

# Wee Kheng Chiang of Sarawak: Entrepreneur Extraordinaire

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## Abstract

This paper is a study of Wee Kheng Chiang, one of the outstanding Chinese entrepreneurs and philanthropists in Sarawak. A first generation local-born Chinese from a humble family, Kheng Chiang rose to preeminence in business and his community. Known for his wealth and entrepreneurship, his success was attributed to his hard work, foresight and alertness to business opportunities both in Sarawak and Singapore. Luck had smiled on him and so had adversity befall him.

His shining accomplishments in business allowed him to contribute unselfishly to the good cause of Chinese culture, education and social welfare services to Sarawak society as a whole, thus earning him the title of “Father of Philanthropy”.

Unlike many successful entrepreneurs, he was able to chart a smooth transition in passing his various businesses to the next generation before he retired. The wisdom of this decision is well vindicated by the outstanding performance of businesses helmed by his children.

**Key words:** Business personages, Sarawak Chinese, entrepreneurship, and business performance

## Introduction

The life of Wee Kheng Chiang (1890-1978) is a shining example of a rags-to-riches story. He came from an early Sarawak Chinese family whose origins were no different from other families living in humble circumstances. Yet he accomplished much more in life than the vast majority of his fellow men and citizens. The story of his life is best portrayed with the broad sweep of the brush on canvas rather than with a pen on paper. He lived to a ripe old age and his achievements in many different areas of endeavour that spanned across business, community services and charitable work were well beyond the reach of all but the tiny few.

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His work and achievements were acknowledged by the state which honoured him with a distinguished title known by the honorific of *Dato Sri*.<sup>1</sup>

Kheng Chiang was not born into wealth but into abject poverty and hardship. He started life facing a future like any other person, with a probability of “making good” in life no better than the next person. Yet he overcame these initial handicaps to build up a business empire with a remarkable spirit of enterprise and foresight. He lived through four “regimes” that had characterized the administration of Sarawak. The first 52 years were spent under the rule of the White Rajahs<sup>2</sup> which began in 1841. He survived the harsh rule of the Japanese Occupation between 1941 and 1945, saw a revival of his business and fortunes during the early post-war period when Sarawak ended the Brooke rule to come under Britain as a colony. This lasted for 17 years until Sarawak opted for independence by joining the Federation of Malaya, Singapore and British North Borneo (Sabah) to form the Federation of Malaysia in 1963.

Many among the younger generations of Chinese settlers would continue to strive to realize the unaccomplished dreams of their parents or grandparents. Wee Kheng Chiang was an outstanding example who achieved fame and wealth that was denied his father. While many people admired his forceful style and qualities, he could not have blossomed forth so brilliantly in Sarawak without various factors coming into play. One may delve into these factors to discover the reasons behind his many successes that others could only dream of. One wonders if he won the confidence of persons who had helped him in his career, or he had special talents to excel in all that he chose to be involved in, or that he possessed the urge to persist in the face of adversity. One may also wish to understand how and why he was motivated by this inner desire to excel and to play a larger than life role in society. These and many other queries may be probed to gain a better insight into the life and accomplishments of one of the leading entrepreneurs and philanthropists of Sarawak.

## **Growing Up**

Wee Kheng Chiang, the second of three sons, was born on 22 July 1890 in a simple wooden thatched house not far from Kuching, already the principal township of Sarawak then. His father, Wee Tee Ya, had migrated from China from the Quemoy (Jinmen) district of Fujian province. His ancestral village was located in the remote hinterland where the soils were infertile and agriculture unproductive. He therefore migrated at his prime age with some elders from his home village in search of greener pastures overseas, but had to leave behind his newly married wife. Not long after he settled down in Sarawak, he married a local-born Chinese woman, Choo Kim Kiaw, who was to bear him three sons and one daughter. Tee Ya never saw his first wife again.

Like many immigrants, Tee Ya led a life of struggle and hardship in Sarawak as he engaged in vegetable farming, pig rearing, and poultry keeping. He had to eke out a living and lived under poor and unhygienic conditions. Malnutrition and physical strain took their toll on his health and that of his wife. He suffered from cholera and succumbed to it when he was only in his thirties. His eldest son was eight years old, Kheng Chiang was six, and the youngest was just three.

Wee Tee Ya left nothing except his unfulfilled dream of making good in Sarawak. His life was an unmitigated failure as he left his widowed wife and three young sons facing a bleak and uncertain future. Kheng Chiang was already conscious of his helplessness as he witnessed his mother struggling to fend for the family. The sense of poverty was deeply ingrained in the child as it borne hard on the family with devastating and dreadful effects. Yet, among the Chinese community, Tee Ya's premature departure and abject failure in life was not an isolated case. It was in fact one of many such tragic cases in the local community. But life went on and the family was undeterred by the misfortune that had befallen it.

A year after her husband's departure, Madam Choo Kim Kiaw sent Kheng Chiang and his elder brother back to their father's ancestral village in Quemoy Island (Jinmen). This was to let the children fulfil their father's last wish to take care of his wife in China. This was a noble gesture on the part of Madam Choo in keeping with the hallowed traditions of filial piety and ancestral worship. Despite the immense pain of separation, she dutifully dispatched the two young boys back to their ancestral village in a junk that sailed via Singapore.

Both the boys were well taken care of by their "first" mother who treated them like her own children. The elder boy was to return to Sarawak four years later, leaving Kheng Chiang remain behind in the village. Fate had it that when an epidemic broke out in Quemoy, Kheng Chiang too was sent back to Sarawak to escape the likely fate of being struck down as a victim. He was fifteen years old then. His "first" mother had begged a relative who happened to travel to Sarawak to bring Kheng Chiang with him. This again was a magnanimous move on the part of the Kheng Chiang's mother in China though she would miss Kheng Chiang in her old age. Despite the emotional strain of parting, she was nevertheless farsighted enough to put the welfare of the boy before her own. Had Kheng Chiang continued to live in China, his own fate and that of his future family would have been radically different from what he was about to chart for himself in Sarawak in the years ahead.

