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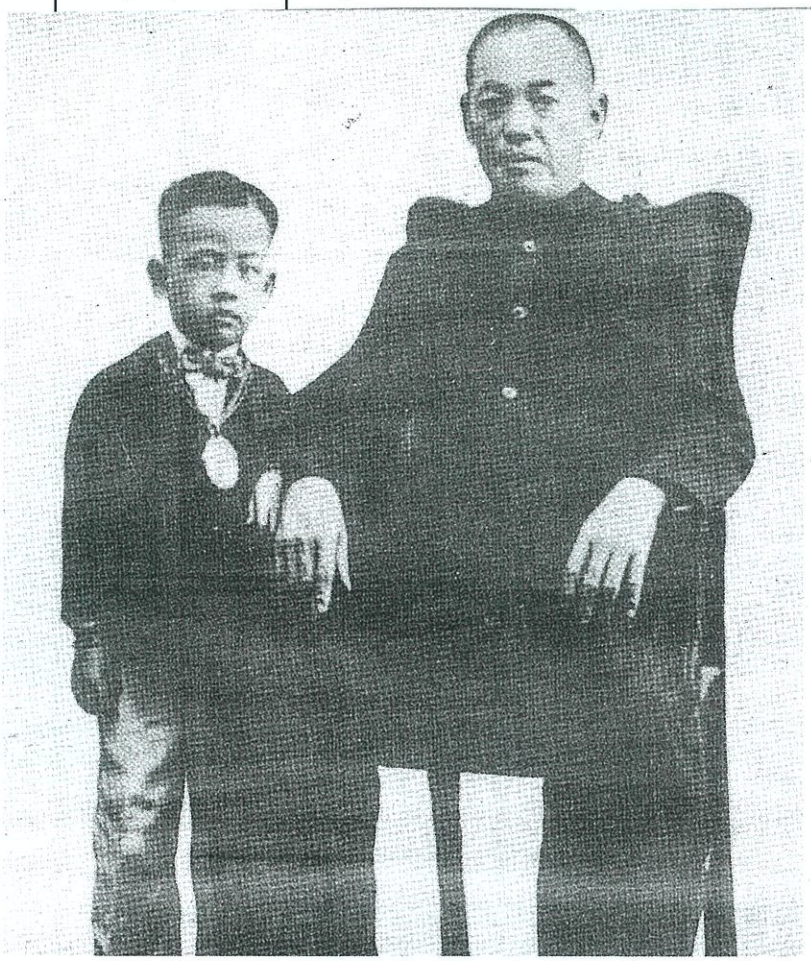
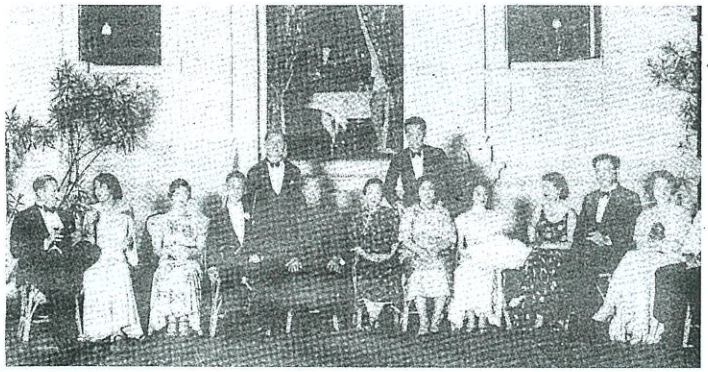
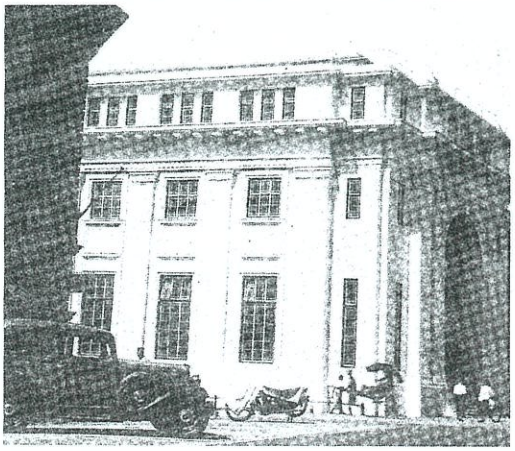
Media Title	The Star
Date	01st December, 2019 / Pg : 18 & 19
Language	English



Chor Ee and his only son with Cheng Kin, Hock Hoe. Chor Ee would have been in his early 50s in the late 1910s in this image. — Photos from *The King's Chinese: From Barber To Banker, The Story Of Yeap Chor Ee And The Straits Chinese*



Wedding dinner party held in Homestead for European guests in 1933.



Ban Hin Lee Bank headquarters on Beach Street, 1938.

