

## ROUTES—EXCERPTS FROM A MEMOIR 1940-1975

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Two events, ten years apart, have inspired my memoir-writing attempt. The first was the appearance in 1976 of Alex Haley's ground-breaking story of his African ancestry called *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and the acclaimed TV series which followed the publication of the book. The second was a visit I made with my family, including my wife and two young daughters, to the east Malaysian state of Sarawak in December 1986, in search of my roots. What led me to the capital of the state called Kuching was my maternal grandaunt who told me this story. Once upon a time, she said, a young Chinese man in Sarawak in the closing years of the nineteenth century agreed to marry a local girl; however, on the wedding night, he failed to show up and the enraged parents and relatives of the abandoned bride employed a *bomoh* (a Malay medicine man) to punish the irresponsible groom; not only the groom but his three other brothers as well. This caused the four brothers to flee Sarawak and they landed in Singapore. The eldest brother called Yeo Teck Hock settled in Singapore—and he was my paternal grandfather.

As it turned out, my trip was not successful in locating relatives. Firstly, I had assumed the four brothers fled from Kuching but I was not sure, as there were other smaller towns where the Chinese settled. Secondly, I was completely English-educated, and if I wanted to trace ancestors—and remember, the event I narrated took place many years ago—I had to do some prior research, preferably in the Chinese language. Thirdly, it may have been too late to pursue the ancestral tale, as relatives, cousins of my father, who died in 1962, were probably dead in 1986. This was my Sarawak connection.

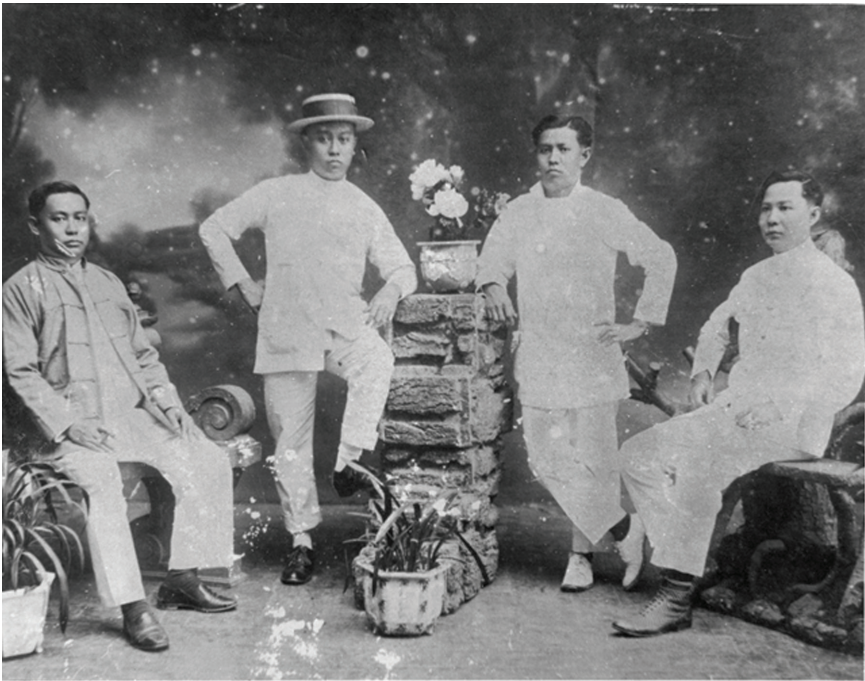
Nonetheless, the idea of tracing my roots lingered and would not go away.

The overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia are part of a diaspora that goes back centuries, back to the century when the first Chinese left the southern states for a variety of reasons. History books tell us that the reasons include

instability or poverty in China, trade, or exploration, or alliances the Chinese Emperor formed with Southeast Asian States. Whatever the reasons, the early Chinese took sailing routes to the south, which led them to capital cities like Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, Phnom Penh in Cambodia, Bangkok in Thailand, Rangoon in Myanmar, Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia and Jakarta in Indonesia, as well as to smaller towns and villages.

