

In the Swim

The Story of Robert Khay-Woon Chan

Robert Chan

This edition first published for Robert Chan in 2006 by
Memoirs Foundation Inc. (Australia)
2 Burwood Highway, Burwood East Victoria 3151
03 9888 9588
www.memoirsfoundation.org.au

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The author may be contacted through the Memoirs
Foundation

National Library of Australia Cataloguing in Publication Data

ISBN No 978-0-9803214-0-1

Typeset in 11pt Adobe Garamond Pro by Synergy Publishing

Publisher: Arnold Bonnet
Edited by: Vivienne Achia
Art Director: Mark Bonnet
Project Coordinator: Mary Peries
Graphics: Louise Jones
Production: Wendy Wright

Printed in Australia

The opinions expressed by the author are not necessarily those
of the publisher or the editor.

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Foreword

Khay Woon Chan's Story

Khay Woon Chan's story, like all our stories, takes place in the relationships of his family of origin, in the language and culture of the society in which he grew up from childhood to adulthood and in the places where he has lived.

In telling of his forebears and his own family's story he explores situations and life experiences that matters to him, his family and the rest of the human family recognize that behind the contented door of all our lives; life always shows its claws and trouble comes-illness, poverty and losses of many kinds.

Khay Woon' honest recording of some of his personal experiences illustrates the wisdom of his years and his capacity to reflect on both his outer and inner journey.

Since migrating to Australia he has through family, friends and involvement at the Box Hill Baptist church committed himself to faith in the God revealed by Jesus. His faith journey is one of constantly questioning and seeking so that he lives comfortably with the riddles of human existence.

As I am grateful for his warm friendship, his enriching of my understanding of another culture and his joy of life.

When you read his story, enjoy it and seek to understand what he is telling us.

M. John West

Voluntary Chaplain. Baptist Church and retired school principal

Preface

Fau Zii Chan

*Teacher, teacher, the topic of this essay
is that I will be a grandfather one day
so what will life bring me so I can say
grandson, listen to my story and stay
a while I share my life, trialz and tribulationz
upz and downz and celebrationz
many challengez from moving across this continent-nationz
and as we become austral-asianz
in this foreign land wif the foreign facez
strange people goin' even stranger placez
we like tarzan in the middle of civilasation
in this big white-cultural nation
if we are going anywhere we be needing patience
like a kid sittin' through multiple news stationz.
ten... nine... sbs... abc...
all sayin' cloudy but fine, top of twenty-three
summer moments you lay next to me, me next to you
feet up on the sofa is what we do
coz its nap-time at a quarter past two
as sure as adhesive is glue*

*as pure as abrasive it was leaving eight ten james
movin'away was like crossin'over thames
all the way over that street, literally over the bridge
into the stickz and the one-room crib
but every weekend I could come visit
two-dayz isnt enough, when your seven is it...
funny how heaven playz out life wif our choicez
should we choose it then in Him our life we rejoice it
our regrettable actionz we have no need to lament
life is like touch-chess, our actionz are set in cement
our hugz, kissez, wordz, good and bad are meant
to build up personalitez to the skiez
its all triviality as my nickname was boy
idealz, sittin' peacefully next to the koi pond
when a shark comez out to feed upon
to say, peace be wif you my fish
battered flake wif the chipz really what reality is
but enough of this ramble on pastz
what you brought to my life, us
vinez of melon and tomatoez sprinkled wif caterpillar dust
linez of earz and headz of corn and cabbagez
every advice you shared wif me in the vegie patchez
I take your voice wif me till i own my own land
to spread seedz again wif my own hands
wif my sonz and watch the growth*

