

THE TEMOLEH KINGS OF KUALA KANGSAR

By Aznir Malek

The mighty Perak River

There was a time, in the Eighties, when the Perak River system almost became a second home for me. Every month would see my aged Fiat 124 passing the trundling lorries along the old KL-Ipoh road, towards the peaceful town of Kuala Kangsar. My friends and I covered literally all the upper waters of that mighty river, from the turbid pools at the royal town to the weedy coves of Cenderoh Lake to the eerie depths of the Temenggor, Bersia and Kenering. Most of our trips were hit-and-miss affairs, dependent on where the Fiat brought us and whom we met. Still, we managed to catch our fair share of family-sized haruan, toman, kalui and the like.

I considered myself lucky, being able to fight those behemoths, before the crowds overran the waters in the Nineties. Then, a copy of The Journal of the Malayan Angling Association fell on my lap, courtesy of an angling acquaintance. It was like opening a Pandora's box: the stories and faded monochrome pictures were downright sobering. I discovered that I was not that lucky after all! The catches of these anglers of the Fifties from waters like the Cenderoh were staggering, both in terms of size and quantity.

The pioneers

The exploits of these early anglers were indeed remarkable when you consider the rudimentary tackle they were using at the time: steel aerial rods (even homemade wooden ones!), centre-pin reels and early nylon or gut lines of 8, 12, or at most 20 lb. test. I began to have a deep respect for these fellows.

Another thing that impressed me was the dedication of this small group of anglers who put their knowledge and experience on paper for the benefits of anglers at large. I guess that was one of the reasons why I ended up in the present Malaysian Angling Association or PeMM. More than thirty years down the road, we still have some way to go, to match the organisation and dedication of that original group.

An article in the September 1954 issue made my heart miss a beat: the faded photo showed a man in a broad-brimmed hat, with a huge striped carp slung over his back, just like the Cod Liver Oil advert. That was my first sight of a temoleh.

The first temoleh

The 37 ½ lb. fish was landed by a Mr. Ming Ah Man of Kuala Kangsar on 4th April of the same year. He used an 8 ft. wooden rod and a Standard (centrepin) reel, with 300 yards of 16 lb. ICI line. The killing bait was a bunch of worms on a no. 6 hook, on a trace of 1 ½ yards and a heavy 2 oz. sinker.

If the picture of the fish was staggering, the fight as told by Mr. Ming was even more so: its first run

was 200 yards downstream. He then managed to pull it back to within 60 yards, but the fish was having none of it; its second run took out another 90 yards. It sounded the bottom when he again pulled it back to the sampan. After a lengthy stalemate, it came up but broke the surface with a jump of 1 ½ feet, followed by a 100 yard run upstream! Yet again, Mr. Ming brought it back and yet again it ran off, this time for 70 yards. It was finally brought to the boat and gaffed by Mr. Ming's brother.

This account of probably the first recorded catch of a temoleh on rod and line really set my left brain working overtime. For some time, I made enquiries as to the whereabouts of Mr. Ming Ah Man, until I was erroneously told by a fishing friend that he had passed away years ago. My quest to meet this esteemed angler died with the news, until just a few weeks ago...

The happy discovery

We were having lunch in my favourite coffee shop in Kuala Kangsar, Editor Fong, Kelah Kwong and I. We were on our way to Bukit Merah Laketown Resort but I managed to somehow persuade Fong to detour to this place, to savour the chicken chops and beef steak of Yut Loy Eating Shop. I was chatting with the towkay when, just out of the blue, I asked whether he knew a certain Mr. Ming Ah Man, the temoleh angler. Imagine my amazement when he noted that Ming's family shop was just down the street! Goodness, I've been frequenting the place for years, and have never thought of asking. Dumb!

No prizes for what happened next. Bukit Merah was momentarily forgotten (sorry Lawrence, but now you know why we were late that day!). We eventually met a Mr. Ming Yean Fang, who happened to be Ah Man's elder brother. We spent almost an hour chatting with the 74 year old man. The coup de grace was when he brought out these black and white pictures of catches made by the family, dating back to the early Fifties. I felt like I have just found some lost treasure! And guess what; Uncle Ming gleefully noted that his younger brother, Johnny Ming Ah Man, is alive and kicking in Penang! (Thanks, GP!)

A second meeting

A meagre hour was definitely insufficient to tap Uncle's memories of a lifetime, so I set another meeting with the genial man, a few weeks later. The writings henceforth are the results of that interview meeting.

There were actually six of them, the Ming Brothers, and all were ardent anglers. I guess they were famous in those days, catching huge fish on rod and line when the other locals were merely using nets. Uncle (Yean Fang) was the second eldest. The eldest had sadly passed away but, in the Fifties when they were all strapping young lads, he was the obvious leader of the pack. They were catching all sorts of fish from the Perak River, literally a stone's throw away from their family textile shop.