The agony of separation from his "first" mother notwithstanding, Kheng Chiang on his homeward journey was inspired by a few things that he observed and which were to have an impact on his life. First, he noticed that the cabin of the ship was larger and could accommodate more passengers and cargo compared with the junk that he traveled in nine years ago. He was puzzled as to why the owner, the captain and the senior officials of the

ship were Europeans and not Chinese, while all the passengers were Chinese. Already in his young mind, he felt that the shipping business should not be the monopoly of foreigners. His insights were to prompt him eventually to venture into the shipping business. Second, he learned from the many passengers from Quemoy who knew Singapore that it was a bustling city with a flourishing trade in local produce and imported goods as well as a financial sector. As a busy market place of businessmen and companies from different countries, it would be a fascinating place in which to do business. This awareness of the importance of Singapore could have sown the seed of his venture into the banking business there many years later.

Kheng Chiang never saw his “first” mother again. When he went back to his ancestral village about ten years later, already a successful businessman, he could only visit her graveyard. He rebuilt and beautified her tomb in a gesture to show his love and appreciation. He would make an annual trip to the village to perform ancestral worship before Qingming (the Chinese All Souls’ Day) to offer his thanksgiving for several years in succession. He held on to the belief that the annual visit to the grave was essential as the soul of the deceased required offerings of food, clothing, shelter and “money” from the descendants. Through this act of piety, all who knew him looked upon him as a model of a filial son.

Upon his return to Sarawak from Quemoy after an absence of eight years, Kheng Chiang stayed in the same old house with his own mother and siblings. He readily shared the same chores at the pig farm. Each day he would spend much time and efforts to gather wild leaves from the countryside to feed the pigs.

Life was hard but it instilled in Kheng Chiang a resolve to improve his life and that of the family. He was aware of the teachings of the great Chinese philosopher Mencius, that “If heaven wants to give a great mission to a person, his mind must be exerted, his body must be trained, by doing this, it could inspire his spirit, strengthen his mind, and increase his capability” (林鎮國/ Lin Chen Kuok 1983:193). Mencius further stressed that “He who exerts his mind to the utmost knows his nature. He who knows his nature knows Heaven. To preserve one’s mind and to nourish one’s nature is the way to save Heaven”. The intense hardships that Kheng Chiang endured in his teenage years were to motivate him to strive for success later in life.

Kheng Chiang started school at the age of sixteen. This was the price that he paid for his eight years of stay in Quemoy. It was fortunate that there was no age restriction in admission to school then. He enrolled in St Thomas’, a mission school that was known for its strict discipline and excellent academic performance. The teachers were mostly British and European missionaries or teachers. The need to help out in the pig farm and sharing various chores at home deprived him the luxury of spending much time on his lessons. While his results were average, his good conduct won praise from his teachers. He was often nominated

to participate in extracurricular activities and would perform with distinction. The five years spent in St Thomas' instilled in him certain leadership qualities that were to stand him in good stead later in life.

The years in school taught him the ability to speak and write English. This was a decidedly intellectual strength in a society in which illiteracy was high and in which only a handful of Chinese commanded the skills in English. The English language was an essential communication tool in social and business ventures especially at functions organized by the Rajah and in negotiations with foreign firms. Kheng Chiang readily acknowledged that his career, his business and his social standing could not have been smooth-sailing had it not been his education in the medium of English. In fact, it had had made possible his employment in the Borneo Company, in the Brooke Government Administration, and in the Sarawak Steamship Company. Similarly, it was his ability to communicate in English that he was able to build up his friendship with the Second and Third White Rajahs of Sarawak and to socialize with British senior government officers and dignitaries.

### **Employment and Opportunities**

A primary education was considered the highest level of attainment for a child in the 1910s. Kheng Chiang completed Standard Five and was deemed to possess credentials that could land him a job and to secure his future. His first job was that of a clerk in the Borneo Company. This was indeed the ideal employer then as it was the premier British company in Sarawak. Under its control were the monopoly of distribution rights to the imports of the state and hence the dominance of the market. It also possessed the means to manipulate prices to maximize its profits.

Kheng Chiang worked in the Sales Department under British superiors. Among his colleagues were a few Chinese and Malay clerks like him. His junior position did not deter him from observing and learning the ways foreigners managed their business. He was able to gain an understanding of the marketing principles of buying and selling, the setting of profit margins, stock keeping and checking, and related aspects of business to which he was exposed to. These experiences yielded good insights into the operation of business dealings in general. Armed with his observation and analytical skills, this learning process was to help him to start on his own in the near future.

It was his sharp and discerning mind that convinced him to keep clear of the mining industry as a possible business proposition. From his knowledge of the Borneo Company's investments in the various mining ventures, he noticed that only gold mining brought them a small profit while other ventures were losing concerns. He realized that the mining business was influenced by nature and was beyond the control of man. On the other hand, Borneo

Company raked in good profits from other businesses especially in the export of local products and the import of foreign goods. It was in the export of local produce that Kheng Chiang saw a niche for himself.

In his urge to improve his prospects and as he did not see a future as a junior employee in the Borneo Company, his commitment to his first job was brief and lasted a mere six months. While he realized that the job offered few opportunities for advancement, he was able to benefit from the introduction to the world of business and the insights into its inner workings.

From the sphere of private business, he became a junior government servant in his next job as an office assistant at the Resident's Office of the Brooke Government. Again, he worked for only three months assisting in the handling of Chinese affairs. Brief as it was, it did expose him to some of the senior expatriate officers in certain departments. It also introduced him to the rudiments of British administration and protocol.

He was back in the private sector when he landed an appointment in the Sarawak Steamship Company as an Office Assistant in the Cargo Forwarding Department. This was a totally different business from the first. The job paid better than his previous ones and he was able to learn new things such as how to deal with recording and collecting bills of landing for merchandise and goods imported from Singapore and other countries. It also widened his vista on the trade and shipping that were going on outside the narrow confines of Sarawak. The Sarawak Steamship Company was founded on 1 July 1875 as the first shipping company with steamships to transport passengers and merchandise between Kuching and Singapore, and operated its own warehouse and wharf in Kuching (Foo and Chai, 2001: 28). As the dominant shipping company in Sarawak, it was in a position to corner a major share of the shipping business to reap handsome profits. Yet, when better prospects beckoned, Kheng Chiang would not be tied down, even if the employer was as dominant as the Sarawak Steamship Company.