*that I learnt to cultivate so many yearz ago
activate the legacy I have been privileged
to be equipped wif, this I acknowledge
and thank the Lord for my grandpa
whos goin' to argue me if I call him da
well, mayb no-one except for my ...
stood by me when I stretched the rope far
was there when the 'lastic snapped in my life
when you sit judged you cherish the positivez a person can write
even a few scribed wordz, I believe in you
nothin' new, the same ol' message, I love you
yeah, word... grandpa I love you too
we swept the dirt fallen of peoples shoez
on our kneez, we brushed the carpet clean
for those few dollarz, that sweet coffee we could dream...
tick, tock, as the handz turn around the grandfather clock
all your friendz get called in from around the block
you know your loved when your receiving sockz
as your let go of the bread the duckz around flock
at the pond, the pool, in the sunshine
this is what I do best, writin' linez between linez
tick, tick, tick of the checklist
seemz therez so many thingz I miss, ill miss, I missed
readers digest well and follow my gist
everyonez curtain closez, understand lifez like this*

Chan Khay Woon

Chu Khyun Yin

田
啟
運

朱
羣
英

長
女
蓮
清

次
男
光
明

三
女
蓮
鳳

四
女
蓮
花

Chan Lian Cheng

Chan Kuan Beng

Chan Lian Hong

Chan Lian Hua

Great Grandfather

*Dreams and
Gold Dust*

The story begins in 1855 when he was 17 years old. At the time his old mother was very ill and about to die. It was a summer night. She was not sleeping in the hut, but outside the house. She was half asleep at the time. In her dream she noticed that the door to heaven was open and she was asked what she wanted. She said, "I'm an old lady about to die. I want nothing for myself. I only beg that my son will be wealthy and have many male children."

Not long after that, according to the legend, his mother died. So Chan Kho, at the age of 17, was left alone.

At the time, and even now, the Chinese called themselves the Middle Kingdom; and many of my countrymen thought that their emperor and empress had great power and controlled world affairs. But in reality China was in chaos. Foreign powers were devouring China like vultures, many millions of people suffered; it seemed never ending. We were worse than third world countries, and far behind the developed ones. Countless numbers of my people were killing each other or starving to death. To illustrate the backward mess of China at that time, here is a true story.

During the arrival of the first British steam ship in Hong Kong, a junior officer noticed that the ship was not made of wood, but of steel. He quickly went to the palace, asked for permission and saw the empress. In the old Chinese tradition he had to kneel down and report humbly that a foreign

ship had come to Hong Kong and it was made of steel. Hearing this the High Minister who was attending the meeting shouted, "How dare you lie to the Empress! Guards, bind him and take him out and behead him."

The poor fellow was bound; but before he was killed, another senior officer knelt down and begged the Empress to investigate the report so that the punishment could be justified. The first senior officer shouted, "Why are you so foolish and wasting time? It is common basic law that when steel touches water it sinks, so how can a ship be made of steel?"

The Empress thought for a while and then commanded both the officers to investigate in Hong Kong. On the way to Hong Kong the second Senior Officer was told that he would be punished on his return, because there would never be a ship made of steel.

When they were on board in Hong Kong, the British captain of the ship was asked, "Could this ship really be made of steel?"

He answered, "Yes." The senior minister still did not believe this. He asked for a small hammer and personally knocked it against the side of the ship. He was surprised and ashamed. The British soldiers who were nearby started to laugh and the prime minister's face turned red.

Coming back to Chan Kho; believing in dreams sounds like believing in fairy tales. But for Chan Kho it was almost a dream - like Joseph in the bible. Chan Kho's mother was dead and he was alone when autumn came.

The rice which had been planted in the small plot which belonged to the landlord, was ready for harvesting. Chan Kho worked very hard, cut the stalks, threshed them and dried what the Hokkien call 'paddy', meaning the rice with the husks. Then came the landlord with the big 'hong kueh'. A hong kueh is a double-bladed fan fixed on a shaft, that can be rotated on a handle. When the landlord turned the handle, a strong breeze blew forward, then the paddy was slowly poured down in front of the rotating fan. Thus the good rice, being heavier, fell closer to the fan; and the poor rice and the husks, which were lighter, were blown further away. Then the servant of the landlord used a measure and divided it equally. The portion

near the fan went to the landlord and the portion blown far away belonged to the farmer. And that was called 'equal share' in those days. The same amount but not the same quality.

