Abstract

Tan Tock Seng (1798-1850) was a well-known philanthropist and Chinese community leader who lived in 19th century Singapore. He was born in Malacca in 1798 and when Stamford Raffles developed Singapore as an entrepot port in 1819, he came in search of business opportunities. He made his fortune through investments in property and slowly established himself as a leader of the Hokkien community and eventually the Chinese community.

Tan Tock Seng’s leadership position was succeeded by his son, Tan Kim Ching (1829-1892). In addition to being a leader of the local Hokkien and Chinese community, Tan Kim Ching had close links with Siam, Japan, China, Russia and the British colonial government. He was accorded leadership roles by these countries. His achievements surpassed that of Tan Tock Seng.

In the 20th century, Tan Kim Ching’s leadership position was succeeded by his grandson, Tan Boo Liat (1874-1934). Tan Boo Liat’s social activities took a different turn from that of his grandfather’s. He was a member of the Straits Chinese British Association and he was a supporter of Sun Yat Sen and his revolutionary activities.

The Tan Family took on important leadership roles in the local Hokkien and Chinese community for almost a hundred years and they provide a unique case study to study the Singapore Chinese community of the 19th and 20th centuries. The social activities of the respective leaders in family in the 19th and 20th century differ vastly and this can be attributed to the change in the social environment. This trend and the reasons causing it would be explored in depth in this thesis. The ability of this family to maintain a stronghold on the leadership power would be discussed as well.