After four months, Kheng Chiang resigned to join a Chinese employer for the first time. He was Ong Tiang Swee<sup>3</sup> who was also a shareholder of the Sarawak Steamship Company. The performance of an Asian junior staff working under European superiors was unlikely to attract much attention. But working under a fellow countryman and under the same cultural environment would allow one to be noticed if one were to perform well. This was indeed the case with Kheng Chiang. His diligence and performance did not escape the notice of Ong Tiang Swee. Perhaps Ong could recognize a "gem" when he saw one. Within six months, Kheng Chiang was promoted to the position of Manager. With Kheng Chiang at the helm, the company's business prospered and net profits were high. The trust of Ong Tiang Swee for Kheng Chiang grew by the day.

Kheng Chiang's job was to coordinate and manage the sale of commodities and goods. Taking charge of the trading business helped him to lay the foundation of his future career and fortune, and the path to a wealth and high society. For at the outset, armed with experience working in the shipping business and having acquired some knowledge of the trade, Kheng Chiang was convinced that the shipping business would become an important commercial activity and therefore an avenue for making money. With this conviction, he began to take up shares in the company while working for Ong Tiang Swee. He rose from an employee to become a shareholder and, in later years, to assume the chairmanship of the Sarawak Steamship Company. This dramatic transformation of his status was the outcome of his far-sightedness and sharp judgment in investments. It was not a case of coincidence.

Kheng Chiang's first impression of Ong Tiang Swee was that he was very rich and powerful, respected by all, and lived a luxurious and extravagant life. Kheng Chiang was quick to realize the secret formulae of his employer's success. He was to apply what he learned in his business ventures.

Ong Tiang Swee was a successful entrepreneur and managed a diversified business that included the import of cooking oil and other goods, a pharmaceutical shop, farms to rear pigs, cows and deer, and factories as well as plantations. He was also the major shareholder of Tiong Hua Bank, the first commercial bank in Sarawak.

As one of the earliest millionaires in Sarawak, it was not surprising that Ong Tiang Swee maintained cordial relationships with the Second White Rajah, Charles Brooke, and had his trust.<sup>4</sup> In 1911, he was appointed the President of the Chinese Court, established to settle cases among the Chinese in matters of marriage, division of property, small debts and Chinese customs and traditions (Chew, 1990: 257). As the Kapitan China of Kuching, Ong Tiang Swee was effectively the acknowledged community leader among the Chinese. With his exalted position, it came as no surprise that the Rajah granted him exclusive rights in the trade of many imported goods and ownership of a few pieces of land.

While solid performance in business is crucial for advancement, chance too cannot be discounted entirely. Chance indeed played a decisive part in determining the future of Kheng Chiang. Fate had it that, in 1910, the eldest daughter of Ong Tiang Swee by the name of Ong Siew Eng, was reaching marriageable age. Her parents were eager to find her the most eligible bachelor in town. The custom and tradition of the Chinese then was to match wealth with wealth and the humble among themselves. The prospective son-in-law must then be a man of means and high social standing. The humble origins of Kheng Chiang had disqualified him in the Ong family's search for the best man in town. Months of match-making search for the right man were spent to no avail. A worried Mrs. Ong had a dream one night in which a match-maker gave the beloved daughter's hand to a tall, slim and pleasant looking young

man. Her dream told her that this was the right man and he was in the vicinity. The match was literally decided as Mrs. Ong remembered a young man in the person of Kheng Chiang. After some discussions and consultations, Ong Tiang Swee and his wife decided that Kheng Chiang was to be their chosen son-in-law. This was a decidedly defining moment in Kheng Chiang's life. He was, like the carp that leaps over the rapids, to ascend the "dragon gate"<sup>5</sup> by becoming the son-in-law of one of the wealthiest men in town.

The wedding was held on 10 March 1911, 99 days after the engagement. Conducted in accordance with Chinese traditions, the wedding was attended by a thousand invited guests at a grand dinner. Among the dignitaries who graced the occasion were Rajah Charles Brooke and his wife, the Resident, Financial Chief, high ranking government officers and local eminence. It was said that the occasion was the grandest ever held since the founding of Sarawak.

Life after the marriage for Kheng Chiang, who moved into the Ong residence, was one of comfort and abundance. Surrounded by servants and maids, Kheng Chiang sampled the luxuries of life as son-in-law of Ong Tiang Swee. It also marked a turning point in his life.

One of the visible changes in his life was the frequent contacts with Rajah Charles Brooke. A cordial and firm relationship developed and Kheng Chiang became a regular guest at social functions hosted by the Rajah. The ties also paved the way for Kheng Chiang to establish a profound friendship with the Third Rajah, Vyner Brooke<sup>6</sup> and his wife, Sylvia Brett, in the ensuing years. These personal ties with the highest authority in the land were an important ingredient in building the foundation of Kheng Chiang's future business ventures. With Rajah Vyner Brooke as a supporting pillar to his ventures, coupled with his own enterprise and foresight, Kheng Chiang's road to success, wealth and fame was clearly and well-charted.

### **An Emergent Entrepreneur**

In 1921 and at the age of 31, Kheng Chiang established his own trading company, registered as Hiap Chiang Leong, with premises in downtown Kuching. The company was to distill and trade in *arrack* or liquor, for which the licence was granted exclusively by the Rajah. He set up ten more trading firms in town in the next few years to deal with a variety of businesses, excluding the sale of crocodile skin, birds' nests and sharks' fins. Kheng Ann Company dealt mainly with the import and export of local products such as sago, rubber, pepper, jelutong, mangrove, and illipe nut. Lian Chong Leong Company was involved in the import of rice, sugar, cooking oil and groceries; Lian Hua Company ventured into timber; Kheng Chong Company manufactured soaps and engaged in printing and selling stationeries; Tong Chiang Company, with branches in Kuching, Bintangor and Mukah, manufactured and



processed sago. Chung Chin Farm, situated near a river, raised and bred pigs for the market.