The Chinese people still remember stories about the Great Navigator, Admiral Cheng Ho, who made seven western voyages from 1405 to 1433. At that time China enjoyed overwhelming economic, military, technological and cultural advantage over other nations. However, China was interested only in trade and had never conquered any country in the world. With all those things on in his mind, Chan Kho decided to join a sailing ship as a deck boy without pay. The ship was sailing for Singapore.

It was early winter, and the north west monsoon was good for the ship; and it arrived at its destination quickly. He and one of his friends chose to stay in Singapore but neither of them had any money; so each found work in different shops to earn enough for food and lodging. Chan Kho worked very hard and after the first month, the kind shopkeeper gave him six dollars a month. However, his friend's employer did not pay him a cent. Six months passed quickly for Chan Kho. He was treated well and given free food and lodging, and he saved all of his wages.

But for his friend it was a different story. The stingy boss did not give him a cent; and when he told the boss about his friend, Chan Kho, who was paid six dollars a month, the boss answered that it had nothing to do with him.

At about this time Chan Kho had a dream himself. In the dream his mother told him that his luck was not in Singapore, and she mentioned the name of a place he had never heard of. The morning after the dream his friend came to him, wanting to borrow four dollars for a voyage. He said that he was leaving Singapore and going to Sarawak. When Chan Kho heard the name 'Sarawak', he thought it was strange.

"It sounds like the place my mother told me about in my dream. I have never heard of that place. I will go with you and pay for your passage as well."

It was summer and the south west monsoon blew against the sailing

boat; and it was many days before it reached Kuching, which is the capital of Sarawak.

Sarawak was the country given to a British captain by the Sultan of Brunei, because the British navy captain had helped the Sultan to win the war against the natives who rebelled against him. Soon after that Captain Brooke from the British Navy became the Raja (King) of Sarawak. Though Kuching was named the capital of Sarawak in 1847, it was only a small village with a few timber shop houses on the left bank of the Kuching River, and some groups of houses were made from atap leaves called 'kampongs', where the Malays lived, The true natives of the country, called 'Ibans' and 'Dyaks', lived deeper in the jungle. The Malays were mostly Muslims and quite civilised, but the Ibans were still head hunters. They did not eat human meat, but the young men were not allowed to take a wife until each was brave enough to cut off an enemy's head. Then the head was brought to the chief of the longhouse who would tattoo a ring around the man's finger. Some of the skulls can still be seen in the longhouses today, and the tattoo symbolises bravery and qualification for marriage.

The experience in Singapore made it easier for Chan Kho to survive in Kuching. Again he went to work for a shopkeeper, with low pay; and again he was given food and lodging. Because he was obedient and he worked very hard – that was his nature – the boss liked him; but as it was only a small shop he could not afford to employ him. He went to work as a labourer for a prospecting company in Bau (it means 'bad smell'; a Malay word). It was called Bau because later on there were many Chinese working there, and they rebelled against the government and thousands of them were killed. No one buried them - so their bodies turned smelly; that is why they called the place 'Bau'.

Just a few miles from there was another small town called 'Buso' which is also a Malay name meaning 'rotten'. Again there were thousands of Chinese who were killed there; and their flesh rotted, so the Malays called it 'Buso'. These two towns still have the same names, 'Bau' for the bad smell and 'Buso' for the rotten meat. What I have just said happened much later on, not during Chan Kho's time; but I am jumping forward to explain

the names of these two towns.

My great grandfather went to work there as a labourer; and because he was a willing and hard worker, the manager liked him and sent him to buy food for the workers. He went to his old boss's shop for most of the goods and was given a discounted price. He did not forget the discount and always returned all the change money to the manager. Thus news of his honesty began to spread and he became a permanent buyer.

