



THE DEFINITIVE BIOGRAPHY OF  
DR SOO KIM LAN

---

A FAMILY'S TRIBUTE

MALAYA'S  
**GRAND LADY**  
OF MEDICINE

JACQUELYN PY SOO, PHD.

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PUBLICATIONS

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DEDICATED TO THE LIFE AND TIMES  
OF DR SOO KIM LAN



Circa 1916-1917. Soo Kim Lan with her second sister,  
Choon Lan prior to her medical school days.

## PROLOGUE

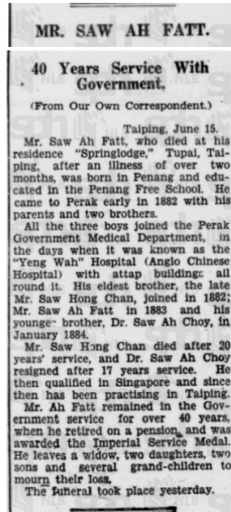


This biography is much more than an absorbing portrait of a benevolent woman ahead of her time. It articulates two potent themes regarding the life and times of Dr Soo Kim Lan. First, it is an affirmation of our innate human appreciation for warmth, compassion and love of life via a series of historic publications and media recognition from the onset of her illustrious career, to its fortissimo coda. Second, this work is an anthology of true accounts from family members and immediate circles, which collectively reveal the untold story of the only woman we know and love across our nation, as “The Grand Lady of Medicine” (Sin Chew Daily, 15 October 2010). The following is a chronicle of the central events of her life. According to pertinent chapters written in chronological order by decades, a selection of these events will be revisited to provide more extensive descriptions, systematically supported with news articles, manuscripts and photographs.

### **Childhood and family background**

Soo Kim Lan was born in Taiping, Perak on February 16, 1894. Her parents were Soo Hoong Cheung/Saw Hong Chan and Chong Cheng Foong. Both were born and raised on the island of Penang. Her father was the eldest son of Soo Pak Seng, and eldest brother to Soo Hoong Fatt/Saw Ah Fatt, and Soo Hoong Choy/Saw Ah Choy. Born in Penang and educated at the Penang Free School, the three boys arrived in Perak in early 1882, with their parents. Upon graduation, all three boys

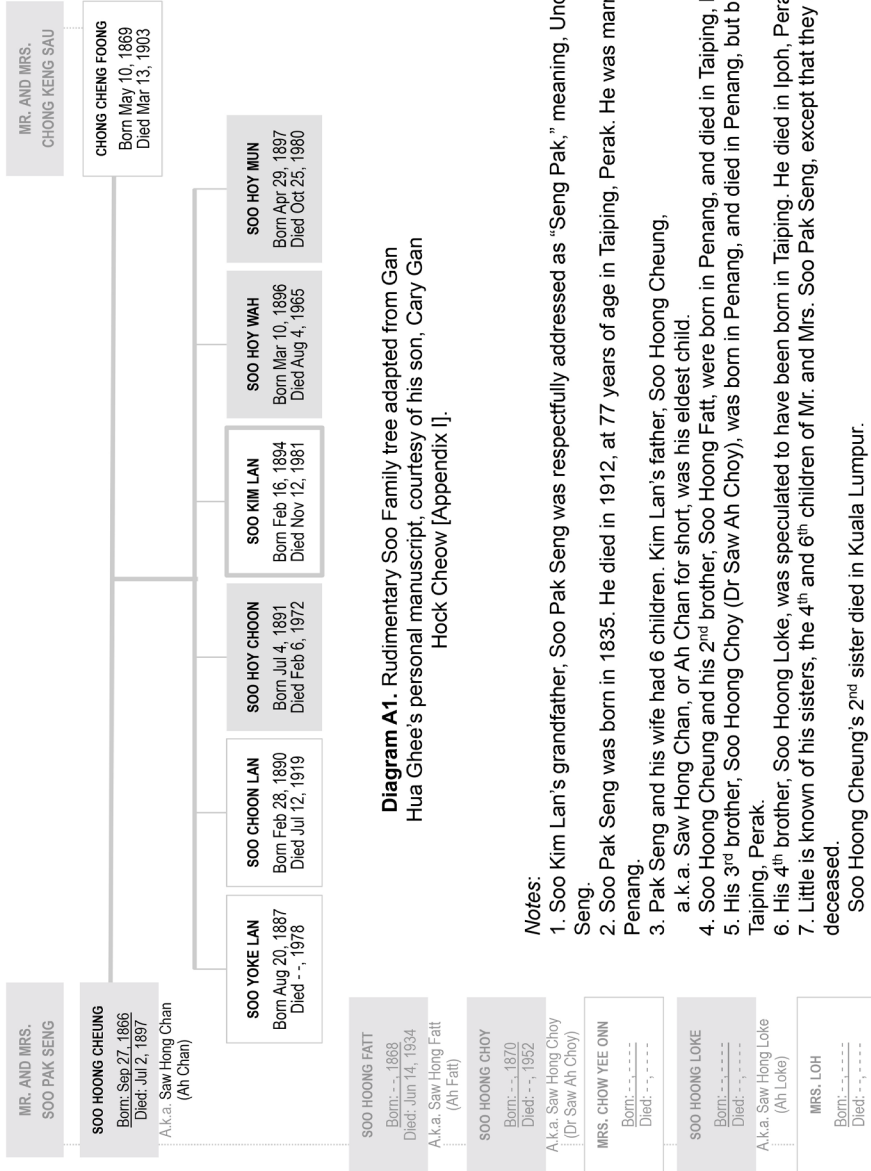
joined “Yeng Wah,” also known as the Anglo Chinese Hospital, under the government’s medical department (The Straits Times, 18 June 1934, p.13).