Kheng Chiang's business soon began to gather financial clout. The scope of his commercial interests was such that his growing army of customers began to request assistance to send cash remittances to relatives in China or elsewhere. Chinese settlers sent their remittances to their families in China by hiring the services of friends or couriers who made regular trips to China. There were therefore opportunities to provide this service as a commercial undertaking. Thus was sown the seed of a bank as an effective means to tap these opportunities. In 1924, with his friend Soo Kok Siang, he founded the Bian Chiang Bank in Kuching. This was a bold venture as it was only the second bank backed up by Chinese capital. The first bank, Tiong Hua Bank, was established by a group of well-established merchants among whom was Ong Tiang Swee as the major shareholder. Management of Bian Chiang Bank was subsequently passed on to his third son Wee Hood Teck. In an exercise in 1978 that involved issues of extra capital and subsequent share restructuring, ownership of the bank was finally transferred out of the hands of the Wee family (林煜堂/Lam, 2005: 60-62).

Another capital-intensive undertaking that Kheng Chiang ventured into was in shipping. Inspired by his personal boyhood experience in traveling to and from China and realizing the potentials of the trade in carrying passengers and cargoes between south China and Southeast Asia, he was keen to corner a share of the local coastal shipping business. The intricate network of waterways in Sarawak and the lack of roads meant that coastal shipping was the best means to connect Kuching and outlying coastal and riverine ports. Kheng Chiang's initial venture was to acquire a barge to ply regularly between Kuching and Mukah to ferry passengers and goods.

Kheng Chiang looked beyond the confines of Sarawak and saw business opportunities elsewhere. This was none other than Singapore when he founded Lian Hong Company in the year 1926. This company was to serve as a liaison centre to handle agricultural produce from Sarawak. Having built up a stake in Singapore, frequent trips to the city became a part of his life. These visits were to let him to observe and draw insights into the workings of commerce and trade in the biggest and busiest port in Southeast Asia, in particular the export of agricultural produce and import of goods from Europe and America. He was impressed by Singapore's capacity in handling large quantities of exports and imports and its flourishing trade. Ever alert to business opportunities, he recognized the potentials of Singapore as a place where he could pursue his business plans and to expand his fortune.

The founding of Bian Chiang Bank in 1924 in Kuching had widened his contacts and experience in finance. By 1935, he was sufficiently confident to venture into banking in Singapore when he founded the United Chinese Bank (UCB). By then three Chinese banks were already in existence in the city, yet Kheng Chiang's reputation convinced many Hokkien

businessmen to subscribe shares in the bank. The bank was re-named United Overseas Bank (UOB) a few years later when it expanded its business overseas. UOB is now the biggest local banking group in terms of deposits and is listed among the world's top 500 corporations. The entire group, comprising UOB and all its subsidiaries, had total consolidated assets of \$2,741 million and a staff of 2,700 in 1974 (UOB, 1985: 81).

Kheng Chiang's business was gathering momentum and its profits multiplied. The reason behind his success was the ability to put in place a sound management system. Working under him was a corps of trusted, responsible and experienced staff. He devised a hierarchy of command in every line of business. At the apex is an able manager, assisted by a "controller" whose role may be likened to that of a general "housekeeper". In the purchase of local produce, the job of the "controller" was to inspect and to negotiate prices. Below the controller was the chief storekeeper who was also responsible for taking delivery of and weighing goods and commodities. Further down the line was the supervisor who took charge of the workers.

The division of labour and management command were devised to accommodate differences in skills, experiences and interests among the staff and to meet the demands of job specializations. Kheng Chiang was careful to assign the best persons for the right jobs to maximize efficiency and productivity. Management of his staff was guided by two fundamental principles, namely, to appoint the right person for the job and to give him a free hand to manage as best he could; and to treat his staff well in order to win their loyalty and to retain their service. These guidelines earned him all-round respect from his staff who served him faithfully until they retired. He would refrain from coercion in his treatment of his staff so as not to put pressure on them. He believed firmly in the axiom that the better one treated one's staff, the harder and more efficiently they would work in return.

In his business dealings, Kheng Chiang was an epitome of honesty and trustworthiness. He regarded these as the core principles in business transactions just as they are basic to good social behaviour as a virtue of daily life. In consequence, dealing honestly and rationally in business transactions won him a great deal of respect from his business associates and staff.

In investing in business ventures, Kheng Chiang opted for businesses for which market demand was assured and which could yield handsome returns in good time. He tended to avoid businesses that required long-term investments, especially in mining and land. He concluded that mining and land development were too speculative and risky.

Kheng Chiang's business in local produce, import and export trade and banking services all turned in good profits, making him a wealthy man before the Japanese Occupation. At the same time, as the Chinese businessman *par excellence* in Sarawak, his social stature grew in tandem as he was contributed actively in the service of the Chinese community and society

as a whole. In his various capacities, he also devoted much of his energies to charity and community work.

In 1931, Kheng Chiang was acknowledged as the doyen in the Chinese business community with his election as Chairman of the Sarawak Chinese Chamber of Commerce. He was to serve in this capacity for 15 years until 1946 when he relinquished the position voluntarily. While the Chamber was largely responsible for looking after the commercial interests of Chinese business, it also promoted the social and cultural interests of the community. The Chamber also took the lead in performing other significant functions. Among the major ones were the setting up of the China Relief Fund Committee of Sarawak to raise funds in support of China in the Resistance War against Japan. As the Chairman of the Committee, Kheng Chiang shouldered heavy responsibilities as he laboured to galvanize the community to stand up against Japanese aggression.

### **Adversity and Fortitude**

The Japanese invasion of China began on July 7, 1937 aroused strong patriotic feelings among overseas Chinese in support of anti-military aggression movement. Malaya set up a China Relief Fund Committee and recruited hundreds of young men to serve as mechanics and drivers along the China-Burma road. The Chinese in Sarawak too organized themselves to raise funds and recruited volunteers.

