

Book Reviews

My Story, by Lim Goh Tong. Subang Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 2004 (also available in Chinese), vi + 187 pages (ISBN 967-978-859-8 (pb); 967-978-892-X (hb))

Biography of Wee Kheng Chiang, by Lam Chee Kheung, Kuching: Wee Hood Teck & Co, 2005 (available only in Chinese), iv + 169 pages (soft cover ISBN 983-99454-3-2)

The work and contributions of Malaysian Chinese to the progress of the nation are generally acknowledged. Yet claims of the community are not always backed up by reliable documented “evidence”. This is despite the fact that the Chinese have resided in Malacca from the fifteenth century and permanent Chinese settlements were scattered in parts of the Malay Peninsula from the time of Francis Light. Some of the oldest clans in Penang trace their settlement back to 13 generations.

Sadly, despite more than 200 years of settlement, the Chinese have little to show in terms of documented history or historical records. The community is not known for its appreciation of old records, be they in the form of genealogies, personal papers and biographies, or files on Chinese associations, schools, temples, and other organizations. In view of the paucity of written documents and the absence of community archives, the appearance of biographies and autobiographies by or on Chinese entrepreneurs is indeed a welcome sign of change of attitude among Malaysian Chinese.

In general, the Chinese tend to keep a low profile and are loath to make public their life histories. Many too are unwilling to share their experiences with private researchers who are looked upon more with suspicion than understanding. Biographical research to date has been sporadic and include those on Khaw Soo Cheang (1797-1882), Yap Ah Loy (1837-1885), Wong Ah Fook (1837-1918), Chan Wing (1873-1947), Tan Kak Kee (1874-1961) and a number of others who are still active in public life. Some are serious studies by academics and others by their descendants or the biographers themselves. This is a healthy trend of development that contributes positively towards the documentation of the history of Malaysia.

The tradition of biographical writing in Malaysia, especially on Chinese personalities, has yet to take root as a recognized field of academic research. For one, the early pioneers and personalities are no longer around, others are unwilling to commit their experiences and achievements to paper or permit others to do so. Again, academics who have a “vested”

interest in writing about the lives of past personalities are restricted to the historians or freelancers. Research by the trained historians has led to excellent studies, such as those by Yong Chin Fatt on Tan Kak Kee (1989) and Jennifer Cushman on Khaw Soo Cheang (1991). A select few outside the confines of history have made valiant efforts in biographical studies. These include Lim Pui Huen on Wong Ah Fook (2002) and Lam Chee Kheung on Wee Kheng Chiang (2005). There are also those who try their hands in producing biographies of their illustrious ancestors, while a few “high achievers” have taken steps to record their autobiographies.

Two welcome publications that have appeared recently are those on Wee Kheng Chiang (黄庆昌1890-1978) and Lim Goh Tong (林梧桐1918-2007). The former, by Sarawakian academic Dr Lam Chee Kheung, is written in Chinese, and the latter is an autobiographical account drafted in Chinese by Chew Sau Loong and in English by Ms Cheong Mei Sui.

Born a generation apart, these two pioneer entrepreneurs shared many similarities in their background and experiences. Wee was born in Kuching, Sarawak, and Lim in Anxi village, Fujian province. Both were Hokkiens and came from poor families. They grew up under difficult and demanding circumstances that helped them to build up their resolve to succeed in life. They learned many lessons from their early lives that enabled them to venture into businesses ahead of their peers. Through their strict upbringing, hard work and foresight, they charted their own rags-to-riches careers with remarkable enterprise. Wee became known as “The Uncrowned King of Sarawak” and Lim reigned over one of the largest business corporations in Malaysia and the East Asian region.

Written by an academic, *Wee Kheng Chiang* is more generous with details as the author has the full cooperation of the family. The account provides insights not only into the family life and business operations of Wee, but also his active involvement in community work and philanthropy. *Lim Gong Tong* is a straight forward account by the autobiographer himself and without the slightest hint of self-aggrandizement. Major business deals and transactions are mentioned almost in passing without revealing the secrets of how crucial decisions and judgements are arrived at.

