As seen from the diagram, the early "Zhangzhou

Haicheng" covers a much bigger region than the present "Haicheng" that may appear on any root-tracing routes in present-day travel itineraries.

From two compiled lists* of the early Chinese in Singapore that captured their ancestral birthplaces, about 200 (out of over 3000) Haicheng people were identified - 50 from one list and 150 from another. Some of them may have told the names of their actual ancestral villages to their children and descendants, with each name then remembered by succeeding generations. However, those families who passed down only the name of Haicheng without detailed geographical context will need to dedicate more effort into root-tracing to be able to confirm the identities of their ancestral villages. It is noted with relief that in the more recent history references, celebrity pioneers such as Gan Eng Seng are now being identified with their ancestral villages known by their present names. One such reference is "A General History of Chinese in Singapore", published by the Singapore Federation of Clan Associations in 2015.

The table below shows the present names of the ancestral villages of the celebrity pioneers of Haicheng origin.

Celebrity Pioneer	Ancestral Village	
	Former Name** [Haicheng]	Present Name [Precinct]
Tan Tock Seng (1798 - 1850)	Tshngtau/Chngtau	[Zhangzhou] Cangtou
Gan Eng Seng (1844-1899)	Tshinnta	[Xiamen] Qingjiao
Lee Chin Tian (1875-1965)	Tangsu	[Xiamen] Dongyu
Lim Chwee Chian (1864-1923)	Mohiatgong	[Xiamen] Qun Yao
Lim Boon Keng (1869-1957)	Gohguan	[Xiamen] Aoguan
Khoo Seok Wan (1874-1941)	Sinuann/SinKang	[Xiamen] Xin'an
Chia Ann Siang (1832-1923)	Sektong/Jiohtng	[Xiamen] Shitang
Yeo Cheng Hai (1865-1927)	Ayeyeo	[Xiamen] Xiayang

Even without any published statistics, it is believed that most Haicheng people came from the northeast region of Haicheng County. This is supported by the renaming of this region as the region of overseas Chinese homes, known as the Haicang District, and put under the administrative governance of the present Xiamen Precinct. Jimei [Chipbee], the ancestral village of the best known philanthropist, Mr Tan Kah Kee, belonged to the Tong'an [Tangwa] County in his time. This is now also under Xiamen Precinct. Such reorganisation is obviously moving in the right direction to better maintain consistency when drawing up policies for overseas Chinese.

It is not uncommon for the same name to be duplicated for different places. Haicheng as a place name is causing a misunderstanding of its exact location, due to its association with the evolution of administrative reorganisation over the past decades. Given the geographical distance on the two maps, it is clear that Haicheng Town cannot be mistaken as Haicheng County.

Xiayang is the ancestral hometown of this author. Not long ago, the author received an itinerary drawn up by a travel agency for a visit by a family in Penang's Xiayang clan to

Haicheng. The trip was arranged as such: the visiting group would first fly to Quanzhou, and the second stop was listed as Zhangzhou City, suggested for the group to use as a base to visit their relatives in Xiayang. After which they would fly to Xiamen before heading back to Quanzhou and then returning to Penang. Given the greater distance between Zhangzhou and Xiayang, it doesn't make sense for the group to make the trip to their hometown of Xiayang from there. This should, instead, be done from Xiamen. With the clarification made through this article, it is hoped that travel agencies would take steps to confirm the location of the visiting group's hometown and make better itinerary plans in similar situations.

Legends:-

Present Name	In Chinese	Labelled on Map
Aoguang	吾贯/鳌冠	1
Cangtou	仓头	2
Dongyu	东屿	3
Haicheng Town	海澄镇	4
Qingjiao	青礁	5
Qunyao	困瑶	6
Shitang	石塘	7
Xiayang	霞阳	8
Xin'an	新垵/新江	9
Zhangzhou City	漳州市	10
Island of Xiamen	厦门岛	11
Jiulong River Mouth	九龙江口	12

* The compiled lists were from:

《新华历史人物列传》 人物索引 <http://libguides.nus.edu.sg/c.php?g=145667&p=954457>

《南洋名人集传》 檳城南洋民史纂修馆编辑

**The Romanized names in this table were either selected from various sources, or spelt by this author, in the best of her knowledge of Fujian(Xiamen[Amoy]) dialect.

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