In July 1938, a proposal to set up a regional China Relief Fund was put forward by Lee Chin Chuan from the Philippines and Chong Sii Yuan from Indonesia. The inaugural meeting in the assembly hall of the Hwa Khiew Middle School in Singapore on 10 October 1938 attracted 172 delegates from seven countries in Southeast Asia. Kheng Chiang was one of the seven delegates from Sarawak, the others were Wong Yu Chian and Tu Nai Pin from Kuching, Lau Ka Thu and Tan Chong Hu from Sibu, and Chong Yu Seng and Yong Yi Ing from Miri. Two days later, the Federation of China Relief Fund Committees (FCRFC) of Southeast Asian Chinese was formed, and Tan Kah Tee was elected as the Chairman (刘子政/Lau Tzy Cheng, 1997: 68-71; 刘伯奎/Liu Pak Kuei, 1992: 21-29).

Among the many objectives of FCRFC were the setting up of branches in the region, to organize fund-raising activities, to encourage local residents to remit money to their relatives in China, to provide assistance to refugees in Guangdong and Fujian provinces, to support China-made goods and products, to encourage local Chinese youths to join the Chinese army or its medical corps.

Back in Kuching, Kheng Chiang was elected to head the Sarawak China Relief Fund Committee with the assistance of three deputies, namely, Tan Sum Guan, Tan Bak Lin and Lee Yong Thong as respective representatives from the Hokkien, Teochew and

Cantonese communities, and 19 other committee members. The Committee created three sub-committees with functions to raise funds, to solicit support through charity sales, and to recruit manpower. Members worked tirelessly in door-to-door fund-raising campaigns, organized sales of handicrafts made by students and goods donated by local businessmen, and recruited volunteers to serve in the logistic division of the Chinese army (刘伯奎/Liu Pak Kuei, 1983: 10).

The Chinese in Sarawak rallied in support of the anti-Japanese campaign. The Fund-Raising Sub-Committee successfully raised about \$900,000 in 1938, of which half the amount was collected in Kuching, \$300,000 from Sibü and \$60,000 from Miri. A total of 76 young men responded to the call to serve as mechanics and drivers along the China-Burma road.

The Sarawak contingent of mechanics and drivers was among 3,072 volunteers who answered the call for assistance. The Sarawak volunteers embarked on their journey from Singapore via Port Klang, Penang, Rangoon, Lashio (in Burma) to Yunnan. Kheng Chiang was touched by the patriotism of these young men and their courage to sacrifice their lives in the war of resistance. He rendered generous assistance in cash and kind, even when they returned to Sarawak in 1947 and 1948 when the war was over. He sponsored accommodation in hotels and an allowance of \$3 per day while they were in transit in Singapore. He paid for their passage from Singapore to Kuching where they received a sum of \$50 for living expenses, paid out through Bian Chiang Bank. They were provided with two meal coupons daily until they found a job. For his generous gesture, Kheng Chiang won wide praise in Sarawak. In terms of recognition, he enjoyed almost the same honour that was accorded to Mr. Tan Kah Kee of Singapore whose work to rally the Chinese in aid of China had become legendary (刘伯奎/Liu Pak Kuei, 1983: 11; 1992: 28).

For his part in the anti-Japanese movement, the Japanese occupying forces targeted Kheng Chiang, his brother and many others as dangerous “elements”. Both were arrested by the Japanese on two occasions and tortured and imprisoned by the Kempeitai, the dreaded Japanese secret police. They were forced to perform hard labour in road construction and were made to carry sacks of rice that weighed 150 kilograms each. The brutal treatment took its toll on the physical, mental and emotional health of Kheng Chiang and his brother. Kheng Chiang suffered from hernia that was caused by carrying heavy loads during his imprisonment. He was later to walk with his legs slightly apart, much to the amusement of some ignorant onlookers. He was even picked for execution but was saved by a stroke of luck as the Japanese soon surrendered. But his brother was not so lucky as he succumbed to the severe torture inflicted by the Kempeitai (林煜堂/Lam Chee Kheung, 2005: 106). Upon his release from prison, Kheng Chiang sought urgent medical treatment locally but to no avail. He had to travel to London for surgical operation before his conditions improved.

## **Business Revival and Consolidation**

In the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese war, Kheng Chiang was able to be reunited with his family in Singapore. Except for some damages and losses, his house in Kuching had remained largely intact. His first priority then was to revive his business. Urgent attention was directed at UCB in Singapore. The bank had not suffered much capital losses during the Japanese Occupation, but it had lost many staff members of high caliber. On the list were two Board Directors, Chionh Kee Hu and Khoo Beng Chiang who had passed away, and some had resigned. There was an imminent need to restructure UCB to cope with the increase in demand for capital to fund projects in post-war reconstruction.

Under such circumstances, Kheng Chiang had to personally take over the helm to propel the bank back to its former glory. UCB resumed its operation on 17 September 1945, with a capital of \$100,000 raised from a loan from the Controller of Finance and Accounts of the British Military Authority (BMA). All its former staff were recalled to work, and their salaries were retained the same as in their last pay sheet in December 1941. Kheng Chiang remained as Chairman of the bank but, upon the request of the Board, he doubled as the Managing Director as well in April 1946 (UOB, 1985: 27). Experienced senior management members including the bank manager Goh Cheng San and its secretary Kwa Choo Ping were appointed to the Board of Directors to replace the two who had passed away. This decision not only opened a way for the smooth revival of the bank, it also rekindled and motivated the spirit of the staff.

Kheng Chiang now had to look after the day-to-day administration of the bank. The first move by Kheng Chiang to improve the business of the bank was to open a Savings Department in 1948 to cater for savings. This new facility was well-received. The Bank's gross assets more than doubled from the pre-War amount of \$5 million to \$11.9 million in 1948.

The Board went through a complete overhaul in 1952 due to resignation or death of three directors. The new Board now consisted of two old members, namely the Chairman, Wee Kheng Chiang and Tan Boon Khah, and eight new members.

Corresponding to the progressive economic development in the world, the bank's business expanded and grew rapidly. On 18 December 1954, the Board resolved that a one to one bonus share was to be issued to the directors to boost the share and paid-up capital to \$2 million (UOB, 1985: 30).

In 1958, Kheng Chiang appointed his fourth son, Cho Yaw to the Board which further strengthened the management team of the bank. When Cho Yaw eventually assumed full management control in 1960, the bank was ready to grow by leaps and bounds. It was finally to join the ranks of the renowned banks of the world (UOB, 1985: 31).

