



GUNN CHIT WHA

# WAVES OF INDEPENDENCE

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MEMOIRS OF A  
MALAYSIAN DOYENNE

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WITH A FOREWORD BY  
HRH SULTAN OF SELANGOR

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WAVES OF  
INDEPENDENCE

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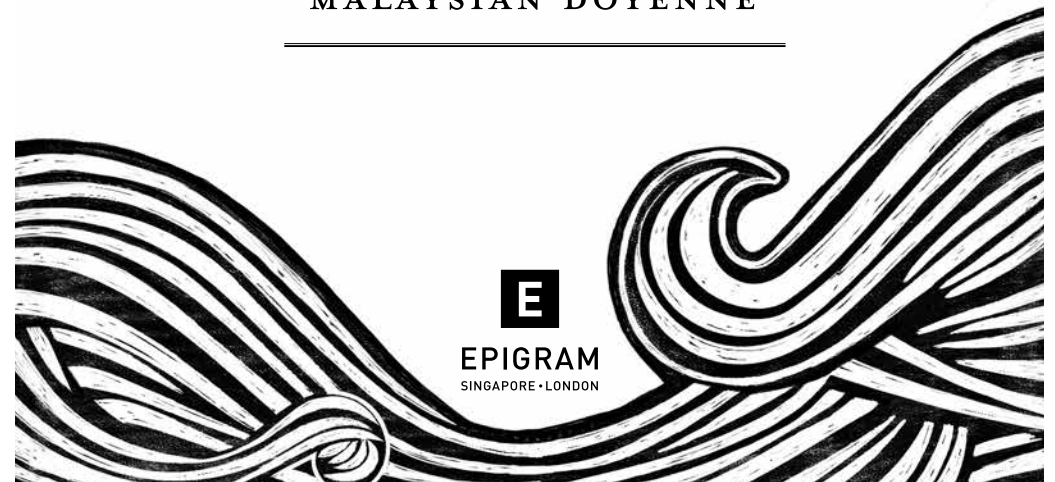
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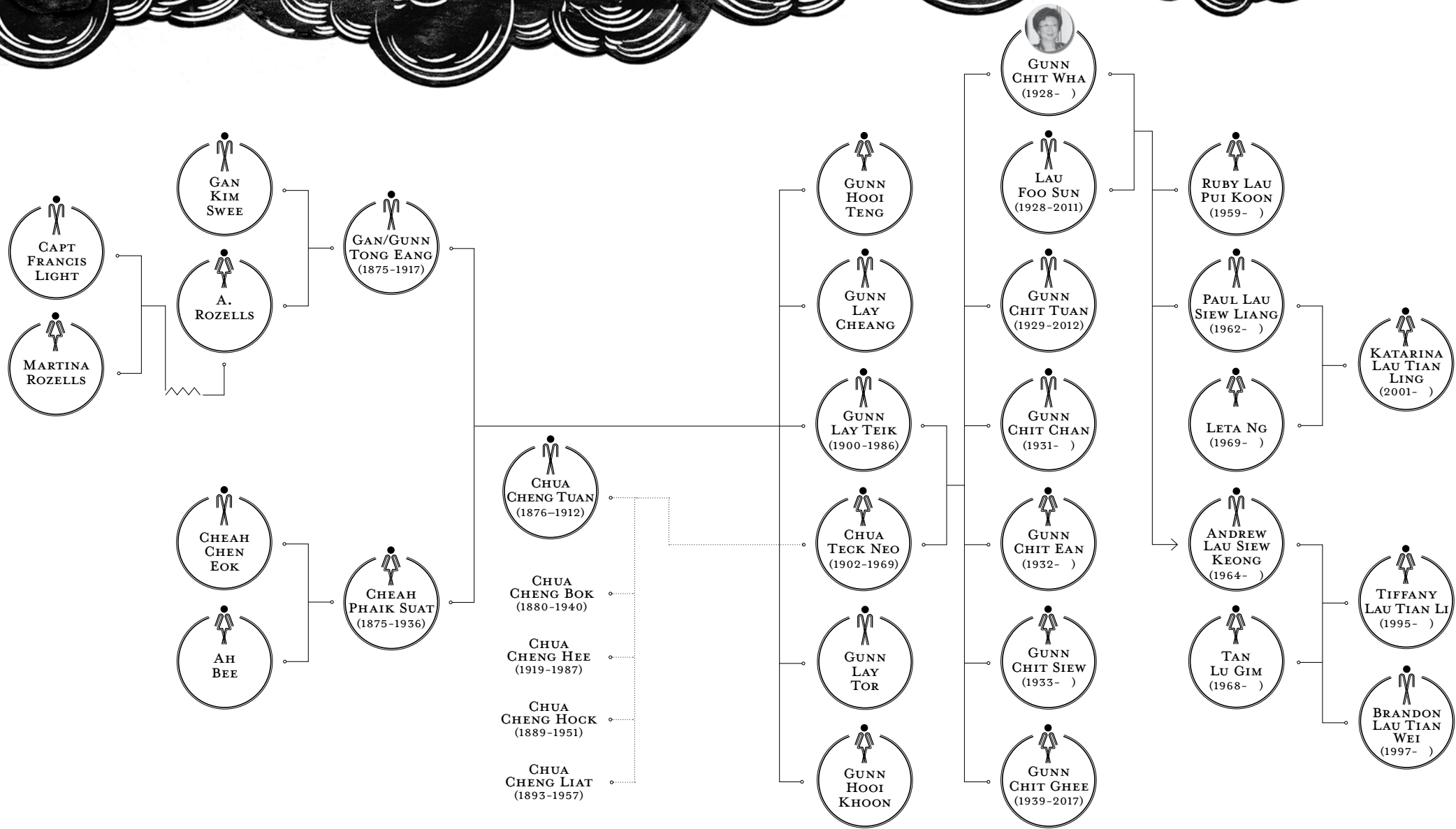