The two books take the readers on a journey to the different stages of the remarkable lives of their subjects. Both survived a harsh and early adulthood to lay the foundations of their enterprises, escaped death at the hands of Japanese invaders through sheer luck, and navigated through the vicissitudes of policy changes after independence.

In business, both Wee and Lim started small, building up their ventures block by block through years of honest hard work, patience and unflinching resolve. They left behind lasting legacies that are now thriving and expanding transnational businesses. Wee founded the United Overseas Bank (UOB), now a leading financial institution in Singapore, and Lim

built a sprawling business empire from his base in the highlands of Genting. They also saw the decline of some of their ventures, for example, Wee's Sarawak business now remains in dormancy and Lim's joint-venture in banking has fizzled out. A comparison of these two giants among Malaysian entrepreneurs reveals some interesting insights.

The first is the lessons that their youthful days and early careers brought to their business ventures. Their keen minds and rational thinking led them to ventures that offered attractive prospects. These early ventures led to expansion into new ones. They had confidence in what they did and seized opportunities when their peers saw nothing but risks.

The second is their family background and strict upbringing that instilled in them strong traditional values that helped to strengthen their determination to excel. Both were imbued with a strong sense of filial piety and gave their children an excellent education. They answered readily the needs of society through generous acts of charity and in support of education.

Next is the recognition of their peers, society and country. Both were rewarded by the government and scaled social heights that were beyond all but the select few. Wee's contributions to education and charities are documented. Lim remained largely quiet on this issue but his contributions too were well-known to all. The Chinese believe that the benevolent are well-rewarded with a good life and longevity. Both were abundantly blessed on this count.

Another important insight is that Wee and Lim successfully passed on their baton of control to the next generation. This is particularly pertinent as Chinese businesses are commonly afflicted by a "curse" that wealth does not last three generations. Instead, the second generation of the Wee and Lim families has more than justified the trust of the founders by diversifying the original portfolios of the family enterprises.

Another element that may have escaped notice is that "luck" had smiled on Wee and Lim in the early stages of their business careers. The former married the daughter of his employer and eventually surpassed the fortunes of his father-in-law. The latter's plan to develop Genting into a family retreat in the mountains turned into a casino through a suggestion from an official source. But one must not attribute business success to luck as it works only on those who are enterprising, farsighted, and perceptive.

In all, one is impressed by the force of the spirit of *zhiqiang buxi*, or unremitting efforts towards self-advancement, that is manifested in the lives of Wee and Lim. By their bold action, keen foresight and unwavering efforts, they were destined to be truly remarkable entrepreneurs who became iconic figures during their lifetime.

For obvious reasons, both accounts are meant to be informative rather than interpretative or analytical. These books are not to be judged on their academic merits or demerits but essentially in throwing insights into the supremacy of the human spirit and the personal

challenge to rise above one's circumstances in the spirit of *xiqiang buxi*. Both books are non-academic but this fact does not in anyway detract from the lessons that may be learned from two distinguished entrepreneurs in different areas of business endeavours. The broad strokes of the brush in both cases are tantalizingly sketchy in painting panoramic scenarios that reveal enough details only to whet one's appetite for more. Without doubt, both may easily be filled with more details and penetrating observations to enhance their presentation and authority as sources of reference.

From a reading of both the books, one may be tempted to ask if the success stories of Wee and Lim are repeatable. The answer is obviously negative as each offers a unique business model circumscribed by the special conditions of the time. The readers come face to face with two outstanding personalities who embody the quintessential qualities of the successful entrepreneurs. Their success is the epitome of the self-made entrepreneurs guided by a belief in themselves and a set of age-old moral and cultural values in the conduct of business and their demeanour in the public and private spheres.

Just as these remarkable entrepreneurs have contributed immensely to the development of the country in the past, many are similarly carrying out the tradition in the contemporary period. Yet their lives would have counted for little if the stories behind their enterprise and contributions remain undocumented. In this context, the need for more biographical studies of distinguished personalities will certainly help to fill the immense gap that exists in the literature on the entrepreneurial spirit of Chinese business people. These two modest publications may yet inspire others to undertake biographical studies to add to the collective memory of the nation.

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