*June 18, 1934. The Straits Times, p.13. Soo Kim Lan’s second uncle’s obituary and brief write-up of her father’s family’s history.*

Her father, Soo Hoong Cheung/Saw Hong Chan, joined the government’s medical service upon the family’s move to Perak in 1882, and it is surmised, he married Chong Cheng Foong, three years later, in 1885. His second brother, Soo Hoong Fatt/Saw Ah Fatt, joined him the following year in 1883, and their third brother, Soo Hoong Choy/Saw Ah Choy, joined them to work under the government’s medical service in January 1884. Kim Lan’s parents had six children in Taiping. As shown in Diagram A1, she was their fourth child. Whilst the record show that her father passed away after 20 years of service, at Yeng Wah Hospital, family accounts submit that her father departed on July 2, 1897, from recurrent typhoid when she was three.





**Diagram A1.** Rudimentary Soo Family tree adapted from Gan Hua Ghee's personal manuscript, courtesy of his son, Cary Gan Hock Cheow [Appendix I].

**Notes:**

1. Soo Kim Lan's grandfather, Soo Pak Seng was respectfully addressed as "Seng Pak," meaning, Uncle Seng.
2. Soo Pak Seng was born in 1835. He died in 1912, at 77 years of age in Taiping, Perak. He was married in Penang.
3. Pak Seng and his wife had 6 children. Kim Lan's father, Soo Hoong Cheung, a.k.a. Saw Hong Chan, or Ah Chan for short, was his eldest child.
4. Soo Hoong Cheung and his 2<sup>nd</sup> brother, Soo Hoong Fatt, were born in Penang, and died in Taiping, Perak.
5. His 3<sup>rd</sup> brother, Soo Hoong Choy (Dr Saw Ah Choy), was born in Penang, and died in Penang, but buried in Taiping, Perak.
6. His 4<sup>th</sup> brother, Soo Hoong Loke, was speculated to have been born in Taiping. He died in Ipoh, Perak.
7. Little is known of his sisters, the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> children of Mr. and Mrs. Soo Pak Seng, except that they are deceased.
8. Soo Hoong Cheung's 2<sup>nd</sup> sister died in Kuala Lumpur.
9. Soo Kim Lan's maternal grandmother is Mrs Chong Keng Sau. A.k.a. is an abbreviation meaning, "also known as."