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## FOREWORD

BY HRH SULTAN OF SELANGOR

I am pleased to have been asked to write a foreword to this book by To' Puan Gunn Chit Wha that tells the story of her long and storied life, not least as one of Malaya's pioneering female role models.

To' Puan's links to Selangor are extensive. I myself knew her late father, formerly Malaya's High Commissioner to Australia and New Zealand, having travelled by sea with him to further my studies in the United Kingdom. To' Puan herself was elected in 1954 as the first female Municipal Councillor in Petaling and was appointed in 1959 as the only female State Councillor in Selangor. Both these appointments were strongly supported by my late grandfather, HRH Sultan Hisamuddin Alam Shah Alhaj. Over the years that friendship extended to myself and to my late father, HRH Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah Alhaj, who in 1971 invested To' Puan's late husband, YDH Dato' Lau Foo Sun with the royal title of Dato' Lela Jasa Diraja.

To' Puan herself was awarded the Pingat Jasa Kebaktian (PJK) in the 1950s for her contributions to Selangor.

To' Puan's story spans the hardships of World War II and of the early post-war years both in British Malaya and as a student in the United Kingdom. This is followed by her life, after her return to Malaya, as a Councillor, lawyer, wife and mother. Her experiences and insights add to our understanding of our country's transition to independence, its development since and the challenges and issues that it faced during those formative post-independence eras.

Today, it is important not to forget the role of the many people like To' Puan who, at all levels of society, played their part in helping our nation through the challenges of independence and beyond.

I congratulate her and her family for their efforts in producing this fascinating record of To' Puan's life.



His Royal Highness Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah Alhaj  
ibni Almarhum Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah Alhaj,

DK, DMN, DK (Terengganu), DK (Kelantan), DK (Perak), DK (Perlis), DK (Negeri Sembilan), DK (Kedah), DK (Johor), SPMS, SSIS, SPMJ, Commandeur de la Legion d'Honneur (France)

Sultan and Ruler of the State of Selangor

## PROLOGUE

The first time I travelled across oceans, it was to England and it was 1946. At seventeen years old and alone, I left Malaya on a Dutch steam-powered troopship named *Vollendam*, which was making its way from the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) to Europe. At the time I was a young girl who had never left home and my journey of eight thousand miles began with one step, as the saying by Lao Tzu goes.

My journey started all those years ago, and it took me to many shores. I came of age in a unique time in world history. Born under the British flag in a land known as British Malaya, I saw my country evolve into its own nation called Malaysia. This required a change of identities and a change of mindset.

It was as a British subject that I saw how a war devastated my country and my people, and how after the British returned, a nation of people hungry for Merdeka fought

for independence. It was also as a British subject that I saw how not all those on the enemy's side are bad. War made us take sides and I never want to do that again. Leaving for England soon after the Japanese surrendered, I witnessed how the British Empire, too, suffered from a war they took part in so zealously.

I had a successful career as a lawyer, one of the rare few female lawyers of Malaya. I could not have done it if it were not for the lawyers and barristers at Bannon & Bailey, who gave me the opportunity despite the challenges of employing a woman. All this, too, was the result of a father who had the foresight to plan for the futures of his children. When I subsequently struck out on my own, it was the confidence and support of relatives and friends that allowed me to continue my practice. During that time, I had little competition from other women. The other early female lawyers in Malaya had enough clients of their own to not see me as a threat. Besides, the society was smaller then and I can say that we all worked well together serving a nation that we were rooted in.

It was as a British subject that I became politically aligned as the first female Municipal Councillor of the Petaling Ward of Kuala Lumpur, though politics was far from my mind. It was a public duty that called me to stand

for elections. From a British subject, I became Malaysian in 1957.

