Tan Cheng Lock

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The Straits Legislator and Chinese Leader

Yeo Siew Siang

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To my wife, Yoke Choo,
and son, Qi-yao,
with affection and hope.

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PREFACE

This book is a story of the struggle of Tun Tan Cheng Lock on behalf of the Chinese in British Malaya from 1923 to 1935. It focuses on Cheng Lock's role as a leader of the Chinese and their spokesman in the Straits Settlements Legislative Council during the formative years of modern, multiracial Malaya and Malaysia.

The account is by no means a complete biography of the man. It deals with Cheng Lock's early life and pre-war political career – an area that has not been adequately told. It assesses objectively and fairly Cheng Lock's contributions within the context of his times.

This book would not have been possible without the assistance of many. First, I must thank Alice Tan Kim Yoke, Cheng Lock's most dedicated daughter, for sharing the deep knowledge she has of her father, her fine collection of family papers and photographs. I am also indebted to the late Tun Tan Siew Sin and her daughter Siok Choo, for the time spent in clarifying significant points on the family's history. Thanks are also due to Professor Ernest Chew Chin Tiong, Head, Department of History, National University of Singapore for his encouragement and constructive comments.

Last but not least, my wife, Yoke Choo and son, Qi-Yao, who besides bearing the stresses of my work in good cheer, were a constant source of moral support.

Yeo Siew Siang B.A. (Hons.)
Singapore

Sir Tan Cheng Lock, the elder statesman in later years. Photo taken in 1952.
(Courtesy of Alice Tan Kim Yoke)

CHAPTER ONE

PROLOGUE

Tan Cheng Lock's Ancestry

Tan Cheng Lock was born on 5 April 1883 in 111, Heeren Street, a stone's throw from the orange, silt-laden Malacca River and the famous red Dutch *stadthuys*. Born in a historic street in the ancient settlement, he grew up in historic surroundings which ironically stood as stark reminders of a declining and anachronistic Malacca.

About one hundred years earlier when Tan Hay Kwan, Cheng Lock's great great grandfather, migrated to Malacca from China, it was a thriving port. Arriving "between 1771 and 1781",[1] he founded a flourishing junk trade plying between Malacca, the Rhio Islands, Bandjarmasin, Macassar, and after 1786, Penang as well.

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[1] Hay Kwan "hailed from Chiang Chew prefecture, in the Province of Fukien, the district of Nam Cheng Kwi, village of Teck Hong Siah". This information appears in a typescript *Notes on the Tan Family*, prepared by Tan Siew Sin, 17 March 1946.

After Hay Kwan's death in 1801, his son Tian Hock[2] continued with the junk trading business, but it was his grandson Choon Bock who expanded the family business enormously. Born in a Malacca which had again passed to British rule in 1824 and, at a time when Malacca's sea trade was in a state of decline, Choon Bock not only expanded his junk trade in the face of this decline, but also secured a foothold in agriculture.

In the sea trade, Choon Bock proved himself adaptive in switching from junks to steamships in the 1860s. The shipping line he founded later (under his nephew Keong Saik) amalgamated with others to form the Straits Steamships in 1890. Besides this expansion of his "sea-leg", Choon Bock also anchored his investments firmly on land, in tapioca and gambier cultivation, and real estate. He adopted western ideas and was a pioneer in the introduction of power machinery in his tapioca estate at Pankalan Minyak, Jasin.[3] He diversified into real estate and owned, by the time of his death, more than 60 lots of property worth a fortune in Malacca and Singapore.[4]

Choon Bock, however, was not a man driven by a blind passion for wealth. In a family anecdote, which undoubtedly influenced young Cheng Lock, Choon Bock was said to have rejected outright a friend's suggestion that he should tender for the gambling and opium farms as an easier way to prosperity. He believed that such tainted money would bring retribution upon his descendants.

Hard-headed and principled in business, within the domain of his home, Choon Bock was strict, even severe, in the upbringing of his four sons, Keong Keng, Keong Jeang, Keong Ann and Keong Thye. Not much is known of Keong Jeang and Keong Thye, except that, like Keong Keng, the

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[2] Genealogy researched by Emrys Chew, son of Prof. Ernest Chew, a kinsman of Tan Cheng Lock. Prof. Chew is Head, Department of History, National University of Singapore.

[3] Tan Siok Choo, "The Tan Family Saga" in *New Straits Times Annual 1981* (Kuala Lumpur, 1980), p. 23; and *Malacca Guardian*, 26 October 1931.

[4] Tan Choon Bock, *Will and Last Testament*, 16 June 1880.

eldest and Keong Ann (Cheng Lock's father), they were disinherited by Choon Bock.

Keong Keng, the eldest, had taken to opium as an escape from Choon Bock's unflinching discipline. Choon Bock thence sent him to the United States of America in the early 1860s for six years[5] hoping that he would give up the habit. But Keong Keng on return, resumed the habit.

However, according to family and other sources, Keong Keng's children became converts to Methodism around the turn of the century and Keong Keng himself is believed to have embraced Christianity. He allowed his Heeren Street home to be used by a Methodist mission to run an English school for his daughters and the Chinese girls in the neighbourhood. In this, he was indeed a pioneer as English education for Chinese girls then assumed very low priority.

Keong Keng also sent his daughters to Singapore to be married to graduates of the Anglo-Chinese School. Keong Keng's third daughter, Swee Eng, subsequently married Goh Leng Inn, the father of Goh Keng Swee. (Keng Swee is the widely acclaimed economic architect of modern Singapore and rose to become the First Deputy Prime Minister before retiring in 1984.) His second daughter, Swee Loo, married Goh Hood Keng, a noted Methodist pastor. His eldest daughter, Siok Kim, married Chew Cheng Yong who fathered Benjamin Chew. Benjamin, a medical doctor and church Elder, and his son Ernest Chew, a University don, are still true to Song Ong Siang's words (written in 1922) about the Chew family:

> ...[they] are earnestly working for the intellectual, moral and spiritual advancement of the Straits Chinese community.[6]

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5 In K.G. Tregonning's *Home Port Singapore: A History of the Straits Steamship Company 1890-1965* (Singapore, 1967), p. 17, it was erroneously stated that Choon Bock "resided in the U.S.A. for five or six years...." Prof Ernest Chew (who is descended from Keong Keng) first alerted me to this error. Both Alice Tan and Tan Siew Sin have confirmed that it was Keong Keng who travelled to the U.S.A. For a similar view, see Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur, 1967), p. 528.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 529. Dr Benjamin Chew is Chairman of the Evangelical Fellowship of Singapore.

Keong Keng's fraternization with Methodism started the long tradition of association that the Tan family has with Christianity. His conversion also probably shaped Cheng Lock's tolerance. Although an ancestor-worshipper, Cheng Lock had this to say of the Methodist faith:

> ...one fervently hopes that Christianity [*sic*] ideas and values will prevail in the world and counteract the excessively materialistic tendencies of modern times.[7]

Unlike Keong Keng's double "sins" of opium and religious "deviation", Keong Ann – Cheng Lock's father – incurred Choon Bock's displeasure for alcoholism. To escape from his disciplinarian father, Keong Ann, at thirteen years old, took to the bottle and did not stop till he died at seventy-two. Despite this excess, it is claimed in family circles that he never fell ill. Siew Sin, the illustrious son of Cheng Lock who rose to become Malaya's Finance Minister from 1959 to 1963 and Malaysia's Finance Minister from 1963 till his retirement from politics in 1974, recollected that Cheng Lock, his father, used to joke that should Keong Ann "swallow a nail, I would feel very sorry for the nail". Keong Ann's sturdiness was apparently passed on to his descendants and longevity became a trait of the Tan family.

Choon Bock, himself, died much younger in 1880 at the age of fifty-six. But before he died, he made a "will in perpetuity" in which he disinherited his sons. His properties were frozen in a "Reserved Trust Estate" which could not be distributed till after "the space of ... twenty-one years ... from the date of the death of ... [the] longest liver [survivor] but not longer...."[8] The sole living grandson at the time of Choon Bock's death and the "longest liver", Cheng Teong, eldest son of Keong Keng, died in 1943. Twenty-one years later, on 15 April 1964 at 11.30 a.m., eighty-four years after Choon Bock's death, his estate was finally divided. Other than his properties, Choon Bock bequeathed "the rest and residue of my said monies and

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[7] Tan Cheng Lock welcoming the Methodist Bishop of Malacca. See *Malacca Guardian*, 3 December 1928.

[8] Tan Choon Bock, *Will and Last Testament*, p. 2, Clause 7.

of the proceeds and sale of my real and personal estate ... to my Nephew Tan Keong Saik absolutely."[9]

Choon Bock, however, did provide varying allowances for his widow and descendants from his estate. Keong Keng received a $16 monthly allowance while Keong Ann was given $30 a month. The $100 allowance to his wife, Thung Soon Neo, would on her death go to Keong Ann. The Heeren Street home would be "enjoyed" by Keong Ann and his descendants "without power to alienate" till twenty-one years after the death of the "longest liver". With this small but manageable allowance and an inherited roof over his head, Keong Ann chose to live the life of a gentleman of leisure.

Cheng Lock's Early Life and Career

Keong Ann must have been about nineteen years old when he married Lee Seck Bin, Cheng Lock's mother. It must also have been soon after the marriage and in quick succession between 1880 and 1883 that three sons, Cheng Siang, Cheng Siew and Cheng Lock were born. This couple eventually had the proverbial full complement of seven children, including daughters Guat Choo, Guat Kee and Guat Poh, and another son, Cheng Juay.

With such a large family, Keong Ann's drinking and a meagre allowance, young Cheng Lock grew up in a stern school of learning. He learnt early, at first hand, the virtue of thrift. His father's drinking and his mother's indulgence in the *nyonya* card game of *cheki*, moreover, resulted in the young Cheng Lock's growing self-reliance. Poverty also spurred him to make a success of his life.

Not much else is known of young Cheng Lock except that he inherited Choon Bock's stubbornness. A family source said that as a little boy, "he would cry without stop till his mother in those unenlightened olden days ... would smoke out his eyes." He probably also inherited his

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 9, Clause 36.

grandfather's serious demeanour and capacity for hard work which he applied to his studies.

These Victorian values were further reinforced by a family tragedy when Cheng Siang, the eldest and smartest son, whose ambition was to be a doctor, died suddenly of typhoid fever while preparing for the Cambridge School Certificate Examinations in Singapore. His death shocked young Cheng Lock, then probably fourteen years old. Cheng Lock now the eldest boy in Keong Ann's household (Cheng Siew, the second son, died at 3 years old when he fell off a rocking chair in 1884 or 1885) made a resolve to prove himself a worthy grandson of Tan Choon Bock.

Applying himself diligently to his studies, he completed Standard VII in Malacca High School in 1899 and in the process won the Tan Teck Guan Scholarship which was awarded to the first or second boy in the school.[10]

The next phase of his academic career in Raffles Institution, Singapore, is, however, surrounded by numerous myths. One source stated that he was a Queen's Scholar.[11] Another overrated him with a "3rd Class Honours"[12] and stated that "had the Queen's Scholarship not been suspended during his time, [he] might have ..." been awarded it.[13] The available documentary records indicate that Cheng Lock, in two examinations in 1900 and 1901 for the Junior and Senior Cambridge School Certificates, "satisfied the Examiners" but was not good enough to be awarded any of the three classes of honours nor the Queen's

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10 *Malacca Guardian*, 10 December 1928, 9 January 1933 and 25 February 1935. This fact is missed by all the biographical works on Tan Cheng Lock consulted by the author.

11 The editorial in *Straits Times*, 4 June 1947.

12 A Cambridge School Certificate, even without honours, was a creditable achievement then. In 1901 and 1902, only 23 candidates in the Straits Settlements obtained a pass in the examinations. See *Straits Settlements Government Gazette*, 26 April 1901, Government Notification 574, and 11 April 1902, Government Notification 438.

13 E. Wijeysingha, *A History of Raffles Institution: 1823-1963* (Singapore, 1963), p. 107.

Scholarship.[14] This scholarship was, in the years in question, awarded to two other candidates.

Unable to win an overseas' scholarship and without finance to pursue his ambition to do law in the United Kingdom, Cheng Lock took up the next best alternative – teaching at Raffles Institution from 1902-1908 – a profession that the less successful candidates settled for.[15]

Cheng Lock, the schoolmaster, proved to be a good teacher of English but a bad sufferer of fools. This is supported by Wijeysingha who states that he was "extremely good at his subject ... was of serious turn of mind", but hinted of his impatience with errant students by stating that he "was popular solely because of his teaching ability".[16] He was impatient with school children and in an irritated moment, he slapped a boy till he bled. In another incident, he wounded his hand when he flung a glass at some mischievous schoolboys. From these incidents, young but quick-tempered Cheng Lock learnt the importance of self-control and in his Council years, despite provocations at times, managed to keep in check his irritability.[17]

Fortunately for Cheng Lock, his public career, and perhaps his pupils also, his mother intervened and led him from the frustrating classrooms of Singapore to the booming rubber plantations of Malacca. Seck Bin, an astute woman, told her son that a teaching career, while of some social standing, was not one that could give full scope to his boundless energy. It was, moreover, not a well-paying

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14 For details of Tan Cheng Lock's results at the Junior Cambridge School Certificate Examinations held in December 1900, see *Straits Settlements Government Gazette*, 26 April 1901, Government Notification 574. For his Senior Cambridge Results, see *Straits Settlements Government Gazette*, 11 April 1902, Government Notification 438.

15 Wang Gung-wu, "Traditional Leadership in a New Nation: The Chinese in Malaya and Singapore", *Leadership and Authority*, ed. G. Wijeyewardene, (Singapore, 1968), p. 208.

16 E. Wijeysingha, *A History of Raffles Institution: 1823-1963*, p. 107.

17 In private, this unpredictable temper remained. See, for example, Thio Chan Bee, *Extraordinary Adventures of An Ordinary Man* (London, 1977), pp. 68, 84 and 90-92.

occupation. Drawn by the logic of his mother's arguments and the lure of the rubber boom, Cheng Lock packed up his books (though not for good) and headed home for Malacca. His mother's timely intervention had two consequences. Firstly, it returned the "son" of Malacca to his "constituency" hence facilitating Cheng Lock's nomination to the Straits Settlements Legislative Council later. There was the trend then in the Straits Settlements for successful Malacca-born Chinese to make their permanent home in Singapore. Among these were Tan Kim Seng (grandfather of Tan Jiak Kim) and Song Hoot Kiam (father of Song Ong Siang). Secondly, the change of career allowed Cheng Lock to amass the wealth that permitted him to take an active part in the public life of the Straits Settlements.

Cheng Lock thus left teaching and Singapore in 1908, at twenty-five years old, a changed man. His years in Raffles Institution, which provided the opportunity for interaction with his European colleagues, had nurtured his pro-British loyalty[18] and imbued in him a Westerner's sense of civic consciousness which laid the foundation for public office in the Colony. On embarking on his new career, he also snipped off his queue or *tow-chang*.

The Road to the Legislative Council

In 1908, with the help of his mother's cousin, Lee Chim Tuan, Cheng Lock plunged into the rubber industry. From 1908 to 1910, he was the Assistant Manager of his cousin's estate, the Bukit Kajang Rubber Estates. Working hard and long hours in the primitive days of inadequate plantation roads and bullock carts, he quickly mastered the intricacies of rubber planting. When off-duty, in the lonely evenings

[18] For the role of English education in fostering this loyalty, see Yong Ching Fatt, "Patterns and Traditions of Loyalty in the Chinese Community of Singapore, 1900-1941", *New Zealand Journal of History* (April 1970), 84.

in the isolated estate, he found time to pursue his life-long habit of reading from 8 p.m. to 1 a.m.

His competence in the rubber business soon impressed others and he was appointed visiting agent to Nyalas Rubber Estates in 1909. A contemporary company report had this to say of him:

> Tan Cheng Lock was very strict and seldom smiled, and was feared by estate staff and labourers alike. News of his impending estate visit would be passed around that, *harimau akan tiba esok*.[19]

By 1910, tired of working for others, he floated his own rubber companies. With the help of Chan Kang Swi, a prominent Malaccan businessman and a $10,000 loan from Lee Chim Tuan, he floated the Malacca Pinda Rubber Estates, Ayer Molek Rubber Company and the United Malacca Rubber Estates.

Apparently doing well in the rubber business, Cheng Lock who "spoke English with natural ease and at the same time with peculiar care"[20] attracted British officials' attention. They began to groom him for public office. In August 1912, he was appointed a Justice of the Peace[21] for Malacca and a few months later, a "Commissioner for the Municipality of the Town and Fort of Malacca".[22]

While serving in the Municipal Council and making one of his many fluent English speeches, which was unusual in those days, he caught the eye of his future father-in-law, Yeo Tin Hye, the leader of the Hokkien Community in Malacca. The "go-between" was hastily called in by the dying Tin Hye and in 1913 Cheng Lock married his daughter, Yeok Neo.

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19 Literally the English translation for this Malay phrase is "the tiger will be coming tomorrow". See United Malacca Rubber Estate Berhad, *Annual Report 1985*, p. 2.

20 Rom Landau, *Seven*, pp. 170-171, cit in typescript *Biographical Sketch of Dato Sir Cheng Lock Tan*, p. 6.

21 *Straits Settlements Government Gazette*, 9 August 1912, Government Notification 901.

22 *Straits Settlements Government Gazette*, 15 November 1912, Government Notification 1318.

The importance of the marriage to Cheng Lock's career was soon to be proven. About 1913 to 1914, he ran into liquidity problems because of an ill-advised venture in rubber speculation and Lee Chim Tuan, his creditor, had threatened foreclosure of his rubber estates. Propitiously, the "woman behind the successful man" came to his rescue. Yeok Neo had meanwhile inherited $130,000 from her father and with part of this, Cheng Lock regained solvency. This close shave taught him the prudence of liquidity and in the Legislative Council later, we would see ample evidence of his advocacy of surplus. His wife's inheritance, moreover, provided the capital for Cheng Lock, who was a wiser man, to accumulate the wealth which helped him gain a leadership role in a wealth-conscious community and the British recognition of this.

