



BOOK REVIEW

Kua Bak Lim, Lim How Seng and Roney Tan (eds.). *An Illustrious Heritage: The History of Tan Tock Seng and Family*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2023.

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Tan Tock Seng (TTS) is a household name in Singapore, essentially because of the Tan Tock Seng Hospital that was established in 1844 as a “pauper hospital” has become one of Singapore’s pioneering medical institutions (p. 224). According to the book, Tan Tock Seng Hospital in the past two centuries “has evolved from a pauper hospital to a full general hospital, its journey marked by many pioneering milestones that reflect the evolution and innovation of healthcare in Singapore” (p. 277). Today, the hospital is the second largest hospital in Singapore and a national centre for a few fields such as neuroscience, infectious diseases, and skin. Chapter 7 of the book, entitled “Tan Tock Seng Hospital: Then and Now”, provides the hospital’s history from a pauper hospital to becoming “an integrated healthcare hub” in Singapore. But apart from the hospital’s national historical significance, the book provides fascinating stories and history of the family, illustrating the significance of the Peranakan Chinese and colonialism in Singapore and Southeast Asia.

The first three chapters cover the background and cultural context of what might have impelled TTS’s father, Tan Guat Tiong, to migrate from China to the Nanyang (Southeast Asia) as well as TTS’s life; and of particular significance in Chapter 2, is the reappraisal of TTS’s family financial situation. The common idea of TTS’s rags-to-riches story was based on the obituary published in the *Singapore Free Press* in 1850. But archival records show that TTS’s family was moderately affluent as they owned slaves, and that by 1828, approximately nine years after Singapore was established, he was already a landowner. Chapters 3 and 4 chronicle and explore the Tan empire that was built by TTS, whose humble beginning was as a produce retailer. However, “in a short span of 18 years, Tan Tock Seng’s business had expanded, markedly evolving from a small local firm trading in local produce within the Malay Archipelago to an international import and export entity” (p. 49). His import and export business soon expanded into the markets of China, India, and London and by the 1840s, he was a leader of the Chinese community. In 1844, he “became the first Asian to be bestowed Justice of Peace by Straits Settlements Governor William John Butterworth” (p. 62). He also had a close relationship with King Mongkut and the Siamese royal family, which would continue through the generations until TTS’s great grandson, Tan Boo Liat (TBL). In fact, both Tan Kim Cheng (TTS’s eldest son) and TBL were conferred the royal title of *Phra Anukulsiamkij* (Consul-General).

Chapter 4, “The Multiple Dimensions of Tan Kim Ching”, focuses on TKC, who exponentially expanded TTS’s empire and also introduced Anna Leonowens to the Siamese court famously portrayed in the film, *The King and I* (directed by Walter Lang, 1956).¹ It is the longest and

arguably the most interesting chapter with contributions from four different writers: Vitthya Vejajiva's² "At the Royal Court of Siam" that draws out TKC's relationship with the Siamese royal family; Lim How Seng's "From Chop Chin Seng to Kim Ching & Co." that maps out TKC's life and businesses with clear and comprehensive charts and tables; Toshiyuki Miyata's "Siam Rice and Tan Kim Ching's Rice Business" that focuses on TKC's rice business in Thailand; and Wong Yee Tuan's "A Power Broker in Geopolitics of 19th Century Southeast Asia", which intriguingly examines how TKC's multifarious business empire was "intertwined with politics that crossed geographical boundaries and influenced the social, economic and political realms in the region", shaping the commercial and political landscape of Southeast Asia (p. 151). TKC's wide geopolitical influence illustrates the complex commercial network of the Peranakan Chinese (where business and kinship were often intertwined) and the significance of colonialism (trade) in Singapore and Southeast Asia, where they were clearly compradors as well. Wong also notably discloses TKC's involvement in the firearms and opium trade; such unsavoury information in Asian contexts is usually whitewashed. Moreover, this information seems to contradict Kua Bak Lim's (one of the editors) idealistic opening, which introduces the illustrious Tan Tock Seng family's *jia feng* (a Chinese precept of "family heritage"), "which refers to the morals and lifestyle passed down from generation to generation within a family or clan, that is, the ethos of the family... It is only with high moral standards that the family can last for generations" (p. 1). This only proves that life is more complex, and even paradoxical, with many shades of grey.

Chapter 5, "The Tan Family and Thian Hock Keng Temple", delineates the lasting relationship carved out by TTS, who was the temple's strongest benefactor, and its subsequent management under TTS, TKC, and TBL, who served as presidents. Chapter 6, "The Rise and Decline of Tan Boo Liat", is somewhat disappointing, as more research could have been undertaken on the "mysterious disappearance" of TBL from 1915 until his death in 1934.³ The remaining last three chapters (8, 9, and 10), respectively focus on historical monuments relating to TTS and the family, the philanthropic spirit of the family, and the family ties that have been kept alive through reunions in the last three decades.

An Illustrious Heritage: The History of Tan Tock Seng and Family is a much needed, well-researched book with interesting photographs (old and new) that documents over 200 years of history of a pioneering family in Singapore—how they have contributed significantly to the foundation and development of Singapore. It is thus far, the most academic book on the subject matter that offers multiple perspectives and also proves to be an interesting read. It is commendable that the National Heritage Board of Singapore has funded the book and strongly supports in the national archiving of personal and national histories—an important activity that is lacking in the surrounding Southeast Asian countries.

David Hock Jin Neo

Faculty of Film, Theatre and Animation, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

NOTES

- 1 Other cinematic adaptations included *Anna and the King of Siam* (directed by John Cromwell, 1946) and *Anna and the King* (directed by Andy Tennant, 1999) but they were not as popular as the musical, *The King and I*.
- 2 Vitthya Vejajiva was the Deputy Chief of Mission of the Royal Thai Embassy in Singapore from 1967–1971.
- 3 This is especially when most parts of the book are well-researched and when a family member, Roney Tan, who was also one of the editors, has access to the family.