



Pride in family history

The great-granddaughter of Penang tycoon Yeap Chor Ee tells **Zuhaila Sedek** that to know one's future, it's important to look at the past

THE secret to understanding the present is to look at the past and that, for Daryl Yeap, is the beauty of history. She is the great-granddaughter of Yeap Chor Ee, a barber turned business tycoon during the 1880s in Penang.

Chor Ee's story is fascinating. His life story has been well documented by family members in the hope that it can be celebrated by the whole Yeap family as well as Malaysians. To commemorate the glory of Chor Ee's life, Daryl carried a research mission to trace the family genealogy and opened a museum, The House Of Yeap Chor Ee.

BACK TO ROOTS

In 2004, Daryl's family hired a research team of historians and translators to trace the Yeap family genealogy. The team went to every nook and corner in China, where Chor Ee was born.

It took over two years for Daryl and the team to unearth the complete Jiapu (also known as Book Of Generations). *Jiapu* documents the clan history and lineage, and can go as far back as 3,000 years.

For Daryl, it was important to dig into the family history as it would provide her with a sense of belonging. "There is a saying that 'you need to know where you come from to know

where you are going,'" she says. "If you have the time, the means and patience to trace your genealogy, I believe it's everyone's duty to do so," says Daryl, a bank analyst.

In China, the team looked for members of Chor Ee's family as well as his ancestors. "Most Chinese families from those days have long genealogical histories, thanks to their *Jiapu*," says Daryl.

The team spent another two years to translate the data acquired and in the end, recorded almost 3,000 names from 117 generations dating back 2,500 years, to when a general, Shen Zhu Liang, fathered the first line of Yeap descendants in Henan, China. Henan was the cradle of Chinese civilisation back then. Later, some of Shen's descendants moved south, all the way to Fujian.

Chor Ee, a 113th generation Yeap, was born in the small village of Sia Tua in Nan An, Fujian. According to Daryl, many family links have been lost through migration and this poses a challenge when tracing family lineage. Also, during the Cultural Revolution, a lot of family records were destroyed by the Red Guards. "The longer one leaves it, the more difficult it becomes to trace the link," says Daryl.

To date, there are 250 descendants of Chor Ee living here and in China where grandnephews and nieces as well as their children and grandchildren live in the family house in Sia Tua.

But most of his grandchildren and great-grandchildren are here. According to Daryl, her family used to send money to the family in China till the 1980s.

"Nowadays, many Chinese nationals, they are quite well off," she says.

The Yeaps get together occasionally. "We have gatherings during Chinese New Year or special occasions

such as big birthdays. But because the family has expanded, getting everyone together is quite difficult," says Daryl.

BUSINESSMAN & PHILANTHROPIST

Chor Ee was born during a difficult time in China. He migrated to Penang in 1885 at 17, in search of work, fortune and a better life.

Upon arrival in Penang, Chor Ee worked as a barber. Before 1911, Chinese men shaved the front of their heads and wore a queue (a long braid of hair).

"When the Manchu Tartars introduced the hairstyle over 400 years ago, they adopted the slogan Keep Your Hair And Lose Your Head or Keep Your Head And Cut Your Hair!" says Daryl.

Because of this policy, barbers were kept busy. In five years, Chor Ee had saved enough money to start his own shop.

The shop was called Chop Ban Hin Lee and it sold sundry goods on consignment basis. Shortly after this, he met Oei Tiong Ham, who was later known as the Sugar King Of Asia.

Oei was also a budding businessman at that time. He produced sugar and Chor Ee sold it. Combining Oei's knowledge in production technology and Chor Ee's honesty and business ethics, they cornered the sugar trade in the region.

Chop Ban Hin Lee also went into trading of other commodities.

In 1918 Chor Ee started offering financing services to customers. This was the start of Ban Hin Lee Bank.

"It was the only locally incorporated bank based in Penang at that time. Till today, it remains the only bank in Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore to be funded single-handedly by an individual," says Daryl.

Ban Hin Lee Bank was in Daryl's family for over 80 years until 2000,

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when the bank merged with Southern Bank and the merged entity was later acquired by CIMB Bank six years later.

Chor Ee contributed to education too. He never went to school but he realised the importance of education to give someone a good start in life.

He contributed to a number of educational institutions. The most significant was the University Malaya Endowment Fund. In 1948, the Carr-Saunders Commission report recommended the establishment of a university for self-government. It was to be a key instrument in the construction of a new Malaya. Lacking funds, the founders approached private sectors including Chor Ee.

THE MUSEUM

There are just too many things that Chor Ee had accomplished. For Daryl, it was right to honour Chor Ee's legacy with the establishment of a museum, The House Of Yeap Chor Ee, in 2008. Located in Penang Street, George Town, the museum features Chor Ee's life in a chronological manner.

"When our family bestowed Homestead (the family home) to the Wawasan Education Foundation in 2006, we didn't really give much thought to what we would do with the furniture and artefacts that had been part of the family for generations. A friend suggested setting up a museum and we thought that was a good way to pay tribute to a man that had achieved and

contributed so much to society. That was how the idea for the gallery came about," says Daryl.

Housed in a 19th Century shoplot, the museum's first gallery introduces Chinese immigrants, explaining why they came here and how they lived. Visitors can listen to narratives via audio guides.

The next gallery introduces Chor Ee's business and personal life. This main gallery showcases how the poor immigrant worked his way up, from a barber to a banker.

"Every piece of artefact and furniture in the museum has a sentimental value and played a part in serving the family. It is difficult to say which is the most valuable... it is almost like having to choose which child is the most important!," says Daryl, adding that the museum is the first gallery of its kind on Chinese immigrants in Penang.

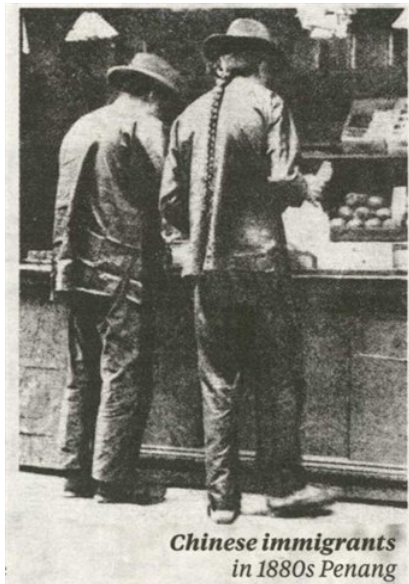
The next two galleries are an overview of what it was like living at home for the Yeap family. Although Chor Ee brought up his family based on Confucius principals, day to day life was filled

with a mix of cultures — from the food they ate to the attire they wore. There was also a lot of Western influence.

The last gallery is about Homestead, with a brief history of the building and photographs of the interior. Homestead was originally owned by a lawyer, Thomas Gawthorne, who lived there with his wife in the 1890s. In 1919, a shipping magnate named Lim Mah Chye bought the property for his family. The Lim family sold Homestead to Chor Ee during the Great Depression years for a reported sum of \$600,000.

In 2004, Daryl's father and the other trustees of Chor Ee's will accelerated the terms of the Yeap Chor Ee Endowment Trust. This enabled them to donate Homestead and properties in China Street Ghaut to Wawasan Education Foundation. Homestead is now the Wawasan Open University campus.

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*Chinese immigrants
in 1880s Penang*

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Some of the items belonged to Chor Ee's wife Lee Cheng Kin



All the items in the museum carries a sentimental value for the Yeap family

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***Chor Ee** started as a **barber** before becoming one of the most **respected businessmen** in the region*



***Chor Ee's wife Lee Cheng Kin** in the 1940s*

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