From 1914 to 1923, he assiduously worked at gaining British recognition. In 1914, he helped revive the Chinese Volunteer Company of Malacca and served in it as a private till 1919. In 1915, he revived the Malaccan Branch of the Straits Chinese British Association and was elected its President. In a long and mutually beneficial relationship, the organization was to serve as his main source of "political support" in his Council years. In 1917, he was also one of the moving spirits in raising funds to present *Malaya No. 26*, an aeroplane, to help the British Empire in its war effort. Such expressions of loyalty along lines encouraged by the British, on Cheng Lock's part, could not have gone unnoticed by the British. This display of patriotism to the British Empire coupled with his growing leadership role in the Malaccan Straits Chinese community was given due recognition when Sir Laurence Guillemard,[23] the Governor,

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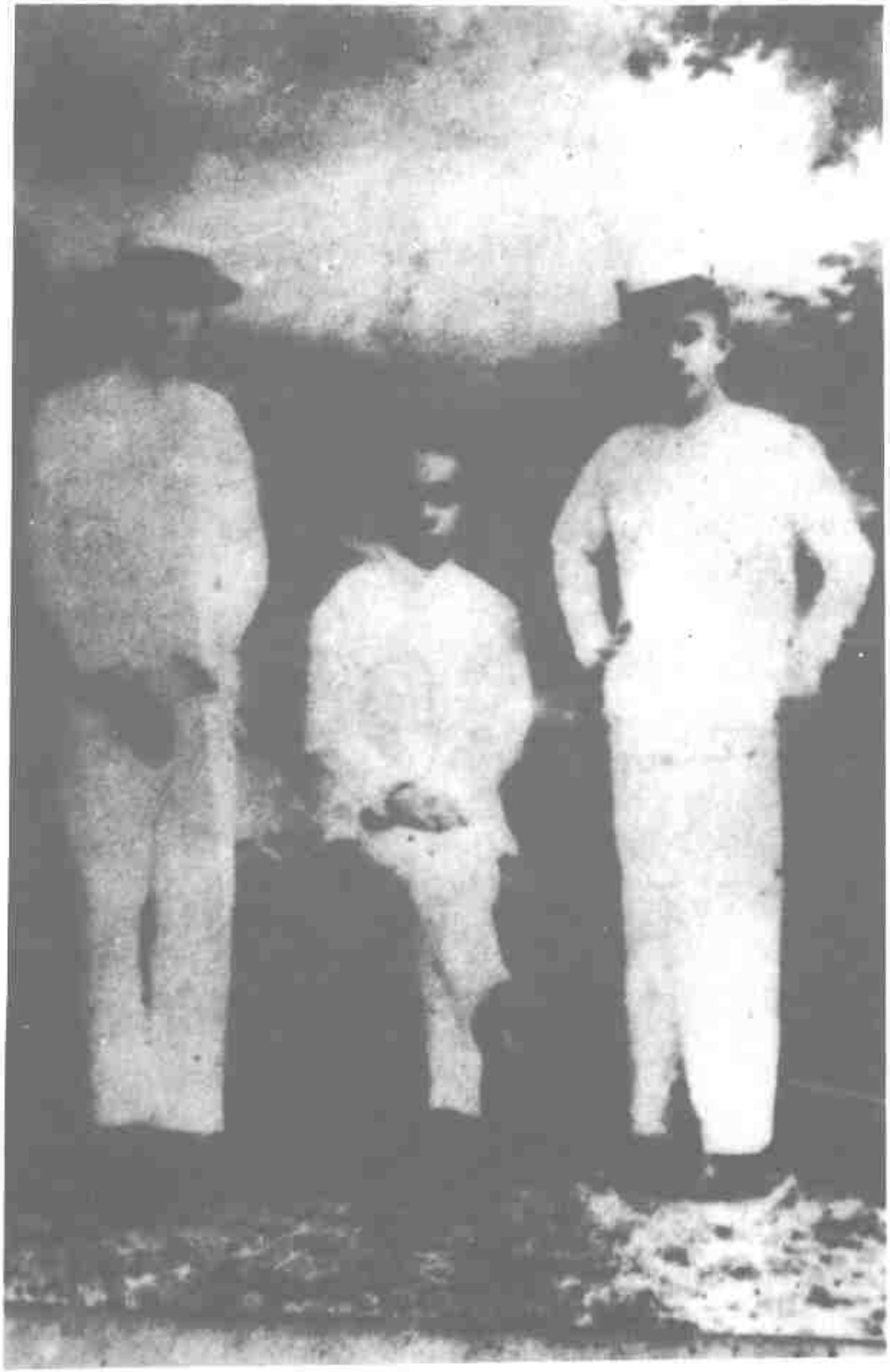
[23] Sir Laurence Nunns Guillemard, was the Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner of the Malay States from 1919-1927. His earlier career included: Home Office 1886-1888; Treasury, 1888-1891; Private Secretary to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1892-1902; Deputy Chairman, Board of Inland Revenue, 1902-1908; Chairman, Customs and Excise, 1908-1919. See Yeo Kim Wah, "The Guillemard-Maxwell Power Struggle, 1921-1925", *Journal of the Malaysian Branch, Royal Asiatic Society*, LIV, 1 (June 1981), 48.

accepted a tiffin in his honour at Cheng Lock's house in Heeren Street in March 1920.

In welcoming the Governor, Tan Cheng Lock made a speech which may perhaps be construed as a bid for office. He addressed his speech to Malacca's needs and the "Colour Bar" to the Straits Settlements Civil Service,[24] in a moderate yet spirited tone, which impressed Guillemard. The Governor took note of the eloquent and elegant gentleman and at an early opportunity, three years later, appointed Tan Cheng Lock to the Straits Settlements Legislative Council.

[24] Reported in *Straits Times*, 3 March 1920.

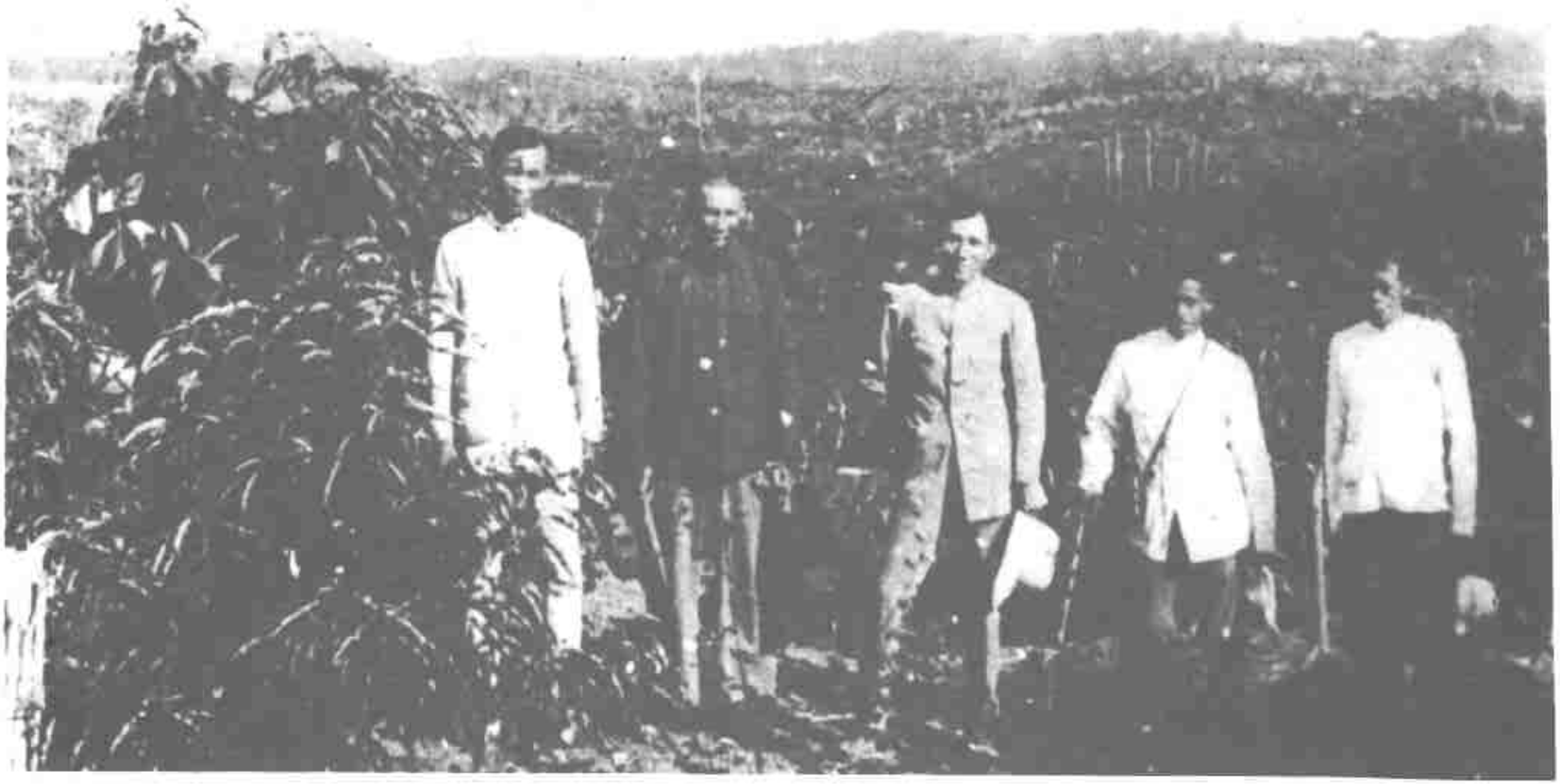


CHENG LOCK, THE STUDENT

Tan Cheng Lock (standing, left) with his brother, Cheng Siang (standing, right) and friend.
(Photo by the courtesy of Alice Tan Kim Yoke)

TAN CHENG LOCK WITH FRIENDS

Cheng Lock (seated, second from right), probably in his 20's, posing with friends.
(Photo by the courtesy of Alice Tan Kim Yoke)



TAN CHENG LOCK, THE "TIGER" AT WORK

Cheng Lock (centre) at Nyalas Rubber Estates, 1909.
(Photo by the courtesy of Alice Tan Kim Yoke).

A TRADITIONAL STRAITS CHINESE WEDDING, 1913

Tan Cheng Lock, in a Mandarin's suit with bride, Yeo Yoke Neo.
(Photo by the courtesy of Alice Tan Kim Yoke)

THE YOUNG RUBBER PLANTER

Tan Cheng Lock, aged 30.
(Photo by the courtesy of Alice Tan Kim Yoke)

A BID FOR PUBLIC OFFICE

Tan Cheng Lock (with sun-glasses) welcoming Sir Laurence Guillemard, the Governor, to Malacca, 1920.
(Photo by the courtesy of Alice Tan Kim Yoke)

CHAPTER TWO

THE CONSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL REFORMER

On 1 January 1923, Tan Cheng Lock, at the age of 40, was appointed an Unofficial Member of the Legislative Council.[1] According to a Governor's Despatch of the day, he was "appointed from the residents of the Settlement of Malacca ... is by profession a Merchant ... and has considerable interests in the Settlements".[2] His appointment was the result of Guillemard's partial acceptance of the Report of the Select Committee on the Straits Settlements Legislative Council Constitution of 1921 which recommended the enlargement of the Council by two additional Chinese Unofficial Members. Ironically, Tan having gained entry by this liberalizing act on the part of the Governor was to wage a crusade for changes to the Council over the next twelve years.

He struggled for the introduction of limited franchise and the abandonment of the official majority in the

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1 *Straits Settlements Government Gazette*, 8 January 1923, Government Notification 34.

2 GD/C 29, Guillemard to Colonial Office, 2 February 1923.

Legislative Council, and an Asian unofficial member to the Executive Council. In the non-constitutional arenas, he campaigned for the admission of non-European British subjects to the Malayan Civil Service and against the Sri Menanti Scheme of 1931. In both constitutional and non-constitutional fields, his views were tempered by his pro-British, united Malaya vision.

Political Vision

Tan Cheng Lock's ultimate political vision from 1923 to 1935 was a "united self-governing British Malaya with a Federal Government and Parliament ... functioning at Kuala Lumpur and with as much autonomy in purely local affairs as possible for each of its constituent parts".[3] Common full-citizenship for all races was also envisaged.[4]

It would be a goal to be attained after the evolution of a Malayan consciousness. This Malayan consciousness, he believed, had to be gradually nurtured by deliberate policy. Conscious efforts should be made to forge links between the component parts. English should be used as the common language "to produce a community of ideas ... as much as a community of allegiance,"[5] among the heterogeneous population. This common outlook would thus be based on the English language, common affection for Malaya and loyalty to the British Empire but with racial distinctiveness retained.

In Tan's vision, the pro-British political union would not be an independent one. The image of an independent Malaya which a writer suggested that he had,[6] was as

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3 *PSSLC*, 1 November 1926, p. B161.

4 *PSSLC*, 12 February 1934, pp. B17-23.

5 *PSSLC*, 29 October 1923, p. B158; 8 December 1930, p. B175; and February 1934, p. B19.

6 See K. G. Tregonning, "Tan Cheng Lock: A Malayan Nationalist", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, X, 1 (March 1979), 31, (hereafter, "Tan Cheng Lock: A Malayan Nationalist").

yet an unarticulated goal. He was for constitutional advancement within the basic colonial political framework.

Executive Council Reforms

Conditioned by such thinking, the constitutional reforms he advocated were understandably limited. They merely sought a larger indigenous voice in running the Colony. This was evident in Tan Cheng Lock's advocacy of the inclusion of an Asian member to the Executive Council.

Since the 1870s when Hoo Ah Kay (Whampoa) served as an extra-ordinary member on the Executive Council, Asians were not represented in this Council. Tan deplored this lack of Asian representation. In 1926 and 1928, he called for the inclusion of "at least one Asiatic gentleman".[7]

The British, after initial reluctance, were brought around. Guillemard had objected to the appointment of a Chinese unofficial member as he would "represent only one of the many tribes of the Chinese race".[8] This British attitude was gradually softened by Tan's representations in the Council. By 1930, Sir Cecil Clementi[9] opined that "it would be politic to add to it an Asiatic member".[10] A Malay, Mohammed Unus, was thus appointed to the Executive Council in 1931 as the Unofficial Member.[11] Tan Cheng Lock was hence not, as stated by Soh Eng Lim[12] and Tregonning,[13] the first Asian member nominated to the

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7 *PSSLC*, 1 November 1926, p. B161; and 29 October 1928, p. B147.

8 GD/C 36, Guillemard to Colonial Office, 21 June 1926.

9 Sir Cecil Clementi was Governor of the SS and the High Commissioner of the Malay States from 1930 to 1934. Prior to his SS's career, he served as Colonial Secretary, British Guiana (1916-17, 1919, 1921); Colonial Secretary, Ceylon (1922-23 and 1925); Governor, Hong Kong (1925-30). See *Dictionary of National Biography 1941-50* (London, 1959), 156-158.

10 GD/C 46, Clementi to Colonial Office, 7 July 1931.

11 GD/C 46, Clementi to Colonial Office, 30 July 1931; and COD, Colonial Office to Clementi, 3 September 1931.

12 Soh Eng Lim, "Tan Cheng Lock: His Leadership of the Malayan Chinese", *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, I, 1 (March 1960), 39.

13 K.G. Tregonning, "Tan Cheng Lock: A Malayan Nationalist", 31.

Executive Council. But the fact that he was instrumental in transforming the British thinking on this is undeniable. His voice was the solitary one in urging such reforms on the British.

Tan was not satisfied with the inclusion of a Malay unofficial member in the Council, and he called for a Chinese representative in the Council. To pressure Clementi into granting the concession, he initiated the Straits Chinese British Association Petition of August 1931. Clementi, however, rebutted that the appointment of the Secretary of Chinese Affairs as an Official Member to the Council since July 1931 should adequately represent Chinese interests.[14] The Colonial Office hence replied to the Straits Chinese British Association that with:

> ...the addition of the Secretary for Chinese Affairs and of an Asiatic Unofficial Member ... no further change should be made until the effect of these additional appointments has been fully tested by experience.[15]

Tan remained adamant. In his strongly worded Memorandum to Sir Samuel Wilson in December 1932, he reaffirmed this "real grievance of the Chinese".[16] Finally, the British relented. With the resignation of Mohammed Unus in July 1933, a Chinese unofficial member was appointed. This honour, however, did not go to Tan. It went instead to Wee Swee Teow, a seasoned but less senior Legislative Councillor than Tan.[17] However, on the resignation of Wee several months later,[18] the distinction of being the Chinese Executive Representative could not be denied to Tan. He was nominated to the Council in November 1933.[19] His long years of struggle on the issue

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14 CO 273/577, 92004, Clementi to Colonial Office, 31 December 1931.

15 CO 273/577, 92004, Colonial Office to Secretary, Straits Chinese British Association, 24 December 1931.

16 Tan Cheng Lock, *Malayan Problems* (Singapore, 1947), pp. 74-88.

17 COD 258, Colonial Office to Clementi, 13 September 1933.

18 GD 103, Clementi to Colonial Office, 1 December 1933.

19 COD 260, Colonial Office to Clementi, 8 February 1934. Tan Cheng Lock's appointment was for two years with effect from 8 November 1933. See also *Straits Times*, 3 December 1934; and *Straits Settlements Government Gazette*, 24 November 1934, Government Notification 2214.

of Chinese representation was thus capped with a personal triumph and a "victory" for the Chinese. After his resignation in 1935, this "experiment" of an Asian unofficial member to the Executive Council was not discontinued, as stated by Tregonning,[20] but the nomination passed on to another Chinese.[21]

Legislative Council Reforms

Tan Cheng Lock also pressed for reform of the Legislative Council. Nominated unofficial members, he argued in 1926, lacked direct mandates from the people they represented.[22] Except for two unofficial members (inevitably Europeans) who were elected by the Singapore and Penang Chambers of Commerce since 1924, the rest of the unofficial members were beholden to the Governor. They were, he complained, nominated or re-nominated at the Governor's "pleasure". They might thus be selected or re-nominated for their docility, while those who were too critical might not be re-nominated. There was, moreover, he claimed, "an unwritten law" against an unofficial member serving a certain number of consecutive terms. This "provision", he opined, meant a loss of experienced unofficial members.[23] Such a situation, he concluded, did not make for effective criticism of the Government.

To redress these weaknesses, Tan advocated the introduction of limited franchise. All unofficial members besides those from the two Chambers must be elected. Comparing the lack of franchise in the SS to Burma, Ceylon and Jamaica, he implored the British to institute similar reforms. Only in this way, he counselled in 1926, would

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20 K.G. Tregonning, "Tan Cheng Lock: A Malayan Nationalist", 31.

21 Chan Tze Jin was the next member, see GD 110, Officer Administering the Government to Colonial Office, 26 September 1935. Cf, GD 112, Shenton to Colonial Office, 16 January 1936.

22 *PSSLC*, 1 November 1926, p. B160.

23 Tan Cheng Lock, *Malayan Problems*, p. 85.

the apathy of an uninitiated people be corrected.[24]

Not getting a response, he reiterated his call for limited franchise again in the 1930s. In August 1931, in the combined Straits Chinese British Association Petition of Singapore, Penang and Malacca, he asked for the three Straits Chinese British Association branches the privilege to elect a representative each.[25] This reform, he optimistically added, would provide for an unofficial majority. The Colonial Office, however, ruled against the Petition. It replied, firstly, that since the Straits Chinese British Association's 1060 members represented only 0.73 per cent of the total 144,857 Straits-born Chinese (based on the 1921 census), they could not be granted such an inordinate privilege. Secondly, it would be unjustifiable for the Chinese to have, in effect, six representatives while the Malay, Indian and Eurasian communities had one each.[26] Undeterred, Tan, in December 1932, proposed a "proportionate increase in the representation of the Malay, Indian and Eurasian communities ... to provide for an unofficial majority".[27]

It was for the official majority that Tan reserved his most incisive attacks. The official majority's shadow, he lamented in 1926, hung over the proceedings of the Council. It imparted a sense of helplessness that discouraged opposition.[28] To enliven debates and reap the full benefit of criticisms, he advocated an unofficial majority. Sir Hugh Clifford, the Governor, disagreed. He affirmed that the Straits Settlements' peculiar circumstances made it impossible to grant "a Constitution of [such a] liberal character ...."[29]

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24 *PSSLC*, 1 November 1926, p. B160. See also *Report on the Straits Settlements Legislative Council Constitution 1921*, p. 4 for mention of this apathy.