Cho Yaw proved to be as enterprising as his father. He introduced several innovations in banking services almost immediately when he took the helm of the bank. He found that foreign exchange dealings were very lucrative and his first initiative was the creation of a Foreign Exchange Department. However, the new department hit a snag in its effort to participate in the financing of Singapore-Indonesian trade, because only “first class” banks were permitted to issue a shipping guarantee for bilateral trade. To overcome this handicap, Cho Yaw visited and appealed to the Indonesian authorities and succeeded in gaining approval by the Indonesian authorities to recognize shipping guarantees issued by the bank (郑明杉/Zheng Min Chan, 1997: 15-17).

The second project introduced by Cho Yaw was the establishment of the Godown Department in 1963. The new department provided an additional service for customers and also improved the security for overdraft and other credit facilities granted by the Bank (郑明杉/Zheng Min Chan, 1997: 13). Property acquisition and investment in land were also recommended by Cho Yaw, and vigorously carried out with the approval of the Board. The Bank’s premises at Bonham Building were bought over from its landlord in 1963.

A banking licence in Hong Kong was obtained in 1964. The application of the licence was prompted by the formation of the Federation of Malaysia which included Malaysia, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak. The Indonesian government was hostile towards the Federation and labeled the act as a “neo-colonialist plot” and staged a military confrontation against it. Indonesia severed her trade ties with Malaysia including Singapore. To get over the economic blockade, Cho Yaw found it necessary to trade through Hong Kong. He made several trips to Hong Kong and was told by the authorities that a licence would be issued to UCB if it was registered under a different name because there was already a UCB registered in Hong Kong. The Board had no choice, but changed its name to United Overseas Bank (UOB) on 23 January 1965, but its Chinese name “Tye Hua” (大华) was retained (UOB, 1985: 36; 郑明杉/Zheng Min Chan, 1997: 17-18).

With the anticipated expansion, the Bank’s authorized capital was further increased from \$4 million to \$20 million, and the paid-up capital was raised to \$3 million in 1964. In addition, five more branches were opened to cope with growing demand.

In June 1965, Singapore separated from the Federation of Malaysia. This however, did not affect the operations of the Bank. Instead, it boosted its operations in 1966 by investing in a government owned textile factory with 50 per cent equity in January, incorporated a finance company in August 1966, and financed several major projects in the new Jurong industrial estate, among them the National Iron and Steel Mills and Jurong Shipyard.

In 2001, UOB achieved yet greater glories by outbidding the mighty Development Bank Singapore to take over Overseas Union Bank. By now the biggest bank in Singapore, UOB

transforms itself into a major financial institution that competes in the world of international banking. In retrospect, the achievements of the bank stands as a proud testimony to the foresight of its late founder (*The Straits Times*, 29 March 2002).

Besides spread his wings overseas to carve out a share of the overseas market, Kheng Chiang also saw the need to meet the stiff competition from other companies in the business on local produce and consumer goods in Sarawak in the post-war period. He realized the importance of innovations through the use of modern management techniques and technology. As the small and separate business concerns that were run according to the old management method of the past were no longer viable, he was decisive in restructuring them to form a single private limited liability company registered as Wee Kheng Chiang & Co Ltd on 6 July 1946 with a registered capital of \$3,000,000 divided into 30,000 shares. All its component firms were merged and relocated to the same premises at Main Bazaar, the prime trading centre in Kuching. Appointed as directors of the new company were Wee Kheng Chiang himself, his son-in-law, Ong Kee Hui, Chua Sok Jin, Tan Chui Kiaw and Chua Kee Chuan (林煜堂/Lam Chee Kheung, 2005: 117-118). This move led to more effective control and management on the one hand and rationalization of operation on the other. He was well aware that this reorganization was the only means to raise the competitiveness of his business and to meet the rising demands of the world market.

The formation of Wee Kheng Chiang & Co Ltd after the end of World War Two was timely. The company was well-positioned to take advantage of an economic upturn during the Korean War in the early 1950s. Prices of local produce soared. The price of pepper, for example, rose to an incredible \$1,000 per pikul (60.6kg) during the War. As a major pepper producer, Sarawak reaped large profits from the export of the commodity and many pepper farmers grew rich overnight. It was even said that some even carried cash in “gunny” bags to buy shophouses in Kuching. Wee Kheng Chiang & Co Ltd was a major trader in pepper and it was not unusual for it to stock as many as 5,000 bags weighing a pikul each in its warehouse (林煜堂/Lam Chee Kheung, 2005: 120).

Rubber was another major local produce that benefited from the boom in commodity prices during the Korean War. At the height of the boom, the premises of Wee Kheng Chiang & Co Ltd that occupied two shophouses measuring 80 feet by 50 feet were fully stocked with rubber. The rubber was traded with a profit margin of nearly 100 per cent (林煜堂/Lam Chee Kheung, 2005: 121).

Wee Kheng Chiang & Co Ltd ran a variety of businesses. All turned in substantial profits that brought in much liquidity to the company. The name of the company was dubbed as “the signboard with seven golden characters” by the people of Sarawak. Kheng Chiang’s vision, ambition and capability had made him the most successful businessman in Sarawak.

As the prices of pepper and rubber declined sharply in the 1970s, Wee Kheng Chiang & Co Ltd, like many companies dealing with these commodities that were subject to violent price fluctuations, had to scale down its business gradually. When Kheng Chiang's son, Hood Teck, left the helm of the company to venture into housing and industrial development, the parent company became dormant.

When Kheng Chiang handed over his business to two of his children to manage his separate enterprises in Sarawak and Singapore, they were able to venture into new businesses or to expand existing ones. Unlike many Chinese businesses which decline and disappear after the founder's death, Kheng Chiang has succeeded in passing on his spirit of entrepreneurship to his sons. The nature of the business in Sarawak has changed but the name of the Wee family in the local business circle remains. Many of his sons rose to positions of eminence in business and society in their own rights. Among the outstanding sons are Wee Hood Teck and Wee Cho Yaw.

