

5 My father was a candle

The Chinese have a long history of a presence in Sarawak (and Borneo in general) due to trading of made goods from China and the natural produce of Borneo. From this early association, the Chinese emigrated from their homeland (mainly in the south) to lands further south (Nanyang) - to Southeast Asia. My grandfather was an itinerant trader who brought goods from China to barter with the natives in Sarawak. It was warring (during the era of warlords⁵ in China), pestilence and disease, and famine that motivated my grandparents to uproot and migrate to Kuching, Sarawak. Other members of the extended family moved to other places in Sarawak, to Bangkok and to Singapore.



Kuek Chiang Tai's family in Swatow ca. 1915

This photograph was taken with my paternal Great Grandmother (Agatha Sia) in the centre. You can see that my Great Grandmother had bound feet. She joined the family in Sarawak after Chiang Tai had settled in Batu Kawa.



Joseph Kuek Chiang Tai's identity paper in 1936

My Great Grandfather was a Henghua who after he moved to Swatow, became Teochew. My grandfather, Joseph Kuek Chiang Tai is 3rd from the right. My grandmother (Anna Choo) is 2nd from the left. One may wonder why these Chinese in Swatow had Christian names. This was because my family were already Catholic Christians before they migrated from China. Indeed, the photograph above was taken at a church in Swatow.

⁵ An era which was characterized by constant civil war between different vying factions, began in 1916 and only ended in 1928 when the Kuomintang under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek brought China under unified rule.

This photograph was taken at the Song Kheng Hai garden in Padungan, Kuching. It was just before (ca. 1938) the Centenary of Brooke Rule (see *Further readings* at the end of this chapter). My father recalls that in those days, fresh milk was available, delivered daily to households from the Rajah's dairy.



Joseph Kuek Chiang Tai's family in Kuching ca. 1938

It is obvious which ones are my grandparents. The taller of the two youngest ones at the front is my father. To my father's right in the photograph is Roch, the youngest. The two youngest ones at the front were too young to be bought shoes I guess, but the elder sons wore *batu ehs* ("stone shoes" in the Malay/Hokkien dialect).

If you listened to the English news on Radio Sarawak in the 60s and 70s you will know who Roch Kuek is (of him, Robert Lo once said: "... Here is the news read by earthquake").

My grandfather named his Number 2 son (3rd from the left) Joseph. His Number 5 son was called Joseph (2nd from the left; although he used his second name Gregory).



The two youngest sons of Joseph Kuek Chiang Tai in 2016; Roch (L) and Joe (R)

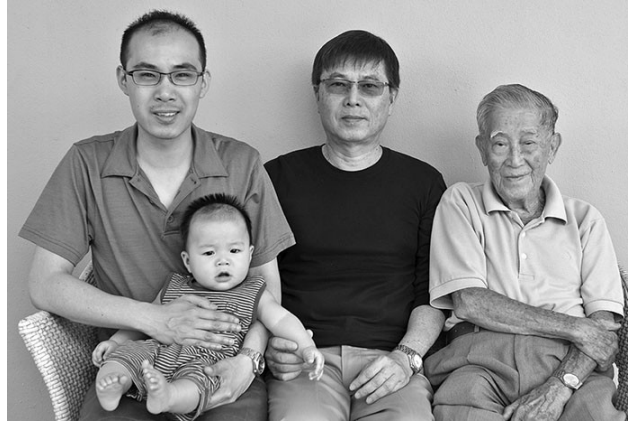
My father (No. 6 son; born 1929) was also named Joseph. Since my father was Brother No. 6, he was called "Lak Chek" ("lak" in the Teochew/Hokkien dialects means "six" and "chek" means "younger uncle") in the extended family. But, "Lak chek" also means "candle". Hence, "My Father Was a Candle", the title of this autobiography.

My father named me Clement.

Many years later, his elder brother, Number 2 Son Joseph had a son by his second wife and named him Clement.

