

# A TALE OF TWO FORTUNES

By Dr. Ho Tak Ming

Malaya has always been known as the land of rubber and tin, commodities that were the twin pillars of its economy. However, coffee and tin formed an unusual backdrop of a saga at Tambun, near Ipoh, involving an English Inspector of Mines, FJB Dykes, and a Chinese tin miner, Leong Fee, at the close of the 19th century that had all the elements of a Greek tragedy for one, and a fairy tale with a happy ending for the other.

Leong Fee @ Liang Pi Joo was born in Mei Xian district, Guangdong province, China, in 1857 and came to Penang at the age of 19, a penniless young man trying to earn a living in this country. Six months later he arrived in Ipoh with 16 of his fellow countrymen, "the party then being the only Chinamen in Ipoh." Ipoh was then a small settlement consisting of a few huts. He worked as a clerk and later opened a small shop, while all the time

prospecting for tin. By the late 1880's he was the principal miner in Ipoh. He was appointed a member of the Ipoh Sanitary Board in 1894 and a member of the Perak State Council the following year.

Dykes, on the other hand, was trained at the Royal School of Mines, London, where he had been appointed Government Mining Prospector at Kuala Kangsar in 1893. Two years later, he was appointed Demarcation Officer, Kinta. It was in connection with his mining activities that Leong Fee got to know Dykes. At that time the price of coffee was rising rapidly, and the pair of miner and mining expert decided to become partners, buying a 358-acre piece of land at Tambun in 1896 to begin a coffee planting venture. They employed one Coghill, formerly of Kamuning Estate in Sungai Siput, to manage the estate, which was situated between Tambun and Tanjong Rambutan, where the soil was reputed

to be very rich and eminently suitable for coffee. On 1st May 1896, Dykes resigned from Government service. He took a few months off to explore Pahang, and when he came back to Ipoh, threw a large party to announce his new career as planter. *The Perak Pioneer* reported:

"Mr. Dykes, late Mining Inspector, Kuala Kangsar, who has been away in Pahang since he severed his connection with the Government service, is back at Changkat Pari and has invited nearly everybody in Kinta to dinner at his coffee estate at Tambun. The entertainment, it is understood, will beat everything of its kind in Kinta."

The Tambun Coffee Estate was one of the two largest coffee estates in Kinta. In 1897 it was described thus, "The Manager is Mr. Coghill. The property has a very considerable frontage along the main road from Ipoh to Tanjong Rambutan. It comprises an area of 358 acres,



A coffee estate.

of which 200 acres are planted up, and the remainder are in the process of planting. The older trees of about 16 months growth are healthy and already bear flowers and berry. The estate is well kept and appears to have a prosperous future."

Kinta was in a recession due to depressed prices of tin and the Government was encouraging the people to plant coffee so as to diversify its economy. However, from mid-1896 onwards, the coffee price too began its downward spiral. Most of the smallholders abandoned their holdings. Dykes was in a dilemma. He had resigned from Government service less than a year ago, forsaking a steady and secure income, and did not have deep enough pockets to face a prolonged recession. He tried to convert the agricultural land to mining, but failed. In desperation, he sold his share of the estate to Leong Fee, reportedly for \$2,000. The newspaper reported:

"Mr. FJB Dykes will, we hear, shortly rejoin the service in the capacity of Inspector of Mines, Selangor. It is seldom we hear of an officer rejoining the public service in these States after resigning for a more lucrative civil appointment but no



Chung Hwa School, Penang, 1904. Leong Fee was a founder.



Tambun tin-mine.



Early Tambun settlement.



doubt the higher authorities knowing the value of this excellent officer have made it worth his while to again cast in his lot with the Government."