Her mother passed away six years later on March 19, 1903, when she was nine. Her eldest sister, Yoke Lan, was sixteen, second sister, Choon Lan was thirteen, eldest brother, Hoy Choon was twelve, second brother, Hoy Wah was seven, and youngest brother, Hoy Mun was six years of age. From thereon, Kim Lan and her siblings lived under the care of their maternal grandmother (Mrs Chong Keng Sau), known as *Ah Chor* to those in Kim Lan's daughter's generation. *Ah Chor* was a very resourceful lady, determined to keep the family together. She did her best to provide for her grandchildren. Amongst others, *Ah Chor* sold homemade specialities and brokered land sales to ensure her grandchildren grew up amidst amicable surroundings and attended good schools. The Soo siblings were forever grateful to her. After *Ah Chor* passed away, Kim Lan often showed filial affection in honour of her maternal grandmother's memory. On occasions, she would bring her only daughter, Crystal and other family members to visit *Ah Chor*'s gravesite, situated diagonally across the Kuala Lumpur Railway Station. When they arrived, everyone would bow in respect, and place flowers on *Ah Chor*'s memorial ground, where the National Mosque now stands. Kim Lan's steadfast filial affection, taught youngsters and loved ones in the family to faithfully respect elders and those who gave freely of themselves in aid of others.

From a very young age, Kim Lan, which translates to, "Golden Orchid," doted on dolls. She mended and restored dolls and toys whenever she found them frayed

or looking worse for wear. As she grew older, she redirected her tender penchant for mending to healing. Anytime she happened to come across a hurt animal, an injured dog or cat, she would bring it home and quietly, patiently nurse it back to health.

It was during these early childhood days when young Kim Lan realised that she would like nothing more than to be a doctor.

### **School days and social norms**

Despite her aspirations, the social norms of those days dictated that it was unheard of, for young ladies to engage in public life or travel unchaperoned. Hence, after graduating from the Lady Treacher Girls' School (LTGS), she became a teacher in 1915. During most of her early school days, from the time she was seven to fifteen years of age, Kim Lan was a favourite student of Catherine Jackson. At the time, Ms Jackson was a renowned missionary of the Methodist Mission (The Straits Times, 5 July 1947, p.7) and principal of the LTGS in Taiping from 1901 to 1909. She always addressed Kim Lan as "dear old Soo Kim." Today, it is reasonable to infer that it is this special bond that the two shared, that helped to open the way for Kim Lan to begin giving sermons and serving the community at the Middle Road Methodist Church in Singapore. The earliest record of her sermons was from 1916 (The Straits Times, 25 November 1916, p.11) when she was only twenty-two years of age. Even so, she held to her hopes of becoming a medical doctor. A year

later, she attributed her unwavering determination, for the opportunity to further her studies at King Edward VII Medical College in Singapore. On May 29, 1917, she passed the medical college entrance exam and was awarded the Tan Jiak Kim Scholarship (The Straits Times, 30 May 1917, p.9). By September the same year, Kim Lan embarked on her college years as one of three women in a class of forty students (Her World Magazine, February 1963, p.19). She went on to win numerous academic acclamations in college, including two eminent medal prizes for outstanding performance during her third year, in 1921.

Throughout her college years, Kim Lan served charitable causes and gave sermons at the Middle Road Methodist Church.

### **Malaya's first Chinese woman doctor**

Kim Lan graduated from The King Edward VII Medical College on August 27, 1923 to become the first woman to break the male monopoly of medics in Malaya (The Straits Times, 28 August 1923, p.9). This achievement widened the possibility for women across the region to pursue a career in medicine. She commenced her medical career at Singapore's General Hospital where she worked and trained as a gynaecologist and midwife under Dr J.S. English.

Four years later, in 1927, Dr Soo Kim Lan moved to Kuala Lumpur on her brother's request. Dr Soo Hoy Mun persuaded his sister to set up a joint practice with

him on Petaling Street to better serve the healthcare needs of the local community. Their clinic was called Coronation Dispensary. It rapidly gained public acclaim and word of mouth recognition for benevolent health care services.