A young Cheng Kin in a photo taken after her marriage to Chor Ee in the early 1910s.

Tale of a man and his community

In telling the rags-to-riches story of an illustrous ancestor, author Daryl Yeap provides glimpses into the historical life of Penang's Straits Chinese.

By ANDREA FILMER
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"WHO are we" and "where do we come from" are questions almost everyone asks at one point or another. It's especially so in a country like Malaysia with its rich immigrant history, where many share a similar narrative – that is the message at the heart of *The King's Chinese: From Barber To Banker, The Story Of Yeap Chor Ee And The Straits Chinese*.

Written by Daryl Yeap, a great-granddaughter of Yeap Chor Ee who was one of early Penang's biggest immigrant success stories, the book delves into the history of not only the self-made "merchant prince" but also the communities in which he grew up in and laboured with.

From the realities of famine, civil war and poverty in China, Yeap starts the story with how millions of Chinese ended up leaving the motherland in waves, resulting in people of Chinese ethnicity being found in practically every corner of the world today.

"When Chor Ee left China in the late 1800s, it was during the first wave of the Chinese diaspora. Millions of young men like himself fled China. This mass migration would carry on until the mid-20th century.

"It was a significant period in Chinese history and I wanted to find out why: What drove them out?" Yeap says.

While many Chinese children in Malaysia today are told of how their great-grandfathers and great-great-grandfathers "jumped off a boat from China", there were specific push and pull factors that led the Chinese to Malaya's shores.

"What drove them out (of China) was mainly extreme hardship as a result of the famines, rebellions and unrest which occurred in 19th century China.

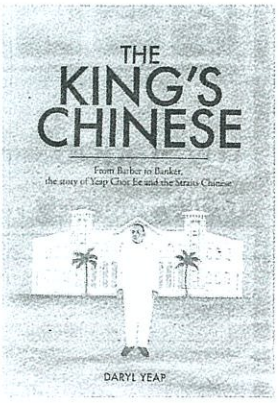
"In the areas most affected, people were so poor and destitute, they had to burn their furniture and parts of their home for warmth.

They resorted to eating tree bark, leaves and dust from the ground. There were even accounts of cannibalism. That was pretty shocking.

"As children, we were often reminded of how lucky we were compared to kids growing up in China during my great-grandfather's days. We knew life was tough but I didn't realise how hard it was until I was reading through accounts of what happened during the famines," Yeap says, adding that these calamities were recurring events for over a century.

At the same time, there were events happening in different parts of the world that encouraged young Chinese men to set sail.

"There were also 'pull factors' which enticed them to leave. The world was changing: abolishment of the slave trade in the US, the opening of the Suez Canal which promoted trade and heavy industrialisation required manual labour throughout the world – hence, resulting in huge waves of migration from China," she says.



From China To Penang

The tale of *The King's Chinese* starts off in China and moves to Penang, a "land of eternal summer", as Yeap describes.

Accounts of late 19th century and early 20th century George Town that she has managed to gather are fascinating, from the price of a single egg (about $0.01 Straits dollars) to the various calls of street peddlers and the many khek-pangs (boarding houses) on China Street that housed new Chinese arrivals.

Most of the story revolves around the lives, perspectives and events surrounding the sinkheks, a term referring to "the new guests of the Celestial Empire" or, put simply, Chinese immigrants.

Yeap says the motivation to make the book about more than just one man – Yeap Chor Ee – was to broaden its appeal and relevance to the wider community.

"If you look around Penang and for that matter Malaysia, almost every one of us are of immigrant stock. Our forefathers came from China and, for that matter, India, the Malay archipelago and elsewhere.

So I thought it would make sense to write a book which is more inclusive rather than just focusing on one man. But using Yeap Chor Ee as a vehicle in the narrative, it personalises the story," she says.

For hundreds of years until the early 20th century, Chinese men were mandated by custom and authorities in China to wear a tow-chang or queue from birth – a hairstyle where the front and sides of the head are shaved and the back is plaited into a long braid.

As a result, barbers were in strong demand wherever the Chinese emi-

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grated and that is where Chor Ee found his first job in Penang.

At $0.07 a shave, barbers could service over 100 customers a week and earn more than four times an unskilled coolie.

"With his tools on his back, Chor Ee peddled his services along the streets of Weld Quay towards the Prangin Canal. This was where most of his clients congregated. Once a week, his customers sought his service to have their heads shaved and hair plaited.

Chor Ee soon built a long list of regular customers who knew him as Thi-Thau Ee (Barber Ee), a nickname that was linked to his trade," Yeap writes in the book.

She adds that a total of 43,000 men arrived in Penang in 1885 – the year Chor Ee landed – and the constant influx of new immigrants in Penang made barbering a lucrative trade.

Chor Ee saved up money from cutting hair until he could open a chop (a Chinese business or partnership) which he named Chop Ban Hin Lee, which translates to "Ten Thousand Prosperity Shop".