Leong Fee was left to see the worth of his coffee estate dwindle to rock bottom. Dykes, meanwhile, flourished in his second stint as a Government official. He was promoted to Acting District Officer of Jelebu in 1899, appointed Warden of Mines for Negri Sembilan in 1900, Senior Warden of Mines, Perak in 1903 and finally Senior Warden of Mines, Federated Malay States. At the start of the new century when the coffee industry was already moribund, Leong Fee had the estate prospected for tin and opened his Tambun Mine in 1902.

Even before Tambun Mine was opened, wild rumours began circulating in Ipoh as to the richness of the mine. It was being whispered that about 100 tubs (1 tub = 2 piculs) were being worked daily, giving the mine an output of about 6,000 piculs a month, an unbelievable figure. Another rumour was that the owner was being offered three or four million dollars for his mining concern. Finally the newspaper confirmed what had earlier been rumored, "It is confidently reported that Mr. Leong Fee has been offered a sum of eight million dollars for his Tambun mining concern which was declined. Ten million was said to have been named as the figure worth consideration, and even at that the feasibility of an exchange of ownership may possibly have now passed by, considering the present enormous outruns at the mine. Our Chinese 'Morgan' is to be congratulated."

In 1903, Tambun Mine's production of over 60,000 piculs of tin ore set a world record. It was worked in the old-fashioned Chinese shafting system, but Leong Fee subsequently introduced modern technology by employing the mining engineering firm of Messrs Nut-

ter and Pearse.

In March 1903, the *Malay Mail* featured FJB Dykes as its "Man of the Week", a rather mischievous thing to do at a time when the richness of Tambun Mine was the talk of the town:

"Mr. Fretcheville Joseph Ballantyne Dykes, answering to the less cumbersome epithet of "Bertie", is too well known to need much of an introduction, though unlike the poor, he is not always with us. For he pays sundry mysterious visits, to Negri Sembilan and Pahang, sometimes setting out without being quite certain where he is going, and rarely letting his friends know his destination. Not that his friends mind, at any rate they seem to bear up bravely under the suspense. He likes his letters addressed to Warden Dykes, and has given out that anyone holding an appointment in a class lower than his own must call him "Sir".

Bolstered by the mystic symbols, FGS, MIMM, and FCI, he has earned the reputation of being an expert in mining matters. If he has an ambition it is to become Federal Warden before retiring on a pension, or being asked to resign. Much of his best work, including his important Despatches, is done in the early hours of the morning, as he affirms that his brain is clearer then than at any other part of the day.

He has been known to dabble in racing, his part-ownership of Alazee being attended with a singular want of success. He will tell you that he has had a run for his money. Certainly Alazee did run a great many times. He will also tell you a great number of things if you have time to listen. He was once mistaken for an incendiary, and had some difficulty in proving an alibi. He plays Bridge occasionally, and has been seen inside the Selangor Club."

It was altogether a portrait of a rather self-important man. But the last

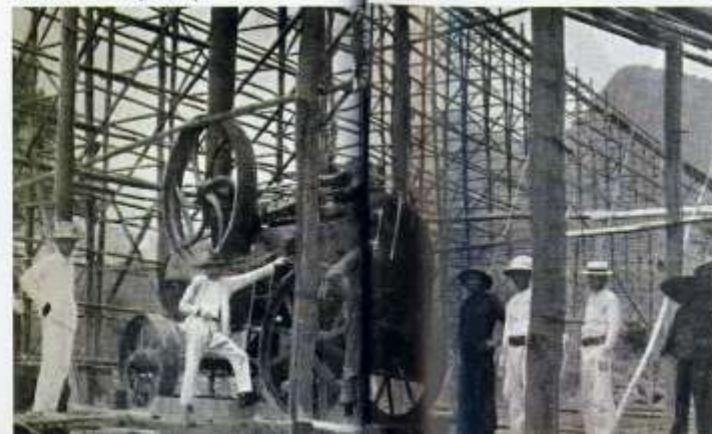
sentence gave the impression that this might be a mask to hide a deep feeling of disappointment, "His clothes are not always new, but any deficiencies in that respect are counterbalanced by the importance of his manner, and the business-like air which he assumes on the slightest provocation."

