

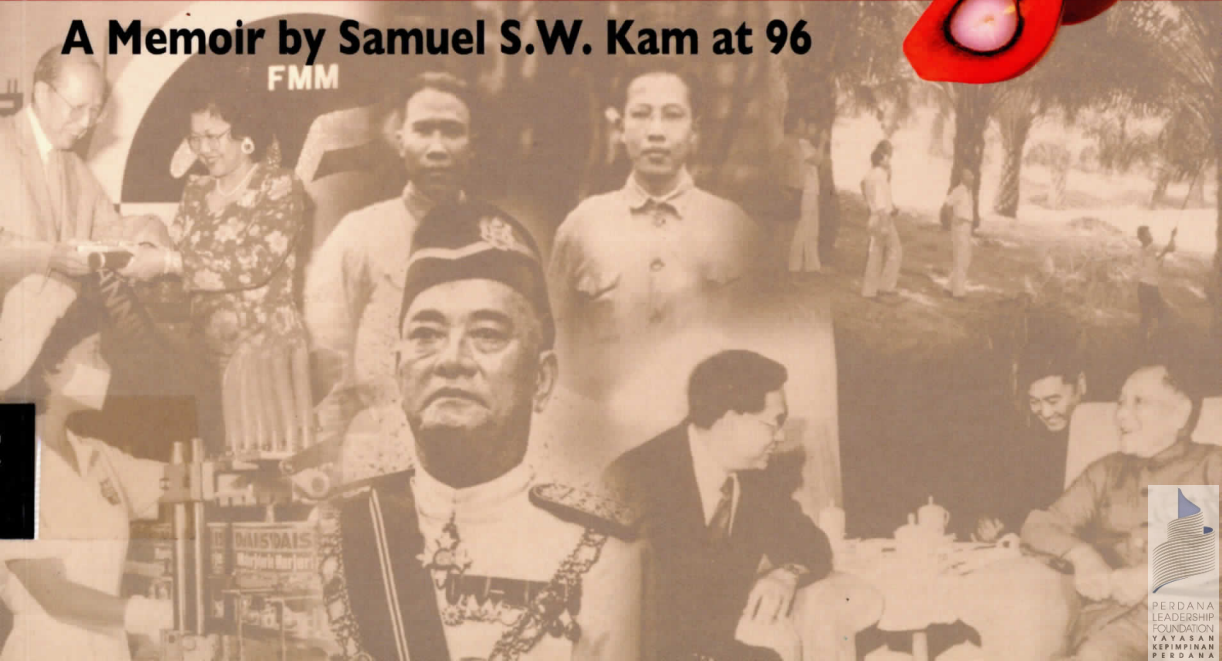


# THROUGH WARS AND PEACE

From the gunfire of the Sino-Japanese War  
to the golden oil of Malaya

**A Memoir by Samuel S.W. Kam at 96**

FMM



**Samuel S.W. Kam** was born in 1915, four years after the Chinese Revolution.

In this memoir, he reminisces about the defining narratives of his time: the second Sino-Japanese War, WWII and the Chinese Civil War, and how, through wars and peace, he had adapted to the changing times.

Samuel Kam's perspective on life is rich given his diverse work experiences during and after the war in different parts of the world in addition to his unique background, one that straddled the old and the new, the East and the West. He was nurtured in the Chinese classics and



Chinese literature (he personally wrote the original memoirs in Chinese), schooled in the British system in Hong Kong, read science and English literature and studied chemical engineering.

His own defining narrative lies in his enduring contribution as an industrialist and CEO, turning family-run Lam Soon into a vibrant company, and along the way, helped build the palm oil industry of Malaysia.

At 96, Samuel is articulate and engaging. He attends church and goes to classical music concerts in Kuala Lumpur.

