Memories of a NONYA

The late Queeny Chang led an extraordinary life. Her autobiography, first published in 1981, introduces readers to a time when ladies led a genteel way of life.

In this book, Queeny Chang presents a vision of a way of life that has long since vanished. Her tender memoir opens the windows of time and allows the images of the old world charm of the early 1900s to be seen again.

She paints colourful portraits of her family, relatives, and many friends, particularly of her strong-minded but fastidious and flamboyant mother. What she had to say about her life with her famous father, the late Mr. Tjong A Fie (a prominent businessman and leader of the Chinese community in Medan, Indonesia) is both fascinating and touching.

Here is a story of a gentle woman, very real, warm and sincere.

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BIOGRAPHY
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To the memory of my father

Contents

'Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass
And glory in the flower
We will grieve not:
rather find strength in what remains behind.'

—Wordsworth

Publisher's Note

QUEENY CHANG (1896–1986) was the daughter of Tjong A Fie, a prominent businessman and leader of the Chinese community in Medan, Indonesia. She was born into a life of luxury and married into a prominent Chinese family from Amoy, China. From a young age, she was exposed to different cultures and people, and she was fluent in German, Dutch, French, Malay, Chinese as well as several dialects.

A pioneer in many ways, Queeny's biography gives readers a realisic idea of what life was like in the early 20th century. She also shares interesting portraits of the relationship with her immediate family as well as friends.

The late Queeny Chang with the 1982 edition of her book.

Queeny Chang wrote her biography in Medan. Entitled *Memories of a Nonya,* it was first published by *The Star* in 1981. It was re-published by Eastern Universities Press in 1982.

After *Memories of a Nonya* was published, Queeny spent most of her time in Medan. She suffered a mild stroke in 1983 and relocated to Singapore where her grandson, Lam Seng (Tong's son), and her grand daughter-in-law, Poo Ten, took care of her until her death on 28 August 1986.

In early 2016, Poo Ten approached Marshall Cavendish to consider a re-issue of *Memories of a Nonya*. In this edition of the book, we have retained the spelling of words as per the original edition. As an example, nonya is used instead of nyonya which is the spelling of the word today.

Queeny Chang at home in Medan.

Foreword

NONYAS ARE A vanishing breed. A gracious but increasingly rare species of the old-world charm about whom too little is known.

So, when one of them dares to commit her memories to paper, it is something to look forward to. A publishing event, no less.

Queeny Chang's memories are all the more remarkable because she is a remarkable woman, and also because she has a fascinating story to tell. She tells it warmly, enthusiastically and authentically.

Queeny is a nonya who went to a Dutch school and became 'foreignised'. However, she never forgot her nonya origin. She spoke Malay as well as her Chinese dialect, Khek; and during her school vacations in Penang, picked up a smattering of nonya Hokkien.

I first met Queeny shortly after I had joined *The Star*, under its new management, towards the end of 1977. *The Star* had published the first part of her memoir earlier that year and she brought the second part to show me. We duly published them in February 1980 and the tremendous interest they created among the readers in Malaysia and the neighbouring countries prompted her to have her writings reproduced in a more permanent form. This book is the happy outcome.

Khor Cheang Kee
Editorial Adviser
The Star, Malaysia

Preface

AT THE RISK of being refused entry on account of my passport's expiration in twelve days, I had travelled from Jakarta to be in Penang in time for my brother Kian-liong's birthday in December 1976. Our niece and her family had motored up from Singapore besides several relatives who had arrived from Medan. In spite of all the fuss we had made expecting a celebration, Kian-liong wanted instead to make a pilgrimage to *Kek Lok Si*, a Buddhist temple in Ayer Itam, Penang, to take offerings to our father whose memorial image (statue) is kept, together with those of other prominent people, in a gilded shrine encased in glass in the Tower for Sacred Books. They were the first donors to the construction of the Temple at the end of the nineteenth century. Although the hall is not open to the public, we were admitted after we had explained our wish to the guardian monk.