My ancestors took these routes, but not other routes, and as the line in the Robert Frost poem “The Road Not Taken” says, “that has made all the difference”(77).

Quite obviously, there is an intended pun on roots. Roots is figurative and takes me back to the early beginnings, possibly to a village in south China somewhere to trace the origins of the Yeo clan and the first ancestor who left. Some relatives and friends have managed to track the route and constructed a family tree but I am not about to do that. At least, not until I have done



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more research. ‘Routes’ is more obviously literal, as explained earlier. One route, taken by ancestors on my mother’s side lead the first Tan patriarch to the ancient city of Malacca in the Malay Peninsula on the Straits of Malacca, in what is now modern Malaysia. This links me to one of the most famous Chinese families in Malacca, that of the Tan Cheng Lock, a former president of the Malayan Chinese Association, the leading Chinese political party of his time. Tan stood side by side with Tengku Abdul Rahman when he proclaimed Malaya’s independence in 1957 and became the first Prime Minister.

One of the strategies of my autobiographical writing in dealing with the diaspora is to interrogate old photographs. Starting out with and maintaining the linear narrative throughout, I swerve into the past by analyzing photographs carefully. The writing of the American critic Susan Sontag provides an interesting read. In “On Photography”, she wrote:

Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait chronicle of itself—a portrait kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness. It hardly matters what activities are photographed as long as photographs get taken and are cherished. (8)

Interrogating the photograph—not just using it to illustrate, but careful scrutiny through description, questioning, speculation, arriving at tentative conclusions—became an essential part of my technique. In this way, the photograph becomes integral to my autobiographical tale.

Here is what I did with the first photograph of the Four Brothers of Sarawak:

This photograph was given to me by my late uncle Yeo Koon Leng, first cousin of my late father Koon Yam. It is a black and white copy of which the original is probably lost.

There are four brothers posing for what is obviously a studio shot. From left to right are Teck Hock, Teck Kee, Teck Joon and Teck Chye. The studied pose indicates a well-lit interior, which enabled the photographer to shoot a picture that he was finally satisfied with. Two brothers are seated and two standing and this is probably by design, both ierarchical and aesthetic. Teck Hock, the eldest, and Teck Chye, who is next in age, are seated, and they flank their two younger brothers who stand in the middle. This arrangement also makes a harmonious pose as the two brothers

in the middle are shorter and if I look at the seated and standing postures, and especially at the faces, I notice a smooth arc from left to right and another arc where their feet are. The arcs are sort of parallel. The one on top is slightly more curved than the bottom one.

All four are in full pose from head to toe. Three brothers, from left to right, look straight at the camera while the second brother looks away. I wonder what he is thinking of?

All four are dressed up but the age of the photo shows only Teck Hock in detail. He sits with reasonable comfort on an antique chair whose armrest is too low for him to rest his hands on and so he is forced to put both hands on his laps. Bareheaded, he wears his grey Chinese *baju* unbuttoned over what is probably a white short-sleeved shirt. His trousers are white and he wears dark-coloured socks in black slip-on shoes without laces.

And in his right hand, he holds an unlit cigar between the index and second fingers.

His mode of dress stands out because his *baju* is unbuttoned. Why? It goes against the grain of the formality of the occasion. But what is the occasion? More of this later.

The relatively poor quality of the photo does not enable scrutiny of the dresses of the other three brothers except to note that they are all in white long-sleeved shirts and white trousers. Untucked, the shirts of three brothers cover their trousers and conceal whatever belts they wore.

Teck Kee is the only one to wear what looks like a vaudeville hat while the rest are bareheaded.

He looks odd in his hat.

White socks and black-laced shoes complete his attire. He stands a little stiffly with his right hand against his waist, his left arm on top of the tiered flower stand and his left foot against the second tier. His whole body tilts slightly to the left, almost leaning against the flower stand.

Teck Joon is the mirror image of his brother, his right arm on top of the flower stand and his left hand against his waist. The difference is that he stands comfortably erect, right leg with knee bent slightly crossing over the straight left leg and with black socks and white shoes.