No. 1 son John (2nd from the right), No. 2 son Joseph, and No. 3 son Quentin (4th from the left) were all born in China and had wives arranged for them from the mainland. According to his autobiography, No. 2 son, Joseph was imprisoned by the Japanese during the Second World War in the house almost next to the Sikh temple at the corner of Jawa and Mosque Roads in Kuching. He hadn't bowed to a Japanese soldier. My father the younger Joseph had to bring the elder Joseph his dinner every day in prison. My mother always called the elder Joseph "Kling Kling" owing to the fact that he would always ring his bicycle bell whenever he rode by.

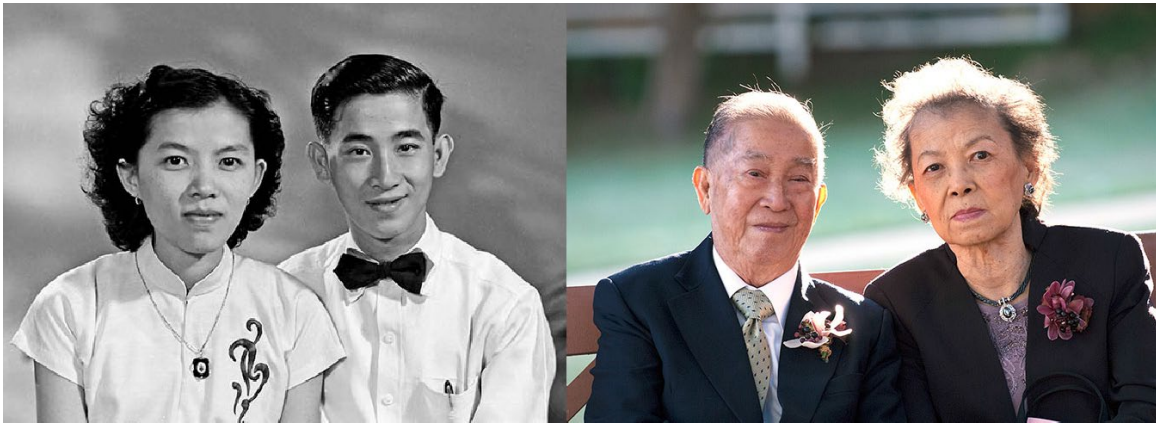
In 2014, I had a photograph taken which shows four generations of Kueks in my family:



L- R: Martin, Adam, Clem, Joe

There are now six generations of Kueks recorded in photographs.

Inheritance



Mum (Angela Tan) and Dad in 1955

In 2006

In the extended Kuek family, there are those who have the distinctive "kuek look" in facial features. I look more like my Mum.

Obituary

Joseph Aloysius Kuek Tze Hiang

15 March 1929 - 12 August 2021

Kuching, Sarawak; 14 Aug 2021:

“Old Joe fell off his perch just after midnight on 12 Aug 2021. He was feeling a bit crook in the last weeks of his life. He lived a full and eventful life until he closed his innings; retired hurt at 92.

Joe was born in 1929 in Kuching of immigrants from Swatow, China. He married Angela Joan Tan in 1955 and together they raised Clem, Justin, David, Steven and Jennifer who all also became emigrants and moved to lands abroad. Joe and Angela also migrated for a while but moved back and now spend their time together on a misty foothill outside Kuching.

The pair are grandparents to six grown-ups and great-grandparents to seven ankle-biters. He was known to be a bit of a dag for protocol and procedure but to most people, he is reportedly a kind and personable fellow. To all the relatives and friends: please offer a prayer or two for Joe and ask Harold to be forgiving of his faithful servant, Joe.

Good on you, Dad.