The old boss had a daughter. Chan Kho was working hard and earning a good wage so the old boss offered him his daughter, Chua Lian, in marriage. Chan Kho was blessed. He was happy with a good wife and he became a member of a nice family. He remembered what his mother told him in the dream in Singapore, and he believed that this was what she had meant; that his luck was not in Singapore, but in Sarawak.

That was just the beginning. One year passed and the Chinese were building small villages near the prospecting area. Chan Kho suggested to his father-in-law that it would be a good idea to open a shop in that area. As Chua Lian was expecting a baby soon, the older man agreed since there was no shop in the area; but he asked him to wait until after the baby was born. As usual, he followed the old man's advice. He started making arrangements, which included the building of a small shop house in that village. Blessings from heaven seemed to follow one after the other for Chan Kho. A healthy baby boy was born and they named him Chan Kee Hock. He is the eldest brother of my grandfather. The name means 'Good Family Luck'. Kee is 'family' and Hock is 'luck'.

The parents and grandparents were very happy with the beginning of the next generation. Soon after the celebration of the child's first month, which is a Chinese tradition, Chan Kho opened the shop in the new village, selling such things as rice, salted fish, cooking oil, salt, tobacco and other daily needs. During his free time he planted sugarcane and vegetables on a small plot of land at the back of his shop. Being the only shop, it had no competition and he was doing quite well. However, Chan Kho always remembered what it was like being poor and he was kind and fair

to everyone. Almost two years passed. The gold prospectors did not find much gold; some were bankrupted and others were struggling.

One night, Chua Lian, Chan Kho's wife, looked up and saw the round beautiful moon in the deep blue sky and said to her husband, "Why don't we get some sugarcane, sit here and enjoy the beautiful scene?"

He replied that it was a good idea, went to the back of the shop and pulled up a cane. The roots attached to the cane were sparkling in the moonlight. He was a little surprised; but knowing that his wife was waiting, he quickly cut the soil end off with a parang (which is a big knife), made another stroke at the leaf end, and cut the sugarcane into several pieces. He cleaned them with water from the well nearby and took the whole bundle to his wife. While they were enjoying the moonlit scene and chewing the sugarcane, he told his wife about the strange, sparkling roots.

Women seem to be more interested than men in sparkling things, and at once she asked her husband to go with her to have a look. They found the part that had been thrown away, and examined the strange sparkles which appears tiny and yellowish. The wife said, "Can this be gold dust?"

The husband answered, "Who would throw gold dust here?" and continued, "Oh, who knows. I dreamt about my mother who told me that my luck was in this country, but having you and our son is enough good luck for me."

"How can we know if this is gold or not? Prospectors often come to our shop. They would be able to tell us."

"Don't ask them. Later, I'll ask my father to take this to his friend, a goldsmith in

Kuching,' she suggested. "That is a better way," said her husband.

The dust bits were indeed gold, but they were not worth much. However, the news spread like wildfire and people made big mountains out of the tiny molehill. Not a single story had the facts. Some said fairies brought the gold to Chan Kho's farm, others said gold flew to Chan Kho's house, but everyone believed that Chan Kho was blessed with good luck. He had

arrived in Kuching with nothing. He now had a good wife and a healthy baby, was making good money from his shop, and even gold found its way to him.

The Chinese were very superstitious in those days. A small group of prospectors soon approached Chan Kho and invited him to take shares in their company, but Chan Kho told them that he did not have spare money to buy shares.

“You don’t have to pay money, you just sign the papers and 20% of any profit is yours,” they said.

“That is not fair and I don’t take things for nothing,” Chan Kho said.

“We know you are an honest man; you are not a cheat. We are making you an offer and we wish you would accept.”

Chan Kho looked puzzled. “Why?” The answer came from the prospectors spontaneously:

“We have been prospecting for a long time but have never had any luck, and we believe that if you join us things will change. Please join us.”

Chan Kho thought for a long while and said, “I believe you are sincere, but I have never come across any business like this. Please give me another day or two to consider your offer and then I will answer you.”

“You are really too honest and careful. We’ll come back tomorrow.”