FJB Dykes might be the Senior Warden of Mines, Federated Malay



Leong Fee as a young man. (Top)

Tambun tin-mine. (Bottom)



States, a mining expert whose opinion on mining matters the Government always valued, but he would always regret his decision to sell his share of a coffee estate underneath which were tons of tin ore that he had failed to foresee. He would be forever remembered as the man who let a fortune slip through his fingers for a mere two thousand dollars.

For Leong Fee, fabulous wealth en-



No.7, Leith Street. Leong Fee's mansion.

abled him to pursue his political ambitions, limited though the opportunities were in a colonial society. In 1903, he was appointed Vice-Consul for the Chinese Government in Penang, responsible for protecting Chinese nationals and their business interests. He made frequent visits to China in connection with his work, and also in connection with important mining concerns in the prov-

ince of Guangxi. He raised funds for the victims of disasters or famine in China. He became a philanthropist. In 1905 he offered to build and equip a Pasteur Institute for the Federated Malay States at a cost of \$10,000, but since the Government had already started a Pathological Institute in Kuala Lumpur in 1900, it did not take up the offer. He was one of the founders of the Chung Hwa Confucian School in Penang in 1904, the first modern Chinese school in Malaya teaching in Mandarin. He started the Penang Hakka Educational Fund, giving a donation of \$10,000 in 1908 to buy five shophouses, the income generated by the rental being used for scholarships and bursaries. He donated \$10,000 to the King Edward VII Memorial Fund. He built a fine mansion in Penang where he spent a large part of his later life. The highlight of his career was in 1909, when he was appointed the first Unofficial Chinese Member of the Federal Council by the High Commissioner.

Leong Fee's appointment was in recognition of his contribution to the tin mining industry and of his philanthropic activities. Both the Perak Members, F. Douglas Osborne, a consultant mining engineer, and Leong Fee, championed the tin mining industry, regularly asking for a reduction in tin duty. Leong Fee did not speak English, and used Malay during debates. Leong Fee remained the only permanent Chinese Member of the Federal Council until his death in 1912.

As for Dykes, he performed his duties as Senior Warden of Mines apparently unconcerned with the goings-on in Tambun Mine. Although he visited numerous mines in Kinta, there is no mention of his visiting Tambun Mine. As a Warden of Mines, he was very strict, and in 1905 was responsible for issuing notices of cancellation of some 4,000 mining leases covering over 92,000 acres of mining land in Perak for non-compliance of the labour regulations. These required one coolie to be employed for every acre of mining land held. It was a politically inexpedient move as there were not enough mining labourers in the State to fulfill the requirements even if the miners wanted to. The British Resident of Perak, EW Birch, delayed implementing the notices until a few years later when Dykes retired in 1911 on grounds of ill health, and the matter was quietly forgotten. ■



## HOW LEONG FEE DISCOVERED TIN DEPOSITS

Kong Tai [Leong Fee] had every confidence in his coffee growing venture. There were already several thriving plantations in the vicinity. Filled with optimism, he watched his first crop grow from the seedlings he had himself planted into the earth. But while coffee plants elsewhere flourished, Kong Tai's seedlings grew into something stunted, ugly and deformed. He was completely bewildered. He had been so careful in preparing the soil and planting the seedlings that he could not understand what could have gone wrong.

One morning, while standing in the plantation and contemplating his

freak crop, he began to curse his misfortune and started to rip up the plants, one after another. Suddenly, he stopped. Something caught his eye. He picked up an uprooted plant and was surprised to see strange specks of some foreign material at the tips of its roots. He had no idea what the mysterious materials was so he collected a small sample and consulted a few friends. The sample turned out to be tin. Kong Tai had, unwittingly, planted his coffee seedlings on top of a tin deposit! The deposit turned out to be one of the richest in Perak.