Within a very short time, Kim Lan became a highly sought-after doctor, particularly for women and children. From the start, and throughout her practice, she generously reduced rates and gave free services and treatment to those who could not afford medical treatment. Regardless of their walks in life, or social and economic statuses, no one who visited Coronation Dispensary for medical aid or healthcare services, was ever turned away. Her return to Malaya captured the attention of major media channels of her day and thus, the happy celebration to welcome home Malaya's first woman doctor is well documented.

### **Lifelong service to public healthcare**

Dr Soo Kim Lan's affinity for public health and social welfare extended into every area of her life. She volunteered free medical services to The Chinese Maternity Hospital, Kuala Lumpur, which was built from donations by the local Chinese community while she served at Coronation Dispensary. She accepted the position of Honorary Supervisor at the Chinese Maternity Hospital (CMH) in 1933 and served there for almost 30 years before she resigned at the end of 1961. Throughout her service at CMH, she was regularly consulted and asked to personally intervene during difficult deliveries.

Never one to shirk her responsibilities as a professional, she responded to urgent, late night and early morning calls alike to help with critical medical situations or deliveries. Dr Soo Kim Lan was the first woman to be appointed as assistant to the Medical Officer of the Malayan Union, Dr R.B. McGregor, and the first woman doctor to provide free medical services to a hospital. Undeterred by the hectic schedules at the hospital, she gave unsparing precedence to public welfare over personal wellbeing. She strived to better public health services for the full duration of her vocation. Dr Soo Kim Lan appealed for and acquired the right to respectable privacy for expectant Asian women, conducted seminars and open forums to educate the general public, and raised greater awareness on innumerable healthcare issues, from family planning and personal hygiene to vaccinations that help prevent and control infectious diseases. At the same time, she taught and trained nurses, and gave hands-on lessons, tutorials and courses on midwifery. The educational programmes she established included lectures, guidance and instructions, to the point that her students received their certificates as qualified midwives.

Dr Soo Kim Lan commanded such respect from her students, from all walks of life, that wherever nurses were present during dinners and functions, they would stand up as she entered the room. In the course of her service, when she found that she alone could not treat all the patients efficiently, she brought in other

volunteer doctors, and in time, formed a board to ensure the continued efficiency of medical services to patients. She was also the protagonist and advocate for establishing The Lady Templer Tuberculosis Hospital and its Rehabilitation Centre in Morib (The Star, 20 August 2007, p.N20).

### **Champion for charitable causes**

Regardless of setbacks, prevailing conservative views and what may be considered as near-traumatic trials of her time, Dr Soo Kim Lan retained an optimistic spirit. She worked hard to lay the groundwork for her peers and colleagues to de-stigmatise scores of weighty issues from gender stereotypes and civil unity to healthcare services for everyone from all walks of life. In her commitment to contribute towards raising the standards of public health, she served various philanthropic institutions. These include the Wesley Methodist Church, The British Council of Malaya and The Chinese Athletic Association. Her nature was such that she would always aspire to yield advantage for others even when it came to her own, personal interests in life. A glowing demonstration of this altruistic trait is how she availed her enthusiasm for orchids to represent Malaya at the Royal Horticultural Society's Chelsea Exhibition in England on November 12, 1960. At the exhibition, she went on to make England's headlines for Malaya when she won the event's coveted Gold Medal, as well as the honour for Malaya to host the fourth World Orchid Conference in 1963.

These feats led to the formation of the Selangor Orchid Society and Dr Soo Kim Lan was elected as its first President (The Straits Times, 13 November 1960, p.5). Her interest in local orchids endured till her final days. In the course of her support and participation in local orchid scenes, she also won first prize at two annual Selangor Orchid Shows, in 1959 and 1960. Dr Soo Kim Lan is the first and remains as the only woman to be elected as President of the Selangor Orchid Society.

