

Biographical Notes

Tan Cheng Lock (5 April 1883 – 13 December 1960) –Businessman/politician

Tan Cheng Lock was born on 5 April 1883 into a rich and prominent Straits Chinese family in Malacca. He received his education at the Malacca High School and completed his Cambridge Certificate at Singapore's Raffles Institution (RI). In 1902, he became an English and Literature teacher at RI after giving up his plan to read law in the United Kingdom following his failure to secure a Queen's Scholarship.¹

In 1908, Tan returned to Malacca in 1908 to work as assistant manager at a rubber estate.² He successfully worked his way up and made a fortune in the rubber industry.³ Subsequently, he became the director of more than 20 rubber and industrial companies, including the Malaka Pinda Rubber Estates Limited, the United Malacca Rubber Estates Limited, the Oversea Chinese Banking Corporation, Sime Darby and Company Limited, and the Malaya Tribune Press Limited.⁴

In 1913, Tan married Yeo Yoke Neo and had five children – four daughters and a son. His son, Tan Siew Sin, went on to become independent Malaya's finance minister.⁵

Tan was active in public life. In 1912, he was appointed a Justice of Peace, and in the following year, municipal commissioner for Malacca, a position he held up to 1922.⁶ As municipal commissioner, he championed the needs of Malaccan residents, regardless of ethnic group, economic and social class.⁷

Tan was a member of various business and social organisations, and government committees in Malacca.⁸ In 1915, he helped re-start the Malacca branch of the Straits Chinese British Association, reformed the Chinese Company of the Malacca Volunteer Corps and helped raised funds for the British war efforts.⁹

Between 1923 and 1934, Tan served as an unofficial member of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council, and between 1933 and 1935, he was the first Asian unofficial to be appointed to the Straits Settlements Governor's Executive Council.¹⁰ In the Council, Tan was outspoken on several issues, including the lack of Asian representation in the colonial civil service and local administration.¹¹ He was an advocate for education, pushing for universal English language education as a means of raising Malayan consciousness, and supported the idea of establishing an institution for tertiary education for locals in Malaya.¹² He was on the Anglo-Chinese College Council established in 1918 by the Methodist Mission to oversee the establishment of a Methodist college and was later a member of the council that oversaw the formation of the of University of Malaya in 1949.¹³

¹ Leo Suriyadinata, ed., *Southeast Asian personalities of Chinese descent: a biographical dictionary* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012), p. 1055; Soh Eng Lim, "Tan Cheng Lock: His Leadership of the Malayan Chinese", *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 1, No. 1, March 1960, p. 31.

² Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1055.

³ K. G. Treggoning, "Tan Cheng Lock: A Malayan Nationalist", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, March 1979, p. 25.

⁴ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1055.

⁵ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1055.

⁶ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1055.

⁷ Treggoning, "Tan Cheng Lock", pp. 41-43.

⁸ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, pp. 1055-1056.

⁹ Soh, "Tan Cheng Lock", p. 31.

¹⁰ Treggoning, "Tan Cheng Lock", p. 31; Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1055.

¹¹ Treggoning, "Tan Cheng Lock", pp. 28-31.

¹² Treggoning, "Tan Cheng Lock", p. 34-35.

¹³ Treggoning, "Tan Cheng Lock", p. 35, 37.

Tan was also an advocate of the anti-opium movement, and opposed the servitude of young girls, known as *mui tsai*, to families.¹⁴ He was active in the Po Leung Kuk, an institution whose aim was to protect young women and girls from being trafficked.¹⁵

From as early as 1926, Tan lobbied for self-government for Malaya.¹⁶ When he evacuated with his family to India during the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945), Tan founded the Overseas Chinese Association (OCA) in 1943.¹⁷ While the OCA was established ostensibly to deal with issues relating to Malayan and Chinese evacuees, it seems that Tan hoped that it would also serve as a vehicle for post-war political advocacy for Malayan Chinese. However, the Association did not take off as a mass political party.¹⁸

Tan returned to Malaya in 1946,¹⁹ and became chairman of the All Malaya Council of Joint Action.²⁰ The Council opposed the British proposals of changes to the Malayan constitution and citizenship requirements and called for equal citizenship rights for all who made Malaya their home.²¹ In 1949, Tan co-founded the Malayan Chinese Association and became its first president.²² He held that position until 1958.²³

For his contributions, Tan was made Commander of the British Empire in 1933, and awarded a knighthood in 1952.²⁴ The latter made him one of only three Straits Chinese to be awarded a knighthood. The other two were Sir Song Ong Siang and Sir Lim Han Hoe.²⁵ In 1949, Tan was awarded the Dato Paduka Mahkota Johor.²⁶

Tan died at his home in Malacca on 13 December 1960, at the age of 77. He was the first non-royal to be accorded a state funeral.²⁷

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¹⁴ Treggoning, "Tan Cheng Lock", p. 39-40; "Mui tsai an abomination, says Mr Tan Cheng Lock", *The Straits Times*, 14 May 1937.

¹⁵ Treggoning, "Tan Cheng Lock", p. 40.

¹⁶ Treggoning, "Tan Cheng Lock", p. 30.

¹⁷ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, pp. 1056, 1057.

¹⁸ Treggoning, "Tan Cheng Lock", pp. 48-49.

¹⁹ Treggoning, "Tan Cheng Lock", p. 51.

²⁰ "Council of Action outlines policy", *Malaya Tribune*, 16 December 1946.

²¹ "We must hang together or hang separately", *Sunday Tribune (Singapore)*, 15 December 1946; "Council of Action outlines policy", *Malaya Tribune* 16 December 1946.

²² Heng Pek Koon, "The Social and Ideological Origins of the Malayan Chinese Association", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Sep., 1983, at p. 293.

²³ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1055.

²⁴ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1058.

²⁵ Treggoning, "Tan Cheng Lock", p. 69.

²⁶ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1058.

²⁷ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1058.