

Book Review

Yeap Chor Ee: A narrative of rags to riches. A review of *The King's Chinese: From barber to banker, the story of Yeap Chor Ee and the Straits Chinese* by Daryl Yeap. Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2019, 233 pp.

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This is a long-awaited book. It is the fruit of research and writing endeavour undertaken by a Yeap family member stretching from 2007 to 2018. The book presents more than a conventional rags-to-riches story of a Chinese towkay. Rising from an itinerant barber to an entrepreneurial banker, Yeap Chor Ee [叶祖意], the patriarch of the Yeap family, has become a legendary business figure in Penang. His success story has never been properly told or understood owing to his low-profile life and the paucity of documents associated with his business and socio-political activities.

The King's Chinese is the first ever attempt by Daryl Yeap, the great grand-daughter of Chor Ee, to reconstruct the Yeap family history starting first from China under the Qing government and subsequently in Penang, a British trading port and settlement. The book consists of sixteen chapters. The first two chapters illustrate the 19-century socio-economic and political development in Southern China and Penang, providing the backdrop against the Chinese migration to Nanyang (South Seas). China was then confronted with frequent floods, famines and weak imperial government. These chronic internal problems ultimately drove millions of Chinese to venture into the unfamiliar territories in Southeast Asia. In contrast to China, territories in Southeast Asia were imbued with employment and business opportunities. Penang is the case in point. It was first established as a British trading post and later transformed into a regional entrepot and a business and financial centre, and witnessed steady economic growth, increasing population, expansion of infrastructure and facilities.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 trace the great ancestor of Yeap Chor Ee and the family condition in Nan'an of Fukien province in which Chor Ee was raised and grew up. The author made a trip to

the Ye clan's ancestral mausoleum in Henan to pay homage to Yè Zhuliang, bearing the name of Yè Gong (Duke of Yè). Xue Yu or San Weng, the first of Zhuliang's descendants migrated south to Lam-oa (Nan'an), Fukien province and became the founding ancestor of the Ye clan of the locality. Chor Ee was born into a peasant family descending from San Weng's line. Being an orphan at about three-month old, he was first cared by his grandmother and later by his two elder brothers. Under the custody of the brothers, Chor Ee was required to do different chores in the farm. At the age of 17 in 1885, he decided to leave China for Southeast Asia in search of a better life.

Chapters 6 and 7 sketch Chor Ee's settling down in George Town, the port town of Penang, which witnessed a bustling social and economic life. As a new immigrant, he could only afford to rent a cubicle and became an itinerant barber to make a living. Since the Chinese male immigrants making up the majority of population in George Town still wore the *towchang* (queue), Chor Ee managed to earn a stable monthly income by shaving their head and accumulate some savings.

Chapters 8 and 9 narrate the formation and growth of Chor Ee's new business venture as well as his new family. With his savings, he opened a provision store in 1890 and called it Chop Ban Hin Lee. Located in Prangin Road where new immigrants or *singkeh* congregated, his business expanded rapidly as he built upon the trading of brown sugar from Province Wellesley and white sugar from Java. By allying with Oei Tiong Ham, the "world's sugar king" and "richest man from Semarang", Chor Ee's firm became the largest sugar distributor and dominated the sugar trade in Penang. Later, the firm diversified into rice, rubber, tapioca and tin. By the second decade of the 20th century, Chor Ee was known as the merchant prince of Penang, and had warehouses, production plants, employees, and agents in the key trading ports of Southeast Asia (p.70). Having soundly established his business and accumulated wealth, Chor Ee took four wives and started two families – one in China and one in Penang. His four wives gave him six natural born and four adopted children.

Chapters 10 and 11 recount Chor Ee's advance to the upper echelon of Penang's high society. Being a new millionaire by the turn of the 20th century, Chor Ee bought one of the first cars in town, the British-built black Daimler, and attracted a good deal of interest from the local residents (p.90). Besides, he also acquired an upmarket house at Penang Street and settled in exclusive neighbourhoods making friends with rich and influential businessmen of the time such as Lim Eu Toh, Lim Boon Haw, and Khoo Cheow Teong. Chor Ee's social status was further elevated when he took possession of a grand Italianate villa, Homestead, at Northam Road, dubbed the "Millionaire's row" by the turn of the 20th century.

Chapters 12 and 13 relate the relationships and daily lives of members of Chor Ee's extended family in Homestead as well as the different festivals celebrated by family members. This shows the formation of the diasporic patriarch of the Yeap family's attachment and commitment to this new homeland.

