

Book Review

A.H.C. Ward, R. W. Chu and J. Salaff edited
and translated with notes, *The Memoirs of Tan Kah-kee*,
Singapore University Press, Singapore, 1994, xiv + 366pp.

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I The importance of the original work

This book is an edited English translation of Tan Kah-kee's Memoirs written in Chinese and first published in Singapore in 1946 under the title *Nangiao Huiyilu* 南僑回憶錄 (The Memoirs of an Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia).

The author of the work, Tan Kah-kee (陳嘉庚, 1874–1961) is an Overseas Chinese legend and folk hero whose legacies have inspired and influenced millions of people in China and in Southeast Asia, and have contributed greatly to the modernization of these areas. He was one of the foremost capitalist-industrialists of his time and also well remembered as prominent educationalist, philanthropist, social reformer and political activist. This is one of the important reasons of making his

Memoirs valuable as historical material. It is, therefore, understandable the fact that after the first publishing of the original work, it has been reprinted four times, the latest in Taiwan in 1990.

Authors of this book chose to call the work "Memoirs" rather than "Autobiography" because of the nature of the information and the purpose of its being written which heavily emphasized the social and political happenings of his time rather than his own life.

The importance of this work is best described in the research work on Tan Kah-kee by C. F. Yong entitled *Tan Kah-kee: The Making of an Overseas Chinese Legend* (Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1987) as follows: "Undoubtedly this is one of the best documented autobiographies ever written by an immigrant Chinese in Southeast Asia. This work has remained an immensely important source for those seeking to understand not only Tan Kah-kee himself but the Chinese community in Singapore and Chinese politics as a whole"(p. xv). We have almost nothing to add to this evaluation.

II Characteristics of this translation edition

On this English translation edition, we can point out the following three characteristics.

Firstly, this book is not a complete translation of the Memoirs. The original work, consisting of 420 Chinese pages which nearly 300,000 characters arranged under 518 headings, includes descriptions of many

minor isolated events that seem to make no significant contribution to the enhancement of our understanding of either Tan Kah-kee himself or the political, social and economic circumstances of his time. Furthermore, there is far too much repetition of the same information throughout the text. The major flaws of the original work are exactly the excessive repetition of identical information in different places of the text. These are the sections that authors of this book have left out in this book.

Secondly, authors of this book have re-arranged the order of the original sections and grouped them under 5 major topics — education, patriotism, political matters, social affairs and Tan Kah-kee's personal business undertakings. Within the major topic, there are in some instances sub-topics, under which the original order of sections is kept. The purpose of their doing this are twofold. One is to make it easier for the readers to find information under the theme, and the other is to make the presentation of the information more coherent and as a result easier to read. I think that it is better treatment for the reader.

The third point is about notes in this translation. This translation is intended for scholars and students in the China field as much as for people studying or just having a general interest in various aspects of Southeast Asia. Consequently, contents of some of the notes are mainly very basic background information and are there for those non-specialist readers who may find them useful. At any rate, these notes may be very useful for all readers of this book.

With regard to transliteration of Chinese words, authors of this book

chose the pinyin system for all names and terms with the exception of names of persons, places and organizations in Southeast Asia for which there are already established transliterations.

Considering these points, we can say that this translation edition will provide a rare primary source material for researchers and may be a work arguably more readable and coherent than the original text.

III Contents of the Memoirs — Activities of Tan Kah-kee in the pre-war era and during the war—

Here, I want to say something about the contents of the Memoirs of Tan Kah-kee.

The major topics which Tan's original work should contain are presented in his own foreword as follows:

- (1) Financial aid given by Overseas Chinese in Singapore to Fujian at the time of the founding of the Republic and the return of President Sun Yat-sen to China,
- (2) An account of the history of Jimei Schools, Xiamen University, and the education of the Chinese in Southeast Asia,
- (3) The Committee to aid Fujian, the Ji'nan massacre, and some related

social incidents,

(4) Fund-raising committees in Southeast Asia and the work of the Federation of China Relief Funds of Southern Asia after the July 7th Incident,

(5) The return to China of technical personnel and comfort missions and my (=Tan's) personal experiences in the 10 or so provinces that I visited,

(6) The disasters Chen Yi caused in Fujian and my written protests,

(7) The serious discussions I had with Generalissimo Jiang [Jieshi], Chairman Mao [Mao Zedong] and the commanders of the war zones,

(8) The Japanese invasion of the South, the Overseas Chinese mobilization to resist the enemy and the fall of Southeast Asia,

(9) Material written after the war, to be found in the appendices, such as "Housing and Sanitation" and "China and Annam",

(10) My personal business pursuits. (pp. 8-9)

According to his explanation, Tan Kah-kee came from a modest family background and had only a few years of formal education. He left his home town, Jimei, a small fishing village near Xiamen in Fujian

Province, Southern China, when he was 16 years old, to join his father in Singapore.