25 Reprinted in full in *Straits Times*, 21 January 1932.

26 CO 273/577, 92004, M.B. Shelly to Secretary, Straits Chinese British Association, 24 December 1931.

27 "Memorandum to Sir Samuel Wilson", in Tan Cheng Lock's *Malayan Problems*, p. 87.

28 *PSSLC*, 13 October 1926, p. B135; and 1 November 1926, p. B160.

29 GD/C 39, Clifford to Colonial Office, 19 July 1928.

In 1928, Tan again condemned the anachronistic official majority that allowed the Colonial Office to impose a tyrannical autocracy on the helpless Colony. In 1930, he denounced this "archaic" provision that encouraged the "perverse obstinancy" in the Supreme War Office over the defence contributions. Such tyranny, he cautioned, "should wake ... and stir the people of this Colony".[30]

It is pertinent to note that throughout Tan's long-drawn campaign, he was careful to add a caveat.[31] The Governor, he conceded, should have constitutional powers to enable him to over-ride the unofficial majority when legislation affecting "the safety and tranquillity of the Colony" was needed. This power, if exercised, had to be fully reported by the Governor to the Colonial Office.

Tan was thus for the retention of the broad outlines of the British colonial system. His demands were not for independence, but a moderate form of self-government. This, he argued, had been implemented elsewhere in India, Ceylon and Burma.[32]

Since his demands were relatively moderate, why then did the British reject these reforms? The answer lay in Clifford's[33] reference to "peculiar circumstances", which caused Clementi to state that reforms were "neither necessary nor desirable".[34] They were unnecessary as there was a lack of demand for them,[35] and undesirable because

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30 PSSLC, 13 October 1930, p. B153.

31 See Tan Cheng Lock, *Malayan Problems*, p. 85; PSSLC, 1 November 1926, p. B160; and the Straits Chinese British Association's Petition in CO 273/577, 92004.

32 Of the 103 members to Burma's Legislative Council, 79 were elected. See J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice* (New York, 1956), pp. 158-160.

33 Sir Hugh Clifford (1866-1941) was Governor of the SS from 1927 to 1929. Prior to this appointment, he served as: Governor's Agent, Pahang, 1887-88; Acting Resident, Pahang, 1890-95; Resident, Pahang, 1896-99, 1901-03; Colonial Secretary, Trinidad (1903-1907), Ceylon (1907-12); and Governor of the Gold Coast (1912-19). See *Dictionary of National Biography, 1941-1950* (Oxford, 1959), 158.

34 CO 273/577, 92004, Clementi to Colonial Office, 24 December 1931.

35 *Straits Times*, 3 January 1930.

of internal and external factors. Internally, the British feared that the politically advanced and numerically predominant Chinese in the Straits Settlements would submerge the Malays. Externally, there was a need to synchronize the pace of constitutional change with the Malay States, Singapore, since 1925, had, moreover, become a vital naval base which the Imperial Government was unprepared to relinquish.[36] The British therefore did not want any change in the status quo of the Straits Settlements.

Admission of Asians into the Malayan Civil Service

In 1923 when Tan Cheng Lock first took his seat in the Council, the "Colour Bar" in the Malayan Civil Service was two decades old. In 1904, Governor Sir John Anderson, disapproving the intrusion of Indian officers into the Malayan Civil Service, advocated a closed-door policy.[37] In a strongly-worded despatch to the Secretary of State, he stated that if the Malayan Civil Service remained open, "hopeless disorganization of the administrative service" would be the result.[38] More importantly, he advised that the Malays resent non-European administrators. The Colonial Office then slapped the "Colour Bar" onto the Malayan Civil Service. Thereafter only cadets, who must be natural born British Subjects of pure European descent on both sides were admissible to the Malayan Civil Service. In 1910, the subordinate Malay Administrative Service with the possibility for some to be promoted to the Malayan Civil Service was, however, created for the "privileged children".[39]

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36 L. Guillemard, *Trivial Fond Records* (London, 1937), p. 101 mentions the importance of the Straits Settlements to "imperial defence". In the official records, however, it is clear that the British did not contemplate granting any liberal political reform in British Malaya.

37 Yeo Kim Wah, "The Grooming of an Elite: Malay Administrators in the Federated Malay States, 1903-1941", *JSEAS*, XI, 2 (September 1980), 291.

38 Cit in Lim Huck Tee, "The Malayan Civil Service, 1896-1941", unpublished B.A. (Hons.), Academic Exercise, University of Malaya in Singapore, 1960, p. 21.

39 V. Purcell, *Memoirs of a Malayan Official* (London, 1965), p. 300.

The "Colour Bar" in the Malayan Civil Service, Tan protested in 1923, was unjust and the "very antithesis of the principle and spirit" of Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1858 which decreed that "... our subjects of whatever race or creed be freely and impartially admitted to offices in Our Service."[40] It was wrong, he reiterated a year later, to have the Malayan Civil Service's doors "banged, barred and bolted" to non-Malay British subjects who aspired to participate in the administration of the Colony. This, he declared, condemned them to the status of "hewers of wood and drawers of water" in the Colony.[41]

The Acting Colonial Secretary, however, replied in the Council that it would be a breach of faith to the Malay rulers should non-Malay administrators, recruited in the Colony, be transferred to the Malay States. This would inevitably happen as the Malayan Civil Service was "a combined service for the whole of British Malaya".[42] Guillemard then elaborated that the combined service was imperative for harmonious development, uniformity of administration and the pooling of experience.[43]

On 28 October 1929, four days after the Wall Street crash, Tan again revived the issue. He lamented the loss of the services of eminently qualified Queen's Scholars such as Dr Wu Lien Teh and Dr Lim Boon Keng to the Colony. These two gentlemen, he told the Council, had to seek greener pastures in China. This speech by Tan finally struck a harmonious chord. Clifford, short of medical officers, outlined a scheme to open the lower of a revamped two-tier Malayan Medical Service to Asian medical officers.[44] Clementi, the incumbent Governor half a year later, likewise, expressed concern over the loss of local talents

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40 Cit in *PSSLC*, 29 October 1923, p. B186.

41 *PSSLC*, 14 April 1924, p. B33; and 3 November 1924, p. B120.

42 *PSSLC*, 14 April 1924, p. B34.

43 *PSSLC*, 3 November 1924, pp. B144-145.

44 GD/C 41, Clifford to Colonial Office, 26 December 1929.

from the Malayan Medical Service.[45] Finally, in 1932, the Straits Medical Service – a service opened to non-European British subjects – was established.

Meanwhile, the deepening economic depression, and increasing unemployment had strengthened the chorus of demand for change. Tan exploited the rising tide. He called, in the name of economy, for the replacement of European officers with outstanding Asians.[46] He then led a delegation of the Malay, Indian and Eurasian Unofficial Members to pressure Clementi,[47] who finally gave in. He wrote:

> ... the entry of Asiatics into the Malayan Civil Service proper other than Malays was impracticable and entirely inadvisable from a political point of view. The only solution ... is to constitute a separate branch of the Colony's Civil Service comprising certain posts now included in the cadre of the Malayan Civil Service ....[48]

In the same despatch, the proposed Straits Settlements Civil Service was then outlined. It was a limited scheme opened to natural born British subjects with Raffles College or an approved British University education. It was to be a separate entity from the Malayan Civil Service. Clementi justified this by stating that Malayan Civil Service Officers "must by treaty arrangement be drawn from the United Kingdom. They cannot possibly be Asiatics."[49]

Thus, after a decade of struggle and with the Straits Settlements Civil Service conceded, Tan could claim another achievement. The perfectionist was, however, not satisfied. The new Service, he prompted, only met the Colony's demands "half way". He warned that the "Colour Bar" in the Malayan Civil Service, which still remained, "will continue to give some cause for dissatisfaction".[50]

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45 GD/C 43, Cementi to Colonial Office, 22 May 1930.

46 *PSSLC*, 13 October 1930, p. B147; and 12 October 1931, p. B153.

47 See Minutes of Meeting in CO 273/584, 92144, 14 October 1932 and *PSSLC*, 6 March 1933, p. B29.

48 CO 273/584, 92144, Clementi to Colonial Office, 14 October 1932.

49 *PSSLC*, 31 July 1933, p. B115.

50 *Ibid.*, p. B101.

The Sri Menanti Decentralization Scheme

The issue and occasion over which Tan Cheng Lock was to give a full public venting of his dissatisfaction was, however, not the Malayan Civil Service, but Clementi's Decentralization Policy and Sir Samuel Wilson's visit in the 1930s.[51] These drew forth from Tan, his most critical indictment of British policies.

Clementi's Decentralization Policy of August 1931 announced at Sri Menanti sought "to decentralize in order to re-centralize".[52] Tan objected to both objectives. Decentralization entailed the devolution of power in the Federated Malay States to State Councils dominated by "the Malay Sultan and his Chiefs". This, he feared, would result in the subjugation of the non-Malays. For inherent in the scheme was:-

> ... a purely autocratic form of government based on the taxation of the people, whose energy, labour, capital and enterprise are the mainstay of those States, without their adequate and effective representation ....[53]

This, he extrapolated, would intensify existing anti-Chinese and pro-Malay policies in land, education, immigration and employment in the Civil Service. He was, moreover, sceptical of the efficiency of the proposed political and administrative machinery.

Tan also opposed the recentralization manifested in the proposed Customs Union for British Malaya. Clementi thought the scheme would be "a big step towards simplifica-

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51 Tan Cheng Lock's "Memorandum to Sir Samuel Wilson" was published in full in the *Straits Times*, 23 December 1932. See also R. Emerson, *Malaysia: A Study in Direct and Indirect Rule*, (Kuala Lumpur, 1966) pp. 320-321 for a good feel of the intense bitterness against the scheme.

52 Maxwell Papers I: S.W. Jones to Maxwell, 11 February 1943, cit in A.J. Stockwell, *British Policy and Malay Politics* (Kuala Lumpur, 1979), p. xiv. For a supportive view of decentralization, see Singapore Free Press, 17 February 1932.

53 *PSSLC*, 12 October 1931, p. B156; and Tan Cheng Lock, *Malayan Problems*, p. 76.

tion of Customs procedures in Malaya"[54] with which Tan disagreed. Serving in the Customs Duties Committee, he lent his name to the Report that stated: "We are not in favour of a Customs Union of all Malaya because we believe that it would lead to a clash between the differing economic interests." Such a Customs Union should, the Report continued, be the outcome of "a natural and unhastened process".[55] The free port status of Malacca, Penang and Singapore on which the continued prosperity of the Straits Settlements depended, was in Tan's mind, too much to be risked by the adoption of the scheme.

Review of Tan Cheng Lock's Political Performance

With the publication of Tan Cheng Lock's Memorandum to Sir Samuel Wilson in 1932, we witness a transformation of the man. He seemed no longer contented with mere debates in the Legislative Council. His extra-Council activities had, in fact, intensified since the Straits Chinese British Association Petition of 1931. His political aspirations had also, with the Memorandum to Sri Samuel Wilson, assumed a wider Malayan perspective. What were the factors that brought about this transformation? What circumstances had changed his political complexion?

The end of the 1920s and the early 1930s witnessed vast political, social and economic changes in the Straits Settlements. These in turn, altered the political views of the British, the Chinese and the Malays.

Politically, the Malays were restive and a nascent Malay nationalism was becoming evident. The traditional Malay elite was alarmed by the hordes of Chinese immigrants,

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[54] CO 273/580, 92044, Clementi to Colonial Office, 15 April 1932. See also Yeo Kim Wah, *Political Development in Singapore, 1945-1955* (Singapore, 1973), p. 6.

[55] *Customs Duties Committee Report 1932* (Singapore, 1932), pp. 18-19; See also *The SS Trade Commission 1933-1934* (Singapore, 1934), I, 163, for objections to the scheme.

especially when immigration reached its peak in 1927. By the 1930s, this had altered drastically the demography of the Straits Settlements which is evident from the *Straits Settlements Annual Departmental Report's* statistics:[56]

Relative Changes in the Chinese and Malay Population, 1881 – 1931

Year	*Chinese*	*Malays*	*Total*
1881	.. 174,327	194,469	423,384
1891	.. 227,989	213,073	512,342
1901	.. 281,933	215,058	572,249
1911	.. 369,843	240,206	714,069
1921	.. 498,547	255,353	883,769
1931	.. 663,518	285,316	1,114,015

The Malays were asking the same question asked in the official *Straits Settlements Annual Departmental Report:* "It is questionable whether such a preponderance of any foreign race which is largely unassimilable and which retains its own customs and language is in the interests ... of the people of the country."[57] This concern was, moreover, aggravated by the decentralization controversies, the Chinese clamour for a greater role in government and administration, and the depression. The Malay elite began lobbying for the Malays' birth-ordained place in the sun.

The British, moreover, lent a sympathetic ear to these murmurs of Malay nationalism. In Governors from Clifford to Clementi, and Under-Secretaries of States for the Colonies from Ormsby-Gore to Sir Samuel Wilson, this pro-Malay orientation in policies was obvious. It manifested itself in the 1920s in the free Malay primary education, the Malay Administrative Service and land policies. In the

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[56] *Straits Settlements Annual Departmental Report*, 1932, p. 616.

[57] *Loc. cit.*, and C.M. Turnbull, *A Short History of Malaya, Singapore and Brunei*, (Singapore, 1980), p. 239.

depression years between 1929-1934, the "pro-Malay" policies widened and included the decentralization policy and the Aliens Ordinance of 1932.

Such pro-Malay orientation and policies were labelled by Tan as anti-Chinese. Throughout the 1920s, he debated the issues but without the bluntness that was evident in the 1930s. In 1932, he openly rebuked the trend of "anti-Chinese policy ... which the Chinese on the whole as a community have done nothing ... to merit ...."[58]

This hard-hitting speech was followed up soon after by the trenchant Memorandum to Sir Samuel Wilson in December 1932. In it, he alluded to the "policy of preference for one race and discrimination against another".[59] He attacked the "anti-Chinese policy", warning the British of the dangers of creating a "distinct breach" between the Malays and the Chinese. He also accused the British of applying "the Machiavellian maxim of *divide et impera*" in order to keep the Malays and Chinese at "loggerheads" with each other.[60]

We thus witness a change in Tan Cheng Lock's political outlook in the early 1930s. No longer was he for a united Malaya based on British terms. The economic depression, the pro-Malay and "anti-Chinese" British policies of the early 1930s had urged him to strive for a "Malaya for Malayans and not for one section of it only".[61]

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58 PSSLC, 19 October 1932, p. B145.

59 Tan Cheng Lock, *Malayan Problems*, p. 77.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ECONOMIC SAGE

Besides constitutional and political reforms, Tan Cheng Lock took a keen interest in the issues of finance and the economy. As with the constitutional and political reforms, his speeches focused on a few consistent themes which were close to his heart as a thrifty person, a rubber planter, and a leader of the Chinese. He thus repeatedly spoke up on financial matters which included balanced budgeting, economy in government and the defence contributions of the Colony. On economic matters, the issue that interested him most was rubber although Chinese participation in padi-growing also attracted his attention.

Economic Matters – Rubber

Rubber restriction under the Stevenson Scheme[1] introduced on 1 November 1922 was a few months old when Tan

[1] For an account of the rubber industry from 1900 to 1922, see J.H. Drabble, *Rubber in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur, 1973); for the operation of the Stevenson Scheme, see V. Kamaraguru, "Rubber in Malaya, 1914-1941", unpublished B.A. (Hons.), Academic Exercise, University of Malaya in Singapore, 1961, pp. 21-30; and P.T. Bauer, *The Rubber Industry* (London, 1948) for the International Rubber Restriction Agreement phase, 1933-1945.

Cheng Lock was appointed to the Council. From the outset, he was the most enthusiastic advocate of restriction. In 1924, he stated that restriction was the very foundation of the economic life of Malaya.[2] Fending off an attempt by the mercantilist Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce of British Malaya in 1925 to lift restriction, he said that this would, besides depressing prices, mean that "the rubber planting industry would be severely impoverished by the excessive exploitation and consequent ruination of the rubber trees".[3] His restrictionist view prevailed on Guillemard who wrote in support of him against the Associated Chinese Chamber petition: "Tan Cheng Lock has very considerable planting interests and his views .... [are] representative of planting interests ...."[4] In the Council, half a year later, Tan added that in restriction lay the "salvation of the planting industry and of Malaya".[5] Despite the Netherlands East Indies' non-participation in the Stevenson Scheme, he was for its retention as long as Malaya [including Ceylon] produced 70 per cent of the world's rubber output.[6]

With his long experience in the rubber industry, Tan's support of restriction was understandable. When he first entered the rubber industry, the ruling price was a heady $1.98 per pound in 1910. By 1913, over-production had brought about the first price fall while war-induced restrictive measures on the high seas brought another low in 1917. The brief post-war recovery was stymied by the Little Depression of 1921 to 1922 which saw weak demand and the lowering of prices from eighty-five cents per pound in 1920 to twenty cents a pound two years later. Restriction of production through the Stevenson Scheme raised this price to forty cents a pound in 1928. From his planter's

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2 *PSSLC*, 30 June 1924, p. B62.

3 *PSSLC*, 2 February 1925, pp. B19-20.

4 CO 273/528, 16/42, Guillemard to Colonial Office, 7 March 1925.

5 *PSSLC*, 26 October 1925, pp. B172-173.

6 *PSSLC*, 31 October 1927, p. B159.

perspective, restriction which ensured a pivotal price (achieved through quarterly adjustment of supplies by quota) therefore gave a welcome measure of price stability and profits.

The British authorities were, however, more concerned with maintaining Malaya's predominance in the rubber industry. The unilateral British Empire restriction had allowed the Netherlands East Indies to produce more rubber at higher prices achieved at the expense of the former. Consequently, British Malaya and Ceylon's share of the world's output fell from 70 per cent in 1922 to 52 per cent in 1928. The Dutch's share in the same period, in contrast, crept up from 25 per cent to 40 per cent. Furthermore, the Scheme had soured British relations with the United States of America, the largest consumer of Malayan rubber. For these reasons, the British stopped the Stevenson Scheme in November 1928.

Unfortunately, the abandonment of the Scheme came close on the heels of the Great Depression when weak demand and over-production depressed prices. Tan, the fervent advocate of restriction, swung into action. He called for the reintroduction of restriction by "the Governments of all the producing countries" in May 1930.[7] In his most forthright speech yet on restriction, he spelt out the principles involved. Oversupply during the trade depression, he exhorted, must be regulated by taking concerted action to "keep the latex in the tree until it is wanted" while land alienation for rubber planting had to. be stopped. Regulation of supplies, he emphasized, did not mean raising the price of rubber above its proper and natural value. Such an action would only protect uncompetitive producers to the detriment of expansion in the use and application of rubber.