I saw the life-like statues displayed in colourful Mandarin outfits when I first visited the place in 1908 and often again in later years. Among these sculptures, besides my father, those known and related to us are great-uncle Tio Tiauw-set, Uncle Cheah Choon-seng and my uncle Tjong Yong-hian. We were happy to know that the names of our elders are still remembered with deference and their deeds praised warmly.

My uncle's name appears again on pillars of the Precious Hall of Buddha and on the blackened rocks alongside the beautiful archway.

This pilgrimage evoked the idea of writing this book — a dedication to the memories of my beloved father who gave me the best years of my life.

Queeny Chang

Part One

1

Kwan Yin, Goddess of Mercy and Complaisance, saves the Ugly Duckling

IN THE peaceful surroundings of *Chanteclair*, a picturesque bungalow on a slope of the mountain resort Brastagi, I sat facing the brown peaks of the proud Volcano Sibayak, its white smoke merging into the blue morning sky. Wrapped in the sweet perfume of roses and jasmines, one's mind is cleansed of all the impurities of worldly desires and can only lose itself in serene and endearing thoughts.

Suddenly, as if awoken from a dream long gone-by, the carefree days of my childhood beckoned me. In this kaleidoscope of tender recollections, the first image to emerge from a varied and glorious past is that of my mother, young and beautiful, impregnated with devotion for her family and home.

It was the year 1902. I was about six years old, a not too pretty girl with a pale square face, a pair of melancholic eyes with scarce lashes that looked dreamy under thin straggly brows. I had a flat nose and two of my front teeth were missing. And on top of all those imperfections, a head showing patches of baldness. Poor me, I had just recovered from typhoid. However unattractive I might have appeared in other people's eyes, in my mother's I was a perfect creation, which had almost slipped through her hands, were it not for her devoted care.

For forty days and nights she had sat by my bed, feeling the burning of my fever, wiping away my cold sweat, changing

my clammy clothes, giving me medicine every three hours as ordered by the doctor. Neglecting food and sleep, she had sat with gloomy eyes, more often filled with tears than dry, watching the raving little creature swinging between life and death. Though near to exhaustion, my mother had refused to entrust me, a vacillating candle which at any moment might extinguish, into other hands. Especially so when on one occasion, a male nurse engaged to relieve her had by mistake, given me turpentine instead of my medicine. I can clearly remember the doctor's furious face when he smelled its odour in my mouth while making his evening call. Asked what he had given me, the nurse produced the bottle. Pointing his finger at the frightened nurse, the doctor shouted in a thunderous voice: 'Out, you!' I watched the commotion around me: the doctor grumbling, my mother crying, my father pacing helplessly around the room in speechless anxiety. I was given a huge glass of milk and was none the worse for the experience, to the great relief of everybody. But since that occasion, my mother was not to be drawn away from the sick-room. Morning and night, she prayed to Kwan Yin, Goddess of Mercy and Complaisance. If no human power could save her child, the Goddess of Mercy could. Miraculously, her prayers were answered and I recovered. Since then, my mother became a devotee of the Goddess Kwan Yin. And there I was — the ugly duckling.

With permission from the doctor, my mother took me out for the first time since my illness on Chinese New Year's day. She had dressed me up like a doll, in a red silk jacket and trousers and red silk shoes. She hung a gold chain around my neck and put gold bangles on my wrists and ankles.

Together with my father and my little brother Fa-liong, we went to my uncle's house which was next to ours. Uncle Yong-hian and Aunt Liu were in the big hall waiting for visitors. After the formal kow-tows and offering of good wishes, my uncle drew me to his knees and said how pretty I looked. I smiled happily showing my missing teeth. My little brother merely received a slight pat on his head and no praise, so

contrary to the privileged attention due to a male child. On this particular occasion, following my illness, I seemed to have become the centre of everyone's concern.

'Elder Brother,' said my father to my uncle, 'if this unworthy girl had not got well, I would have cancelled our New Year reception this evening, but as she is now better, I hope you and Sister-in-law will honour us with your presence.'

'Of course, of course,' answered my uncle effusively, 'we must celebrate Foek's happy recovery together.' My uncle liked to call my name as often as possible, because 'Foek' means luck. So much for the ugly duckling.