Teck Chye, the brother who looks away from the camera, has his right arm slightly curled over the armrest of his antique chair on to his lap while his left hand is spread out on his lap. His shoes are laced and rise to his ankles.

When was this photograph taken? The only indicator is the age of the men who look to be between forty and fifty. I don't know when my grandfather Teck Hock was born but he died on January 10, 1954, according to the inscription on his tombstone and this photo looks like it was taken around 1930.

What is the occasion? I can only guess. Perhaps a birthday of one of the brothers. Or, to remember the visit to Singapore of one or two brothers. Teck Hock and Teck Kee lived in Singapore while Teck Chye lived in Seremban, the capital of Negri Sembilan, Malaysia, while Teck Joon lived in Tangkak, a small town just south of Malacca on the road to Kuala Lumpur. Teck Chye's family later moved to Kuala Lumpur.

I would like to believe the latter, as the visits of the Malayan (it was Malaya then) brothers would celebrate brotherliness and cement bonds that survive a trauma decades ago in Sarawak. According to my late grandaunt whom I called Chimpo, the wife of Teck Joon, there were four Chinese brothers who grew up in a town in Sarawak. One of them agreed to marry a local girl, native to Sarawak, but failed to turn up on the agreed wedding day. The family of the abandoned bride was enraged and engaged a *bomoh*, a Malay medicine man, to put a curse on the Yeo brothers. They barely escaped with their lives and that episode accounted for them ending up in Singapore, with two brothers deciding to stay and raise families on the island while the other two families decided to go to Malaya.

How close were the brothers and their descendants? It is a question that will be answered later.

But at this stage, Sontag is worth quoting again:

As that claustrophobic unit, the nuclear family, was being carved out of a much larger family aggregate, photography came along to memorialise, to restate symbolically, the imperiled continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life. Those ghostly traces, photographs, supply the token presence of the dispersed relatives. (15-16)



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My second interrogation of a photograph took me to my matriarchal roots, that of my grandmother, Tan Guat Kee, second sister of Tan Cheng Lock. Here is an excerpt from a longer, published essay:

I acquired this photograph from my maternal third aunt, Sar Ee in Hokien, in one of my New Year visits in the late 1990s. She knew of my interest in old photographs that reveal family history and I asked to see as many of them as she had. She was a little hesitant, fearing, I suppose, that I would stumble on photographs that would divulge more than she was prepared for: aspects of the family she came from, of which she is the third daughter, or bits of her own family history (she, her husband and their four children) which are best concealed from a curious nephew, especially a nephew whom she vaguely knows is some sort of writer.

She brought out two albums containing about fifty photographs, all in black and white or sepia. The one that immediately caught my attention is the one I am now interrogating.

She is the one sixth from the left and her name is Oon Geok Lian. Left to right, she is the only daughter standing of the four daughters of the matriarch, who is my maternal grandmother. And there are two men standing behind. Left to right are my other aunts, Tua Ee (eldest aunt), Ee Chik (youngest aunt), their mother Sar Ee and my mother, the second daughter. And the man on the right I recognize as their brother, my uncle therefore, an only son that the Japanese took.

But the man standing next to him was not known to me.

Who is he? I asked.

Eh? Sar Ee said, in surprise. Obviously she had not set eyes on this photo for some time. Who is he? she repeated my question. She turned to her husband and asked him. He looked and could not tell.

She peered again and then it came to her. Oh yes, he is, what's his name, KB.

But who is this KB? I asked.

Oh, she said slowly, in the grip of difficult recall, he was the person who was interested in your Tua Ee but...

What happened? I persisted.

But she found out that he had a mistress and she dropped him, she said.

They must have been on very good terms for him to appear in an intimate family portrait, I said.

Yes, they were, she replied. And after that, your aunt was very sad and disappointed, she pined and you know what happened.

Back to the picture. It is a photo of the family of Oon Ee Thiam, my maternal grandfather who lived for many years in Haig Road, but he is absent. His wife, though, is not, and her maiden name was Tan Guat Kee. On the extreme left is their eldest daughter, Joon Lian, more commonly known as Daisy, next Poh Lian, the fourth and youngest daughter who goes by the name Diana (*Bongsu*

to the family), then KB, Tan Guat Kee, Hock Ann whose English name was Victor, Geok Lian the third daughter who only has her Chinese name, and finally Kim Lian, Nancy, the second daughter.