There is another version of the story of the inception of the Tambun Mines.

Mr Dykes was, in fact, an Inspector of Mines which meant that he should have known that the land which he and Kong Tai owned contained tin ore. However, the colonial government in the mid 1890s was keen to encourage agriculture and granted land concessions for the purpose of planting coffee. It is likely that, if Kong Tai and Dr Dykes had made an application to convert their concession to tin mining, it would have been refused. Mr Dykes could have decided to sell his share of the coffee estate for that reason." Extract from *Days Gone By: Growing up in Penang* by Christine Wu Ramsay, p.12 [see Editor's Choice]

Tambun tin-mine.



Tambun tin-mine.



## A JEWEL OF A MINE

When Leong Fee received the prospecting results on his coffee estate in 1902, he must have got a seismic shock. The average value of the ground washed for tin was 26 katis per cubic yard, whereas the average yield among Chinese mines at the time was only 4 to 5 katis per cubic yard, and a yield of 1½ katis per cubic yard was profitable to mine. The tin price was then in the high range of around \$90 per picul, reaching a peak of \$100 per picul in February 1903.

For the first few years, Tambun Mine was simply the largest tin mine in the world. As the Ipoh newspaper, the *Times of Malaya*, said in September 1905, "Tambun Mine has made the fortune of its Chinese owner, whose numer-

ous acts of public generosity and liberality have made him a public benefactor. It is computed that within the last four years Towkay Leong Fee has received from Tambun a profit of not less than £160,000."

It became a "showpiece" mine, visited by countless numbers of British visitors, including the High Commissioner of the Federated Malay States. Some, no doubt, were curious to see what Dykes had missed, and some were anxious to see it fall flat on its face. Numerous experts on tin mining, perhaps out of deference to Dykes, predicted that it could not possibly last. But Tambun continued to confound the experts, and continued to earn profits that were not to be sneezed at.

As a mine, it was not imposing, with limited underground working in each shaft and a thousand Chinese coolies providing the hauling power. It was positively hideous on the landscape – just a huge swarming human anthill where dirty red earth was converted to dollars. Although the extraordinary richness of the karang in the early years could not be matched subsequently, still it exceeded eight katis per cubic yard from 1907 to 1910, and four katis per cubic yard from then on. In 1917 the operation of the mine was handed to a tributer, and the mine closed in 1919, having produced nearly 100,000 piculs of tin-ore in the last 12 years of its operation, when figures were available.



# DELVING INTO MALAYSIA'S CAVERNOUS PAST

By Liz Price

**P**erak Man, Peninsular Malaysia's oldest inhabitant, is well travelled, despite his age of 11,000 years old. In 1996 he went to Japan for an exhibition, and in 2001 and again in 2006 he visited Kuala Lumpur where he was the star in an exhibition entitled Perak Man. Now he is having a deserved rest back in his native Perak, residing in the new Lenggong Museum. He is one of the most important inhabitants to

have lived in Malaysia. And his bones survived to tell the tale.

Perak Man, discovered in 1991, is the only complete human skeleton which has been found in Malaysia. The cave that was his final resting place is called Gua Gunung Runtu and is situated in Bukit Kepala Gajah or Elephant's Head Hill in the Lenggong valley in Perak. The skeleton has been dated at between 10,000 and 11,000



Perak Man - reconstruction of the Perak Man skeleton.



Lenggong.

years old, which makes him a Stone Age man from the Palaeolithic period.

It is believed he was an important member of his tribe judging by the way he was buried, in a foetal position, accompanied by stone tools. He was about 157 cm tall and probably aged between 30 and 55 when he died.