That evening, my mother dressed me in a batik sarong and *kebaya* like a native girl. She made a knot of the thin strands of discoloured hair on top of my head and inserted tiny diamond hairpins in it to keep it from falling apart. On my chest rested a diamond pendant and there were lovely little diamond bracelets and rings to match. My feet were shod in embroidered sandals. Thus attired, I could have been a little princess in the Sultan's household.

My mother herself was gorgeously dressed in her gala costume; *songket kebaya* and *kain*, made of wine-red handwoven silk interwoven with gold threads, a material specially made for the royal families. Overseas Chinese ladies had followed that fashion. Her glistening black hair was done in a round bun on top of her head and arranged with a row of diamond hairpins and small diamond flowers. Her *kebaya* was fastened with *kerungsang* — a set of three brooches of which the first and largest was in the form of a peacock with an open tail, followed by two smaller round ones pinned beneath it. That was the vogue followed by fashionable ladies in Penang and Medan.

My mother was much admired, standing there beside her husband who, himself, was an imposing figure. She was a complete mistress of the Malay language in which she conversed with foreigners.

She was perfectly at ease in the circle of invited dignitaries and people of diverse nationalities. It seemed as if she had

Author's mother dressed as Penang nonya.

never known otherwise. She was conscious of my father's position, and was determined to be worthy of him.

My father took me by the hand as he thanked the guests for their good wishes. Everyone had a kind word for me. The Resident took me up and held me so high that everybody could see me and kissed me on both cheeks. The Sultana embraced me and hugged me to her ample breasts. They all knew how much my parents loved me and were pleased to share in their happiness on my recovery. My father did not hide the fact that were I not better, there would have been no reception, the function everyone had looked forward to. It was a splendid and lavish affair and its success was awarded to the smiling duckling.

2

Country maiden becomes lady of good fortune

ALTHOUGH THEY HAD had no formal education, both my father and uncle were greatly respected by the Dutch authorities for their valuable services as Captains of the Chinese population.

The Chinese in Indonesia, because of their willingness to work, their initiative and business acumen, had established themselves firmly into the economy. They, however, remained a separate and distinct community. They held to their own social traditions and customs, and their right to do so was acknowledged by the Dutch in the appointment of a Chinese Captain with independent jurisdiction in such matters. There were also Chinese lieutenants who were directly responsible to the Captain.

The Chinese were not like the Dutch, my mother told me often enough. Most Chinese, she said, were illiterate pioneers who brought very little money with them from their homeland to the new country seeking work on tobacco plantations. They were very badly treated and even the Chinese themselves called them 'sold pigs'. These contract labourers usually borrowed money from the rich on security; not of property, but on the person of the borrower. In effect, it was a form of debt slavery.

My mother had lived on a tobacco plantation before she married my father. Born in 1880, in the small town of Bindjei, Sumatra, my mother was uneducated. Her father was chief overseer in Sungei Memtjirim, one of the Deli Company's

plantations where he supervised several hundred coolies. The Deli Company was, at the time, a large concern which had monopoly of the cultivation of tobacco in Sumatra. Therefore, she had spent her childhood on the estate as a country maiden knowing nothing of the city. Besides, she was brought up by a severe mother who stuck to the old fashioned ideas that a girl need not know more than cooking and baking cakes, her place being in the kitchen.

However, my mother was endowed with a rebellious nature and a grand spirit. To the extreme dislike of her mother, she often judged herself superior to her brothers — whether they were elder or younger, she did not care. She resented the idea that boys were preferred to girls. She quarrelled incessantly with the boys and her final words were always, 'You just wait and see, one day I'll shine over all of you.' And the retort would be: 'You think you're the wife of lieutenant Tjong A Fie (then a leading figure)?' Little did they know that one day those words, spoken at random, would come true!

Thus, my mother reached marriageable age without an offer for marriage. But one propitious morning, as if Fate had thrown in its lot, a matchmaker came from Medan to approach my grandfather, Lim Sam-hap, for my mother's hand to Tjong A Fie. Although my grandfather considered the proposal a great honour, he was hesitant because of the difference between their ages; my father was then a widower of 35 and my mother a mere girl of 16. My grandmother, on the contrary, was in favour of marrying off her unruly daughter as quickly as possible. She doubted that such a chance would ever occur again because my mother already had the reputation of being haughty and aggressive, due to her brothers' propaganda.

