



SPECIAL

Key roles by father and son

The Star - 25/3/2007

Two generations of the Tan family in Malacca, MCA founding figure Tun Tan Cheng Lock and his son Tun Tan Siew Sin, played key roles in gaining independence for this country.

By **JOCELINE TAN**
 joceline@thestar.com.my

THERE is a rather battered-looking desk in the Malacca ancestral home of MCA founding figure Tun Tan Cheng Lock. The late Cheng Lock used to spend a great deal of time at this desk, reading and perusing paperwork, dressed in his preferred home attire — *sarung* and white singlet.

Two generations of the Tan family played key roles in the country's independence process, and this once-grand house of Chinese-Dutch architecture played host to important personalities in Malaysia's history. The fading black-and-white photographs that line the walls of the house say as much.

Cheng Lock was a far-sighted, Straits-born Chinese who had, as early as 1926, advocated a "united self-governing British Malaya". And he was, of course, one of the founders of the MCA.

His eldest child and only son Tun Tan Siew Sin was one of the seven key negotiators of the "Merdeka Bargain" and he went on to join the first Cabinet and later became MCA president.

March 17 was the death anniversary of Cheng Lock, and the occasion saw the Tan family gathering at the house along what used to be known as Heeren Street, which was renamed Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock.

His daughter-in-law Toh Puan Lim Cheng Neo, 85, was there with her three daughters Tan Siok Eng, Siok Choo and Siok Lee and their families and several other close relatives.

"This is the spiritual heart of the



Proud of ancestry: Siok Choo is the undisputed guardian of her family's past.



Siew Sin: Was spurred by the independence fervour in India.

house," said Siok Choo, the middle and most high-profile of the trio of sisters, indicating the ancestral altar where bowls of rice and cups of tea as well as an array of food were laid out for the generations who had passed on.



Cheng Lock: An intellectual who was good-looking and elegant.

Ancestral worship is a big thing for the living members of the Tan clan who first arrived in the peninsula in the 1770s.

"We do it to remember what they have done and the values they stood for," said Siok Choo, a vice-president at

Noordin Sopiee & Associates. She was only seven when Cheng Lock died in 1960.

Petite and articulate, she is the only one in her generation who has come closest to taking an interest in politics although not to the extent of active participation. But she is the undisputed guardian of the family's history.

Both her grandfather and father, who passed away in 1988, were accorded state funerals for their role in the country's history.

Cheng Lock was a disciplined man of slight build who maintained his lean frame till his dying day. He had an intelligent looking forehead, fine cheekbones and what the Hokkiens would praise as *angmoh pni* (white man's nose), that is, a high and well-shaped nose.

Pictures of him in his prime suggested an elegant man, and good-looking enough to play the romantic lead in a Chinese movie but for his rather large ears.

His nephew Albert Tan, 78, who lives in the ancestral home, remembers him as serious and always working at his desk.

"But he had a dry sense of humour," said Albert.

Cheng Lock was a teacher until he decided to venture into rubber planting at the encouragement of his mother. He made a huge success of it and this, together with his English-educated background, won him the attention of the colonial administrators who appointed him a town councillor and later a legislative councillor.

By his 40s, he was a leading member of the Straits Chinese community and noted for his intellect and views on the future of the Chinese immigrant community.

It has to be remembered that the majority of Chinese then still regarded China as the motherland.

But although Cheng Lock, like many Straits-born Chinese, was far more partial towards Britain than China, he was deeply influenced by ideas of independence then sweeping across many British colonies in Asia.

His bookshelves showed that he read

> TURN TO PAGE 11

Cheng Lock wanted son to stay clear of politics

TUN Tan Cheng Lock was a serious-minded man with formal manners.

His daughter-in-law Toh Puan Lim Cheng Neo was no shrinking violet but even she admitted that he somewhat intimidated her.

"He rarely spoke directly to me. If he had something to say to me, he would say it through my husband (Tun Tan Siew Sin)," said Lim who is a sprightly octogenarian with a full head of hair.

As such, Lim was all sixes and sevens when she received a telephone call from the man himself asking her to go to his house.

"I was trembling. 'What have I done

wrong,' I was thinking to myself as I made my way to the house," said Lim.

As she stood before him, Cheng Lock asked her rather crossly why she had not stopped Siew Sin, a British-trained lawyer, from going into politics.

Apparently he had just learnt that Siew Sin had joined the Cabinet.

Somehow, Lim plucked the courage to tell her father-in-law: "I cannot stop him because it is already in his blood."

Cheng Lock was not appeased, she said.

He grumbled that while he had dabbled in politics only after all his children were grown up, Siew Sin was

young and his children still in school.