The provisions store grew and thrived, and Chor Ee soon focused predominantly on the brown sugar trade, which transformed his life and fortunes.

"I get this question often: How did a penniless and illiterate migrant became so successful? There is a chapter in the book which talks about his transition from a barber to banker. "Essentially it (his success) is a combination of three things: timing, luck and character," Yeap says.

Teaming up with the "sugar king" of the day, Oei Tiong Ham, was also greatly beneficial to Chor Ee, and this strong camaraderie later resulted in two marriages between their children.

Three of Oei's daughters are also the main subjects of Yeap's next writing project, which she jokingly hopes will be completed faster than *The King's Chinese*, which is a labour of love more than a decade in the making.

The Ban Hin Lee Bank emblem designed by Chor Ee contains Pinang trees on the right and two merchant junks in the background.

Family and war

Homestead may not be a very recognisable name to Penangites today, but its new name – Wawasan Open University – is.

The stately mansion and former grand family home of Chor Ee on Northam Road (now officially known as Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah) was converted to an educational institution in 2006.

Even before that, however, its history is intriguing.

Bought by Chor Ee from the Lim family after the great stock market crash of 1929, the building was home to Chor Ee's wives, children and grandchildren.

It was the site of weekly movie nights and dance parties organised by Lee Cheng Kin, Chor Ee's fourth wife and Yeap's great-grandmother, and its bustling kitchen churned out food daily not only for the Yeap family, but also the employees of the Ban Hin Lee Bank which Chor Ee founded in 1918.

"I would say over 40 people occupied Homestead (at one time) including the servant's quarters.

"Yes, of course (there is a sense of nostalgia) and I would hope that Homestead could serve as a reminder of Penang's culture and past. For students there now, perhaps it can provide inspiration and encouragement," Yeap says.

The home and its family were largely spared during the Japanese Occupation of WWII from 1941 to 1945, mainly due to Chor Ee's strong reputation as an apolitical businessman.

"Chor Ee was purely a man of enterprise.

He was not interested in politics and never got involved or showed support for any political cause, for example, the China Relief Fund.

"Just before the outbreak of World War II, tensions grew between the local Chinese banks and Japanese banks in Malaya. Since both sides refused to deal with one another, Chor Ee stepped in and offered to act as a clearing house for all the banks just so that businesses could carry on as usual," Yeap says.

She adds that Walter Lim, Chor Ee's right-hand man, was forced to work with the Japanese during the time and this, too, may have provided some protection for Chor Ee and his family.

Estate duty and the present

Just after the war began, British authorities raised estate duty (also known as inheritance tax, though there are differences between the two) in Malaya to a whopping 60% – a move that would greatly alter Chor Ee's plans for his estate.

"Estate duty was a way for the British administrators to raise funding when opium revenues began to dwindle at the turn of the 20th century.

"It started off as a single digit tax but was suddenly raised to 60% in 1940 when Britain went to war with Germany.

"That move angered many wealthy people who opposed to the sudden increase. After the war, it was lowered to 40%, still quite a substantial amount," Yeap says.

Knowing that much of his vast fortune would end up in British hands after his death, Chor Ee began dispersing his assets.

"He had, I would say, a pragmatic approach to dealing with estate duties. He was approaching 80 and it was inevitable that his vast estate would be taxed.

"But instead of allowing the British to do whatever they wanted with his wealth, he took the advice of his friend, Tan Cheng Lock, to do some estate planning.

"Cheng Lock had returned from India and was keen for Malaya to gain independence but in order to do so, the country needed a university to prepare its people for self-rule.

"So, when the King Edward VII College of Medicine was merged with the Raffles College to form the country's first university (University of Malaya), Chor Ee immediately donated towards its cause," Yeap says.

The entrepreneur also rewarded employees and shareholders of his businesses with dividends and bonuses and, upon the advice of Tan, engaged legal firm Rodyk & Davidson in Singapore to draft his will. The result was a two-prong document which involved an endowment trust and a residuary trust.

"It was meant for charitable purposes, so that part of the estate could be exempt from duties. Chor Ee bequeathed a number of prime assets to the endowment trust, which included Homestead and real estate along China Street Ghaut.

"More importantly, the endowment trust allowed Chor Ee to have the final say on how his wealth should be used, rather than allowing the government a free hand with his entire estate," Yeap writes in *The King's Chinese*.

From barber to banker, Chor Ee's journey and that of the Chinese immigrant community in Penang is a story that transcends one family and resonates with anyone who has an immigrant history or lives in multicultural communities.

As an apt sum-up to the story, Yeap simply says: "We all share a common story."

And, indeed, we do.

Yeap wanted to go beyond a biography and give a sense of the community Chor Ee lived in in her book. — Handout