The Lenggong valley is one of Peninsular Malaysia's most important areas for archaeology. Excavations have revealed many traces of Malaysia's prehistory. The town of Lenggong is some 100 kilometres north of Ipoh on the Kuala Kangsar-to-Grik road. It is the site of the oldest known place of human activity in the peninsula. Today it is still a rural area, with small kampungs (villages) surrounded by green vegetation and limestone hills. Lenggong can be likened to an open-air museum, and is home to skeletons, cave drawings and precious finds such as jewellery, pottery, weapons and stone tools. Many of the caves in the Lenggong area have re-





Tambun – the cliff face where the Tambun rock paintings are found.

vealed evidence of ancient humans having lived and hunted in this area.

Excavations began in the Lenggong area in the late 1930's. However the main work started in the 1990's when Prof Datuk Dr. Zuraina Majid, who is now the Heritage Commissioner of the Culture, Arts and Heritage Ministry, led the archaeological team that found the Perak Man skeleton.

When archaeologists began research in the Lenggong valley, they thought the earliest known site of human habitation was in the Kota Tampan area. Excavations revealed an undisturbed stone tool production area, and some 50,000 pieces of stone have been found and recorded, and the culture is referred to as Tampanian. The workshop was initially dated at 30,000 years old, but this figure has now been revised to 75,000 years. However, more recently a team has been digging a site at Bukit Jawa, and this has been dated at 100,000 (maybe 200,000) years old, and



Madal.

is therefore far older than the Kota Tampan workshop just six kilometres away.

The Lenggong Archaeological Museum, also known as the Kota Tampan Archaeological Museum, opened in 2003. It exhibits artefacts excavated from the Lenggong area. Dr. Zuraina has recently edited a book entitled *The Perak Man and other prehistoric skeletons of Malaysia* (2005).

In 2004 Perak Woman was found. Her skeletal remains showed she lived about 8,000 years ago. The remains were found at Gua Teluk Kelawar, which is also situated in the Kepala Gajah limestone massif. At 148 cm she was shorter than Perak Man, and is estimated to have died in her forties. Animal bones were found buried at the same site.

A much older discovery is the  $\pm 40,000$  year old human skull found in Niah Cave in Sarawak in 1958. Since then archaeologists have continued to make important finds in Niah which reveal a period of human activity in the

cave dating from around 50,000 years ago.

But all these findings are very young compared to those from Africa, where the predecessors of the human species originated about three to five million years ago. Lucy is the name given to the fossilised partial skeleton of a three-foot adult hominid dated at about 3.2 million years old. She was found in the Afar valley in Ethiopia in 1973.

#### PIONEERS

Cave archaeology in Peninsular Malaysia started in the 1880's, pioneered by scientists with an interest in geology. Leonard Wray, the first curator of the Perak Museum at Taiping, conducted archaeological excavations in caves in Perak and Pahang in 1886-91. Then there was no more work until I.H.N. Evans resumed the work in 1917-31. Other prominent people include Dr. P.V. van Stein Callenfels in 1926 (Perak); H.D. Noone (Kelantan); W.M. Gordon (Perak);





The Lenggong archaeological museum.

M.W.F. Tweedie in 1935 (Pahang and Kelantan); and H.D. Collings in 1935 (Kedah and Perlis).

The Japanese occupation and the onset of the Malayan Emergency (1948-60) stopped serious archaeological work for a number of years. P.D.R. Williams-Hunt reexamined previously recorded cave sites and recorded new ones in 1951-53 (Perlis and Kelantan). G. de G. Sieveking worked in Kelantan in 1954, followed by various other researchers, notably Datuk Dr. Adi Taha.

Caves have been used by man for aeons. Most of the troglodytes temporarily lived in caves and rock shelters, which provided cover from the elements and wild animals, and were used as a base for hunting parties. The people lived mainly by hunting, evidence shown by the remains of food bones on the cave floors. Some of the caves may have offered good views over the plains below, which would benefit the hunters. A few of the prehistoric sites which have been examined are open sites whereas the majority are deeper caves.