# THROUGH WARS AND PEACE

*Dear Yang Amat Berhormat Prime Minister  
Dato' Sri Mohd Najib Abdul Razak*

*With sincere compliments from*

*Senned Khan*

*Nov. 28, 2013*



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**Professor Wang Gungwu**

*Chairman, East Asian Institute*

*University Professor, National University of Singapore*

Samuel Kam was born in the middle of the First World War (in 1915) and, 96 years later, is still around to comment on where the world should be going.

He has certainly seen, if not the best of times, several versions of the worst of times. In this book of memories, he repeatedly shows that being in the right place at the right time can make all the difference to the course of one's life. Whether what happened were miracles or mere lucky escapes, he lived through them not only to be able to tell the tale but also to ruminate on the ultimate spiritual meaning of such events for the rest of us.

He was certainly at the right place and time to study at the University of Hong Kong (HKU), the first British university to be established in Asia east of India. With his science qualifications, he found himself in China at the start of the 1937 Sino-Japanese War. He worked in Chungking, the wartime capital that became the target of constant terror bombings. After the war, he had the chance to have close-up views of the Nationalist (Kuomintang) failure to rebuild China. Like most other Chinese, Samuel Kam had more than his fair share of troubles arising from China's failures to unite and modernise.

Despite all that, he has emerged as someone who has learnt, with equanimity and many scatterings of cheerful words, to endure disasters and adapt to new opportunities. He has demonstrated how he has married his Chinese upbringing at home to the Oxbridge-imperial

education at HKU by using both to colour the accounts of his life. Through his familiarity with both traditions, plus the dynamic methodologies of Berkeley California, he moves easily from Confucian aphorisms to describing the applications of modern science, and then on to glimpses of the Christianity that he has adopted and made to accommodate them all. Of even greater interest is his mastery of changing business practices in three continents. His keen eye for innovation has heightened the workings of modern industrial methods as he traverses the factories and corporate halls of China-Taiwan, the United States and different European countries. His agility of mind, and the capacity to absorb the creative lessons as well as the debilitating mistakes, has endeared him to his bosses, partners and colleagues throughout his rich life. It would be hard to find a clearer and more positive example of someone who can be described as modern Christian Chinese.

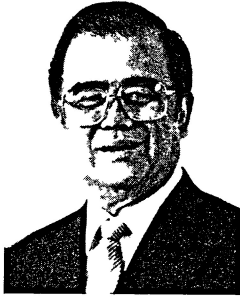
This leads me to say what led me to read his memoirs and to write this foreword. When I was Vice-chancellor of HKU, I had met Samuel Kam in Kuala Lumpur as the most senior among the many Malaysian alumni. His was a success story for me to tell the Hong Kong students of the 1980s and 1990s in order to reinforce the message that we were giving them at the time. We were stressing that university graduates must be prepared to be versatile and adventurous as the world becomes smaller and globalised. And here, in Samuel Kam, was someone who memorised the Chinese classics, studied Western science, worked as a foreign affairs advisor to military men, walked through war-torn zones, mastered the uses of palm oils in a highly competitive soap and food industry, won the respect of the new national leaders of a multicultural Malaysia, and then immersed himself in a wide range of civic and educational charities—what more can any head of an educational institution want of its graduates!

There is also another reason for my interest in Samuel Kam—my research in the history of Chinese migrations. He originated from western Guangdong province, the county of Xinyi in Gaozhou City, where one of the key Chinese community leaders in Malaya, the late Tun Sir H.S. Lee,

was from; Samuel Kam and H.S. Lee happen to be cousins. This meant that Samuel Kam is related to an old friend active in local Malaysian politics, Douglas Lee.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, well-educated Chinese responded to the challenges of modernity and were increasingly more willing to leave home and travel far for the opportunity to extend their knowledge and make their fortunes. Today, this is almost the new norm. Like Samuel Kam, the current generation of *huaqiao* are often torn about where home is and choose carefully where they eventually settle. Many, like him, remain attached to their cultural roots in China but after living through radical global changes during the past decades, as many cannot avoid doing, they will find that it is the peace and happiness that Samuel Kam has made for himself that is closest to wisdom. The reader will find this book well worth reading.