Tan's move to restore restriction during the depression did not go unopposed. Three months after his last speech,

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[7] *PSSLC*, 12 May 1930, pp. B47-48.

two unofficial members representing mercantilist interests, P.M. Robinson of the Penang Chambers of Commerce and W.J. Wilcoxson of the Singapore Chambers of Commerce, labelled restriction as an "interference by Government with economic laws", a "quack remedy" which was nothing "more than a pilliative [*sic*]," and contended that "salvation lies in their [the planters'] own efforts". One of the speakers added that a strong body of opinion held this view.[8]

These deprecations drew from Tan a combative response. He wanted to know whom they represented, for if "there were no members in this Council who happened to be restrictionists [their] remarks would go unchallenged and that would not be fair ...." He then rebutted that the "do nothing" stand was an undesirable form of social Darwinism.[9] The supportive stand of the rubber industry, in view of its importance was not unworthy, he argued, as there was two- and three-quarter million acres of land under rubber in Malaya, producing 400,000 tonnes of rubber a year and employing about half a million people. In short, he reminded the two Members and the Council that the "whole of Malaya depends upon the industry and that is the reason why the Government should interfere".[10]

In this campaign, he was supported by strong restrictionist quarters in Malaya. William Doughty, an Unofficial Member in the Federated Malay States Council, was waging a similar effort. Similarly, public meetings such as that by the Malacca Chambers of Commerce on 21 December 1932 and the Rubber Growers' Association in Negri Sembilan were held to pressure the Government into action. Meanwhile, the *Straits Times* was flooded with a host of letters and articles urging the same.

These calls led the Government, in June 1934, to sign the International Rubber Regulation Agreement with the Netherlands East Indies and seven other countries, which

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[8] *PSSLC*, 25 August 1930, p. B107

[9] *Ibid.*, p. B109.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. B110.

together produced 98.7 per cent of the world's output of rubber. This was a truly international restriction arrangement *par excellence* that he had advocated. Pleased with the outcome, he acknowledged in the Council that the Agreement was a "triumph of common sense and reason".[11]

In the same speech, he referred to possible discrimination against smallholders. Under the new restriction procedure, an Assessment Committee dominated by the European estates would allocate quotas. To prevent discrimination, he asked for Asian representatives to speak for "the interests of the domiciled rubber producers, who own 65 per cent ... of the rubber area in Malaya ...."[12] The District Officer, whose competence was also doubtful should, he counselled, be assisted by "a committee of local men". On this issue, he failed to change the British policy and what he feared came to pass. In 1935, the smallholders as a group was given an export quota of 36.8 per cent although in 1933 they had exported 47.8 per cent. Despite this, Tan's restriction stand did, on the whole, achieve results as rubber prices rose from thirty-five cents per pound to forty-three cents per pound in 1937.

Rice Cultivation

Tan Cheng Lock's view on rice cultivation, whilst reasonable, ran into official opposition. The Straits Settlements Government had followed a fairly consistent though undeclared policy since 1886 in which Malays were encouraged to cultivate rice while the non-Malays were dissuaded. This, the British believed, perpetuated the parochial outlook of the Malays. Towards this end, the Malay Reservation Enactment of 1913, and the guaranteed minimum price and rural credit services of 1919 were designed to keep the Malays on the land and arrest their

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11 *PSSLC*, 28 May 1934, p. B71.

12 *PSSLC*, 5 December 1932, pp. B166-179.

drift from the back breaking and less remunerative rice cultivation to rubber planting. In education, too, this policy was reinforced. Thus demands for English education with its concomitant undesirable "Westernization of the kampong" were resisted.[13] Malay education which would only "make the son of the ... peasant a more intelligent ... peasant than his father has been ..."[14] was thus provided.

Tan protested against the exclusion of the non-Malays from rice-cultivation. In 1924, he urged the Government to extend rice cultivation to the Chinese and Indians so that a resident labour force would be created[15] and in 1927, he asked for the extension of padi cultivation to make Malaya self-sufficient in rice.[16]

Since the rice shortage of 1921 to 1922, the question of self-sufficiency had periodically engaged the Government's attention. In 1925, Guillemard, concerned over the limited stockpile of two months' supplies, asked the Department of Agriculture "to give full consideration to the possibilities of stimulating the cultivation of rice".[17] In 1927, the Local Standing Defence Committee[18] and, a year later, Clifford, expressed doubts over the feasibility of war purchases.[19] These concerns, however, were not acted upon for fear of disturbing the Malay rural setting.

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13 Sir Cecil Clementi's speech in the Council, see *PSSLC*, 12 February 1934, p. B29. See also Loh Fook-seng, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya 1874-1940* (Kuala Lumpur, 1975), p. 65. For the demand by the Straits Settlements Legislative Council's Malay Unofficial Member, see *Straits Times*, 27 September 1932.

14 George Maxwell's Address at The International Congress of Education in Paris, September 1931 in CO 273/574, 82094. The British, to be fair, faced practical difficulties in providing for English education in the rural areas. See G. Maxwell, "Some Problems of Education and Public Health in Malaya", *Honourable Intentions*, ed. P.H. Kratoska (Singapore, 1983), pp. 403-404.

15 *PSSLC*, 3 November 1924, p. B117.

16 *PSSLC*, 31 October 1927, p. B157.

17 GD/C 33, Guillemard to Colonial Office, 9 October 1925.

18 GD/C 37, Report of Local Standing Defence Committee, 26 November 1927.

19 GD/C 38, Clifford to Colonial Office, 19 January 1928.

With the depression, the financial drain in importing more than two-thirds of Malaya's rice requirements led to a reconsideration of the rice policy. Self-sufficiency became a desired policy and Clementi appointed a Rice Cultivation Committee in July 1930 to study the possibility. Tan, appointed to serve in the Committee, opined that the Malays alone would be unable to achieve the objective.[20] He argued that the non-Malays who made up more than half of Malaya's population and had a higher rice productivity level must be involved in the effort. Despite his representations, the Committee recommended the continuation of the pro-Malay policy in rice cultivation.

Tan, with the plight of the repatriated Chinese in mind, further pursued the matter. He "grieved" in the Council that while Malay immigrants from Sumatra and Java were given rice land, the domiciled Chinese were not.[21] Two months later, in the Memorandum to Sir Samuel Wilson[22], he openly accused the Government of discrimination against the Chinese in land and rice cultivation policies.

The Government, however, remained firm. It passed the Rice Cultivation Ordinance of 1934 which further entrenched the pro-Malay policy in rice cultivation.[23] Given this adamance, Tan failed to secure for the Chinese a stake in land and rice cultivation in Malaya.

Balanced Budgeting and Public Works

Although Tan Cheng Lock's efforts to change the rice policy was unsuccessful, his views on the budget were influential in shaping the Government's financial policies. Beginning in 1924 until his last years in the Legislative Council, he

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20 Tan Cheng Lock's letter to Tempany, 29 October 1930. Cit in Tan Soo Hai, *The Rice Industry in Malaya 1920-1940* (Singapore, 1963), p. 18.

21 *PSSLC*, 19 October 1932, p. B145.

22 Tan Cheng Lock, *Malayan Problems*, pp. 74-75.

23 CO 273/33018, Article 3 of the Ordinance, for example, specified that the "the owner or occupier of any rice land shall cultivate ... rice at least once ..." a year.

advocated a balanced budget with a surplus to boot.[24] He believed that governments, like private individuals, must live within their means and save. He advised that a surplus was an insurance against the uncertainties attendant on the diminution of opium revenue.[25]

Within the principle of a balanced budget, he advocated the development of public works which, to him, was a form of capital investment.[26] He repeatedly chided the Government for not doing enough in this area[27] because of its under-estimation of revenue and insufficient exploitation of surplus in the Opium Revenue Replacement Fund.

In 1930, the depression, unemployment and a money-starved economy brought forth from Tan his most stirring call. He urged the Government:

> ...to perform a worthy and noble act of self-sacrifice by the transfusion of some of its plentiful supply of blood into the arteries of this economically sick and anaemic community of Malaya by putting a portion of its enormous surplus funds ... into circulation ... by the execution of large public works which will keep a certain number of people employed....[28]

This, the Government finally did in 1931, by drawing on the Colony's surplus which was about twice the estimated revenue for the year.[29]

Economy in Government

Tan Cheng Lock was not, however, advocating the modern policy of deficit financing. In finance matters, he stood for prudence and thrift. While pressing for public works, he was for economy in Government.

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24 *PSSLC*, 3 November 1924, p. B116; 26 October 1925, p. B170; 29 October 1928, p. B144; 28 October 1929, p. B151; and 13 October 1930, p. B108.

25 *PSSLC*, 3 November 1924, p. B116.

26 *PSSLC*, 28 October 1929, p. B151.

27 *PSSLC*, 3 November 1924, pp. B116-117; 26 October 1925, p. B17; 28 October 1929, p. B157; 28 October 1929, p. B151; and 13 October 1930, p. B146.

28 *PSSLC*, 25 August 1930, p. B113.

29 GD/C 47, Clementi to Colonial Office, 28 Oct. 1931.

He criticized the excessive expenditures in personal emoluments for European civil servants. Beginning in 1928, before the depression gripped Malaya, he cautioned the Government against the increases in this category of expenditure from $8.7 million in 1920 to $16.1 million or 47½ per cent of the revenue for 1929.[30] He urged economy by reducing European staff to trim "our single highest head of expenditure".[31] This was extended to the call for a cut-back in personal emoluments and greater productivity in 1929.[32] In 1930 and 1932, with the depression and unemployment in mind, he proposed reducing personnel cost by the replacement of retired European officers in the Malayan Civil Service by outstanding Asians.[33]

The Government initially took no heed of his proposals. Since Guillemard raised salaries, pensions and temporary allowances in the 1920s, the Government was concerned with maintaining an extravagant "standard of living ... to which members of the senior branches of the Government service are expected to conform".[34] The depression, however, made it see the wisdom in Tan's arguments. In 1931, the Colonial Secretary wrote:

> ...public opinion generally is critical of delay by Government in deciding to reduce allowances. I recommend reduction [by half the temporary allowance] in the Colony accordingly as from 1 June.[35]

Half a year later, Clementi in a drastic move abolished the temporary allowances to save $1 million.[36] In 1932, the

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30 *PSSLC*, 29 October 1928, p. B145.

31 *Loc cit.* See also CO 273/92092, Memorandum dated 17 November 1932 on the oversized European staff. India, despite its relative vastness, had only 600 while the Straits Settlements had 160.

32 *PSSLC*, 28 October 1929, p. B151.

33 *Straits Times*, 27 September 1932.

34 A married senior civil servant could have "a boy, a cook, a water carrier, a gardener, ... a washerman [and] a Malay or Chinese amah". See GD/C 47, Clementi to Colonial Office, 10 December 1931. See also Yeo Kim Wah, "The Grooming of an Elite", 331; and R. Heussler, *British Rule in Malaya* (Oxford, 1981), p. 269 for the British extravagance on this.

35 GD/C 46, John Scott to Colonial Office, 18 May 1931; and *Straits Times*, 6 July 1932.

36 GD/C 46, Clementi to Colonial Office, 28 October 1931.

Governor announced in the Council that "no more cadets [would] ... be recruited for Malaya for the time being".[37]

Defence Contribution

Tan Cheng Lock was also up in arms against the defence contribution which he felt was excessive. Before the controversy took centre-stage in 1927, he had with characteristic foresight, fired the first salvo in 1925. Though the defence estimates for 1926 dipped, he was unhappy that the Straits Settlements was bearing the defence costs of $3.6 million without assistance from the Federated Malay States. He asked for a reduction in the rate of contribution which had been fixed at a maximum of 20 per cent of revenue since 1889.

In the debate on the 1928 Estimates, the subject boiled over. Tan was quick to note that the defence estimates had leapt to $5.3 million. The higher sum, he protested, was to meet the cost of the Singapore Naval Base which was an imperial responsibility. The Colony was only obliged to foot the bill for local defence. He then proposed a reduction of $1 million and of the rate of contribution from 20 per cent to between 10 per cent and 15 per cent. In this protest, he was supported by all the other unofficial members in the Council. The Government, however, over-ruled their protestations and the Colony paid the estimated amount,[38] but in a flurry of letters, Clifford warned the Colonial Office of the impending storm and counselled moderation in meeting the "strong local opposition".[39]

In 1928, Tan took a tougher stand, threatening "that all the Unofficial Members of this Council will resign their

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[37] *PSSLC*, 30 May 1931, p. B55. See also CO 273/92092, Clementi to Colonial Office, 9 April 1932.

[38] For details of sums paid compared to Assessable Revenue from 1919 to 1932, see CO 273/588, 13036/25, Clementi to Colonial Office, 8 November 1933.

[39] See GD/C 38, Clifford to Colonial Office, 19 January 1928; and GD/C 39, Clifford to Colonial Office, 19 July 1928.

seats 'en bloc' " if the Government used the Official Majority to force the Colony to pay for a naval base which, by accident, happened to be located in the Straits Settlements.[40]

In 1931, while warning that the Unofficial Members "have the solid backing of the general public of the colony"[41], he simultaneously offered a way out. The offer was that if the Government agreed to the principle that the Colony paid a fixed sum towards the cost of the local garrison (excluding the Naval Base) but not Imperial Defence, the Unofficial Members would, in return, contribute a gift for the defence services performed by the Royal Navy. Unless this was accepted, he declared "the Colony ... will continue to fight till we get justice".[42] He did not, however, carry the fight into the streets. This was left to his Unofficial Members colleagues who organized a public meeting to protest against the injustice.

The controversy dragged on for another two years during which the Colonial Office was gradually brought round to the Straits Settlements' point of view. The War Office had initially maintained that local and imperial defence could not be separately determined.[43] Clementi publicly echoed the Colonial Office's sentiments that the contributions of the earlier years were now inadequate because of "... developments ... in the means and methods of warfare, that forces and armaments ... sufficient for local defence in pre-war days would be totally inadequate now."[44] The breakthrough finally came with the

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40 *PSSLC*, 29 October 1928, p. B146.

41 *PSSLC*, 7 December 1931, p. B184.

42 *Ibid.*, p. B185.

43 GD/C 36, Guillemard to Colonial Office, 29 April 1927; and GD/C 37, Guillemard to Colonial Office, 26 August 1927.

44 Clementi to J. Bagnall, the Senior Unofficial Member in the Legco, in CO 273/581, 95052, 14 August 1931; and *Straits Times*, 29 September 1931. In confidential despatches to the Colonial Office Clementi was, however, more sympathetic to the Unofficial Members' view. See CD/C 46, Clementi to Colonial Office, 27 September 1930; and CO 273/82093, "Notes on Conference at the Colonial Office" in which he urged a settlement to avoid a "constitutional crisis".

visit of Sir Samuel Wilson in 1932. In discussions with the Unofficial Members, he agreed to the principal points that Tan had raised and pressed. The compromise was hence a fixed contribution of $4 million for five years, from 1 January 1933 (and thereafter quinquennially negotiated), with a "gift" to be determined by the Unofficial Members.[45] The outcome of the struggle was a triumph for Tan, the Unofficial Members and the Straits Settlements.

Evaluation of Tan Cheng Lock's Economic Views

Although Tan Cheng Lock, with strong backing from his Unofficial colleagues succeeded in impressing the Government on the defence contribution, not all his economic representations met with equal success. He failed to make any headway on acquiring for the Chinese a stake in rice-cultivation and against the discriminatory assessment in rubber quota. But he was nevertheless more successful in the economic area than the political. His counsel on balanced budgeting, economy in government, rubber restriction and defence contribution was accepted. In part, this was due to the British preparedness to listen to the nominated member who after all represented business interests; in part, it showed their willingness to bend when confronted by formidable opposition. More importantly, Tan Cheng Lock's persistence, cogency of ideas and grasp of financial and economic matters helped, in some cases at least, in winning the British to his side. The Colonial Secretary recognized his ability in these areas when he said:

> ...the Chinese member from Malacca gave us a very interesting statement of the financial position of the Colony, a statement which I might almost have made myself. He took almost the very words out of my mouth.[46]

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[45] CO 273/588, 13036/25, Clementi to Colonial Office, 8 November 1933.

[46] Speech by Sir John Scott, *PSSLC*, 13 October 1930, p. B151.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CHAMPION OF CHINESE SOCIAL CAUSES

By the 1920s, British Malaya (including the Straits Settlements) had become a plural society, in which the different races mixed without combining, with each living a separate existence. The pattern of general racial harmony changed in the early 1930s. The economic depression, nascent Malay nationalism and the British pro-Malay policies increasingly brought the Chinese and Malays into competition with each other. Against this background, Tan Cheng Lock as a leader of the Chinese was vocal in advancing their cause in education and language, and immigration. He was also in the forefront in the campaign for a form of monogamous marriage, and played a supportive role in the crusade against opium smoking.

English Education and Language

When Tan Cheng Lock entered the Legislative Council in 1923, the British had shifted from a *laissez-faire* attitude towards education to one of control. This change was brought about by the Kuomintang's efforts to regulate

Chinese education in the Straits Settlements since 1912, which led to the politicization of Chinese schools whose disruptive effect was demonstrated in the Chinese schools' anti-Japanese riots in 1919. Thus alarmed, the British passed the School Registration Enactment of 1920, and instituted a grants-in-aid system to "exercise a greater degree of control" over the Chinese schools.

Other than this, the British viewed with equanimity the educational system of free primary Malay education, a supportive role in English education and self-help in Chinese education. The diverse system besides being inexpensive, achieved the objective of economic exploitation of Malaya with a minimum of effort and applied the dictum of divide and rule.

Surveying this scene in 1923, Tan insisted that not enough was being done for English education. In his maiden speech in the Council, he urged the introduction of universal, compulsory free English education for all so that "a common British outlook" which would be the basis for building a Malayan consciousness and community could evolve.[1] Besides inculcating good citizenship with loyalty focused on the British Empire, an English education would, he added, prepare the Straits Settlements ultimately for a representative form of government.[2] He therefore saw in English education a means of nation-building that would straddle the diverse communities and achieve political progress for the Colony.

At the individual level, he shared with the average Straits-born Chinese parent the view that English was a means of getting out of poverty to a respectable occupation.[3] The Malays similarly wanted an English education to keep up with the other communities. Tan argued that since there

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1 *PSSLC*, 25 June 1923, p. B104; and *Straits Times*, 26 June 1923.

2 *PSSLC*, 25 June 1923, p. B106; 29 October 1923, p. B185; and 12 July 1926, p. B85.

