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A POLITICAL PROFILE  
**DR. LIM CHONG EU**

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# PREFACE

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It is really not easy to remain an active political figure for 35 years. Dr. Lim Chong Eu does exactly this, and may be because of this it should be easy to obtain information about him from past records. But, inexplicably, one cannot find even a book providing detail information about Lim Chong Eu. In English publications, we only managed to catch brief glimpses of him in Malaysian political annals. It is therefore safe to say that Dr. Lim Chong Eu the politician and Dr. Lim Chong Eu the man is rarely, if ever, fully credited with a biography.

Recently, Dr. Lim Chong Eu's expressed wish to retire into a more serene life prompted some friends to urge me to "figure about" Lim Chong Eu and to do a serialised biography about him in the United Post.

Writing about Lim Chong Eu is easier said than done because, besides the lack of proper records, the biography spans more than half a century!

When I raised this with Dr. Lim himself, I was given a comprehensive lesson on the writing of history and biography, but in the end, he gave a non-too-acceptable response. "Lim Chong Eu is not an important man and merits no biography. If he is important to Penang it's only because he is Chief Minister. But there is not much to write about Lim Chong Eu," he said.

Perhaps he has turned down similar proposals by writers in English, for there is no "Biography of Lim Chong Eu" in English either.

I disagreed, "In the evolution of Malaysian Politics, you played an extremely vital role, especially in aspects concerning Penang and the Chinese Community. I do not intend writing just about Chief Minister Dr. Lim Chong Eu, but also about Lim Chong Eu the man himself!" I said. Then he switched the subject of conversation to the Inaugural Issue of the United Post which disclosed that he owns 12 horses, and that his intended retirement has something to do with horses. He pointed out to me that this sort of writing is just superficial and that it evades the main

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## Registered Marriage upon Arrival in Hong Kong

The journey to Penang took Chong Eu and Swen Yen through Kwangchou and Hong Kong. Chong Eu, aware of impending changes, could not wait to be home but Swen Yen was feeling precarious. Nevertheless, the bond of love and mutual trust would keep the young couple together for the journey, and for life.

When Chong Eu and Swen Yen arrived in Hong Kong in 1947, they left behind them a China engulfed in war. They heaved sighs of relief, and found that a new life awaited them.

There were things to be done before returning to Penang. Although Chong Eu came from a relatively liberal family, the Baba Society in Penang, as well as the Chinese community, were still conservative. Thus, Chong Eu's first step in Hong Kong was to register his marriage with Swen Yen at the Civil Registry there.

Marriage was, and is, an affair involving only two individuals. Theirs was simple and solemn. No dinners, no unnecessary frills and fanfare. Their intention was to let Chong Eu present to his parents Swen Yen, the bride and not Swen Yen, a girl-friend.

Swen Yen easily adapted to the idea as she was more concerned with getting along well with Chong Eu's family than with rituals.

When they arrived at Penang after setting sail from Hong Kong, Chong Eu discovered that the familiar place had changed. Three years and eight months of atrocious Japanese Martial rule had left ugly scars and removed some friends from sight. Swen Yen found everything refreshingly new. The quiet town, sparse population and most of all, the absence of war made Penang a totally different world from Chinese cities.

At the Lim family home, Swen Yen paid her traditional respects to her parents-in-law with not a little apprehension but was relieved to find that the elders were kind and considerate. She quickly discovered that it was easy to get along with all the family members and that they were all courteous and highly educated.

Immediately upon his return, Chong Eu realised that the Chinese community reflected the conditions in China, the Nationalists and the Communists remaining poles apart and pointedly opposed to each other. The only difference was that in Penang both factions attacked their opponents with the pen, through articles in the local press, whereas in Mainland China guns were the weapons.

With the Nationalists and the Communists locked in ferocious battles in China, their respective supporters in Penang drew clear lines of hostilities too. The Nationalist supporters mainly came from upper echelons of society while Communist faction sympathisers largely came from the working class.

Chong Eu was not drawn into committing his support for either side. He was careful not to take hasty actions while he had yet to arrive at his conclusions.

Even so, Chong Eu was basically a member of the Baba fraternity, having close links with the British Government. Politically, these Baba's also used the British norm as their yardstick. Without much doubt, some Baba community leaders held influential positions in the Chinese Chambers of Commerce and they were inclined towards the Nationalists. Tan Cheng Lock was one of these leaders.

In 1948, a State of Emergency was declared throughout Malaya and the Communist Party of Malaya was outlawed. A state of crisis erupted in the Chinese Community. In the crucial moments, Tan Cheng Lock started the formation of Malayan Chinese Association (M.C.A.).

The MCA was formally established on 17th February 1949 with leaders of both the Baba Community and the Nationalist-related figures forming the core of leadership. Tan Cheng Lock represented the first group while Sir H.S. Lee and Leong Yee Kow represented the other. Sir H.S. Lee was a colonel in the Nationalist Chinese Army while Leong Yee Kow held the rank of a Brigadier General in that Army.

These two groups enjoyed a period of cooperation but later lapsed into rivals through infighting. Dr. Lim Chong Eu was clearly not inspired at that time, partly due to his recent return and was relatively a stranger to the local political scene. He needed time to come to grips with the various factors.

### **Lover's Treaty turned worthless**

Almost immediately upon his return, Dr. Lim Chong Eu began to assist his father at Su Beng Dispensary. This clinic was mercifully left intact through the war. The practice was successful with Dr. Lim Chwee Leong at the helm while Dr. Lim Chong Eu assisted. The elder doctor was quite pleased that his eldest son had finally taken after his footsteps.

But he was no less understanding when Chong Eu decided to join the Malayan Air Force as a doctor in the Auxillary Wing. Dr. Lim

Chwee Leong granted freedom for his son to progress. From an Army doctor in the Chinese Armed Forces to a doctor in the Malayan Air Force, Chong Eu had ample occasion to prove his worth and to improve himself.

Since her marriage into the Lim family, Swen Yen never ceased to count the days. She kept looking out for news about the latest developments in China. But the conditions were getting more aggravated there. The Communist Forces pushed relentlessly on and gained key control of the Chinese soil on various fronts.

Seeing the approach of the six month deadline, at which Chong Eu had agreed earlier to accompany her home, Swen Yen was rather anxious but very worried as the situation in China had gone very tumultuous.

One day, she said to Chong Eu, "It's almost six month now, we should be getting ready to go!" She was longing to see her parents and dear ones back in China.

"Can you go under these conditions? Why not wait a while before we decide?" Chong Eu was doubtful but nonetheless had to console her and to appeal for her patience.

China experienced a series of major political changes in 1948, and by the following year the decisive stage had been reached. The Reds had swung south for further control and Mao Tze Tung had got a new era to himself.

Those swift changes were out of Swen Yen's wildest expectations. Her "treaty" with Chong Eu, had it been written at all, would now be worth not much more than the paper on which it was written. She decided not to raise the matter again and made up her mind to stay permanently in Penang.

Whenever she recalled these vivid moments, Swen Yen could not refrain from laughing at the ironies of life. Regional upheavals had changed her into what she is today — Mrs. Lim Chong Eu. "Had Chong Eu not agreed to the six month stay for me, I would not have consented to come. I had never expected to come and stay for forty years in Penang." she used to say.

Reminiscence brought back many and various feelings; but for Mrs. Lim Chong Eu, it brought no little measure of contentment too. If she had not followed Chong Eu, her life would have taken a different course; and if Chong Eu had been able to return to China with her for a six-month stay, the history of post-war Penang would be written