True brotherhood

Johnny was the glamour boy of the group, having being featured in the Journal and also a known member of the Angling Association. Kuala Kangsar and Ming Ah Man were probably spoken in the same breath, by the likes of Vinell and Kitchener, stalwarts of the Association. When Johnny landed that 50 lb. 11 oz. temoleh (journal issue Vol. 3 No. 2, September 1955) and landed himself in the record books, his fame was well and truly sealed. In reality, however, this did not sever the bonds of these angling brothers. Between them, they caught hundreds of temoleh, including one of over 70 lb. and another of 64 lb.! Unfortunately, these giants could not be considered for bona fide records,

since the brothers had taken turns fighting them. I guess their teamwork knew no bounds!

Uncle's recount of the fight with the 64 pounder was especially interesting. Johnny was the first guy at the rod. He was eventually done in, fighting the tireless monster. Then Uncle took over, only to give up and pass the rod to yet another brother. In the end, everyone had a go. The creature fought tooth and nail for two hours, dragging the boat miles downriver, until it was finally landed!

The tackle and the method

In the beginning, the Ming brothers were using rather basic tackle, as described above. They made the rods themselves, out of the local tempinis wood. The joints were of steel, procured from a shop in Ipoh. The boat was actually a narrow wooden sampan rented from a Malay local. The thing eventually capsized during one of their outings. This motivated them to order an aluminium boat. It was welded by one of the "tin shops" in town!

In later years, they upgraded their angling armoury, too. A Penn Longbeach Multiplier reel and 5 ft. Mohawk rod were purchased from Hock Heng Co. in Singapore (sound familiar?), whilst an Olympic multiplier reel was obtained from The China Emporium in Penang. By the way, the owner – a Mr. Lim – used to come regularly to Kuala Kangsar and Cenderoh to fish with the Mings. The world is a small place!

Anyway, with the new, "hi-tech" tackle, they are now well-prepared for the giant temoleh. Four to five hundred yards of say 20 lb. line can be spooled onto the reels, giving vast assurance when the fish makes its first run.

Even the angling method was modified by the brothers. The hook was tied directly to the mainline. After it was baited – worms or banana pieces (the latter dressed "satay" style) were the normal baits – about thirty yards of line would be let out down current. Then a heavy sinker is tied to the mainline using a cord and dropped directly under the boat. Thus the bait would be swinging about in the current, just above bottom. When the fish strikes, the sinker is hauled up and the cord quickly cut away, leaving the angler to fight the fish with a simple, snag-free rig. Obviously it needs the cooperation of at least two guys, and who better to help you than your own brother!

This specialised method of catching the temoleh and other large species of the Perak River has become a legacy from the Ming brothers, for it is still in use today.

Temoleh tricks

According to Uncle, the season for temoleh fishing is the period around Chinese New Year, when the fish would swim upstream from the Teluk Intan stretches, to the waters around Kuala Kangsar for the spawning. Apparently, the temoleh would deposit their eggs amongst the submerged rocks of the upper Perak, all the way to the Cenderoh Dam. Sadly, the increased netting activity has greatly decimated the stocks of these migrating fish. Those nylon nets with 6 in. eyes are spelling the doom for these beautiful giants.

The best conditions for temoleh fishing would be during the drier spells. Turbid water is not favourable: the Mings would then be chasing other species like the patin and baung. The temoleh, even with its bulky countenance, actually prefer the main current. Hence its supreme strength, speed and tenacity! The females are generally bigger and fatter, what with all the eggs. A hooked male would thus give a significantly bigger challenge to the angler.

The favourite fishing spot for temoleh was definitely at the town itself, in the main current just above Lubuk Mat Anjing. Occasionally the Mings would try the stretches below Iskandar Bridge, or a couple of miles downstream of Kuala. There were other swims, but we'll have to forgive Uncle, for after seven decades, he had forgotten the names of some of these spots!

Other ventures

The brothers made other sorties to other waters, like the Cenderoh Dam where they caught messes of fish. Patin into double figures was the order of the day. Uncle remembered once when they landed a whole car load of the critters. Upon returning to town, they discovered that the price for patin meat was too low, so they decided to donate the lot to needy homes!

Kerai, jelawat, tengas and kelah were the other notable catches. One particularly big kelah was caught on a satay concoction of pieces of apple! Uncle attested that it was a red apple, which confirmed my theory of kelah having an affinity to that colour.

Uncle also mentioned trips made to the Bukit Merah Lake, to catch large sebarau and kalui. Interestingly, he noted that they never caught large toman; not even in the waters of the Cenderoh. Apparently, large toman only came to the fore in the Eighties and onwards.

Nothing like home...

But wherever they went, the Ming brothers would always return to their pristine waters of Kuala Kangsar. And the reason is simply the temoleh, considered by Uncle to be the best fighting fish in the river. When I countered with my opinion of the kelah and sebarau, Uncle plainly replied, "... yes, but the temoleh is much bigger!" Of course I stood corrected! And who was I to argue: I had not yet landed a large temoleh, to stand on the same fish crate as Uncle.

Which is why I'm planning on another sortie to catch this elusive fish. Granted, the odds would be against anyone from "out-of-town" to achieve this. The present rarity of this river species is problem enough: being fairly ignorant of the rhythms of this king of the carps makes it doubly hard. But I'm determined to try, for I have a gut feeling that I will make an old, contented man even happier...