3 *PSSLC*, 12 July 1926, p. B85. On English as an asset, see also CO 273/574, 82094.

was demand for English education, it should be freely available.[4]

The British authorities, however, thought otherwise. Free English education would be a financial burden which they were unprepared to shoulder.[5] Neither were they prepared to give to the Colony an equivalent level of education obtainable in the United Kingdom.[6]

Given such thinking, the British in the early 1930s applied the brakes to an "unconscious" preference for English education over Malay education. Clementi, the vigorous pro-Malay Governor, stated at length in the Council that English was inappropriate as the "basic" language in Malaya and the Straits Settlements.[7] English education in India, Ceylon and the Philippines, he claimed, had divorced the natives from traditional occupations and led to widespread discontentment when the higher expectations attendant on acquiring an English education were not met. He further warned that the "propagation of a smattering of English has its dangers".[8] To avoid these he declared that Malay would be the "basic" language in which free education would continue to be provided in the Straits Settlements. Supporting him, his Colonial Secretary added that Malay as the *lingua franca* of British Malaya could be learnt more easily and cheaply than English. Furthermore, unlike English, it had no intrinsic market value and hence would not lead to discontentment.[9] For these reasons, the British raised fees

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4 *PSSLC*, 8 December 1930, p. B174. For a recognition of this demand, see Straits Settlements Legislative Council Paper No. 103 of 1932, p. 3.

5 English education was more costly than vernacular. See CO 273/72024, "Minutes of Committee on Education"; and R. Emerson, *Malaysia: A Study in Direct and Indirect Rule*, p. 306.

6 *Ibid.* p. 516.

7 *PSSLC*, 12 February 1934, pp. B37-30. For Clementi's address at the Rotary Club Convention in Kuala Lumpur, see *Malacca Guardian*, 25 December 1933.

8 *PSSLC*, 12 February 1934, p. B30.

9 *Ibid.*, p. B27.

in English schools in an attempt to curb enrolment and reinforce the policy of free primary Malay education.[10]

Tan rebelled against this fundamental shift in education and language policy. In the Memorandum to Sir Samuel Wilson, he criticized these steps as retrogressive.[11] Supported by the other Chinese Unofficial Members (Lim Cheang Ean of Penang and Wee Swee Teow of Singapore) and the *Straits Times*,[12] Tan argued in the Council that the Malay language had little practical and literary value, was inadequate for modern usage and could easily be learnt without attending a school.[13] In addition, he warned the British against any attempt at "Malayanization" or assimilation of the Chinese into the Malay culture. This intention, he emphasized, would be "energetically resisted by the non-Malays as something most obnoxious and baneful to their well-being",[14] and the Chinese would for these reasons reject Malay education.

He then reinforced the call he made in 1923 for English education to be the primary system in Malaya. It was best suited as a "bond between the sections of our ... population". It was, moreover, the "most widely spoken language throughout the world ... and [was] likely to become universal".[15] From every conceivable standpoint, be it political (loyalty to the British Crown), economic, educational or cultural, English rather than Malay should be the language in which all Malayans were given free education. The right language, Tan advocated, was English as it was the "common basic language which can impart

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10 See Straits Settlements Legislative Council Paper No. 32 of 1932.

11 Tan Cheng Lock, *Malayan Problems*, p. 81.

12 *Straits Times*, 5 January 1933 and 17 February 1934. See *Malacca Guardian* of the period for the intense campaign.

13 *PSSLC*, 12 February 1934, pp. B18-20.

14 *Ibid.*, p. B18.

15 Contrary to Clementi's claim, English was supplanting Malay as the *lingua franca*. See CO 273/72024 for "Report by the Advisory Committee on Education, 1934"; and CO 273/33104, Caldecott to Colonial Office, 17 June 1934.

to our heterogeneous population the common ... outlook ... conducive to national solidarity".[16] The *Straits Times*, supporting Tan, remarked: "In our view, Tan Cheng Lock in one of the finest speeches of his political career, has conclusively shown the principle [of only providing free primary Malay education] to be indefensible"[17] and "an educational policy which [our] entire non-indigenous population" rejected must be radically wrong.[18] Unfortunately for Tan and his supporters, the British disregarded the pleas for the adoption of English as a neutral language and continued with the free primary Malay education system.

Chinese Vernacular Education

Unlike the typical Straits-born Chinese leader who only supported English education, Tan was also a strong advocate of Chinese vernacular education. He strove persistently throughout his Council years for the cause of Chinese education.[19] In this, he was zealously supported by the overseas Chinese community.

In 1923 he stated in the Council that no child should be deprived of an education in his mother-tongue and "the noblest ideals of [his] race".[20] Aware that many Chinese children (like himself) in English schools lacked facility in Mandarin, he advocated that this language should be taught in their school curriculum.[21]

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16 *PSSLC*, 12 February 1934, p. B20.

17 *Straits Times*, 14 February 1934.

18 *Straits Times*, 17 February 1934. This report was appended in CO 273/585/3006.

19 For a discussion of Tan Cheng Lock's post World War II view on Chinese education, see Tan Liok Ee, "Tan Cheng Lock and the Chinese Education Issue in Malaya". (A paper presented at the 10th Conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia in Singapore, 27-31 October 1986.)

20 *PSSLC*, 29 October 1923, p. B185.

21 *PSSLC*, 25 June 1925, p. B106; and 26 October 1925, p. B173.

Meanwhile, the Straits Settlements Government had second thoughts on the wisdom of Chinese vernacular education. The control measures instituted in the early 1920s had proven incapable of preventing the politicization of Chinese education. The grants-in-aid scheme failed because the Chinese schools shunned aid with its corollary of governmental "inquisition".[22] On the other hand, throughout the 1920s, the Kuomintang and the Communist Chinese sought to direct Chinese education in the Straits Settlements in support of their causes. With the Kuomintang victory in 1927 and the adoption of the Manchu principle of *jus sanguinis* in 1929, the Chinese Government and its Consul-General in Singapore[23] threatened an *imperium in imperio* in Chinese schools in the Straits Settlements. Increasingly, Chinese education with its subversive message against colonialism alarmed the British.

Clementi moved decisively in banning the Kuomintang in 1930 but in education, however, he wavered between an increase in grants-in-aid to regain control[24] and the curtailment of Chinese vernacular education. By 1932, he decided in favour of the latter. Towards this end, at a time when the depression and financial difficulties had increased applications for grants-in-aid by Chinese schools and an increased interest in the study of Mandarin, he decided that "grants shall not be given to schools [Chinese and Tamil] that have not previously received them".[25]

This policy drew forth strong protestations from Tan. While he saw it fit to dissociate himself from the Kuomintang's activities,[26] he strongly attacked the

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22 GD/C 43, Clementi to Colonial Office, 19 August 1930.

23 GD/C 42, Clementi to Colonial Office, 3 February 1930.

24 GD/C 44, Clementi to Colonial Office, 16 October 1930.

25 "Report of the Committee to consider the System of Grants-in-Aid in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States", Francis Wong and Gwee Yee Hean, *Official Reports on Education in the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States 1870-1939* (Singapore, 1980), p. 122.

26 For his support of the banning of the Kuomintang, see *PSSLC*, 19 October 1932, p. B145.

discontinuation of new grants-in-aid to Chinese schools. The Government, he stated in the Memorandum to Sir Samuel Wilson, should continue to subsidize the Chinese vernacular schools as it had the responsibility to educate the local-born Chinese children.[27] Moreover, he pointed out in the Council, the policy would lead to increased illiteracy among the non-Malays. It was unfair, "grotesque and unaccountable" as foreign "Malaysians" such as Javanese and Boyanese could enjoy free vernacular education in their mother tongue while the domiciled non-Malays could not.[28] He declared that the Government was not doing enough for Chinese education which was almost entirely financed through self-help. By doing more through subsidization, the Government could, he advised, better supervise Chinese education and ensure the inculcation of good citizenship.

Tan's advice again fell on deaf ears. Clementi, in summing up the debate restated the merits of Malay education and the demerits of English education, but neglected to comment on Tan's representations on Chinese vernacular education.[29]

Besides holding strong views on the English and Chinese vernacular education issues, Tan, in his long years in the Council, fought for greater educational opportunities for the less privileged in society. He pressed for the establishment of trade[30] and agricultural schools[31] for the less academically inclined. He canvassed for the establishment of evening classes,[32] improvement in the standards of private schools[33] and the extension of the age-limit in Government

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27 Tan Cheng Lock, *Malayan Problems*, p. 83.

28 *PSSLC*, 12 February 1934, p. B20.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. B27-30.

30 *Straits Times*, 2 November 1926. See also *PSSLC*, 29 October 1923, p. B184; 28 October 1929, p. B153; and 13 October 1930, p. B148.

31 *PSSLC*, 12 July 1926, p. B85; and 7 February 1927, p. B3.

32 *PSSLC*, 2 August 1932, p. B109.

33 *PSSLC*, 7 October 1929, p. B125.

schools for the superannuated students.[34] The blind were also not forgotten, as he called for the establishment of an institution to teach them to read and write.[35] For the brightest, he campaigned for the retention of the Queen's Scholarship.[36] In some of these, he was successful, in others he failed, but through these endeavours, the humane side of him was clearly evident.

Chinese Immigration

Tan Cheng Lock was, like most Chinese and European merchants, in favour of the inflow of Chinese labour as they believed that this cheap and productive source of manpower was essential to the prosperity of Malaya. Tan thus acquiesced in the Straits Settlements Government's unrestricted immigration policy in the 1920s which openly encouraged Chinese immigration. The official *Straits Settlements Annual Report* of 1925 mentioned, for example, that the "pressure of unsettled conditions in South China has a favourable effect upon immigration".[37] Chinese immigration for that year was a hefty 214,000.[38] Guillemard's main concern during this period was, in fact, to avoid impeding the flood as "Chinese labour is too urgently required".[39] Efforts were hence made to encourage this inflow, especially of Chinese women, to redress the adverse sex disparity.[40]

By 1927, however, signs of a shift in policy had emerged. Disquiet was expressed over the changing character of

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34 *PSSLC*, 11 October 1926, p. B158.

35 *PSSLC*, 12 July 1926, p. B85; and 31 October 1927, p. B157.

36 *PSSLC*, 29 October 1923, p. B184; and 28 October 1929, p. B153.

37 *Straits Settlements Annual Report*, 1925, p. 313.

38 GD/C 36, Officer Administering the Government to Colonial Office, 17 May 1927. This was soon surpassed by 1925's 348,000 and 1927's peak of 360,000 immigrants.

39 GD/C 36, Guillemard to Colonial Office, 15 January 1926.

40 CO 278/52007, First Report of the Advisory Committee on Social Hygiene, 1925.

immigrants from honest labourers to "men of a criminal type"[41] and communists. Furthermore, the Malay rulers and aristocratic elite were restive and desired that the influx of Chinese should be checked. Accordingly, in 1928, the Immigration Restriction Ordinance empowering the Government to expel and banish undesirable elements and to impose immigration quotas was passed.

By 1930, with the deepening depression and widespread unemployment, restriction of immigration assumed added urgency. The hordes of unemployed Chinese miners in the Federated Malay States and a saturated Singapore, which served as the distribution centre for the Malay States, posed social and political problems which had to be tackled. More importantly, Clementi, as part of his pro-Malay policies had decided to stem the flow. To this end, the Government passed the Aliens Bill of October 1932, which sought to discriminate subtly against Chinese male adult immigrants[42] through the imposition of landing fees and the requirements for admission and residence certificates.

Tan protested vehemently against these restrictive moves. He considered them unnecessary as Chinese immigration had already slowed down due to the Depression. He stated that the Banishment Ordinance and the Immigration Restriction Ordinance provided adequate powers to reject undesired Chinese immigrants.[43] To impose additional immigration fees would, he cautioned, increase labour costs and render Malayan products uncompetitive. The requirement for entry certificates might also lead to arbitrary discrimination on the part of immigra-

41 CO 273/52007, Clifford to Colonial Office, 10 October 1927. Until now, restriction of Chinese immigration had been due to economic exigencies, see Ee Hong Geok, "A Study of Chinese Migration to Singapore, 1896-1941", B.A. (Hons.), Academic Exercise, University of Malaya in Singapore, 1961, p. 39.

42 CO 273/577, 92001/12, Clementi to Colonial Office, 3 November 1932. Clementi states that the Bill while "avoiding any appearance of discrimination, [would] in actual practice, operate to restrict the entrance of Chinese alone".

43 *PSSLC*, 19 October 1932, p. B144.

tion officers. In this campaign he was supported by several of his Unofficial Member colleagues, the Federated Malay States Chambers of Mines and the *Sin Chew Jit Poh*[44] who were ever watchful of labour costs.

More significantly, Tan could see clearly the discriminatory nature of the policy. Not mincing his words, he accused the Government of an "anti-Chinese policy, probably with a political objective, based on distrust and fear ...."[45] If there should be any discrimination he retorted, tongue in cheek, it should be in favour of this group of industrious people who had made British Malaya what it was. To rousing applause in the Council, he then called for the removal of the Aliens Bill which "hang[s] perennially like a sword of Damocles over the heads ... of the ... Chinese aliens".[46]

Unfortunately for Tan, not all Chinese were in support of his actions. Some Straits-born thought the Aliens Bill would not have the slightest ill-effects on them.[47] The *Straits Times* in an editorial[48] criticizing his Council speech, commented that the Bill protected the local-born Chinese against an influx of immigrants. In the event, the concession gained by Tan was not a retraction of the Bill but the minor concession for the Legislative Council to decide on the fees to be levied. Restriction of Chinese immigration was henceforth instituted. From 1933 to 1938, a monthly quota of 4,000 adult males was generally in force. Chinese female immigration which was unrestricted to redress the sex disparity was, after 1938, also regulated.

The Scourge of Opium Smoking

The deleterious habit of opium smoking had gripped the Chinese immigrants in the Straits Settlements since the 19th

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44 Cit in *Straits Times*, 21 January 1932.

45 *PSSLC*, 10 October 1932, p. B145; and Tan Cheng Lock, *Malayan Problems*, p. 78.

46 *Ibid.*, p. B146.

47 See letters to *Straits Times*, 10 November 1932.

48 *Straits Times*, 12 November 1932.

century. The absence of family restraint, the little recreational opportunity and consequential loneliness suffered by the Chinese immigrants, the relative cheapness of opium smoking compared to that in China, and the Chinese perception of opium as a panacea for all ailments helped to sustain the habit. Moreover, the habit provided an important source of government revenue. As early as 1904, the revenue from opium as a percentage of total revenue was a hefty 59 per cent![49]

Given this, the Government, despite strong anti-opium criticisms did not take decisive steps to eradicate it. It thus readily agreed with the 1907 Opium Commission Report which recommended mild measures to curb what it considered to be an exaggerated evil. The Committee's real concern, which the Government shared, was the loss of substantial revenue attendant on prohibition. On a similar note, the Straits Settlements Government rejected the British Malaya Opium Committee Report of 1924 on the rationing of *chandu* (opium prepared for smoking) as too drastic a measure[50] and readily agreed with its recommendation on the impossibility of prohibition.[51] Again, the concern here was with revenue.[52] Guillemard thus counselled the Colonial Office and the Home Government, then under pressure from the League of Nations, to allow "Malaya ... to develop its policy of steady and continuous reduction of opium consumption".[53]

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49 Lim U Wen, "British Opium Policy in the Straits Settlements 1867-1910", unpublished B.A. (Hons.), Academic Exercise, University of Malaya in Singapore, 1960, p. 11. For opium revenues in the 1920s, see GD/C 46, Officer Administering the Government to Colonial Office, 15 May 1931.

50 CO 273/525, 9282, Guillemard to Colonial Office, 25 February 1924. See also M. A. Jansen, "The British Opium Committee Report", B. A. (Hons.), Academic Exercise, University of Singapore, 1974, pp. 27-28 for the difficulties involved.

51 See CO 273/527, 27130, Memo by the Secretary for Chinese Affairs stating that such a measure would be undemocratic and not work with a transient population.

52 See GD/C 31, Guillemard to Colonial Office, 9 July 1924; and GD/C 32, Guillemard to Colonial Office, 8 October 1924.

53 GD/C 31, Guillemard to Colonial Office, 9 July 1924.

The Straits Settlements Government hence introduced measures which, while reducing the consumption of opium, would not harm its revenue position. An Opium Revenue Replacement Reserve Fund was also set up in 1926 to provide for an alternative source of revenue. Gradually, measures to reduce consumption such as the voluntary and compulsory registration of smokers in 1928 and 1929 respectively, and rationing, were introduced.

Tan spoke out in support of these suppressive measures. He stated that the smoking of opium "is an abuse and ... must be terminated".[54] As a realist, however, he added that "we must temporarily tolerate the evil in our midst".[55] because suppressive measures such as the closing of the registers, he believed, were ineffective. The only solution, he opined, lay in "the stoppage of opium growing in the world".[56]

Tan also showed concern for the welfare of the opium addicts. He repeatedly highlighted the injustices done to them by the sale of both under-weight packages,[57] as well as adulterated and sub-standard *chandu* of which the Government had a monopoly.[58] He urged the Government to eradicate the more damaging practice of swallowing or smoking opium dross.[59] To cure those who desired to kick the habit, he called upon the Government to establish wards in hospitals to help them.[60]

In this campaign in the Council, Tan was, in fact, supporting more vocal crusaders outside the Council such as Dr Chen Su Lan and Dr Wu Lien Teh,[61] but to no avail.

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54 *PSSLC*, 3 November 1924, p. B119; and 28 October 1929, p. B152.

55 *PSSLC*, 28 October 1929, p. B152.

56 *PSSLC*, 24 September 1934, p. B128.

57 *PSSLC*, 3 November 1924, p. B119.

58 *Straits Times*, 27 January 1930.

59 *PSSLC*, 3 November 1924, p. B119; and 29 June 1925, p. B64.

60 *PSSLC*, 3 November 1924, p. B120; 2 February 1925, p. B3; and 29 June 1925, p. B87.

61 For Wu's campaign against opium smoking, see Wu Lien Teh, *Plague Fighter*, (especially pp. 494-499). For Chen's efforts, see *Straits Times*, 8 March and 12 December 1930.

The Straits Settlements Government, for revenue considerations, continued with its mild measures against opium smoking. Only in 1943, three years after the expiration of the agreed fifteen years referred to in Article 2 of the Geneva Opium Conference Protocol, would total prohibition be introduced. But in the meantime, in the name of non-interference with Chinese customs, the flames of opium smoking burned on in the Straits Settlements.

Chinese Marriage Laws

The British also refrained from interference with the Chinese customary marriage laws. In a number of cases since 1867, the most famous being the "Six Widows Case" in 1908, the Straits Settlements laws upheld what it deemed were Chinese polygamous laws. Thus secondary wives (concubines recognized by the principal wife) and clandestine mistresses and their offspring, could share in an intestate's property as long as a marriage "in accordance with Chinese customs and usages"[62] was conducted. An adopted child recognized by Chinese customs, on the other hand, was not recognized by the laws of the Straits Settlements as such. In two well-known cases, the intestates' adopted children were not conferred the rights of inheritance.