### **Public services and formal accolades**

Her efforts to raise the standards of public health services were recognised by the British Empire on June 11, 1947 (The Straits Times, 12 June 1947, p.1) when she was made an Honorary Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (O.B.E). She formally accepted the O.B.E. Medal on January 26, 1949. A year earlier, post Japanese occupation in Malaya, on May 15, 1946, she became the first woman to be appointed on the Malayan Union Advisory Council (The Straits Times, 16 May 1946, p.5). Two years later, on May 29, 1948, she accepted the invitation to become the honorary adviser for the Malayan Chinese Women's Progressive Association, which was established in December 1947. At the time, Dr Soo Kim Lan was already actively involved in social welfare works and public charities, that were part of her duties as Member of the Central Welfare Council. All through the 1940s, Dr Soo Kim Lan laboured amongst voluntary medics and philanthropists to curb the scourge of tuberculosis that was spreading across the country. In due course,



her unwearied efforts culminated in her re-election as Chairman of the Malayan Association for the Prevention of Tuberculosis, Selangor branch for the fourth time on May 16, 1953.

In its first year, the association was introduced to the general public as the Selangor Anti-TB Committee. In the second year, it was called the Selangor Anti-TB Association and in the third year, became known as the Selangor branch of the Malayan Association for the Prevention of Tuberculosis (The Straits Times, 17 May 1953, p.9). As official recognition for her devotion to duty and exemplary conduct, she received the Selangor Meritorious Service Medal or Pingat Jasa Kebaktian (P.J.K.) from the Sultan of Selangor at the Istana Kota, Klang, on May 13, 1958 (The Straits Times, 15 May 1958, p.5). Four years later, on August 19, 1961, Dr Soo Kim Lan was bestowed the Ahli Mangku Negara (A.M.N.) by His Majesty the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong at the premier investiture ceremony at Istana Negara, Kuala Lumpur, in recognition of her dedication to keep raising the standards of quality for public health facilities and welfare services. A year later, she was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Medicine by Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Independent Malaya and Chancellor of the University of Malaya at the university's first convocation on June 16, 1962.

She is the first woman to be conferred such an honour by the University (The Straits Times, 16 June 1962, p.1). Fifteen years later, Dr Soo Kim Lan received the Tun Fatimah Gold Medal on March 12, 1977 from the National Council of Women's Organisation alongside three remarkable women, Tun Hajah Rahah, Pn. Hajjah Tom bt. Dato Abdul Razak and Sister Mangalam (The Straits Times, March 10, 1977, p.11).

An attempt to list Dr Soo Kim Lan's plethora of achievements is provided at the end of pertinent chapters.

### **Pioneering spirit and final days**

Dr Soo Kim Lan retired from her duties as Honorary Medical Supervisor at the Chinese Maternity Hospital in 1961. She was nearing her seventies, yet she remained as one of the most active women in the country. She continued to put in a day's work at Coronation Dispensary, started reading the books that she never had time for during those 24-hour "on-call" work days at the hospital, and happily tended to her collection of orchids, which she had spent over twenty years building. In addition, she pressed on with her responsibilities in serving charitable and welfare organisations. Now and again, she would also consent to media interviews. Her personal recollections consistently inspired readers to rise above their personal challenges in life with grace and gratitude, two notable hallmarks of Dr Soo Kim

Lan. She passed away peacefully on November 12, 1981 at her home in Kenny Hills.

The following chapters journal the significant contributions that Dr Soo Kim Lan tirelessly made throughout her lifetime to the credit of the region's public health services and facilities.



*Note: Dr Soo Kim Lan was the first Malayan Chinese female doctor in Malaya. The first female doctor in Malaya (Singapore) was Emily Hitchcock who graduated in 1911 (Register of Graduates, K.E. VII College of Medicine, Singapore, 1963).*