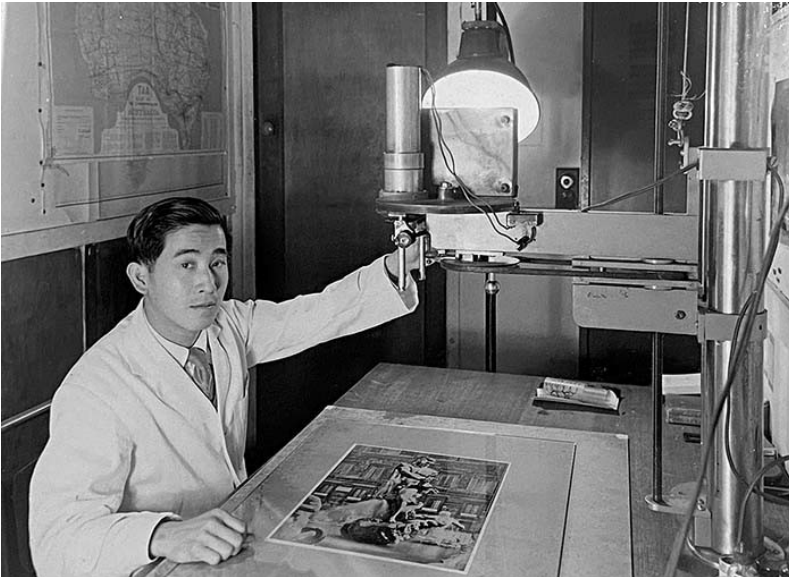
We thank you for your life, and you and Mum for ours.”

While sorting out Joe's papers after his demise, Clem found old photographs which his Dad made during his training in visual aids in Sydney in 1956. This was one photograph:



An iPhone copy of a print of a photograph taken by J.A. Kuek which he labelled by hand as: "Education Department Visual Aid Centre, Burwood, Sydney, NSW, Aust. 1956"

and this one another:



iPhone copy of photograph which is labelled in Joe's handwriting as: "J.A.K. in the darkroom making a filmstrip, Visual Aid Centre, Burwood, Sydney, Aust 1956"

Joe's eldest, Clem went on to live in Perth for seventeen years where his son Martin was born. After Perth, Clem and family moved to Sydney where Martin met an immigrant girl, Alisha from Vietnam (fled as a one-year old in a boat after the Vietnam War). They got married and settled in an inner suburb of Sydney.

In 2014, Martin and Alisha's son Adam (Joe and Angela's first great grandchild) was born. In 2020, Adam started school here:



Google Streetview image of the building at the corner of Hornsey and Conder Streets, Burwood, NSW 2134. The portico was a later addition.

By a mighty coincidence and previously unknown to all parties, Adam went to a school at which is included the building where Joe spent his time in Sydney training in 1956! What a great number of events needed to conspire together to culminate in this coincidence. This is one of life's mysteries. I wish I was able to let my father know of this coincidence before he died.

Further readings

Brooke rule of Sarawak

1. "The White Rajahs: A History of Sarawak form 1841 to 1946"
Steven Runciman
Cambridge University Press; 1960
ISBN 0521128994, 9780521128995
2. "The White Rajahs of Sarawak"
Bob Reece
Archipelago Press; 2004
ISBN 981415511X, 9789814155113
3. "The White Rajahs of Sarawak: A Borneo Journey"
Bob Reece
Editions Didier Millet; 2001
ISBN 981415511X (ISBN13: 9789814155113)
4. "White Rajah: A Dynastic Intrigue"
Cassandra Pybus
University of Queensland Press; 1996
ISBN 0702228575, 9780702228575
5. "The End of the Brooke Raj in Sarawak"
Colin N. Crisswell
Kiscadale; 1994
ISBN 187083836X, 9781870838368
6. "Ten Years in Sarawak Volume 1"
Charles Brooke
Forgotten Books; 1866/2016
ISBN 9781333863012
7. "Ten Years in Sarawak Volume 2"
Charles Brooke
Forgotten Books; 1866/2016
ISBN 9783752555950
8. "Sylvia of Sarawak: An Autobiography by H.H. The Ranee of Sarawak"
Sylvia Leonora Brooke
Hutchinson & Co.; 1936
ISBN 0195889606ISBN, 9780195889604