Tan, in 1924, pointed to the inadequacies of these laws and argued that they led to wild claims, expensive litigation and the humiliation of respectable widows. Justice to Chinese women, he declared, demanded that they should be protected by a monogamous law. Furthermore, no provision existed for a woman to divorce her husband. In the case of mutual agreement to a separation, there were no laws to compel her husband to pay maintenance. Tan then called for a Select Committee to collect information so that "legislation on this subject [which] is absolutely imperative" could be passed.[63] The Government obliged and

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62 GD 95, Clementi to Colonial Office, 15 October 1931. For some of these "customs and usages", see V. Purcell, *The Chinese in Malaya*, pp. 148-150.

63 *PSSLC*, 3 November 1924, p. B118.

a Committee which included Tan as a member was appointed in April 1925.

The Chinese Marriage Committee in its report of 1926, recorded that it was "impossible to submit proposals for legislation".[64] It noted that the subject was extremely complicated as customary rites differed in the districts and provinces of South China, and were, moreover, modified by the various dialect groups which settled in the Straits Settlements. The Committee also found "practically unanimous" opposition among the conservative Straits Settlements Chinese *sinkehs* to any compulsory registration of marriages, and among the Straits Chinese to provisions for divorce.[65] In view of this, the Committee recommended only voluntary registration. On the issue of adoption of sons, however, it recommended the legalization of such a practice.

The Government, desirous of avoiding "a very thorny and difficult subject with a very long history",[66] procrastinated in implementing the Committee's recommendations. Tan would have none of this and he repeatedly pressed for the Government to act on them.[67] Finally, in response to a lengthy presentation by Tan in the Council and a Memorandum submitted by him in 1933,[68] the Government justified its stand. The Secretary for Chinese Affairs stated that the Government could only legislate for the domiciled Chinese. Clementi, an administrator with knowledge of Chinese affairs, then ruled that "the customs of a country such as China ... cannot be altered rapidly". The solution, he emphasized, was that the Chinese should make wills and not die intestate.[69]

Tan's persistence in this matter was, however, not without success. Earlier in 1931, and apparently forgotten

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64 See *Chinese Marriage Committee Report.*, p. 11.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

66 *PSSLC*, 31 July 1933, p. B113.

67 *PSSLC*, 1 November 1926, p. B189; 7 December 1927, p. B2; and 31 October 1927, p. B158. See also *Straits Times*, 2 November 1926.

68 *Malacca Guardian*, 7 August 1933.

69 *PSSLC*, 31 July 1933, pp. B113 and B115.

by the Government,[70] the Straits Settlements (Non-Domiciled Parties) Divorce Rules, had been introduced.[71] The statement of the Secretary for Chinese Affairs on legislative incompetence was hence incorrect. Tan's exertions were thus only partially successful as it was not until 1940 with the enforcement of the Civil Marriage Act that his counsel on a form of monogamous marriage was adopted.

Review of Tan's Championship of Chinese Social Causes.

The Chinese marriage laws, opium smoking, and the controversial English education and language, Chinese vernacular education and immigration issues which we have examined bring out clearly Tan's efforts to promote the social well-being of the Chinese. In these, he was championing the rights not only of the Straits Chinese, but also of the immigrant Chinese, as seen in his campaigns for the cause of Chinese vernacular education, Chinese immigration and the immigrant opium smoker. He was thus not just a leader of the Straits Chinese, but a champion of the Chinese albeit a self-appointed one, for the "alien Chinese" had little or no interest in government or legislative niceties.

In these campaigns, he also recognized the larger issues which few in his days realized and consequently went further than most. He perceived that British Malaya was reverting to its original character as a Malay country and unless the Chinese put up a resistance, their status and stay in the country would be adversely affected.

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70 A recently appointed Acting Attorney General could have been the cause of this. The works consulted also missed this. See, for example, K. G. Tregonning, "Tan Cheng Lock: A Malayan Nationalist", p. 41.

71 For the Divorce Rules, see *Straits Times*, 8 December 1931; and COD 252, Colonial Office to Clementi, 9 January 1932.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE LOYAL SON OF MALACCA

Tan Cheng Lock's zeal in furthering Malacca's interests was also very much evident in his representations in the Legislative Council. First, as a businessman, he was profoundly interested in the economic survival and prosperity of Malacca, in particular as a port. Second, he saw it as his civic duty to campaign against the neglect of Malacca by the Straits Settlements Government whose eyes seemed to be fixed on the ports of Penang and Singapore. Third, as a son of Malacca, he represented without prejudice the interests of the various races that formed his "constituents". It is to these three concerns, beginning with his pet subject – the port – that we now turn our attention.

The Port of Malacca

By the 1920s when Tan Cheng Lock was appointed to the Legislative Council, Malacca had clearly declined as an entrepot. The historical and geographical circumstances which had nurtured her early entrepot growth had drastically changed. The conquest of Sumatra by the Dutch

and the emergence of the favoured centres of Penang and Singapore had truncated much of her hinterland and trade, and relegated her to the status of a coastal port.[1] The heavy silting of the Malacca River and the harbour as a consequence of inland deforestation and erosion had rendered her harbour unsuitable for handling ocean-going ships, and with some difficulties, coastal vessels.[2] Dredging, which was resorted to in 1902, did little to alleviate the problem. Malacca seemed doomed for economic oblivion except for the pioneering efforts in rubber cultivation by Tan Chay Yan in 1895. This expansion of rubber cultivation temporarily revived Malacca's fortune, but it reorientated her maritime outlook. With the development of the road networks inland and the Malacca-Tampin railway link to the Peninsular system in 1905, Malacca after centuries of living off the sea was increasingly forced to look to her shrinking hinterland for survival. Indeed, the official *Straits Settlements Annual Report* commented that the railway might "perhaps save Malacca from commercial extinction".[3]

Tan refused to accept this fate. Coming from a family which had long been associated with the sea, he repeatedly pressed in and out of Council for the revival of Malacca as a seaport. This was of vital importance as Malacca, he believed, could only hope to survive by "improving its facilities as a seaport and ... by becoming a manufacturing town in the course of time".[4]

In the furtherance of this vision, he proposed numerous schemes with the backing of the Malaccan business com-

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1 See C. D. Cowan, ed. "Early Penang and the Rise of Singapore, 1805-1832", *Journal of the Malayan Branch, Royal Asiatic Society*, XXIII, 2 (March 1950), 1-210; *Straits Settlements Annual Report*, 1930, p. 5.

2 G. Cho and M. W. Ward, "The Port of Melaka", *Melaka*, I, 627-633; and K. G. Tregonning, *Home Port Singapore*, p. 22.

3 *Straits Settlements Annual Report*, 1903, cit in C.M. Turnbull, "Melaka under British Rule", *Melaka*, I, 266. The *Straits Chinese Magazine*, IX (December 1905), 190 stated two years later: "So far no attempts have been made by planters to use the railway in sending down tapioca and other produce."

4 *PSSLC*, 24 March 1930, p. B23.

munity. In 1923, he proposed the purchase of a dredger which was readily agreed to by the Government.[5] He carefully monitored its activity from his Heeren Street home and was quick to raise questions when it was redeployed elsewhere.[6]

By 1930, driven to near despair by the lack of progress, he put forward a more comprehensive scheme. Firstly, he drew attention to the need to purchase a "suitable modern dredger" in place of the existing one dredging the river bed and mouth. Secondly, he recommended the extension of the groyne (a concrete wall extending seawards from the shore) to keep the Malacca River mouth clear of deposits washed from further up the coast. This suggestion was a personal sacrifice as an extended groyne would, in his own words, "divert the silt ... into the Heeren Street foreshore ...."[7] on which stands his ancestral home. Thirdly, he urged the Government to construct a new harbour at Pulau Jawa which would be capable of handling ocean-going steamers. In the Council, he outlined his plan thus:

> Such a scheme would necessitate the construction of a causeway of about ¾ miles long leading to the islet where an L-shaped wharf ... may be built .... The railway could then be connected with the wharf and Malacca would regain some of its former importance as a seaport ... [serving] ... the Malayan hinterland ... of Pahang, Negeri Sembilan and Johore ...[8]

When the Governor visited Malacca in May 1930, Tan mobilized interested parties to cajole the Government

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5 CO 273/523, 160930, 19 November 1923, provided $300,000 for such a purchase.

6 *PSSLC*, 30 January 1928, p. B3; and 25 March 1929, p. B23.

7 *PSSLC*, 24 March 1930, p. B23; and *Straits Times*, 25 March 1930. According to Mr Chua Eng Tee, the caretaker of the Tan Family's Heeren Street home, the sea in the 1930s reached the rear part of the house called the "Summer House". Today, the foreshore is reclaimed land. See also Tan Siok Choo, "The Tan Family Saga" in *New Straits Times Annual 1981* (Kuala Lumpur, 1980), p. 23.

8 *PSSLC*, 24 March 1930, p. B23. See also D. F. Allen, *Report on Major Ports of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur, 1951) which makes reference to Tan Cheng Lock's scheme. Allen adds that the idea "does not seem to have been taken seriously".

to build the deep water port. He led a "Harbour Deputation"[9] which presented statistics and his harbour scheme to the Governor. In a public dinner speech in Clementi's honour at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, he again called for efforts to be made to bring about the revival of "Malacca, the mother of Malaya, at one time the great trade emporium."[10]

Despite these efforts, Clementi was unconvinced. Five months later, he wrote in support of the Malayan Communication Board's plan to improve the ports of Singapore, Penang and Port Swettenham which would "be of utmost importance".[11] In his eight-page submission no mention was made of Malacca. When the Board's report was published, the *Malacca Guardian* carried a scathing editorial entitled "Sacrificed Again".[12]

Tan remained undeterred and during Clementi's next visit to Malacca in 1932, he further pressed the issue. This time round, he attempted to put forward a stronger case and to this end, "by a remarkable coincidence is the fine appearance ... of ... no fewer than ten ships riding at anchor" in the harbour.[13] In the Council meeting in the Malacca Court House, he took the opportunity to draw the members' attention to the many ships in the harbour and restated the case for the harbour at Pulau Jawa which he now christened, rather flatteringly, "the Clementi Scheme".[14]

Clementi, however, remained unmoved. In 1934, in the third and last Legislative Council Meeting conducted in Malacca by him, Clementi finally dashed Tan's dream by

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9 This deputation included Mr. H. E. Nixon, the European Unofficial Member for Malacca, and the Harbour Master. See *Malacca Guardian*, 5 May 1930.

10 *Malacca Guardian*, 26 October 1931.

11 GD/C 44, Clementi to Colonial Office, 8 October 1930.

12 *Malacca Guardian*, 30 March and 6 April 1931.

13 *Malacca Guardian*, 25 January 1932. The newspaper added that this was the largest number "within the memory of the oldest living inhabitant of this town".

14 *PSSLC*, 26 January 1932, p. B15; and *Straits Times*, 27 January 1932.

stating that the "die-hard element" working for the revival of Malacca as an entrepot was fighting the irresistible tide of decline.[15] Malacca, he declared, had lost its transit trade and Malaccans had better turned their eyes inland.

Thus, Tan failed miserably in the Malaccan subject closest to his heart because his scheme was an unrealistic one. Malacca had irretrievably passed her prime. Historically, her domain had shrunk and geographically, the quaint, little Malacca River with "a brown liquid three parts water and one part earth"[16] could not hope to compete with Penang, Port Swettenham or Singapore.

Discrimination of "Sleepy Hollow"

Explicit in Tan's crusade for the improvement of Malacca's harbour was his campaign against the discrimination of declining Malacca *vis-a-vis* Penang and Singapore by the Straits Settlements Government. With the deterioration of her harbour and her unimpressive economic performance relative to the two-sister Settlements[17], Malacca had by the 1920s become known by such unflattering names as the "Sleepy Hollow", and the "Rip Van Winkle" of the Straits Settlements. Tan fought hard, within the Council and without, against favouring the "upstart Penang and Singapore" to the neglect of "Cinderella".[18]

In 1926, he queried in the Council, the different interest rates charged for loans to the Malacca and Singapore Municipal Councils.[19] A year later, when Singapore was given $10 million for town improvement and low-cost housing, Tan reminded the Government of Malacca's urgent

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15 *PSSLC*, 12 January 1934, p. B28.

16 K. G. Tregonning, *Home Port Singapore*, p. 22.

17 The gross annual value of Malacca's export for 1930 was only $21.9 million compared to Penang's $140.1 million and Singapore's $405.9 million! See *Straits Settlements Annual Report*, 1930, p. 613.

18 See *Malacca Guardian*, 26 October, 31 July and 28 August 1933.

19 Malacca was charged 5 per cent against Singapore's 2 per cent. See *PSSLC*, 1 February 1926, p. B6; and *Malacca Observer*, 8 February 1926.

need for the same and others such as hospitals, schools and road works.[20] He argued that "the principle of Government contributing towards the costs of town improvement applies equally to ... Malacca as to Singapore".[21] Similarly, when Singapore and Penang were about to have their trade schools, Tan again prodded the Government for Malacca to have her own trade school.[22] And again in 1934, when Penang was given a grant of $1½ million for town improvement, Tan, with the end of the depression in mind, pleaded in the Council that "the time has now arrived for Malacca's claim to be considered by Government".[23]

While Tan was moderately successful in the above advocacies, his main success lay in bringing the Straits Settlements Legislative Council to Malacca[24] on three occasions in 1930, 1932 and 1934. On each occasion, the arrival of the Governor and his yacht *Sea Belle* in Malacca's near empty harbour brought some cheer to the often-forgotten "quiet ... old-world city".[25] The morale of Malacca and its constituents on these occasions were given a much needed boost.

Championing "Constituents" Welfare

Besides advancing Malacca's cause in general, Tan was very active in championing the welfare of the disadvantaged and under-privileged groups of Malacca. In this endeavour, he adopted (unlike at the "national" or Straits Settlements level in which he worked mainly for the welfare of the Chinese) a discernible multiracial approach.

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20 *PSSLC*, 7 February 1927, p. B47. See also *PSSLC*, 27 August 1928, p. B73; 3 July 1929, p. B91; and 16 January 1933, p. B11.

21 *PSSLC*, 21 March 1927, p. B47.

22 *PSSLC*, 13 October 1930, p. B148.

23 *PSSLC*, 24 September 1934, p. B129

24 Tan Cheng Lock first advocated this in 1930, see *PSSLC*, 24 March 1930, pp. B23-24. The Legco session held in Malacca in May 1930 was the first since its inception in 1867.

25 *Malacca Guardian*, 25 January 1932.

The Malaccan Malays was the group that he spoke up for most. In 1925, in support of the Malay Unofficial Member, he rebuked the Government for its insensitivity to the poor Malay fisherman's plight. The Government had for the purpose of standardization of license fees with those in the FMS raised license fees by two times for *kelongs* and eight times for the *jaring* (a drift net). These raises, Tan complained in the Council, were unfair because of the relative "scarcity of fish in the Malacca waters".[26]

In 1927, he once again championed the cause of the Malays. In furtherance of the Malay padi planters' interest, he asked the Government to expedite the survey of irrigation land in Malacca.[27] In 1934, he backed the Malacca Municipal Council's request for funds to deepen certain stretches of the Malacca River so that the "humble cultivator [would] not be robbed of his crop every season by the flooding".[28] Tan's efforts were, in view of the British attitude in keeping the Malays in the padi-field, highly successful. Besides the construction of dams, water gates and bunds in the 1930s which Tan supported, the Government also set up a test plot for padi in Malacca.[29]

The Portuguese Eurasians, then living in deplorable conditions in Praya Lane also received Tan's support in the Council. He asked for these long-domiciled Portuguese descendants "many of [whom] ... have no proper means of livelihood and employment" the benefits of free education that had been granted to the Malays.[30] The Government, in reply, stated that as Catholics, the Portuguese Eurasians had adequate access to free education in mission schools

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26 *PSSLC*, 16 March 1925, p. B42.

27 *PSSLC*, 31 October 1927, p. B157.

28 *Straits Times*, 1 October and 31 October 1931.

29 *Straits Settlements Annual Departmental Report*, 1935, pp. 457-464. See also *Malacca Guardian*, 26 December 1932.

30 *PSSLC*, 5 October 1925, p. B155.

which received more grants-in-aid than other schools. The inadequate housing of this community, however, was not resolved till 1932 when the Government, in response to the efforts of two priests, leased the present Portuguese Settlement in Ujong Pasir to the group.

Review

Without doubt, Tan had an abiding love for the town and state of Malacca – his birthplace and source of "political support". In his Council years, he never forgot this and it was the rare occasion that Tan did not raise matters pertaining to Malacca.

It was, however, this abiding love that clouded his judgement on the port and future of Malacca. This led to years of fruitless crusade and did some harm to his ability to influence Clementi on other more crucial issues, such as Chinese education and immigration.

Except for the port, Tan was generally successful in championing Malacca's needs in the face of discrimination in favour of Penang and Singapore. Where these needs coincided with the British thinking, for example, the issue on Malay padi-planting in Malacca, his constituents' welfare was, as we have seen, advanced far beyond what he advocated. In other areas such as minor town improvements, the need for hospital and water supplies, he was also successful because these were relatively minor and inexpensive projects.

Finally, it was on the Malacca issues that we see him adopt a multiracial approach. While at the Straits Settlements or "national level" he was clearly the spokeman for both the Straits-born Chinese and the *laukehs*, it was at the Malaccan level that he championed the welfare of the other races.

In a tribute to the loyal son of Malacca, Mr Nixon, the European Unofficial Member from Malacca stated:

> The needs of this Settlement have been persistently voiced ... and by none more eloquently than by Mr. Tan Cheng Lock, (hear, hear). The inhabitants of Malacca are not likely to forget his work.[31]

They did not, for in his honour, Heeren Street (along which Tan grew up) was re-named, in years to come, Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock.

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31 Nixon's speech at the Straits Settlements (Malacca) Association luncheon, in honour of Clementi, in Malacca. See *Malacca Guardian*, 5 May 1930.