*August 10, 2010*



## **Tan Sri Dato' Michael Chen Wing Sum**

*Former president of the Senate of the Malaysian Parliament*

This is indeed a fascinating memoir written by a unique non-professional writer in his nineties.

Rooted in classical Chinese texts, with two academic degrees, from the University of Hong Kong and the University of California, Berkeley, Samuel Kam ultimately came to settle in Malaysia where he contributed immensely to the country's commerce and industry.

He has lived through a turbulent century fraught with uncertainties and tumultuous times. His wisdom, tenacity and farsightedness saw him through thick and thin.

His career had been equally colourful. He served as secretary to Chen Jitang (known also as "King of South China"), Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, a very powerful personality in the wartime cabinet of Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang government. Kam was among the first batch of Chinese officers sent to Taiwan to witness the surrender ceremony of Japan when the province was restored to China.

By the wish of God, after a master's degree and some work experience in the United States, he then moved to Singapore and Malaya (Malaysia) where he eventually became the CEO of Lam Soon Company. The outstanding CEO and the successful company he helped establish and develop are almost synonymous.

The younger generation reading this memoir will benefit much while the not so young will have the pleasure of travelling down memory lane with the author.

I have known Kam, a trustworthy and caring man, from as far back as 1970. May God continue to bless him with good health and great happiness.

*August 25, 2010*



**Tan Sri Dato' Seri Chong Hon Nyan**  
*Former Minister of Health and of Transport of  
Malaysia*

“Tinker, tailor; soldier, sailor; rich man, poor man; beggar-man, thief.”

A primary schoolteacher made us intone the above doggerel without explaining to us just what it meant. Now, having been privileged to write this foreword, I find these characters all rolled into one, excepting for the last two, in the person of Samuel Kam.

Starting off as a University of Hong Kong graduate and grounded in classical Chinese literature and the precepts of Confucius, Samuel would prove to his superiors by word and deed that he was honest, reliable and mature.

He was initiated to hardship and tribulations as a “soldier” and a “sailor” when he undertook long and arduous overland journeys and sea voyages in wartime. He joined in the war against unprovoked Japanese aggression as confidential secretary to Chen Jitang, the wartime Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, meeting with leading personalities of the day, both Chinese and foreign. American intervention in the administration of Chiang’s regime accorded him work in liaison and interpreting duties with the US Advisory Forces that came with the rank of Colonel (the “soldier” again) as well as exposed him to American work ethics, management systems and efficiency, elements which he absorbed and later put into practice as a corporate figure.

Later, amidst straitened circumstances, Samuel obtained a masters degree in chemical engineering from UC Berkeley; the “poor man” was the

impecunious student, surviving on fish heads and tails! But the learning process went on: he took on jobs in the United States, applying himself diligently to his preferred vocation.

His response to the request of a Singaporean varsity mate, whose family owned Lam Soon, led to his lifelong association with the company. The “tinker, tailor” instincts saw him going round the industrial West to see how bits and pieces of machinery and equipment could be fitted and tailored to Lam Soon’s needs in the brand new factory that he had to design, install and then operate. His wide and varied experiences gave him a sense of purpose and direction which he applied to the company, abjuring many traditional practices in the process. He persevered in Malaya although he could have been more comfortably off in California—and the rest is Lam Soon history.

Samuel’s ability to remain calm and collected in the midst of difficult circumstances and apply himself diligently to the task at hand marked his progress; his achievements are too many to enumerate in this foreword. Yet he is a fervent believer in sharing his experience and expertise with others. His perseverance in the work of drug rehabilitation demonstrates his dedication to a task, however difficult. His work with the misguided drug addicts completes the “beggar-man, thief” elements of the doggerel nicely!