Based in Singapore, the capital of the then British Malaya, Tan succeeded to build up the vast business empire ranging from rubber plantations and manufacturing, ocean transport, import and export brokerage, sawmills, canneries, real estate, to rice trading.

He tried to share his fortune with others. As one of his famous saying goes, "Money is like fertilizer, to be useful it has to be spread around," Tan was a staunch believer in "giving back to society." As one of the good examples, he single-handedly found Xiamen (Amoy) University and had maintained it for 16 years until it was taken over and designated a national university by the Chinese government in 1936. To him, reform in education was the most fundamental way to modernize China and one of the most urgent things to be done in order to save his homeland from further dominance and humiliation by foreign nations. In Singapore, Tan was also instrumental in the establishment of five primary and secondary Chinese Schools. Promoting education and taking leadership in urging various social reforms were life-long personal crusades of Tan against poverty, ignorance and social and national injustice.

However, it was in politics that Tan had the arena to give full play to his leadership abilities, to make the most immediate impact and win the greatest fame. Tan's emergence as a leading political force in Singapore started in 1928 when he undertook the chairmanship of the Singapore Shantung Relief Fund Committee. His willingness to work

within British rule and order earned him respect, certain trust and the blessing of the British Straits Government.

Within the Chinese community, Tan established his power bases in the Ee Hoe Hean Club, the so-called Millionaires' Club in Singapore, and the Hokkien Huay Kuan (The Fujian Provincial Fraternity Association). Being a leader and an executive of both of these organizations for many years, Tan had gradually developed a most powerful network of financial muscle, brains and grassroots support for himself.

Thus, in 1937, his leadership went unchallenged and was massively supported during the establishment of the Federation of China Relief Funds of Southern Asia and raised a total of S\$400 million to support the Chinese war effort against Japanese aggression before the declaration of war in 1941 by the Allies. Tan was the Chairman and the driving force of the Federation from its beginning to the end.

In 1940, as one of the measures to support China, Tan organized a Comfort Mission to China consisting of Overseas Chinese representatives from almost all the regions of Southeast Asia. During an extensive tour of China, Tan personally met with most of the leaders in the Nationalist government in Chongqing as well as the Communist leaders in Yan'an. Tan returned to Singapore totally disillusioned with the Guomindang (the Nationalist Party) because of its corruption, wastefulness and lack of sincerity about joining forces with the Communists in waging a common war against Japan. On the contrary, in the Communist base in Yan'an, Tan was immensely impressed with

the “classless” atmosphere of the society and the puritanical life style of its leaders. He was convinced by Mao Zedong and other Communists that they were sincere about forming a united front with the Nationalists against Japan.

After returning to Southeast Asia, Tan began to launch a personal propaganda campaign against the Guomindong based on his own eyewitness observations.

IV Tan Kah-kee in post-war years

Tan Kah-kee began to write his Memoirs in March 1943, when he was hiding from the Japanese Occupation of Singapore in Java island, in the then Dutch East Indies. The bulk of the work was completed in April 1944. In the following year and a half, he further completed “My personal business undertakings” and the “Post-war addendum” which he put together at the end of the main work as a sort of supplement. In the meanwhile, Tan came back to Singapore on October 6 1945, nearly two months after the Japanese surrender.

During the post-war years, by making stinging attack on the Guomindang and by voicing strong support for the Communist movement in China, Tan made clear his pro-Communist political stand. Tan’s change of political stand from pro-Jiang Jieshi to supporting Mao Zedong played a significant part in the splitting of the Chinese community in Singapore into two political camps: Pro-Jiang Tieshi

group like Aw Boon Haw (胡文虎, 1883–1954), Hakka Chinese and Tan's rival, and Pro-Mao Zedong group led by Tan himself.

Perhaps this situation helped to bring to an end Tan's role as a community spokesman in post-war Singapore where fear of communism became a dominant concern of both the British colonial government and society at large. Tan Kah-kee returned to settle in the newly founded People's Republic of China in 1950. I agree with the authors of this book that Tan's departure from Singapore was the end of the most colorful and memorable pages of Overseas Chinese history in Southeast Asia, and it was also symbol of the conclusion of one whole generation of Overseas Chinese who had been faithfully guarding their Chinese identity in a foreign land.

After making great contribution to the nation building of the People's Republic of China, Tan Kah-kee died in 1961 there.

Tan Kah-kee's life has been the subject of many controversies. This Memoirs by himself will be useful as one of the fundamental sources for carrying out researches about him and East and Southeast Asia of his time deeply.