Chua Lian heard every word although she was busy doing something else during the meeting. In those days women were not supposed to be involved with men’s business, especially if they were outsiders or strangers.

“Why do you have to wait?” she asked her husband. “This offer sounds too good.”

“But I want to discuss this with your father first. He has a lot of experience. He is older and wiser.”

The old man was approached; and he told his son in law that in business it should be a deal or an exchange.

“You found a bit of gold in your backyard, and since you are not a prospector, why not offer your land to them to prospect in return for the 20% and that is a deal!”

That was the best advice given to Chan Kho.

Next morning the men came early, while Chan Kho and Chua Lian were still having their breakfast. Chan came from the kitchen smiling; and he greeted them. They all looked very happy. Everything Chan said, including his proposal and all agreements, were written in legal papers. Thus a small businessman had the biggest share in the company without paying one cent.

The backyard was indeed a gold mine. A large amount of gold dust extracted from the land, and the company prospered, and Chan Kho became a rich man. More prospectors came to him and begged him to join them for free shares. Chan Kho never wanted anything for nothing, since he now had money, he bought the shares and later on became a big prospector himself. It sounds fictitious but it is true that in a short time he ventured into many other kinds of businesses, like rubber , coconut and pepper plantations; and his business chain continued to expand.

Though his many workers were very loyal, honest and hard working, he soon found that he needed more good men. The problem was solved with the help of Raja James Brooke. In the early 20th century, Chan Kho was the richest man not only in Kuching but in the whole of Borneo; and he was also a personal friend of the King, James Brooke. He could not speak English - they always conversed in Malay. The King allowed him to bring many of his friends from China to assist him in Sarawak. It was a new beginning for all.

For King Raja Brooke, the country began to develop further. For Chan's men, they all had jobs, and some were able to start their own businesses and become shop owners. Most of the goods originated from Chan's big company in Kuching. It was a bit like Macdonald's today. Chan Kho, the poor village boy, had become a multimillionaire. Verification of these family stories can be verified by the facts in Kuching Museum.

One day, one of his successful close friends from China told him that

being a rich Chinese man he should marry a Chinese wife, because his wife in Kuching was not a Chinese wife. Another good reason was that his late father and mother could be worshipped. Chan Kho loved his late mother very much. This advice was embedded firmly in his mind and he thought about it all the time. Though he loved his wife and two sons (Kee Soon, the second son, was born three years after Kee Hock), he decided it was the right thing to do, not because he wanted another wife, but because he wanted future generations to continue worshipping his parents. Hopefully, one day his own bones would be with his parents, too.

Before he left several years later, he built a strong storehouse for his silver dollar coins. In Sarawak in those days there was no bank or paper money. A silver dollar at that time was about 1-1/2 inches in diameter and 0.1 inch in thickness. Boxes that could contain 10 pieces x 10 piece, by 100 pieces were specially constructed to store the coins, and each box contained \$10,000. Then the top was sealed. Each box was so heavy that one person could not carry it. It was estimated that three million silver coins (\$3 million) were kept in that strong house. The elder son was 20 at that time and was authorised to take over as head of the family and the business empire. Then Chan Kho left for China. He was then about 40 years old.

He went back to Chao An in Fujian, China. Because he was a rich man, finding a wife was no problem. He married a specially selected girl in another village. She became my great grandmother Kho Jin Choo. There my grandfather Chan Kee Teck was born and; two years later, he was followed by a brother.

Chan Kho took the bones of his mother and father from their graves and reburied them in a beautiful place according to the Chinese 'Fong Sui.' He built a nice house with orchards for his family; and donated another big building for the people of the village, which was open to everyone for recreation; and the family tree was kept there. Thus everyone in the village knew which generation he or she belonged to, and addressed each other accordingly (sometimes an old man can call a young boy 'Grand-uncle'). That system appeared very strange to those who did not understand it.

Chan Kho was satisfied and happy with what he had achieved. Time passed quickly. Being an older man in his late forties, he already had a lot of experience and money. Being rich, he was well treated by the village people; and he was very generous to them and helped those who were poor.