Kheng Chiang's third son, Hood Teck, helmed the trading company for seven years in his father's trading company before he ventured into property development in 1966. He subsequently also invested in industrial development and became a wealthy man in his own right. Like his father, he involved himself actively in social and community work and was a staunch supporter of educational and charitable projects in aid of the less fortunate. For his contributions to society, he was awarded a Datuk (PNBS) in 1965 and Datuk Amar (DA) in 1978.<sup>7</sup>

Kheng Chiang's fourth son, Wee Cho Yaw worked for nine years before he joined UOB in 1958 and succeeded his father as Managing Director two years later. In 1974, Kheng Chiang retired from the bank and passed on the chairmanship to Cho Yaw. Like his father, he is hardworking and has excellent leadership qualities. By 1974, UOB had become the biggest Singapore bank group in terms of deposits and was ranked among the world's major 500 corporations (大华银行/United Overseas Bank, 1985). As a group, its total consolidated assets reached \$2,741 million in Singapore dollars and a staff strength of 2,700. Total deposits stood at \$1,774 million, and loans and advances at \$1,136 million. In 2001, the bank achieved yet greater glories by outbidding the mighty Development Bank Singapore to take over Overseas Union Bank. Through skilful acquisitions and expansion, he eventually steers UOB to become the largest bank in Singapore. For years it has played a major role in the economic life of Singapore and competes with confidence in the world of international banking. It stands as a proud testimony to the foresight of its late founder. In recognition of Cho Yaw's outstanding performance and achievement in business, he was awarded the much-coveted Businessman of the Year Award in 1990 and again in 2002. The Award was jointly organized by *The Business Times* and the courier company, DHL Worldwide Express for outstanding businessmen in Singapore (*The Strait Times*, 29 March 2002).



## Community Leadership

However vast his business empire, Kheng Chiang would not have left behind a lasting legacy had he not contributed to the general welfare of society and the state. Neither would he have earned the respect and recognition of the government, nor enjoyed an exalted status among the upper echelon of society, had he been a mere man of fortune. Serving and contributing to society and the state he did with distinction in his role as a prominent community leader and a leading philanthropist.

The successful business person would invariably contribute his part for the public good. The traditional obligations of repaying society from which one obtains one's benefits remain strong among the Chinese. This is the essence of Confucian ethics by which the Chinese business community in particular and the public in general adhere to as a core virtue.

Nowhere was Kheng Chiang more conscious of his social obligations than in his service to society and state. He responded readily to calls for support and sponsorships from many quarters from organizations affiliated to education, Chinese associations, culture and religions, sports and the less privileged.

The Chinese had a strong tradition to organize themselves according to clan and dialect affinities. As a Hokkien-speaking member of the community, it was expected that Kheng Chiang had to assume a leadership role in his own dialect community. Starting from 1932, he was looked upon as the community leader of the Hokkiens when he led the Hokkien Association of Sarawak for fifteen years until after the Japanese Occupation in 1947(古晋福建公会/Kuching Hokkien Association, 1980).

A deep concern for the welfare of the young was inseparable from his involvement in education. The founding of schools has always been a core function of prominent businessmen and dialect associations. As early as 1912, the Hokkien community in Kuching had established a school to nurture its children. This school, originally known as Sarawak Free School and later on as Hokkien Free School, is the present Chung Hua Primary School No.1. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, schools founded by the Chinese community drew their support from the business sector and the community at large. A board of governors was organized to ensure that funds were raised to sustain the running of the school. Leadership of the school board would invariably fall on prominent businessmen. Ong Tiang Swee had served the board of the Hokkien school with distinction. Several years later this role fell on the shoulders of Kheng Chiang who served from 1932 to 1947 (Kuching Hokkien Association, 1980: 230). During his tenure as board chairman, student enrollment increased considerably.

After the Japanese Occupation, Kheng Chiang worked hard to revive the Kuching Chung Hua primary and secondary schools for which he contributed \$2,000 annually. In 1947

he had helped to raise funds to purchase the Chinese Consulate Building in Kuching to house the premises of Chung Hua Middle School No. 4, now the property of the Sarawak Chinese Community Trust Management Board. In 1958, he contributed \$100,000 towards the building of the school hall of Chung Hua Middle School No. 1. The magnificent building which now bears his name still stands in the school campus as a legacy of his work. In the same year, he similarly sponsored the construction of classrooms at St. Thomas Primary School. The year 1964 saw him donating \$10,000 to the building fund of St. Luke Secondary School.

Acutely aware of the plight of the poor and unfortunate, Kheng Chiang contributed generously to ease their needs as well as to other welfare organizations. He was ever conscious of the sufferings of his countrymen in China. On one occasion in 1938 he raised \$100,000 in aid flood victims in China. In 1964, he donated a substantial sum to build the Kuching Home for Women. This was to provide training for women in housekeeping and hygiene, in the upbringing of children and also to provide temporary accommodation to rural Iban and Bidayuh women who travelled to Kuching to seek medical treatment. In response to the call by the government to control tuberculosis, Kheng Chiang sponsored the setting up of a special clinic in Kuching in 1953. This clinic was subsequently named after him as a mark of gratitude.

Prominence in business invariably invites respect and admiration by one's peers. The case of Kheng Chiang was no different. Organizations associated with commerce, the Hokkien community, the Wee clan, education, religion and many others were to elect Kheng Chiang in a leadership role. Among them are the following:

- The Sarawak Chinese Chamber of Commerce (1930-1946)
- The Hokkien Association (1932-1947)
- The Singapore-Sarawak Association (from 1930)
- The Hokkien School Management Board(1932-1947)
- The Sarawak China Relief Fund Committee (1938)
- Kuching Joint Primary and Secondary Schools Management Board (1946)
- Kuching China Consulate Building Committee (1949)
- Anti-Tuberculosis Society
- Sarawak Turf Club (1937)
- Sarawak Buddhist Society
- Tse Chia Koh Buddhist Association
- Kuching Hung Nam Shieng Thang
- Sarawak Tong Sin Siang Tong Association
- The Federation of Wee Clan Associations, Sarawak

Just prior to the Japanese Occupation, the Brooke administration had recognized Kheng Chiang's contributions to society by appointing him as one of the two Chinese members of the Legislation Council for the 1937-1940 term. Soon after independence in 1965, he presented a

half-silvered 55-inch long mace, specially made in Britain, to the Legislature Council, as an emblem of the authority and power of the Head of Sarawak State. This mace that had cost a substantial sum to make is still kept by the State Council of Sarawak.