His extraordinary story would not have been possible without the steadfast, supportive and loving companionship of his wife Kwok Fong. She endured long periods of separation from the adventurous Samuel, who was called away on various sojourns at home and abroad.

His life has been one of dedicated application to his responsibilities and is marked by his humanity and abiding faith in God whose divine intervention saved him and his wife from perilous situations.

Samuel is rich in learning, wisdom and world experience. If ever there can be a man for all seasons and a Renaissance man too, then Samuel Kam, who has enlightened me with his memoirs, would be my choice.

*August 26, 2010*

# PROLOGUE

It can be said that the century was the most turbulent period in human history.

Events of epic proportions erupted all over the world at an unrelenting pace: World War I, the unprecedented proletarian revolution first in Russia and then China, fascism in Europe and World War II. The world was swept off its feet.

After the devastating war, more changes were in store: colonial empires collapsed and new nation states sprung up in Asia and Africa. The period was marked by the threat of nuclear warfare as a result of the Cold War. It was also marked by the conflict between Israel and Palestine, the emergence of oil rich countries in the Middle East and the collapse of communism in Europe.

On the other hand, more than any other period in history, the century saw humankind harnessing nature to its advantage: nuclear power, electromagnetic waves, digital technology, bio-technology and space exploration. The results have been impressive. Whilst a lifespan of 70 years used to be uncommon (人生七十古來稀), nowadays, people live up to and beyond the age of 90 (人生九十不為奇), thanks to advances in medical science.

It had been a momentous century. Originally, my memoirs were written for my own diversion. But friends and relatives familiar with various episodes of my life urged me to consider publication, seeing how significant social and political turning points during my lifetime might provide the younger generations a glimpse into a historic period. This book of memoirs has come about through their

encouragement.

I was born in 1915, four years after the 1911 Chinese Revolution. Mine has been a long life and I have witnessed much history as it unfolded.

Looking back, I would consider the Sino-Japanese War to be the singular event that defined the century because it extended into WWII, changing the world forever. I was in my final year of university the year Japan invaded China.

I grew up in Hong Kong, the cultural hub where East meets West. My education likewise straddled two cultures as a result of which my take on things is neither purely Chinese nor entirely Western.

While on a student tour of the Mainland, I happened to be in Jinan in Shandong Province on July 7, 1937 when the first bullet of the Sino-Japanese War was fired at Lugouqiao, also known as Marco Polo Bridge. Days later, at the railway station in Tianjin, I witnessed a blood-boiling spectacle—Japanese women dressed in full kimonos and waving Japanese flags stood in line to send-off battle-ready Japanese soldiers to the war front to slaughter the Chinese!

The scene enacted before my eyes graphically portrayed China's incapacity to defend its sovereignty. It was a national humiliation of the highest measure. I resolved there and then to join the war of resistance against Japanese aggression (抗日戰爭) after graduation. The survival of the Chinese people was at stake!

In the spring of 1940, I left my comfortable home in Hong Kong and entered China by its back door, via Vietnam. After an arduous month traversing remote regions over high mountains and even going on part of the route used by the Chinese communists on their historic Long March, I arrived in Chungking (or Chongqing, in today's Hanyu Pinyin), the wartime capital. I was to take up a job at the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.

Beyond my wildest dreams, Minister Chen Jitang (陳濟棠), known to the Chinese as “The King of South China” (南天王), appointed me, a 24-year-old without any work experience, as his confidential secretary. Through my work, I was kept abreast of the war situations in China and in Europe. Coming into contact with high-ranking dignitaries and foreign diplomats, I learnt fast how to deal with all levels of people as well as work under pressure.

In the first two years I was in Chungking, the resistance effort was at its all-time low. During the summers of '41 and '42, we endured aerial bombardments day and night. The closure of the Burma Road in 1940 was a major blow—it was China's last overland link for the supply of war materials. Left to contend against an enemy of incomparable strength, the resolve of the Chinese government and the people was what saw the country through. China was never more united in the whole of its history!