Young as she was, my mother was well aware that she was to become the wife of an authority; but instead of being subdued, she demanded to see the widower in person, so that she could talk to him herself. My grandmother was shocked; and thought her most unfeminine for wanting to meet the man before she was married to him but all her protests were

waived and my father, though finding the demand most unusual, good-naturedly called at my grandmother's home.

A young girl with a proud countenance and vivid, intelligent eyes faced the prospective bridegroom unabashedly and regarded him from head to foot. She studied his personality, his mannerisms and speech. My father sat down on a chair facing his bride-to-be and in his deep voice told her that he had just lost his wife leaving three children: a boy of 15 and two girls of 12 and 11 respectively. He added frankly that he also had a wife in his village, Sung-kow, China; a girl his parents had chosen and whom he could not discard. As the village wife could not join him in Sumatra, having to look after his aged mother in China, he wished to marry her to replace the mother of his children.

My mother seemed satisfied with my father's honest explanation and moreover, my father's open and frank face had made a good impression on her. My father was good-looking and though in his mid-thirties, was still in the prime of his life. He was tall and well-built; with a square face, high intelligent forehead, and a high-bridged nose above a determined mouth. His complexion was of a glowing bronze. My mother consented to marry him on one condition: that after she became my father's wife, there would be no other secondary wife. My father gladly accepted her condition, because he saw in the young girl a strong and inspiring character, one who would not disgrace him but who would assist him in his ambition for higher achievements. So, my mother married my father according to ancient customs, wearing the traditional bridal costume and going through the ritual ceremony before the altar of God and the ancestors.

Contrary to her brothers' prediction that she would now be singing a tone lower, having an old husband to keep her head down, she would show them that all their mockery would turn in her favour.

When my father was promoted a few months after their marriage, my mother was considered an auspicious wife who brought luck and prosperity to her husband; and at my birth

12 months later, even though I was a girl, it was said that as the first-born was female, many male descendants would follow. Thus the former country maiden had turned out to be a Lady of Good Fortune.

Leaving me in the care of an old *amah*, my father took my mother to China to visit my grandmother in the village. My mother used to tell me how she was spoiled by my grandmother who called her 'my overseas daughter-in-law', making it clear that my mother's place was with my father and that of mother Lee, my father's village wife, was in the village to look after the house and the ricefields. Being autocratic, my grandmother knew how to keep the peace between her two daughters-in-law. She gave each of them to understand that their duties were equally important. Being a village girl, mother Lee was quite happy with the arrangement, because she could take pride in her importance of being entrusted with the riches of her husband.

As my grandmother's word was law, nobody dared to disobey her. Thus, after a sojourn of three months, my father and mother returned to Medan with many happy memories of my village grandmother.

3

The youth with the ruddy complexion

MY THOUGHTS ARE running helter-skelter and unconsciously the story of my father's early days, which my mother had learned from my village grandmother, slips back to mind.

Our forefathers were originally from central China. Owing to droughts, floods and incessant wars, they had drifted from one place to another until they reached the coast. When they finally settled in the provinces of Kwangtung and Fukien on the east coast, they were treated as visitors by the local inhabitants.

Among the exodus of farmers, tradespeople, artisans and warriors was also a group of scholars whose ancestry could be traced back to aristocrats; they had never known menial work. If by chance, a scholar could pass the Imperial Examination, he would become the pride and support of his clan. Sometimes, to save an entire family from perishing from hunger and illness, parents would sell their children to people who could give their offspring food and shelter.

My father's family was descended from one of these. His parents lived with all their cousins in a big house built when the family had been successful, generations back. Each family occupied one or two rooms and each had their own kitchen. The only place they shared was the Ancestral Hall where occasions like the New Year and births of male descendants were celebrated (the latter on the Lantern Festival, the fifteenth day of the first moon). My father grew up in these surroundings where pettiness and jealousy often resulted in quarrels and fights among the nearest of kin. He resented