

Book Review 'From Poor Migrant To Millionaire'

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Second generation Malaysian Chinese, Chan Keng Nui, 8th daughter of 26 children, was born in Hong Kong. She attended Raffles College in 1939 and acquired a war diploma after World War II, but seized the opportunity to obtain a proper Diploma in 1946. She took up teaching in her Alma Mater (Senior Methodist Girls School, Kuala Lumpur), in 1948. She also had a brief stint working for the Malayan Film Unit and later a factory in Ipoh. She return to teaching in 1969 in Kuala Lumpur and then Singapore and subsequently Brunei. In between working in the various schools she travelled widely to Hong Kong, Europe and the United States.

She now enjoys a leisurely life in Kuala Lumpur pursuing her hobbies like copper enamelling, Chinese painting and presently ceramic painting. At 76 when she found that her father, one of the leading personalities of pre-World War II Kuala Lumpur, had not been mentioned in any of the annals of Malaysian history, she decided to write his biography, the result is this book. This book is about life which spanned to inter-Wars years - of a childhood in Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur, a disciplined life under a strict, stern and conservative man with very Confucianist ideas who was also surprisingly progressive where education was concerned. Her reminiscences have vivid details of her home in Hong Kong and her sister's marriage in the 1920s; new year celebrations in the Big House in Kuala Lumpur and the family's flight to India when the Japanese invaded Malaya and Singapore.

From Poor Migrant to Millionaire, with its details of a past long gone, with the bullock carts and horse carriages, should prove interesting in a modern Malaysia of high rise buildings, LRT, electric trains, overpasses and underpasses and traffic congestion. In this book, the author have written on her own father but her work is not a typical made-in-Malaysia biography. Her perception of her father is as impartial as it is humanly possible to be. She has admiration for him but also willingly reveals his foibles and idiosyncracies. Her choice of her father as the subject of her biographical effort is not based on pure sentiment. Chan Wing was not an ordinary man even if posterity now hardly remembers him. But then in a society which places considerable premium on the present and believes that the past is for only the historians, the giants of earlier eras frequently have become nonentities, not merely after their

passing but as soon as they retired from active participation in whatever they had been doing.

Chan Wing's active life in Kuala Lumpur spanned a period of about half a century. When he first arrived, Yap Ah Loy was no longer around. But it was still the days of the Kapitan China. Loke Yew, who came to Malaya at least 30 years before Chan Wing, and soon to be deemed the richest man in Malaya, was still in the process of advancing his entrepreneurial activities. He was one of the few Chinese of his generation to be involved in both the tin and the agricultural sectors. Soon he expanded his investments to Singapore and Hong Kong, not to mention other states in the Peninsula. Almost all the Chinese who became renowned personalities in Kuala Lumpur during the first two decades of the 20th century, at one time or another, worked for Loke Yew, among them Loke Chow Kit (of Chow Kit Road fame), Loke Chow Thye (Chow Kit's brother), and Khoo Keng Hooi (for many years a stalwart in the Kuala Lumpur Sanitary Board), all three of whom were English educated and of Penang origin. Chan Wing too once worked for Loke Yew, but he, like Yap Ah Loy and Loke Yew, had no formal education to speak of.

Chan Wing, like Loke Yew, was a Cantonese, but the mining sector, although originally dominated by the Hakka, was, by the turn of the 20th century, no longer so exclusively under Hakka control. Chan Wing was able to break through and eventually gain recognition as one of the leading Chinese personalities in Kuala Lumpur. But, unlike Loke Yew and some of the English educated from Penang, he was not one of the leading supporters of public fund raising projects initiated by the British administration and, therefore, hardly sat on ad-hoc committees formed by the Government. Moreover, Chan Wing was by and large apolitical although he did contribute to Kuomintang funds not merely for the relief of victims of natural calamities in China but also, after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, to assist China's war efforts. This, in effect, has made it easier for Chan King Nui, as a person also with no specific interest in politics, to concentrate on the portrayal of her father mainly as a family man which otherwise might have led to a lop-sided biography. Had this not been a historiographical work, it could be well received as an interesting novel. This is a work social historians of Malaysia should not miss.

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