Although Cheng Lock had been a keen proponent of independence, he did not quite approve of his only son going full time into politics.

Siew Sin admitted as much in his unpublished memoirs: "While my father was wholly immersed in politics, he told me in no uncertain terms to stick to rubber planting and stay clear of politics."

"I think my grandfather wanted my father to establish himself better in business before venturing into politics," said Siew Sin's daughter Siok Choo.



Lim: 'He rarely spoke to me directly'

Cheng Lock and Siew Sin fought for a united Malaya

> FROM PAGE 1

widely and seriously on government and history, and his interest in political figures ranged from Churchill to Marx and Mao.

Albert, who was with the British foreign office in London before returning to work as a journalist, said his uncle was ardent about self-rule for Malaya.

"He was very pro-British but his heart lay with an independent Malaya. He told me Malaya must be on her own, not under a foreign power," said Albert.

As early as 1926, Cheng Lock had said: "I think it is high time we commence to take action towards forging the surest and strongest link of that united Malaya by fostering and creating a true Malayan spirit and consciousness among its people to the complete elimination of racial and communal feeling."

But it was the year he and Siew Sin spent in India during the Japanese Occupation that inspired them most about the future of Malaya. They saw close-up the Indian struggle for independence and were impressed by the pioneering spirit of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

While in India, father and son presented a memorandum on the "Future of Malaya" to the British Colonial Secretary.

It was around that time too that the idea of forming a Chinese association germinated; and in 1949 Cheng Lock, together with several others like Tun Leong Yew Koh and Colonel H.S. Lee, founded the MCA.

It took the form of a welfare group to assist the Chinese who had been forced into new villages to segregate them from communist influence, and it became a political entity only in 1952.

In his inaugural speech, Cheng Lock said: "One of the basic aims of the Malayan Chinese Association is to help, in cooperation with the Malays and other communities, the development of the process of making the whole of Malaya one country, one people and one government."

Cheng Lock visited many new villages and saw for himself the impoverished state of the Chinese.

It was an eye-opening experience for this Baba gentleman who did not speak any Chinese dialect but only English and the Baba patois.

"The MCA managed to prove that not all Chinese were supporters of the communists," said Siok Choo.

In fact, Cheng Lock narrowly escaped death in 1954 when the communists exploded a bomb during a rally in Ipoh. About 100 died and Cheng Lock was struck in the shoulder by shrapnel.

The family kept his blood-soaked shirt so that they would never forget the incident.

The family home played host to the Reid Commission who drew up the Constitution as evident from the photographs of the commission's members sitting down to a formal lunch by one of the three inner courtyards of the house.

Cheng Lock took to bed after a bad fall at home in 1955.

His health worsened, complicated by kidney problems, prostate gland trouble and brain damage due to uraemia.

It was his son who went on to play a more direct role in the independence process.