Gua Cha in Kelantan was one of

the first sites dug, and revealed a Hoabinhian (10,000- 3,000 BC) occupation and burial site. Other caves in this area of Nenggiri, such as Gua Jaya, and Gua Cawan, were also found to contain archaeological remains. These caves are important. Unlike other caves throughout the peninsula, they have not been disturbed by guano collectors. One reason for the lack of disturbance is there are no roads to the caves, only river access.

In Perlis, Bukit Tengku Lembu has a rock shelter which contained traces of a Neolithic burial – two adults and a child. Pottery and tools such as axes, grinding stones and flakes were also found. Many of the Chuping caves (see *Heritage Asia*, Oct.-Dec. 2006) were excavated in the early 1950's and revealed traces of pottery and tools. In Kedah, many of the caves at Baling were dug by Collings in the 1930's. Williams-Hunt later dug in caves in Bukit Keplu.

The Kinta Valley in Perak runs roughly 20 kilometres both south and north of Ipoh and is famed for its scenic limestone hills rising out of the valley

floor. However few of these caves seem to have been studied archaeologically. To the north at Padang Rengas is Gunung Pondok, which J.W.W. Birch described in 1874 as "The appearance here of a hill in a gorge between two ranges is very curious, sticking up as it does very like Punch's hat". The archaeological finds were first described by Ivor Evans in 1921, and included some human bones, although all were very broken. Evans also dug in Gunung Cheroh at Ipoh, as well as Batu Kurau, north of Taiping.

Caves in Pahang also received Evans' attention, notably at Gunung Senyum near Jerantut. These caves together with the nearby caves at Kota Gelanggi were documented by Sir Hugh Clifford in 1897, but even earlier in 1882 W. Cameron published a report on the Gelanggi caves. Also in Pahang, caves in the Raub area as well as Gua Cinta Manis, Chegar Perah and Merapoh were all investigated by early archaeologists. The caves in the Panching area near Kuantan were first dug in the 1930's.

There are few caves in Selangor. Although the longest, Dark Cave at Batu





Prof Zuraina Majid (second from the right) and her team of archaeologists at the Perak Man site in Lenggong, Perak.



Caves, has been extensively studied for its cave fauna, there has been little archaeological work. Ridley did some work at Batu Caves in the 1890's. In 1896 he blasted two holes in the floor of the mouth of Dark Cave, and found Chinese pottery fragments, ox bones and bat skeletons. However by as early as the 1850's guano was being dug from the caves by Chinese settlers. Thus, any archaeological remains that may have been there have been destroyed.

It is known that caves in Sabah were inhabited by man at least 25,000 to 18,000 years ago, especially at the Darvel Bay area in the east coast. These early communities lived in caves in the east coast of Sabah, such as the Tingkayu area, and Baturong, Madai, Tapadong and Gomantong caves. Wooden coffins, dating to the 14th century, have been found in many caves in Sabah. Some can be seen in the Agop Batu Tulug archaeological site, which has been turned into a museum.

#### CAVE PAINTINGS

There are not many cave paintings in Malaysia. The oldest known only dates back to about 2,000 years, at Gua Tambun, near Ipoh. They are not actually in a cave, but on a cliff face. Sadly nothing has been done to protect the drawings. The famous paintings at the Painted

Cave of Niah have been dated back to about 1,200 years. The Negrito aboriginal cave art at Lenggong is modern graffiti by comparison, being only 100 years old. But all these pale into insignificance compared with cave art at places such as Lascaux in France, which date back some 15,000 years.

The development of Malaysian prehistoric archaeology has depended largely on discoveries made on sites in limestone caves. Fortunately the country has an abundance of such caves and these are providing much of our knowledge about the ancient cultures in Malaysia's history. Much more can be recovered from Malaysia's archaeological past as new finds are being made all the time. ■



Tambun – unfortunately modern graffiti has been added to the prehistoric ones.



Painted cave at Niah.

Gua Senyum, Pahang.



Gua Cha, Kelantan.



Kenyir.

