

Biographical Notes

Tan Chin Tuan (1908 – 2005) – Banker/Philanthropist

Childhood and family

Tan Chin Tuan was born in Singapore on 21 November 1908. His father, Tan Cheng Siong, was a prominent Hokkien businessman who travelled from China to Singapore. Subsequently, he invested in several sawmills and a rubber estate which were highly profitable enterprises in early colonial Singapore. Tan Cheng Siong was Managing Director of the United Saw Mills Limited and the company was reputed to be “an amalgamation of some of the most efficient saw mills in Singapore ... [capable of supplying] all building materials with certainty and dispatch”.¹ Shortly after, Tan Cheng Siong was also appointed as one of the Board of Directors of the Oversea-Chinese Bank when it was established in 1919 and he was the bank’s first non-English educated general manager.² Other than serving as the Justice of the Peace, Tan Cheng Siong was also a member of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and the Chinese Advisory Board in Singapore. He was thus highly respected by the local population before his sudden death in 1922.³ The high social status of Tan Cheng Siong also helped to lend credibility to the reputation of a young Tan Chin Tuan who had yet to make a name for himself in the 1920s. He was able to tap on the social networks of his father when he embarked on his own banking career after 1925.⁴

As the eldest son, Tan Chin Tuan would be asked to accompany his father to social gatherings at various clubs when he was young. Places like the Goh Loo Club and the Ee Hoe Hean Club were popular venues where many Hokkien merchants would meet and socialise, exchange news of China and explore business opportunities over meals. More importantly, it provided the chance for Tan to meet his father’s friends which included prominent Chinese businessman and community leader Tan Kah Kee. It was at these gatherings that he was introduced to rubber tycoon and banker Tan Ean Kiam and See Boo Ih, the managing director of Chinese Commercial Bank, who would later employ him as a clerk upon his graduation.

In September 1926, he married Helene Wee – youngest daughter of Wee Theam Seng (manager of Chinese Commercial Bank). He was, by then, the assistant secretary in the bank.⁵ They had three children after their marriage. In 1933, he was chosen to be the manager of Overseas-Chinese Banking Corporation (OCBC) following the merger of Ho Hong Bank, Oversea-Chinese Bank and Chinese Commercial Bank. He was also entrusted to oversee the Eastern Realty Company Limited, a subsidiary of OCBC which managed properties mortgaged to the bank. This working experience allowed him to build up the necessary knowledge on estate management which in turn, was crucial to expanding the bank’s investment portfolio and assets after the Second World War.

¹ “Important Notice to Contractors & Builders. The United Saw Mills, Ltd.”, *Malaya Tribune*, July 1, 1914, 6.

² Mike Macbeth, *Quiet Achiever: The Life and Times of Tan Sri Dr. Tan Chin Tuan* (Singapore: Times Editions, 2003), 16.

³ A short biography of Tan Cheng Siong in Chinese can also be found in Bak Lim Kua (ed.) 柯木林主编, *Who's Who in the Chinese Community of Singapore 新华历史人物列传* (Singapore: Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, 1995), 90. On the death of Tan Cheng Siong and prominent figures who attended his funeral, see “Late Mr. Tan Cheng Siong, J. P.”, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, October 26, 1922, 12.

⁴ On biography of Tan Chin Tuan, refer to TCT Folios 640, 659 & 660.

⁵ “Fashionable Chinese Wedding”, *Malayan Saturday Post*, October 2, 1926, 15.

Political involvement in the pre-war era

In 1939, Tan was appointed as one of the 25 members in the Board of Municipal Commission and it marked the start of his political involvement under the colonial rule. There were many challenges for Tan which include dealing with arrogance from the then British Municipal President William Bartley.⁶ Nevertheless, he was able to fulfil the responsibilities entrusted to him and his talents were not unnoticed by Sir John Bagnall. Sir Bagnall was a senior unofficial member of the legislature and Chairman of the Straits Trading Company, a British-founded tin-smelting and mining company incorporated in 1887.⁷

Tan also faced racial discrimination in 1943 when he made his way to Calcutta, India, with his assistant Peck Pia Jim. As a Chinese, Tan was automatically registered as a foreigner instead of a British Subject by the immigration officer. Tan felt indignant at this unfair treatment as it was wrong to assume that all Chinese, regardless of where they were born, can never become a British Subject. Even though he would later receive assistance and protection from the British Ministry, he continued to petition and ask for changes to be made. He wrote letters to various Indian and British government officials voicing his dissatisfaction. He also sought exemption for all British Subjects of Chinese origin from the 1942 Foreigners Ordinance in India.⁸ He argued that as long as one carried a British Passport issued in Singapore or Malaya, this should serve as valid proof of their status as British Subjects and they should be granted protection to stay legally in India during the Japanese Occupation.

Political involvement after the Second World War

When the war ended, his outspoken nature and sense of equality led to him being appointed to the British Military Administration Advisory Council in 1945. In 1951, he was appointed as the Deputy President of the Legislative Council, which saw him as the first Chinese to reach high office under the colonial rule in Singapore and Malaya. He was also awarded the Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire for his public service in that year.

While having a good command of English was crucial to Tan's political involvement, there is still room to explore what are some other factors that had contributed to his outstanding public service career between 1930s and 1950s. For example, some scholars like Chua Ai Lin⁹ felt that that it was a growing consciousness of race/racism and ideas of democracy that led to the Anglo-Chinese community playing a more active role in the political scene in Singapore. Others like Mark Ravinder Frost, commented on the tactfulness and pragmatic attitude of the Straits-born Chinese in seeking to bridge colonial and Chinese interests in Singapore during the early 20th century.¹⁰ It is thus possible to suggest that Tan possessed many of the qualities mentioned above which made him an ideal candidate to straddle the British and Chinese communities in Singapore.