Nancy is my mother.

You know what happened, my Sar Ee had said earlier. As I write now, 5th November 2004 at 7pm, the three sisters Nancy, Geok Lian and Diana, are still very much around. In their eighties, the sisters have longevity on their side—except for Auntie Daisy. What happened was that, after the romantic disappointment with KB, she was involved with another man. He was an intellectually brilliant person, a Queen's scholar in the employ of a company owned by Tan Cheng Lock, Tan Guat Kee's eldest brother and Daisy's uncle.

Yes, none other than the great man of Malacca, Dato Sir Tan Cheng Lock and my mother's uncle. I will return to him.

As my mother remembers, and her story is corroborated by her sisters, this bright Queen's scholar was taken into one of the companies owned by Dato Tan on the understanding that he was eventually to marry Daisy. Apparently, he had a mind of his own, refused the order that went with the job, quit and left Daisy romantically bereft. To this day, the three sisters maintain that this second disappointment led to the depression which set in and led eventually to her developing breast cancer and dying from it when she was only forty.

Auntie Daisy was well-educated, had a good job as a senior clerk in Qantas, was patrician and independent minded. That she was the first-born, had the equivalent of 'O' levels and secure employment, contributed to her independence. It may also have led to her rejection of KB. In the photo, she is seen as tall and slim, physical attributes which are accentuated by the long cheongsam she wears, her ramrod-straight sitting posture and the length of the cheongsam almost covering her legs. The long collar hides her neck and there is an austere beauty on her face, an austereness that is less apparent in the portrait photo of her. Very likely, the latter picture was taken earlier and the collar of her long cheongsam covers her partially to set off a slightly sharp chin. The formality of Daisy's cheongsam contrasts with the samfoos of her sisters.

This is obviously a studio shot. I am neither able to put a date to it nor identify the studio. This post, this arrangement of the sitting and standing positions with the women in front and



the men behind, points to a simplicity of symmetry in a relatively uncluttered interior with a floral carpet, European armchairs and a curtain behind. The seven persons are dressed in three ways, Nonya, Chinese and Western. At the center is the mother in *sarong kebaya*, with a set of three *kerosangs* to pin down her baju and give her a slim appearance tapering down to her *kasut manek* slippers. Of her three daughters, Daisy wears a formal cheongsam while the three daughters wear samfoos. These is another difference—why is Daisy’s hair permed but not her sisters? The men sport Western suits, presumably white or light-coloured, with ties.(6-9)

The great French critic, Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida Reflection on Photography* wrote:

I might put this differently, what founds the nature of Photograph is the pose...looking at the photograph, I inevitably include in my scrutiny the thought of that instant, however brief, in which a real thing happened to be motionless in front of the eye. I project the present photograph’s immobility upon the past shot, and it is this arrest which constitutes the pose. (78)

I hope these two examples, a complete article and an excerpt with quotations which end in the preceding paragraph, will provide a good idea of my method.

## Conclusion

Two observations can be made about the writing of biography and autobiography. The first, that they are mostly written in chronological fashion with photographs as illustrations; second, that there has been renewed interest in this genre. In July 2007, *The Straits Times* carried an article *Four Reasons to write your autobiography*; it reported that retired MPs “pen their stories for posterity” (2). This is something to look forward to. But, it must be pointed out, their accounts will emerge from the lookout of a member of the governing elite; and are very likely swayed by the most influential autobiography of the last decade, that of the memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister of Singapore. The title of his memoirs which appeared in 1998 was *The Singapore Story*. It became immediately clear, soon after it was published and widely read, that only he could call his story *The Singapore Story*. Mostly, mine

is a Singapore story, told from the private point of view, from the ground up and where, if the ground is sweet, the fertile soil may point the way to others who want to cultivate the rich patch of autobiographical/biographical ground.

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