## **Chapter 1**

### ***The 1910s (1910-1919)***

#### **The setting**

Soo Kim Lan turned sixteen at the start of the second decade of the twentieth century. The 1910s elevated the momentum of its first decade, which opened the century with exploits that unfurled one of the most revolutionary times in human history. Change became the natural order of the day as the world got used to soaring the skies (Wilbur and Orville Wright took their first flight in 1903), gliding over land (Henry Ford introduced his first Model-T on October 1, 1908), taking photographs (Kodak introduced the low-priced Brownie camera in 1900), watching silent movies (Thomas Edison produced the first silent movie in 1903), receiving Nobel Prizes (First Nobel Prizes were awarded in December 10, 1901), and exploring a new physics of reality (Max Planck formulated the Quantum Theory in 1900), which paved the way for Einstein's Theory of Relativity in 1905. The world was caught up with a profusion of new inventions and incorporations when it received news that King Edward VII departed in 1910. His funeral was described as "the greatest

assemblage of royalty and rank ever gathered in one place and of its kind, the last” (Tuchman, 1964). Closer to home, the Anglo-Siamese treaty was signed on March 10, 1909 by the United Kingdom and Thailand, dissecting the northern Malay states from Malaya.

Unfortunately, the 1910s came to be dominated by the First World War (WWI), which began in 1914. This war spread to Malaya at the Battle of Penang on October 28, 1914, when German cruiser SMS Emden sank two allied warships in the Strait of Malacca.

### **The undeterred goal**

Set against this backdrop, an orphaned, sixteen-year old school girl living with her maternal grandmother in Taiping, Perak, was contemplating her future. Soo Kim Lan was filled with childhood dreams of becoming a doctor. Her intrinsic yearning was so intense that she would immediately go to the aid of any animal in need. She would soothe and nurse limping stray dogs, injured cats and birds till they were able to walk, run and fly on their own. At the same time, she was a teenager overwhelmed with gratitude for her maternal grandmother who cared for her and her siblings after the loss of their parents.

Well aware of the trials of her times, which made it seem near impossible for a woman to be accepted into Medical College, she proceeded to become a teacher after graduating from high school. While she found some consolation in being able to help reciprocate her

maternal grandmother's kindness, it appeared that fate would not allow her to settle into her job. World War I (July 28, 1914 to November 11, 1918) broke out just before she completed her teachers' training program. The war lasted throughout her years as a teacher from 1915 to 1917. She persevered, doing her best to educate and care for every child under her tutelage. In her own time, Kim Lan immersed herself in her studies, community services, charity and church services. Assessments of her choices during her teenage years demonstrate that she held unwavering faith in the wisdom of a biblical verse that counsels one to be joyful in hope, patient in affliction and faithful in prayer (Romans 12:12).

Hereinafter are five photographs of her teachers' training and teaching days. She was eighteen to twenty-two years of age when these photographs were taken circa 1912 to 1916.



*Circa 1912-1914. Soo Kim Lan (far right) at an outdoor session with fellow teacher trainees.*



*Circa 1912-1914.  
Soo Kim Lan (left)  
with much loved  
missionary Catherine  
Jackson (middle)  
and fellow trainee (right).*

*Note:  
Ms Catherine Jackson  
was the Principal of  
The Lady Treacher Girls'  
School from 1901 to 1909.*



*Circa 1915-1916. Soo Kim Lan (back row, third from the  
right) as a young teacher.*



*Circa 1915-1916. Soo Kim Lan (far right) in the teachers' room with friends and fellow teachers.*



*Circa 1916-1917. Soo Kim Lan (right) with elder sister, Soo Choon Lan before she left for medical college.*

*Note:  
Choon Lan passed away during Kim Lan's second year at medical college on July 12, 1919.*



### **The childhood dream**

Soo Kim Lan's earnest dedication to pursue her chosen field, Medicine, was so deep-rooted that by 1916, at only twenty-two years of age, she was working beyond her duties as a teacher. She actively served local communities and charitable causes, and gave public sermons at the Middle Road Methodist Church in Singapore. By all accounts, she was a young lady who had dedicated her life to help others, to make a difference by giving with kindness. In due time, she showed that giving does indeed, open the way for receiving. Soo Kim Lan went on to take the medical college entrance exam and upon passing, she received the Tan Jiak Kim Scholarship on May 30, 1917. She embarked on life as a college student at the King Edward VII College of Medicine in September the same year.

The succeeding photographs, manuscripts and news articles are presented in chronological order to provide a more in-depth understanding of Soo Kim Lan's paths in life during the 1910s.