Unfortunately, during the communist revolution, all those buildings were destroyed and can no longer be seen. But some of the buildings have been returned to us.

My great grandmother knew that her husband returned to China to find a second wife. In those days that was not unusual - it was quite normal. Men could marry any number of wives. But she never met the Kuching wife. She knew he was married already and had two sons with the Kuching wife; and she knew he had enough money to support them all. It was as if he had two different families, one in Sarawak and one in China.

To make a long story short, Chan Kho was happy in the village with my great grandmother. Kho Jin Choo had three sons and two daughters with him. The eldest was my grandfather, Chan Kee Teck, who married Soh Hoon, my grandmother. My father Chan Eng Cho was the first born, the second one is Chan Kuan Cho and the third one is Chan Kay Cho.

Several years later, someone from Kuching came back to China and told him that his eldest son of the first wife in Kuching had built hundreds of shop houses. He heard the story and he decided he had to go back to Kuching himself to check what was going on. So back to Kuching he went. With money it was quite easy to travel; and there were steamships by then.

When he arrived, the first thing he asked his son was, "Is everybody all right?" Everyone was well and happy; and, in fact, his two sons were married and each of them had a child. After that, he asked his son for the key to his money store. His son gave him the key, he opened the store, and he found that all the boxes had disappeared.

When he was in Kuching, he was given a walking stick by the Rajah (King) and he was authorised to use it to hit anyone who did wrong (at

that time Great Britain was still having what was called ‘thumblaw’). He started to hit his eldest son. The son was very obedient and said, “Father let me explain.”

He shouted at him, “What is there to explain? When I left here there were three million silver coins and now there is nothing.”

The son said, “Father, the money in the store was dead money. I used it plus some more money I got from other businesses to build 112 shop houses. Now the shop houses are rented out, and they are bringing in seven dollars each shop house per month, and the shop houses will be there forever. We are making about \$1,000 every month from the rental.”

The old man was sorry, but did not tell the son he was sorry.

Chan Kho remained in Kuching for several years, and had another three sons and several daughters – I can’t remember how many. The Chinese culture at that time was: daughters were just daughters.

Chan Kee Ong, in Kuching, was my youngest uncle; my fifth great uncle. He should have been number six, but he was called number five all his life. The mistake was accepted; there must have been some reason but I don’t know what it was.

My great grandfather married the Chinese wife because he wanted someone to worship his father and mother; and, when he was in Kuching, he wished that when he became old, he could go back to China and die. Most of his millions of dollars were in Kuching and he was already old (in those days 60 years was considered old). He said, “I’m now sixty, I’m going back to China so that I can die and be buried close to my father”. He went back to China and a few years later he died.

After his death, because he was very rich, all the villagers (not only the Chan family, but also people with other surnames), were encouraged to come and worship him. In order to worship him they organised, as a tribute, a whole pig. The pig was just freshly killed; not yet roasted. I repeat, these were not the Chan villagers, but the villagers from around the area. In those days China was very poor. People needed food and money,

and money is always a temptation. After worshipping Chan Kho, the villagers were given money for the whole pig, or given the money and then were allowed to keep the pig. They brought the pig to worship, were paid the full amount of money; and they received the red packet (good luck and prosperity), plus the whole cost of the pig. Later on one of my relatives found out that the same pig had been brought there for worship and was then being brought back by other people for a second and third time; for one pig they were being paid three times. Because of that, when anyone brought a pig to worship, my relative would cut off the right ear of the pig and keep it so they could not bring the same pig to worship again.

At the end of the seventh day, according to the records, close to one million in Sarawak currency, was spent on that kind of charity.

He was able to build up the whole area where the Chan village started. This is Chinese culture. Ordinary Chinese – they usually just bring a pig's head, not a whole pig, but because he was a multi-millionaire this made a big difference. People brought a whole pig, and they received the payment for the pig, and they earned the whole pig for themselves.