From the 1930s until his death, Kheng Chiang was the doyen among the Sarawak business community and a well-respected personality in social circles in Sarawak and Singapore. His numerous acts of generosity and kindness won praise and admiration by both society and government. It was not without reason that he was known as the ‘Father of Philanthropy’ in the state (林煜堂/Lam Chee Kheung, 2005: 125-128).

Among the many friends of the Ranee Sylvia Brooke, she admired most only three. One of these was Kheng Chiang. She admired him for great courage during the Japanese Occupation when he risked his life to supply cigarettes to the government officers in the Kuching concentration camp. She acknowledged this as “a brave act from a Chinese towards the British captives” (Brooke, 1939: 115). Highly impressed by his remarkable achievements and the spirit that he embodied, she saw him as “a brilliant and ambitious man with the lined face of one who has had to work hard for everything. He amassed great riches, became very powerful, and eventually owned vast properties and a bank”. In her 1939 book entitled *The Three White Rajahs*, she described Kheng Chiang as “The Uncrowned King of Sarawak”.

Official acknowledgement of his outstanding social and charitable contributions came from both the colonial government and the Malaysian nation. He was conferred the Commander of the Star of Sarawak by the Third White Rajah of Sarawak in 1941, and the Panglima Negara Bintang Sarawak, which carries the title Dato Sri by the first Governor of Sarawak in 1964.

### **A Life Fulfilled**

Kheng Chiang proved to be a successful entrepreneur from the time of his first business venture. He earned his first million within five years of launching into business, at the young age of just over thirty. His residence at Mathies Road facing the Sarawak River, with a splendid garden, was a magnificent building. Its uniqueness and splendor marked it out as a landmark in that area. His two wives bore him five sons and ten daughters. He had three sons and eight daughters by his first wife and another two sons and two daughters by the second.

Kheng Chiang became a Buddhist when he was 83 years of age. Having successfully handed his business over to the next generation and relieved of the burdens and obligations that were part and parcel of life in business, his was a life fulfilled as he began to immerse himself in the tranquility of retirement, to enjoy its rich rewards, and to seek spiritual assurance in life. The blessings of a good life and family were evident in abundance.

In 1978, he passed away peacefully at a ripe old age. Paying their last respect to this remarkable man who rose to prominence from a humble origin were relatives and friends, business associates, representatives of Chinese associations, students, and state dignitaries including the Chief Minister of Sarawak and his wife. The funeral procession stretched over a mile in a grand send-off for a proud son of Sarawak.

## Conclusion

His humble origins and untimely death of his father who left nothing behind but a widow and children had not deterred Kheng Chiang to accumulate a fortune that all but the tiny few could only dream of. Brief though his career was as a hired employee in various offices, the experience that he gained stood him in good stead as he broadened his views and skills for his future ventures. His meeting with Ong Tiang Swee, his employer, mentor and father-in-law, was the turning point in his life and career.

Perhaps having an already highly successful entrepreneur as father-in-law, coupled with an uncanny ability to grasp opportunities in promising ventures, Kheng Chiang went on to build up a business enterprise that had exerted a dominant presence in Sarawak and Singapore. He emerged as the wealthiest man in Sarawak and one of its leading community leaders. He presented himself as a self-made man, a public figure, a beloved patriarch to his family, an ambitious entrepreneur, and a philanthropist rarely matched by his peers.

The factors behind Kheng Chiang's success in business might be complex. Essentially, they were inseparably associated with his analytic mind, his humanistic approach to management, his noble principles of honesty and sincerity, and the right timing in launching into the right types of business. He was ahead of his contemporaries when he ventured into the banking industry. This bold and decisive move into a budding industry came at the right time when there was little competition to contend with at that time. Banking proved to be a highly profitable investment and the business was stable and secure. His entry into the trade in local produce too was well-timed. With his ready cash, he purchased the goods at low cost and sold them at high prices. In the immediate post-war years especially during the Korean War in the early 1950s, the demand for such commodities as pepper and rubber yielded unprecedented profits.

Kheng Chiang's business ventures might have been blessed with an element of luck. Luck was undeniably on his side when he appeared in the dream of a wealthy future mother-in-law. Luck too had accounted for his escape from execution at the cruel hands of the Japanese and that added decades more to his life in what was to be his golden years in business.

In business and family life, Kheng Chiang enjoyed harmonious social relationships

with people from all walks of life. Numerous social associations and educational, religious and cultural organizations benefited from his leadership role. His capacity for philanthropic causes brought comfort to countless numbers of the less privileged. In short, none could dispute his generous contributions to the general welfare of the community and the state.

The entrepreneurial and community spirit of Kheng Chiang has inspired many in their admiration and emulation. His life and success had etched a deep imprint on the history of Sarawak.

### Notes

- 1 “Dato Sri” is a state-level honorific title conferred by the governor on persons who have made significant contributions to state and society.
- 2 The Brookes from England were the “White Rajahs” who ruled Sarawak from 1841 to 1946 for 105 years.
- 3 Ong Tiang Swee (1864-1950) was the eldest son of Ong Ewe Hai, a pioneer and successful Hokkien merchant in Kuching. Tiang Swee inherited his father’s business, and became a close friend and advisor to Rajah Charles Brooke, the second Rajah of Sarawak who also appointed him Kapitan China General. He was Kheng Chiang’s first Chinese employer and father-in-law (黃建淳 /Hwang Jiann Chen, 1999: 181 and 214; Lam, 2005: 28, 37-43).
- 4 A Rajah is a monarch in the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. Rajah Charles Brooke was the second Rajah who ruled Sarawak from 1868 to 1917.
- 5 A Chinese proverb, it means attaining sudden success normally through passing the imperial examination.
- 6 Rajah Vyner Brooke was the third white Rajah of Sarawak, who ruled Sarawak from 1917 till 1946. He turned Sarawak to the British as her colony in 1946.
- 7 The Panglima Negara Bintang Sarawak (PNBS) carries the title of Datuk and the Datuk Amar Bintang Kenyalang (DA) carries the more senior title of Daruk Amar.

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