Chapter 14 touches on Chor Ee's involvement in the banking business. In 1918, he set up the first local bank in Penang – Ban Hin Lee Bank. This venture was made possible by the investment of capital accumulated from Chor Ee's trading activities, especially in tin. By stocking up tin in 1914, Chor Ee made enormous profits when World War I ended and prices of tin spiralled upwards to a high of £420 per ton. With Chor Ee's business acumen and his recruitment of financial professionals, Ban Hin Lee Bank operated efficiently and became a modern bank in Malaya.

Chapter 15 highlights the Japanese Occupation of Penang and its impact on the Yeap family. Being prominent and wealthy, Chor Ee and his family members were unusually exempted from the Japanese maltreatment and harassment. Instead of being closed, Ban Hin Lee Bank continued to operate under the Japanese rule. Such episode was not a coincidence. According to the author, one Walter Lim Kho Leng, who was seconded to work for Mamoru Shinozaki, the head of the welfare department in Singapore, could have played the role of protecting Chor Ee's family and banking business. Walter Lim was Chor Ee's bank manager and the third son of Dr. Lim Boon Keng, an influential political and social figure in Singapore.

Chapter 16 concludes the book with a look at Chor Ee's response to the estate duty. It was a graduated tax, levied on the amount of estate left by the deceased (p.194). When the estate duties were fixed at 40% in 1941, Chor Ee, realising the risk of losing his wealth to the British government, allotted substantial money for benevolence and philanthropy. In 1949, he donated \$100,000 to the establishment of the country's first university, The University of Malaya in Singapore as it was known then. The following year, \$50,000 was donated to the university's Chinese Library and three months later a further donation of \$100,000 was made, bringing the total contribution to a quarter of a million dollars (p.201).

Throughout the book, the author provides insights into the social and economic history of Penang through the life and family of Yeap Chor Ee. It is well-illustrated with photographs of George Town's street scenes and family members. The most interesting part of the book is the narration of Chor Ee's rise in the trading and banking businesses in Chapters 9 and 14. As a member of the family, the author is able to paint a picture by assembling the factors that have contributed to the business success of Chor Ee.

However, this account of Chor Ee's successful entrepreneurial endeavours remain incomplete. Little is mentioned about Chor Ee's engagement in the sago trade from which he made a huge profit. In the 1920s, he had stocked up hundreds of thousands of piculs of sago when prices were low. Five years later, the stockpile of sago was sold at high price to Australia, Hong Kong and India. With the accumulated capital, Chor Ee had not only diversified into trading of other commodities, but also made investments in real estate. In 1925, when the Noordin Estate, comprising 243 shop houses, six large residences with extensive compounds, a rubber estate and various pieces of land planted with coconuts, fruit trees, and padi, were auctioned off, Chor Ee headed the list of purchasers. The amount of properties bought by him exceeded over \$0.7

million. The appreciation of the value of these properties in the post-war period had added significantly to Chor Ee's wealth.

Ban Hin Lee Bank was indubitably a major business that generated substantial revenue for Chor Ee. The main source for profit-making of the bank was providing loans. From 1950 to 1952, the total loan amount increased from \$9.2 million to \$19.4 million. This immense increase in loan was due to the demand from the region. In 1949, for instance, Ban Hin Lee Bank made a loan of \$1 million to Aceh Trading Corporation, which was owned by the Indonesian revolutionary army. It may not be wrong to infer that Ban Hin Lee Bank advanced some major loans to Indonesia, where the Indonesian revolutionaries were fighting the Dutch for independence. With the end of the struggle, the Indonesian paid off the loans with high interest rate. Loans from Penang were not only for profits, but also to sustain the Indonesian efforts in breaking free from the yoke of Dutch colonialism.

It is believed that Chor Ee did not subscribe to the China Relief Fund. Interestingly, there is a mention of Chor Ee donating \$100,000 to China for fighting the Japanese. In 1938, when the Wuhan Chorus came to Penang to perform a repertoire of patriotic songs to raise funds for the anti-Japanese campaign in China, Dr. Chen Ren Bing, who led the chorus, persuaded Chor Ee to make the donation on conditions of anonymity. With his close attachment to his homeland where some relatives and friends were residing, it was natural that he would support the cause.

Despite the absence of certain details, this book is an interesting read and should provide insights on early Chinese entrepreneurs in late colonial Penang. The Chinese community in the late 19th or early 20th centuries had reached several hundred thousand in number. Some members became prominent capitalists and merchants and dominated the economic scene of Penang throughout the postwar and post-Independence periods. Eventually they overshadowed the Baba and their descendants. Daryl Yeap has contributed a fine biographical account of one of these successful Chinese pioneers and has helped to enrich the growing body of literature on the history of Malaysian Chinese. Nevertheless, the author seems to have more to say about the Yeap family. Another volume on Chor Ee's descendants who are carrying his business legacy would be eagerly awaited as we navigate the new and modern economic terrain of Penang and Malaysia.

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