⁶ See TCT_659, oral history interview with Tan Chin Tuan on page 41. The original words are "[this] Lazarus Rayman was quite a different character from Bartley. Bartley was very colonial. Rayman although still colonial, he tended to be more approachable. His predecessor, a man called Bartley, was not so friendly."

⁷ On John Bagnall and his role in Straits Trading Co., see K. G. Tregonning, "Straits Tin: A Brief Account of the First Seventy-five Years of The Straits Trading Company, Limited.", *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 36, no. 1 (201) (1963): 79-152.

⁸ On Registration of Chinese British Subjects under Foreigners Registration Act, see TCT Folio 8.

⁹ See Ai Lin Chua, "Nation, Race, and Language: Discussing Transnational Identities in Colonial Singapore, circa 1930", *Modern Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (2012): 283-302.

¹⁰ See Mark Ravinder Frost, "Transcultural diaspora: The Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819–1918", *Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series*, no. 10 (Singapore: Asia Research Institute, 2003).

Building up his corporate career

Having retired from public service in 1955, Tan devoted his time and energy to his banking and corporate career. He was also conferred the prestigious title of *Tan Sri* by the Malaysian King Yang di Pertuan Agong in 1969. He sought to achieve steady growth in OCBC and made prudent investments to increase capital for the bank. Over time, this helped to build up the public's confidence in OCBC as well as its international reputation. In 1977, the annual survey conducted by influential New York banking journal *American Banker* listed OCBC as among the top 400 banks in the world in terms of deposits. This was also the first time a Singapore bank had achieved such a high international ranking.¹¹ By the time Tan retired in 1983, its shareholders funds had increased by more than \$1 billion.¹²

Tan's key to success also lies in his ability to push for innovation such as the introduction of computerisation in banks as early as the 1970s. He was always on the lookout to nurture high-calibre staff like Yong Pung How, Tony Tan and Michael Fam, for the various companies under his charge. He kept a watchful eye on his staff, rewarded those who worked hard and promoted those who excelled. To improve staff welfare, Tan started the OCBC Staff Provident Fund for their retirement. He also allocated a Clubhouse for staff recreation and gave out generous bonuses based on the bank's annual profits.

Personal beliefs and values

Apart from an illustrious banking career, Tan served as Board member, Director or Chairman of various companies such as the Malayan Breweries Ltd, the Overseas Assurance Corporation Ltd, the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation, Wearne Brothers Ltd., Fraser and Neave, Great Eastern Life, Robinson & Company and the Straits Trading Company.¹³ He stressed loyalty and integrity among his staff and management. When dealing with business partners and competitors, he was constantly mindful that he should not embarrass others, which was associated with the concept of "saving face" in Chinese culture. This is evident in his dealing with the Philippines brewing conglomerate San Miguel as well as persuading Wong Yew Kee to reform the operations of Applied Engineering Pte Ltd (which was acquired by Wearne Brothers Ltd.) in the 1980s.¹⁴

His personal beliefs included "do not do to others what he does not like others to do to him", which was based on the teachings by Confucius in *The Analects*. He was more than happy to share his good fortune with others, as seen in the setting up of Tan Chin Tuan Foundation for charity in 1976. He also offered gifts and donations to local organisations as well as to overseas institutions like the Needham Research Institute in Cambridge, England.

¹¹ "Up global ladder for OCBC, UOB", *Business Times*, 24 August 1977, 1.

¹² "OCBC Factsheet," OCBC Official Website, accessed on March 12, 2021, https://www.ocbc.com/assets/pdf/media/ocbc_factsheet.pdf. For key milestones and achievements of OCBC, see TCT Folio 155.

¹³ For Tan's involvement in the various companies, see TCT_87, TCT_640 and TCT_660.

¹⁴ On San Miguel, see "MBL Investing \$30m to Improve Breweries", *Business Times*, January 10, 1984, 14; on Applied Engineering Pte Ltd, see "Wearnes to Acquire Engineering Company", *Business Times*, October 2, 1979, 1. Also see TCT_198 & TCT_377 which documented the way Tan Chin Tuan dealt with San Miguel and Applied Engineering Pte Ltd respectively.

Retirement

Having groomed competent successors for the companies under his supervision, Tan planned for his retirement in the 1980s. While he stepped down gradually from OCBC and various other companies, he remained as Chairman for the Straits Trading Company and Great Eastern Life until 1992. Retirement meant that he could devote more time to enjoy hobbies such as rearing of race horses, cultivation of orchids, as well as giving back to the society.¹⁵ Tan made the headlines in 1999 when he rewarded active Singapore citizens above the age of 90 with a \$1000 gift.¹⁶

Even though Tan was the man who had successfully transformed OCBC from its humble origin to a stellar organisation in the 20th century, he did not boast about his achievements. He was committed to his friends and family, remembered by people as a man with a heart of gold for he was generous to others in need. He passed away at the age of 97 in Singapore on 13 November 2005, earning a reputation of an outstanding banker who was “solid as a rock”.¹⁷

Link to [Tan Chin Tuan Private Papers Index List](#)

¹⁵ On the various hobbies of Tan Chin Tuan such as orchid cultivation, see TCT_3 and TCT_59-60; on race horses owned by Tan Chin Tuan, see TCT_589-600. 603-604 and 608-609. On philanthropy, see TCT_63-64.

¹⁶ “Banker’s birthday gift for over-90s”, *The Straits Times*, November 22, 1999, 1.

¹⁷ “Solid as a rock” was used by Dr. Chang Kia Ngau, former General Manager of the Bank of China, to describe the accomplishments of Tan Chin Tuan in 1975. Also see Lee Su Yin, *Rock Solid: The Corporate Career of Tan Chin Tuan* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2006).