

Interview with Yong Shook Lin's daughter

Few of us would have known Yong Shook Lin personally. To us he seems legendary and larger than life. Our Adrian Hii and Goh Siu Lin were fortunate to have had the opportunity to meet with Shook Lin's daughter, Mdm Phyllis Yong @ Mrs Hamid Tun Azmi, to gather some insights about her father.

Please share with us some background about your grandfather's family.

My grandfather, Yong Ngee Chai was a Hakka migrant from China. He had businesses in Hong Kong and settled there but he moved his wife to Malaya, as she preferred the warmer climate.



Madam Phyllis Yong Hamid Azmi at the interview

My grandfather was a prominent businessman in Hong Kong and after he had made good there, he came to Malaya and invested in rubber plantations. The family home was located in two adjoining shophouses along Jalan Pudu. My grandfather was successful in business and divided his time shuttling between Malaya and Hong Kong.

My grandmother had three sons, Joo Lin, Shook Lin and Loo Lin. The eldest became a businessman. The second was my father and the third became a doctor, but he did not enter the medical profession. He looked after my grandfather's business in Hong Kong.

Every weekend, my grandmother would send us a big pot of yong tau fu, char siew or siew ngap from the famous Pudu stalls.

What was your father like as a child?

He was very westernized in his ways and yet very filial to his parents in the traditional Asian way. He was the best behaved of the three sons and always returned from school neat and immaculate, while the other two would have unkempt hair and clothing.

According to my grandmother, they each had long hair which my grandmother would plait. His two brothers would be restless, but my father would sit quietly for my grandmother to do his hair.

My grandmother said that my uncles would spend the money my grandmother gave them for lunch, 10 cents or 20 cents. But my father would save that money and give it back to my grandmother. Understandably, he was her favourite.

My father was a filial son. He carried that trait into adulthood. Every Saturday and Sunday, after office, my father would send us and the driver in the car to my grandmother's house at Pudu to fetch her to our home. He would sit in the porch waiting for her. When we drove

up the long driveway, he would stand up, rush to open the door and escort his elderly mother up the three porch steps. He would take her to the armchair and bring a cushion for her feet. Have you ever seen a modern man doing that now?

So, I say my father, he really was it, very special.

Was law your father's destiny?

Yes, right from his childhood that was his aspiration. He graduated from Emmanuel College, Cambridge, at the age of 20. However, local Bar restrictions prevented him from practising until he was 21. So, he decided to spend one year in Hong Kong and during that sojourn, met my mother.

What motivated your father?

The opportunity to contribute to society. He was brilliant yet humble. Whenever photos were taken he would prefer to stand at the back. My father did not seek position, his ambition was to be a good lawyer.

Could you describe for us his strongest qualities?

His selflessness and generosity of heart. He was firm in his principles and strong in his conviction. He sought no recognition in philanthropy, and donated to schools, eg. Nan Khai School, the Lady Templer hospital in Cheras and various other charities, year after year without the family knowing. When he passed away, many school children came to pay their respects.

He mooted the setting up of the MCA lottery to raise funds to financially assist the villagers who were resettled during the communist insurgency in the Chinese new villages.

He was also instrumental in the establishment of Petaling Jaya as the first satellite town to Kuala Lumpur. He was then on the Kuala Lumpur Town Board. From his domestic staff, he came to know of the plight of lower income workers who were housed in cramped quarters (each room would house 10 people and there would be approximately 60-70 packed into each shophouse) in Kuala Lumpur which posed a fire hazard. The workers were resettled in Petaling Jaya (now regarded as the "old town"), with a railway line at its doorstep. It was in his honour and memory that Yong Shook Lin Road located in Petaling Jaya, was named after him.

Could you tell us about your family?

My father was devoted to my mother. For example, during the war, when food was scarce, our meals would consist of tapioca mixed with rice. But father would make sure that my mother's portion was purely rice.

For him, there was no favouritism. When my siblings and I were in England for studies, he sent the same amount of money and goodies to each of us, for example, Mars Bars, biscuits and tins of fruit and butter. These items were rationed in UK after the war but were plentiful in Malaya then.

During the war, the family was supposed to be evacuated to India by boat. At the last minute, my grandmother refused to go. My father listened to her wishes. That is why we remained here, we never left the country. My father was arrested by the Japanese and we didn't know where he was for six months.

After my father married my mother, Yu Tak Fong, he built a house named "Isola" at No. 5, Treacher Road which is the site on which Shangri-La hotel stands today. We later moved to 211, Jalan Tun Razak. In later years, the American Embassy was built opposite us.

My mother during her lifetime, was very active in social work. She was Patron of the Family Planning Committee for 25 years, member of the Discharged Women's Prisoners Committee and member of the Committee for Wayward Girls (Po Leong Kook).

What family values did your father impart to you?

He was traditional in his values. He drummed in us the virtues of independence and from young we were taught to stand on our own feet.

My father was strict. But he never needed to raise his voice or use a cane. He had this aura and one stare from him would be enough. For breakfast, he would insist that the children eat 2 raw eggs each. It was something I dreaded, I would surreptitiously pass my eggs to the servant maid standing behind me.

He would never allow us to eat outside at the hawker stalls. But we loved eating there. We would look into his diary to see when he would be away at meetings and on those days, we would sneak out with mother's permission to eat satay at Campbell Road.

If he were free, he would take us out to see the first show on a Friday evening. We would be driven back home. The driver would have brought steaks from the Coliseum and when we passed Campbell Road, my father would say, "You see, all your friends eating there, all those people may die of cholera you know." We would remain quiet, exchanging smiles and secret glances with our mother.

How many siblings do you have?

There were six of us altogether.

Siew Chin is the eldest. She is a practising lawyer in New York. My only brother, Pung How, is second. He was a partner in Shook Lin & Bok and later was the Chief Justice of Singapore until his retirement in 2006.

Third is Siew Kuen, an economist. She passed away in 1982. I am Siew Choon, the fourth in the family, and have a degree in Administration and Political Science from the London School of Economics. Siew Lee is the fifth and she qualified as a lawyer. The youngest, Siew Toong, is an architect, she qualified from the University of London with an A.R.I.B.A.

What advice do you recall your father giving you?

In a letter dated 15.10.1954 to me, he said, "I may have a temper but I only show it through my mouth and do not keep it in my heart. I suppose that is the reason why doctors have found nothing wrong with me physically. I may be thrifty on myself. I spend very little money on myself - my needs are very few but I have no objection to any of my children (daughters or son) spending any amount of money. You can take it from me that I have never regretted the expenditure of monies I have spent on my children (your sisters and brother).

I took great pains in building up my reputation. Work hard for what you want and preserve my reputation which I leave behind for all of you. That is all that I ask of you."

Thank you for sharing with us your recollections of your father.

The family joins me in thanking you all for respecting and preserving our father's memory at Shook Lin & Bok, the organization of his creation.