THE YOUNG COUNCILLOR IN PENSIVE MOOD

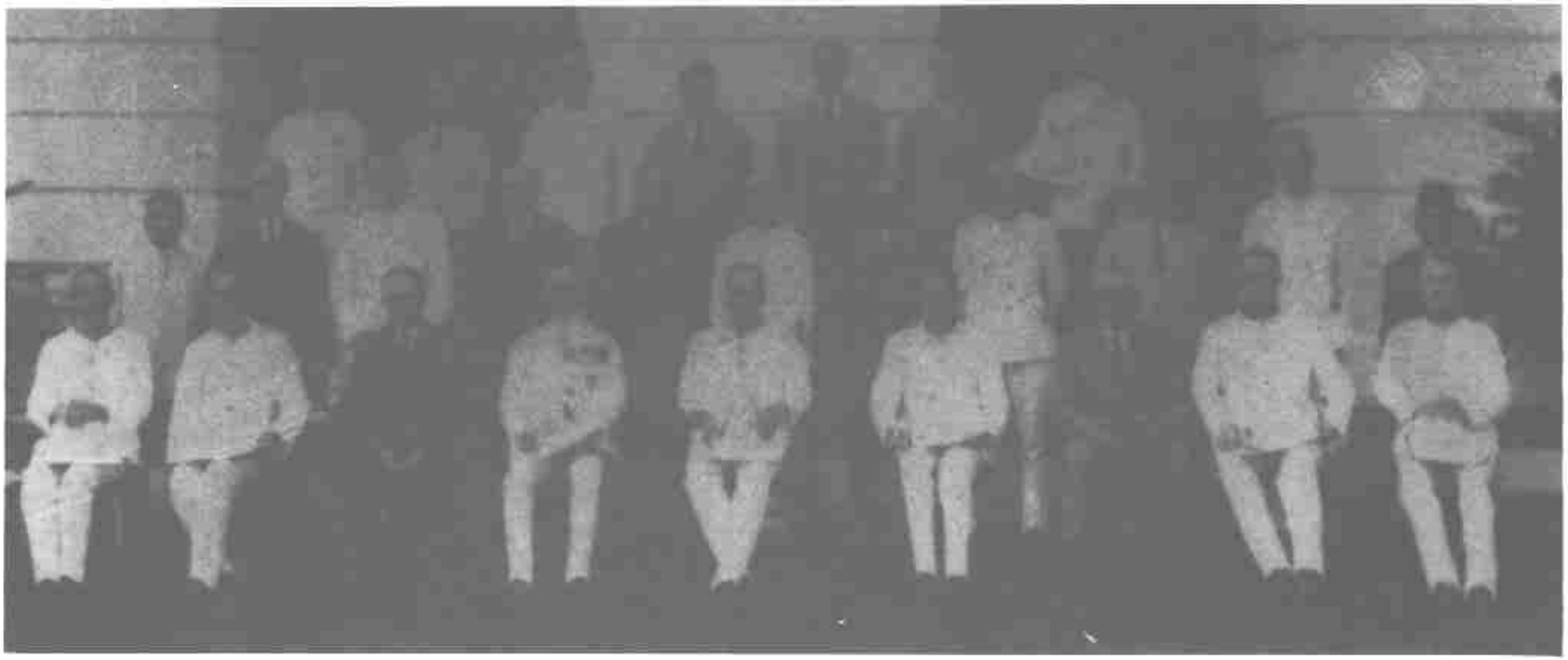
Tan Cheng Lock in the early 1930's.
(Photo by the courtesy of Alice Tan Kim Yoke)

THE COUNCILLOR IN RELAXED MOOD

Tan Cheng Lock, in sarongs, at home with his family.
(Photo by the courtesy of Alice Tan Kim Yoke)

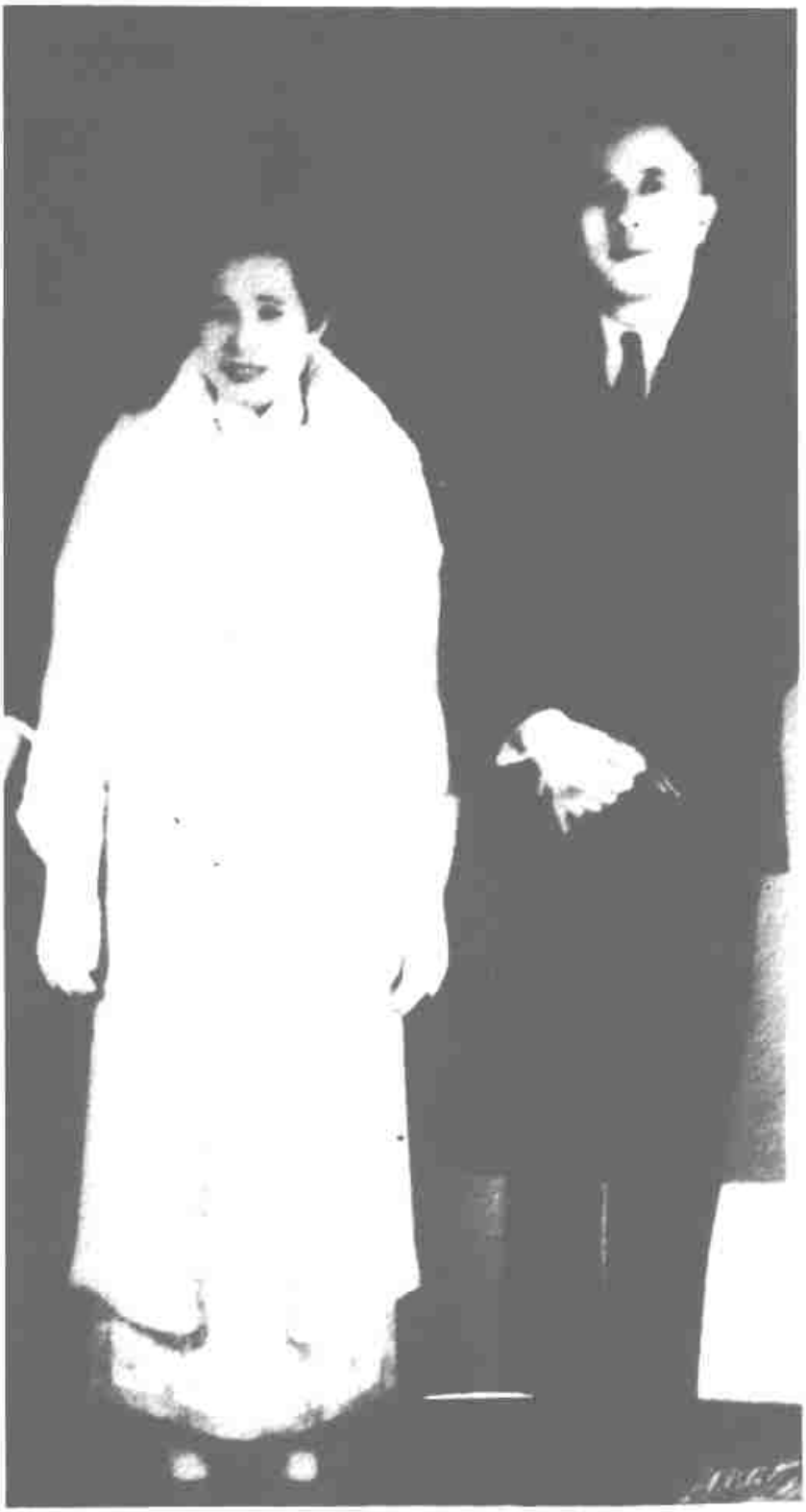
PLAYING HOST

Tan Cheng Lock (seated, fourth left) with Sir Cecil Clementi (seated, third from left) at his home in Malacca.
(Photo by the courtesy of Alice Tan Kim Yoke)



THE STRAITS SETTLEMENTS LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL, 1934

Back Row: G. E. London (Ag Supt, Govt Monopolise), Lim Han Hoe, W. S. Ebden (Commissioner of Land), Khoo Sian Ewe, E. V. G. Day (Clerk of Council), G. E. Wurtzburg, H. Fairburn (Inspector-General of Police), C. Milne.
Centre Row: H. H. Abdoolcader, Sir A. Robinson, J.S.W. Arthur (Ag Resident Councillor, Malacca), P. Simpson, Dr. N. L. Clarke, Dr. W. M. Chambers (Ag Director of Medical and Health Services), TAN CHENG LOCK, A. B. Jordan (Secretary for Chinese Affairs), J. Robinson, J. Watson (Ag Director of Education), Mohamed Rouse bin Chee.
Front Row: A. S. Small (Treasurer), A. M. Goodman (Resident Councillor, Penang), W. J. Wilcoxson, Major General E. O. Lewin, A. Caldecott (OATG), G. L. Ham (Ag CS), E. Newbold, J. H. Pedlows (Ag Attorney-General), A. Sturrock (Director of Public Works).
(Photo by the courtesy of Alice Tan Kim Yoke)



WITH WIFE IN EUROPE

Tan Cheng Lock with Yeo Yoke Neo in Switzerland in 1935.
(Photo by the courtesy of Alice Tan Kim Yoke)

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

While Malacca may be unreservedly proud of its famous, loyal son, it is within the broader framework of the Straits Settlements' politics that Tan Cheng Lock should be assessed. We turn thus to an appraisal of Tan Cheng Lock's legislative performance – an aspect which has not attracted any major scholarly work – and a re-appraisal of his leadership of the Chinese in the inter-war period. In evaluating the former, one cannot treat Tan in isolation but instead would need to compare him with other "great" Straits Chinese Legislators of the pre-World War II period such as Tan Jiak Kim, Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang. In the latter, an attempt is made to assess Tan's leadership of the Chinese, keeping in mind the importance of placing him within the context of his time.

Tan Cheng Lock – the Legislative Councillor

Tan Cheng Lock, the Legislative Councillor, had undoubtedly pro-British leanings. His English education, his belief in the British system of government and the general

benevolence of British rule had nurtured this orientation. For this reason, he was moderate and restrained in his representations in the Straits Settlements Legislative Council. Where he felt that a reform was required or an injustice had been done, he was, however, prepared to right it within the legislative system. He was thus no reactionary.

In the political field, while Tan was for a form of self-government, it was to be achieved within the British Empire. In this regard he was like Song Ong Siang, a "King's Chinese",[1] whose loyalty was focused on the British Crown. But while Song Ong Siang (Tan's contemporary in the Legislative Council) stuck mainly to non-political social issues, Tan consistently spoke out for political reforms. His advocacies of an Asian member to the Executive Council, limited franchise and an unofficial majority in the Legislative Council were demands not heard before in that august body. This is significant, as the 1920s were a period when "politics was something that happened elsewhere".[2] The other "greats" before him, such as Hoo Ah Kay, Lim Boon Keng[3] and Tan Jiak Kim[4] did not "ever dabble in politics in their

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1 Song Ong Siang, an Unofficial Member, first acted in this capacity on behalf of Lim Boon Keng from 1919 to 1921. He held the actual appointment from November 1924 to October 1927. For an account of his career, see Ching Seow Ying, "Song Ong Siang: A King's Chinese", unpublished B.A. (Hons.), Academic Exercise, University of Malaya in Singapore, 1972.

2 Editorial, *Straits Times*, 15 December 1960, when referring to Tan Cheng Lock's political representations in 1926.

3 Lim Boon Keng, the first Straits Settlements Queen's Scholar and a doctor, was first appointed to the Legco in 1895 at the young age of 26. He was re-appointed for three additional terms in 1898, 1901 and 1915. For an account of his career, see Khor Eng Hee, "The Public Life of Dr. Lim Boon Keng" unpublished B.A. (Hons.), Academic Exercise, University of Malaya in Singapore, 1958. See also Hong Lysa, "The Intellectual and Social Reforms of the Chinese in Singapore (1894-1910)", unpublished B.A. (Hons.), Academic Exercise, University of Singapore, 1975, pp. 25-29, 50-51.

4 Tan Jiak Kim first served as an Unofficial Member from December 1890 till he resigned in August 1893. In 1903, he was again appointed to the Legco and served till 1915, a record period of 15 years. For an account of his career, see Phyllis Chew, "Tan Jiak Kim (1895-1917): Straits Chinese Leader" unpublished B.A. (Hons.), Academic Exercise, University of Singapore, 1975.

days, for politics was taboo at that time".[5] Tan, alone among these "greats", had the political vision of a self-governing British Malaya.

This does not mean, however, that Tan was an idealist ahead of his time. The political reforms he advocated had been implemented elsewhere in the British Empire in India, Ceylon and Burma. If he was less than successful in his campaign, it was because luck – an important element in any public career – was not on his side. Tan was unfortunate to have been in the Straits Settlements Legislative Council at a time when:

> The political circumstances ... render it impossible to grant to this Colony a Constitution of the liberal character which his Majesty's Government has approved in most of the leading Crown Colonies. The Government of the Straits Settlements is accordingly endowed with more autocratic authority than would nowadays be regarded as admissible in ... a community equally advanced.[6]

In addition to these circumstances, Tan's attempts at political reforms also ran into the intransigent Clementi, who believed that "democracy ... is not a suitable or a safe form of government for the peoples in the Far East ...."[7]

Despite these obstacles, Tan gained through his persistence several tangible political concessions. The establishment of the Straits Settlements Medical Service and Straits Settlements Civil Service were two such achievements. In contrast to Tan Cheng Lock's vigorous representations, Tan Jiak Kim who also took up the Civil Service issue merely enquired about the qualifications for admission to the Civil Service. Tan was also successful in having an Asian Member nominated to the Executive Council.

On economic matters, Tan Cheng Lock was very vocal like Tan Jiak Kim and Lim Boon Keng, and unlike Song

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[5] *Malacca Guardian*, 25 February 1935.

[6] GD/C 37, Clifford to Colonial Office, 19 July 1927.

[7] *Straits Times*, 31 January 1930. See also L. Guillemard, *Trivial Fond Records*, in which the Governor in his memoir states that "the time is not really right...."

Ong Siang who seldom spoke up on these issues. He spoke up for local interests despite knowing well, as a businessman, that it would be unwise not to sing the tune of the Government. In this area, Tan Cheng Lock, like Jiak Kim before him in 1891, showed that where Government policy was detrimental to the Straits Settlements' interests, he would fearlessly fight it. This, he did on the defence contribution and because he and other vocal elements within the Straits Settlements protested vigorously, the British gave in. From this, and his advocacy to cut down personal emoluments enjoyed by European civil servants, Tan showed that his loyalty to the British Crown did not mean a blind subordination of local interests.

In the social area, Tan stood out as the champion of the community he represented. He took a long-term view, and like Tan Jiak Kim, Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang, he rose in arms against the unfavourable impact of the Government's policies on the English and Malay languages, and Malay and Chinese vernacular education. He, however, went further than Jiak Kim and Ong Siang in pushing for Chinese education, but less so than the resinicized Boon Keng whose efforts in this field extended beyond the confines of the Straits Settlements. Tan saw these issues together with the Government's policies on rice cultivation and restriction on Chinese immigration within the wider framework of a "re-Malayized" British Malaya, and hence was much more vocal about these matters than the others. Unlike the others, however, he carried the fight beyond the confines of the Council. The *Malacca Guardian*, the newspaper of which he was the Chairman, was replete with editorials and articles backing his representations in the Council. He was thus not merely a "chamber politician".

Tan was very much a product of his time. The hordes of Chinese immigrants that flowed in till the 1930s, the large numbers who settled down in British Malaya; the Malay elite's apprehension of this, and the economic depression were developments which called for unusual British policies and reactions. Tan perceived the British as adopting a "pro-Malay" and "anti-Chinese" policy and thus was

forced to switch from a moderate to a near "radical" stance both in and outside of the Council, to champion the interests of the community he represented.

Tan was also a product of his environment. The unrealistic efforts to revive the port of Malacca were a manifestation of his genuine love for his birthplace and his family's long association with the sea. Similarly, the hardship he suffered as a child, nurtured the concern he showed in the Council for the less fortunate in society. As a fifth-generation Malacca Baba with no facility in Mandarin or any Chinese dialect, he, unlike Boon Keng who was a man with dual loyalties, did not suffer from the political split-personality of resinicized Babas. He was thus unaffected by the national awakening in China and was unquestionably loyal to British Malaya.

Given these qualities, Tan was not as "Westernized" as the Christian Ong Siang, neither was he, though proud of his Chinese heritage, as steeped in Confucianist culture as Boon Keng. He epitomized the majority of Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia today – a confluence of both Asian and English influences. He was a public-spirited reformer strongly imbued with Western liberal ideas, yet tolerant of Oriental vices such as concubinage and opium smoking. This unique Westernized-Oriental outlook that he possessed was due to his English education and Chinese upbringing.

Tan Cheng Lock, the Chinese Leader: A Re-appraisal

Soh Eng Lim in his article, "Tan Cheng Lock: His Leadership of the Malayan Chinese", concluded that:

> Tan Cheng Lock's leadership of the Malayan Chinese before the war [World War II] then was basically, but not exclusively one of the English-educated British-citizened Straits Chinese ... It was also largely one of an 'intellectual' and 'indirect' nature ....[8]

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[8] By "indirect", Soh meant that Tan Cheng Lock's advocacies did not come from the public and were made without reference to the circumstances of the time. Tan Cheng Lock was also not a mobilizer. Soh Eng Lim, "Tan Cheng Lock: His Leadership of the Malayan Chinese", *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, I, 1 (March 1960), 39 and 60.

Soh apparently reached this conclusion after a 4-page-section study of Tan's early career from 1923 to 1935[9], a period spanning thirteen years of his public life. Scant reference was made to the political constraints that Tan laboured under.

In evaluating Soh's criticism of the nature of Tan's leadership, it would be well to remember that in the Straits Settlements of the 1920s and early 1930s, it would have been "impolitic" and impossible on Tan's part to attempt a "direct leadership" by organizing the Chinese "masses". As a Legislative Councillor, Tan faced numerous constraints. It is true that Tan was nominated for his "leadership" of the Chinese community of Malacca, but it was largely in recognition of his "commercial leadership" rather than political leadership of the Malacca Chinese. As a leader representing the social, economic and political affairs of the Chinese, the British saw his role to be one of giving "expert" insight into or reflective of the sentiments of the community.[10] In this regard, his advice could either be taken and implemented, considered and forgotten, or simply ignored. At no time was he (or any Unofficial Member) expected to organize his "constituents" or to "aggregate the interests" of his community or to initiate bills in the Council based on such actions. Had he proved too energetic in these activities, he would simply not have been re-nominated by the colonial masters. Too active an extra-Council mobilization "direct leadership" of the Chinese might well have been counter-productive to Tan.

Even if Tan had seriously contemplated political organization and mobilization of the Chinese, it is doubtful whether he would have been successful in organizing the amorphous Chinese. They were by no means a homogeneous, united people as they "form no single community which can be viewed as a political or social entity for other

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[9] *Ibid.*, 36-39.

[10] R. Emerson, *Malaysia: A Study in Direct and Indirect Rule*, p. 279.

than statistical purposes ...."[11] They could be divided into three broad groups. These were the Straits-born or *Nonyas* and *Babas* to which Tan belonged; "local-born" or China-born "domiciled" Chinese or *Laukehs*; and "alien" or "China-born" Chinese or *sinkehs*. The first group of Straits-born were subdivided into the Malacca *Babas*, Penang *Babas* and Singapore *Babas*, each having some or no competency in the Chinese language and dialects. The *Laukehs* and *Sinkehs* were sub-divided into antagonistic, mutually-exclusive clan-dialect "bangs", and reinforced by occupational specialization.[12] The *Sinkehs* and *Laukehs* despised the *Babas* as they considered the latter as "soft" and "lazy".[13]

The Chinese thus constituted, in a sense, a "plural society" within the plural society of British Malaya. Tan as a highly desinicized non-Chinese speaking Malacca-*Baba* would have been seriously handicapped if he had tried to mobilize his kaleidoscope of "constituents" for the effectiveness of a Chinese leader was related to the degree of his "Chinese-ness".[14]

The Chinese were, moreover, politically apathetic. The *Babas* found the British benevolent rule agreeable. The *Sinkehs* viewed their sojourn in British Malaya a temporary one, their sole pre-occupation being to make enough money[15] and retire to their village in China and, for this reason, China's politics more than Malaya's engaged their attention. The *Laukehs*' strong ties to their ancestral altars

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11 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

12 For the thesis that the British as part of their "divide and rule" policy perpetuated these political, socio-economic groupings along dialect lines, see Cheng Lim Keak, *Social Change and the Chinese in Singapore* (Singapore, 1985). See also Edwin Lee, "Singapore, 1867-1914, British Rule in a Multiracial Society", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, National University of Singapore, 1981, pp. 51, 69-71 and 74-76 for fights between the rival Hokkien and Teochew clans in the 19th century.