Following Japan's sneak attack on Pearl Harbour, America entered the war, dramatically changing the situation in the Pacific. With no less than the United States as a war ally, China slackened in its resolve and began to lean on outside support. Corruption set in, notably within the army.

Japan surrendered in 1945 after America dropped the two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The end of the Sino-Japanese War, however, marked the start of a full-scale civil war.

Meanwhile, fate took me to Taiwan. I was at the surrender ceremony where Taiwan was officially restored to the motherland after 50 years of Japanese rule. It was a glorious day in Chinese history and how the Taiwanese celebrated when Mainlanders arrived on the island! It was a new beginning. Industrial enterprises under the Japanese were reorganised into national corporations and I was involved in industrial management and commerce. But the peace was marred by the 228 Riots fourteen months later. On the Mainland itself, the Civil War raged on.

In 1948, I was summoned to Hainan Island by my former boss, Chen Jitang. My mission: to explore the development of resource-rich island where Chen was now Governor-General. But time was running out for Chiang's regime. The Battle of Hainan, the last battle of the Civil War, was waged while I was there (by then, I was serving as Hainan's de facto foreign affairs officer). The loss of Hainan signalled the final curtain fall on the once powerful Kuomintang; together with tens of thousands of army men and civil servants, I fled the island.

In 1950, as the Korean War was about to erupt, I was back in Hong Kong where I started out 10 years before. By then, the Chinese Communist Party held sway over mainland China. While radical transformations were underway around the globe, I too was headed in a new direction—I was accepted to do a post-graduate degree in the United States.

Life as a mature student was demanding, but I buckled down to it, financial constraints and all. I obtained my master's degree in chemical engineering from the world-renowned University of California, Berkeley. Back in the East, former colonies were emerging as new nations. A Singapore-based family business owned by the father of a Berkeley varsity mate needed someone to help develop it. I returned to the East, little knowing it would be the start of a long association with Lam Soon.

As the company's chief engineer, I introduced modern machinery, up-to-date processes and current management practices. Two years later, the company ventured into the bigger Malayan market. Starting from scratch, with minimal manpower and financial resources, we were up against all odds competing with multi-national Unilever. But it was all or nothing. After much effort and banking on good teamwork, the advantage of local knowledge and dogged perseverance, newcomer Lam Soon became a household name within a few years.

Malaysia was embarking on large scale palm oil cultivation at the time. I saw the economic advantage and switched to using locally available palm oil in the manufacture of cooking oil, replacing the less healthy coconut oil. Later, other edible oil refiners followed suit. This was a breakthrough for the country's palm oil industry which has since grown by leaps and bounds. Rigorous palm oil research in Malaysia has expanded the uses of palm oil and its fractionated products, as a result of which the oil palm is today one of the world's most grown commercial crops. Malaya has been on the world map for its rubber and tin exports in the first half of the century; since the second half, it has been palm oil, the mainstay of the Malaysian economy.

I have lived four-score and ten in this troubled world and have had my fair share of difficulties due to wars and ever-changing political scenarios. In every instance, there had been untold human suffering. Which begs the question: were they necessary? Most of my contemporaries have been swept away by the tsunami of time. As for me, I would not have made it thus far if not for the many miracles in my life. Therefore, I cannot but include these divine interventions as my testimony to the grace of God Almighty.

Samuel Kam was born in the middle of World War I in 1915 and, 96 years later, is still around to comment on where the world should be going. When I was Vice-chancellor of HKU, I had met Samuel, the most senior among the many Malaysian alumni. His was a success story for me to tell the HKU students. He has married his Chinese upbringing at home to the Oxbridge-imperial education at HKU. Through his familiarity with both traditions, plus the dynamic methodologies of Berkeley California, he moves easily from Confucian aphorisms to describing the applications of modern science.

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