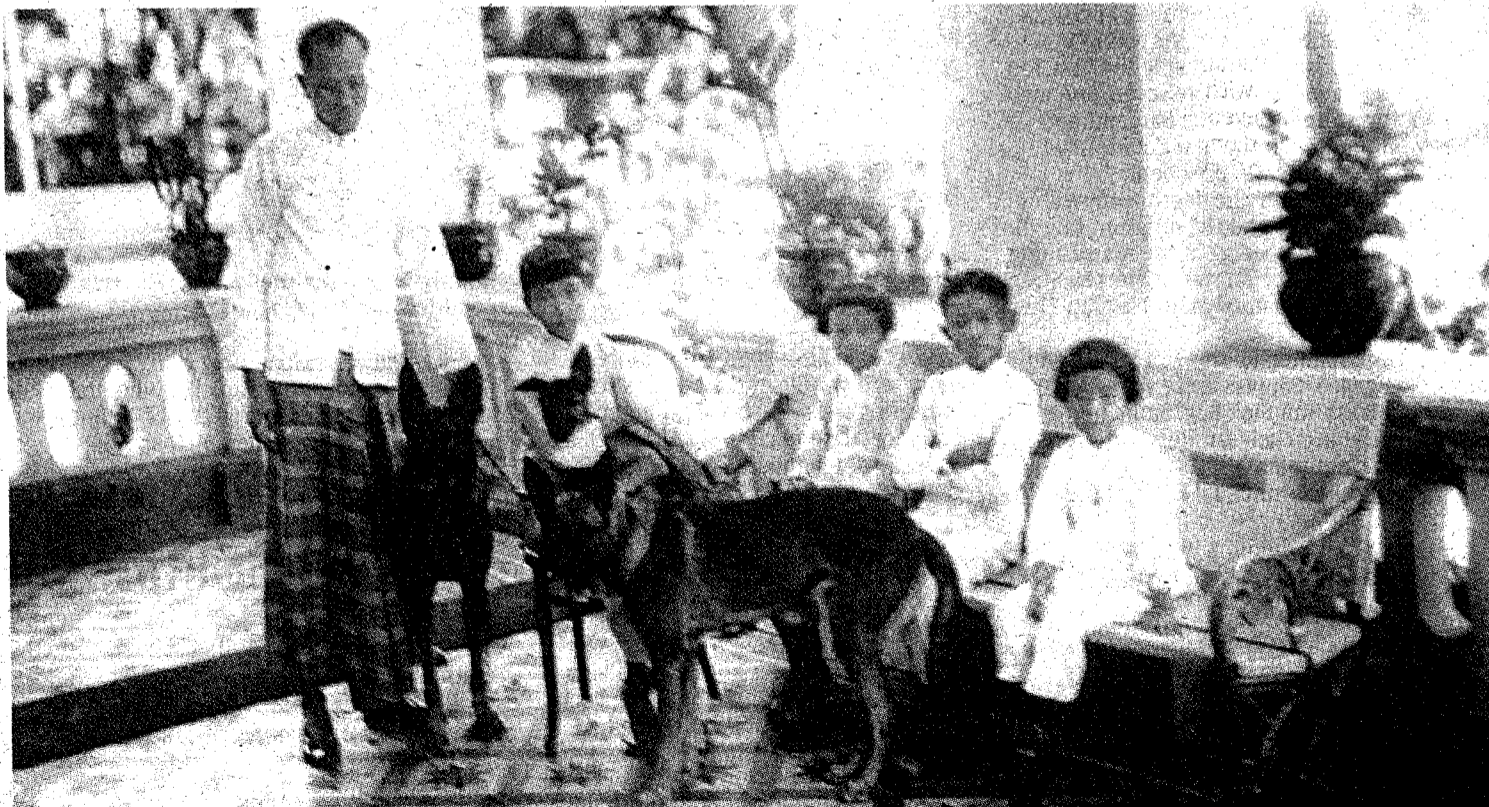
As such, the group of seven who negotiated the terms of independence included Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Razak Hussein, Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Siew Sin, Tun Omar Ong Yoke Lin, Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu and Tun V.T. Sambathan.

Given the diverse needs and demands of the different communities, the eventual Merdeka blueprint did not satisfy everyone.

But the non-Malays obtained citizenship and political enfranchisement and the freedom of worship and to propagate their own culture, language and customs.



Political ties: The backdrop of Cheng Lock's portrait depicted Tunku Abdul Rahman.



Man of tradition: The young Tun Tan Cheng Lock in Baba home attire with his son Siew Sin and three daughters.

Upon Independence, only 10% of the non-Malays were citizens but a year later about 90% had been enfranchised.

"My father used to say later that Britain gave independence to Malaya for only two reasons -- they saw that Umno and MCA could work together and negotiate differences among themselves, and also to neutralise the political objective of the commu-

nists," said Siok Choo.

Cheng Lock did not hold high office but he did live to see his son become MCA president.

Siew Sin went on to join the first Cabinet as Commerce and Industry Minister and then Finance Minister, a post he held for 13 years.

The family is proud to have their ancestral

QUOTES

"If not for the great support and contributions rendered by the late Tun Tan, I must admit that the struggle for independence for Malaya would not have succeeded. Perhaps we may have had to shed blood or pay a high price for that cause. No matter how we view Tun Tan, he will always be remembered not only as a great scholar, successful businessman, capable politician and devoted elder but an enthusiastic patriot as well." — *Tunku Abdul Rahman in his condolence speech in Parliament when Tun Tan Cheng Lock passed away on Dec 18, 1960.*

"My father said that during the early days he wanted the Chinese to be more involved in politics, to think of Malaysia as their home rather than China." — *Tan Siok Eng, eldest daughter of Tun Tan Siew Sin.*

"For as long as I could remember, my father was always busy, away at meetings. When I went away to study, I received letters that he dictated to his secretary." — *Tan Siok Lee, youngest daughter of Tun Tan Siew Sin.*

"My uncle was a staunch friend of the British but his heart was with Malaya. If he had lived, he would have been proud of Malaysia." — *Albert Tan, nephew of Tun Tan Cheng Lock.*





home standing along a road named after Cheng Lock.

But as Siok Choo said: "Malaysians don't need roads to remember him by. The longevity of the two institutions he founded as well as the values he espoused and promoted through example and leadership will ensure that his is a name renowned through this new millennium."