13 J. Clammer, "The Straits Chinese in Melaka", *Melaka*, II, 170.

14 G.W. Skinner, "Overseas Chinese: Paradigm for a Paradox", in Wijeyewardene, (Ed.) *Leadership and Authority*, p. 203.

15 Tan Cheng Lock cit in R. Heussler, *British Rule in Malaya* (Oxford, 1981), p. 167.

in China also stood in the way of transplanting the loyalty of this group of British Malaya.[16] Hence, except for a handful of English-educated Chinese elite in the Straits Chinese British Association, the rest were busy making money, China-oriented, and disinterested in local politics.

Given this political apathy and Chinese divisiveness, it would have been almost impossible for any Straits Chinese leader of the time to exercise a "non-intellectual" and "direct" form of leadership. This was amply demonstrated by Tan's personal experience in his "leadership" of the Chinese. In the Malaccan Straits Chinese British Association's Extra-ordinary General Meeting of 1928, "out of a membership of 200 only 24"[17] turned up for the "political" meeting. This low turn out, moreover, occurred among a supposedly politically-conscious group. In contrast, Tan's efforts in the formation of the commerce-oriented Asiatic Planters' Association in 1925 "immediately secured 75 memberships".[18]

Such were the political constraints of Tan's time, the divisiveness of the Chinese and their disinterest in politics, it seems far from fair to assess his leadership as "indirect". To assess him so without regard to the context of his time or to employ any modern, liberal yardstick would be irrelevant and quite unfair.

Tan's "leadership" style as the representative of the Chinese during his Legislative Council years was "appropriate" given the circumstances of the day. Since the Chinese could not be organized into a politically influential force and as the generally reasonable British colonial masters could be cajoled into yielding concessions, Tan, by playing by the British rules, had chosen the right strategy to further the interests of the Chinese community. His success is reflected in the concessions that he gained

16 B. Simandjuntak, *Malayan Federalism 1945-1963: A Study of Federal Problems in a Plural Society* (Kuala Lumpur, 1969), p. 5.

17 *Sunday Mirror*, 2 December 1928.

18 *Malacca Observer*, 9 March 1925.

for the community, the British circumspection on issues which he and other Unofficial Members represented, and the fact that despite his refractory stance in the Council, he was renominated on three occasions.

What Others Said

Tan had the satisfaction of knowing that his success was well acclaimed in the 1930s. While one should be cautious in the reading of the hyperbolic references to him in the *Malacca Guardian*,[19] the *Straits Times*, a more independent newspaper, was on the other hand, no less complimentary. In an editorial in 1933, it had this to say of Tan:

> ...far from being a titular representative of Chinese interests. He is a man of unusual ability and attainments, well read and a forceful speaker ... a vigorous critic of the government ever since he was appointed a member of the Legislative Council in 1923 and a sturdy champion of the interests of those he represents.[20]

In another issue the *Straits Times* again honoured Tan, the "universally respected figure in the public life of the colony",[21] as one who

> ...has undoubtedly been one of the most outstanding Asiatic Councillors of recent times. He has followed in the best traditions of the early veterans like Mr Whampoa, Mr Tan Jiak Kim, Dr Lim Boon Keng and Mr Song Ong Siang.[22]

Other contemporaries, including those on the official benches, were no less appreciative of his work. One Colonial Secretary, Sir John Scott, referred to him as "an example of a nominated member who is not tongue-tied but ... a straightforward and outspoken critic".[23] Another Colonial Secretary, Sir Andrew Caldecott, stated that "for 12 years, he represented current opinion ... with a frankness,

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19 See, for example, *Malacca Guardian*, 25 February 1935, which referred to Tan Cheng Lock as "the Great Councillor" and "one in a class by himself...."

20 *Straits Times*, 3 January 1933.

21 *Straits Times*, 18 February 1930.

22 *Straits Times*, 3 December 1934.

23 Speech by Sir J. Scott, *PSSLC*, 16 January 1933, p. B2.

fullness and a fairness that has compelled universal admiration".[24]

Later references to his Legislative Council years, including his own writings of his twilight years in the Council were, however, less complimentary. In an editorial written on the death of Tan in 1960, the *Straits Times* was more restrained when it stated that "much of Tan Cheng Lock's activity in the years before the Second World War was not markedly distinguishable from that of many other Straits Chinese ...."[25] In 1948, thirteen years after his Legislative career, Tan himself wrote:

> ...At the end of my public career, I vowed never again to become a member of any Malayan Legislative Council ... but instead to work among the members of the public and organize them into a strong political body....[26]

Was this the reflection of a disgruntled man, disappointed with his Council years or was it the "manifesto" of an aspiring politician? While the next phase of this aspiring but aging politician's career is too involved to be recounted in this brief work,[27] it is pertinent to establish how Tan felt towards his Council years' performance. The answer may well be found in the circumstances under which he resigned from the Executive Council in 1935.

Retirement

On 26 September 1935, Tan Cheng Lock "resigned his appointment"[28] as an Unofficial Member of the Straits

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24 Speech by Sir A. Caldecott, *PSSLC*, 18 February 1935, p. B2.

25 *Straits Times*, 15 December 1960.

26 Tan Cheng Lock in letters to Mrs. B.H. Oon, 22 October 1948 and to Wu Lien Teh, 7 October 1948. Cit in K.G. Tregonning, "Tan Cheng Lock: A Malayan Nationalist", 47; J.M. Gullick, *Malaysia: Its Political and Economic Development* (Petaling Jaya, 1986), p. 43; and Soh Eng Lim, "Tan Cheng Lock: His Leadership of the Malayan Chinese", 48.

27 For an account of his post-1935 political career, see K.G. Tregonning, *Ibid.*, 46-76; Soh Eng Lim, *Ibid.*, 40-59; and Chan Heng Chee, "The Malayan Chinese Association", unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Singapore, 1965.

28 GD 110, Caldecott to Colonial Office, 26 September 1935.

Settlements Executive Council, a short two months before the expiration of his term.[29] Why the undue haste? The official records (CO 273, GD/C and GD) did not specify the reason for his resignation. The newspapers of the period, too, were silent over the issue. Only family sources are very sure that Tan "retired" so as to go to temperate Switzerland for an urgent "rest-cure" for his wife who was suffering from a serious chest infection. Tan's reason for resigning was, perhaps, not as straightforward.[30]

At the end of his second term in 1928, Tan had "wished for retirement".[31] He was however persuaded to stay on "in view of the unanimous desire for his reappointment...."[32] This report in the *Malacca Guardian*, probably with Tan's blessings, added that "it means a genuine sacrifice on his part". The "sacrifice" was his wife's need for attention because of her fragile health.[33]

In 1935, while his wife's chest infection needed his urgent attention, Tan's sudden exit may also have signified his disappointment with the Legislative and Executive system.[34] We have seen his unhappiness with Clementi's "anti-Chinese" policies between 1932 to 1934. More telling, perhaps, was his indignation at being awarded a "lowly" C.B.E. in 1933.[35] The *Malacca Guardian* in a scathing editorial stated:

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29 Tan Cheng Lock was appointed for two years with effect from 17 November 1933. See GD 105, Clementi to Colonial Office, 7 February 1934; and *Straits Settlements Government Gazette*, 24 November 1933, Government Notification 2214.

30 Colonial Office record series 285 "Minutes of the Straits Settlements Executive Council" is unfortunately unavailable in Singapore. This series may throw light on Tan Cheng Lock's resignation.

31 *Malacca Guardian*, 14 December 1931.

32 *Malacca Guardian*, 31 December 1928.

33 Tan Cheng Lock subsequently took her to Bagrasti in Sumatra for a "rest-cure". See *Malacca Guardian*, 18 May 1931.

34 For Tan Cheng Lock's dissatisfaction with the Legco, see Tan Cheng Lock, *Miscellaneous Speeches* (Malacca, 1951), pp. 65-70.

35 Clementi had to send three emissaries to persuade Tan Cheng Lock to accept the award. Interview with Alice Tan on 26 September 1986.

> ...we cannot but say that the compensation is a most ungrateful one ... we contend that the Hon'ble Tan Cheng Lock deserved, not a ... C.B.E. but a knighthood. We consider it an insult that the Chinese member for Malacca had been called upon to accept an honour ... doled out ... to officials for good, routine-salaried work....[36]

Tan, probably angered with the award, failed to attend the investiture ceremony. Clementi, in reporting his absence, wrote that Tan was unable to attend because of an illness.[37] Yet another indication of his increasing disappointment with the system, was a report in *Malacca Guardian* in December 1934 stating that Tan was "definitely retiring"[38] from the Straits Settlements Legislative Council. Tan was clearly disengaging himself from the legislature that he had increasingly grown disillusioned with.

Tan Cheng Lock thus, temporarily, faded out of the Straits Settlements' public life in 1935, a disillusioned man. For most of his adult life since 1912, he was the doughty champion of Malacca and the Chinese community. From 1923 to 1934, in the Legislative Council, he soldiered alone for political reforms and (with or in support of others) for economic and social justice. Much of what he struggled for did not meet with success, but several of his concerns such as loyalty to Malaya, self-government, education and language remain relevant in modern Malaya and Malaysia. It may be argued that Tan Cheng Lock, more than any Chinese of his generation in the 1920s and early 1930s, contributed to the foundation of present-day Malaysia. In his endeavours, while he gained personally in some, it was the Chinese and the Straits Settlements – and British Malaya generally – that gained most.

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[36] *Malacca Guardian*, 9 January 1933. Tan Cheng Lock was awarded a Knighthood nearly 2 decades later, see *Straits Times*, 1 January 1952.

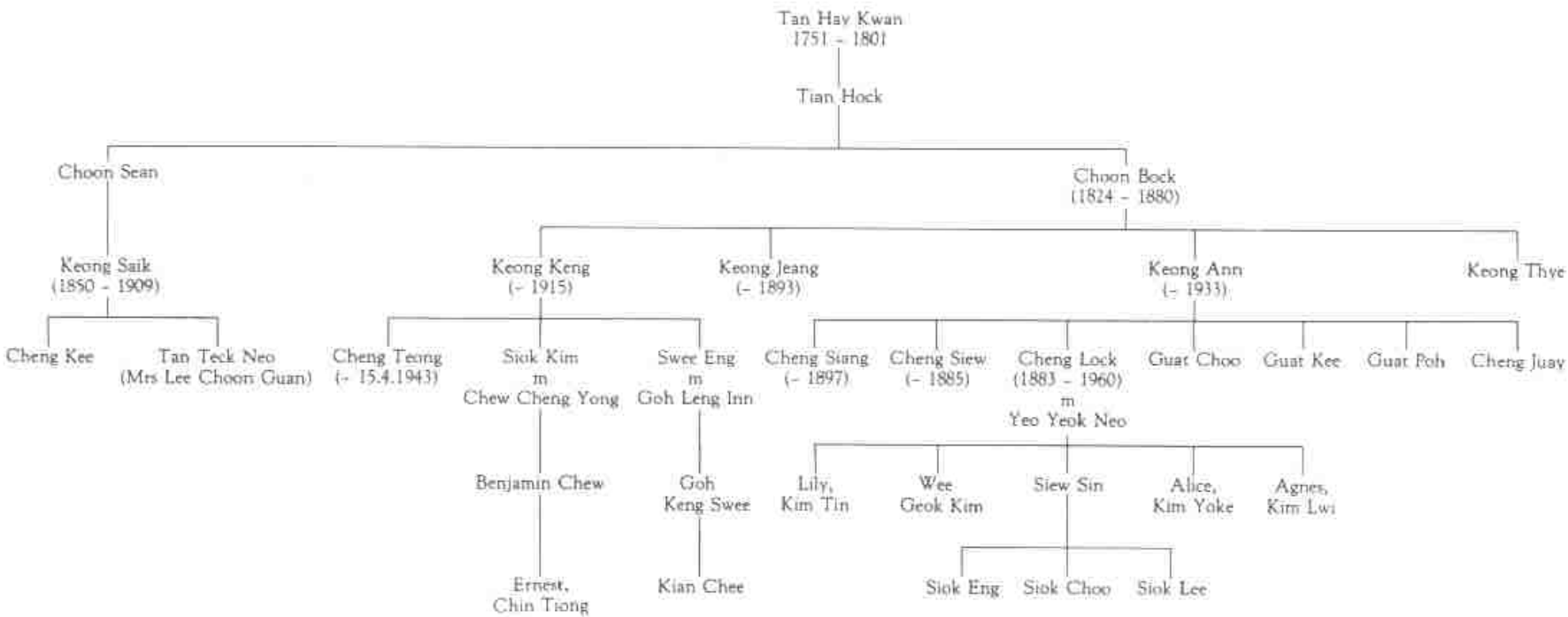
[37] See GD 101, Clementi to Colonial Office, 3 May 1933.

[38] *Malacca Guardian*, 3 December 1934.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

A Condensed Family Tree of Tan Cheng Lock



Appendix B
Chinese Members of the Straits Settlements Legislative [Council, 1867 – 1942]

Chinese Members	*Period*	*Approx. nos. of years*	
Hoo Ah Kay	1869 – 1880	9	Kay
Seah Liang Seah	1883 – 1890	7	
Tan Jiak Kim	1890 – 1893		
	1903 – 1915	15	
Lim Boon Keng	1895 – 1903		
	1915 – 1921	14	
Lee Choon Guan	1922 – 1924	4	
Tan Cheng Lock	1923 – 1934	12	
Yeo Guan Seok	1923 – 1926	3	
Song Ong Siang	1924 – 1927	3	
Quah Beng Kee	1926 – 1929	3	
Chan Sze Jin	1928 – 1930	2	
Wee Swee Teow	1930 – 1933	3	
Lim Han Hoe	1933 – 1941	8	
Khoo Sian Ewe	1934 – 1941	7	
Tay Lian Teck	1935 – 1941	6	

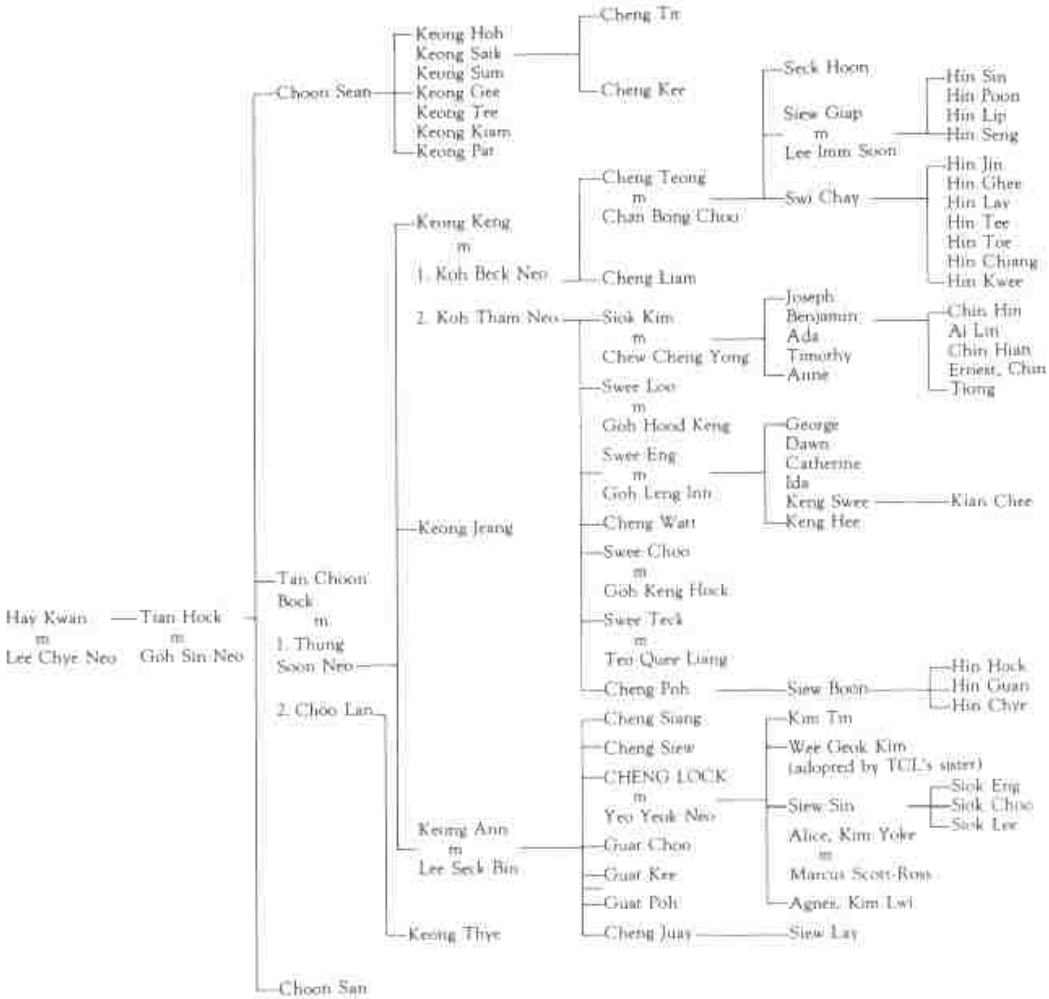
Sources:

a) G. Chia, "Asian Members of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council, 1908 – 1941" unpublished B.A. (Hons.), Academic Exercise, University of Malaya Singapore in Singapore, 1953. pp. 67-70.

b) P. Chew, "Tan Jiak Kim (1895 – 1917): Straits Chinese Leader" unpublished B.A. (Hons.), Academic Exercise, University of Singapore, 1985. p. 70.

c) C.F. Yong, "British Attitudes towards the Chinese Community Leaders in Singapore, 1819-1941" in *Journal of the South Seas Society*, Vol. 40, Parts 1 & 2, (1985), 82.

Appendix C
The Family of Tan Choon Bock



Sources

a) Tan Choon Bock's *Will and Last Testament*, 26 June 1880. (Loaned by Alice Tan Kim Yoke)
b) Proposed 10th Interim Distribution of the Estate of Tan Choon Bock.
c) Tan Siok Choo, "The Tan Family Saga" in the *New Straits Times Annual 1981.*
d) Genealogy of Tan Choon Bock's Family researched by Master Emry's Chew, son of Prof. Ernest Chew.
e) Typescript *Notes on Tan Family*. (Courtesy of Alice Tan Kim Yoke).
f) Interviews with Alice Tan Kim Yoke.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

List of Abbreviations

CO 273	Colonial Office records series 273
COD	Colonial Office Despatch
GD	Governors' Despatches to Secretary of State
GD/C	Governors' Despatches (Secret and Confidential) to Secretary of State
PSLCC	Proceedings of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council

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