It was as a Malaysian that I saw unnecessary civil unrest and how political agendas could cost so many lives. Nobody should take sides in a multicultural nation. We all need to make it work so we can live harmoniously together. It is as a Malaysian that I say this.

Through all that, I continued to find pleasure in travelling, especially with my husband Foo Sun. We embarked on cruises and enjoyed them tremendously. These trips reinforced what we liked to do as a couple: discover the world and dine. (Foo Sun went on to found the Malaysian chapter of *Chaîne des Rôtisseurs* and publish his own books on viticulture and wine appreciation.) As a couple, we were used to travelling; visiting Europe, America, China and other parts of the world gave us great pleasure and injected meaning into our lives. I continued to travel even after Foo Sun's death in 2011. To date, I've been on more than forty-three cruises, where I've met the most interesting people, travelled to far-flung places and discovered new cultures.

For many years, I have been putting my life experiences into words. When I can, I write them down because as I get older, I find that remembering becomes harder;



writing keeps me focused on what I want to recollect. Unfortunately, I've misplaced many of my diaries where I've kept accounts of the events in my life, documents that can jog my memory. The idea for these memoirs came from my granddaughter Katarina, who said to me, "Write your memoirs, Grandma!" I am not one for public speaking, ironically, considering that I was a lawyer and was called to the Bar. What I enjoy is narrating to my grandchildren episodes of my life—a long one to date—and of the various journeys that I have taken so far. These experiences are unique and, like all epochs in history, can never be relived or reenacted again—nor should they be, especially those dark and unhappy ones. I want to record these events before my memory fades with the waning of time.

On reflection, I feel that my path has followed the popular adage: "Man proposes, God disposes". My life has not always been in my control. We can plan our lives down to the last detail but things happen that can throw our preparations off-kilter. I must admit that the first thirteen years of my life are patchy in my memory but of the good times, I remember vividly.

Where do I begin my memoirs? When you've lived this long, your younger years can be as elusive as the wind whispering amongst the leaves; some things I remember

so well it was as if they happened only yesterday. Other memories come to me in dribs and drabs, blurry at the edges. On many, I draw blanks. I do not wish to write an autobiography, so whatever I have enjoyed and am happy to recall has been recorded here. The heart frequently remembers happy occasions, for this is how nature makes the past more bearable. We would never forget past pains, of course; how can we? They're just tucked away at the back of our minds, waiting for a smell, a phone call, a movie, to come forth again. But a life lived only remembering pain and sorrow is a long and unhappy one.



If I had to choose a point to start my story, I would begin it with a happy memory: Merdeka. Why would this be important to my story? To start, I was born during the twentieth century when the British flag was hoisted high and we pledged allegiance first to two British kings, then later a queen; my country was then known as British Malaya. Later, it was as British subjects that Foo Sun and I chose to become Malaysians when our nation gained independence in 1957. I remember this historical day well. On 31 August, Tunku Abdul Rahman, who became

our first Prime Minister, declared that the Federation of Malaya was independent from the British Empire. It was 9.30 in the morning and the crowds at Stadium Merdeka cheered in unison for Hari Merdeka. This iconic stadium, which later received the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Award for Excellence for Heritage Conservation, was built by an American architect, Stanley Edward Jewkes, who was on friendly terms with the Tunku. Jewkes was commissioned to build Stadium Merdeka, Malaysia's first modern building, in preparation for independence, which had already been in discussion and agreed upon by the British government since February 1956. All important decisions must take time to come to fruition, and it was not until 31 August 1957 that Malaysia could stand on her two feet. By then, I was already an adult.

A photo of the Duke of Gloucester, who came to this important celebration, shows me shaking hands with this royal personage, who was the third son of King George V and Queen Mary; I was about twenty-nine years old then. It was the Duke of Gloucester who presented Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman with the instrument of independence. It was an important day for the people of Malaysia, a day that was attended by dignitaries who came from all over the world to celebrate this joyous occasion

with us. I remember Father's face beaming with pride as he witnessed our nation's Merdeka.

But this is only part of my story, a part that makes my life interesting, I dare say. I did live in an interesting time like the many Malaysians of my generation. I also lived in a time when a woman had very little going for her unless she were born into a different type of family. I was lucky enough to have been. So this part of my story, where I shake hands with British royalty, is not where I would like my memoir to begin. Rather than start in media res, I would like to go back to the beginning.



Meet Gunn Chit Wha, a pioneering role model with many firsts: she was one of the first female lawyers of Malaya, one of the first female Municipal Councillors of Kuala Lumpur and the first female State Councillor of Selangor. Now 92, she recounts the blissful and difficult years of her own independence while breaking barriers in the 1950s, a unique time in the country's tumultuous history.



*“It is important not to forget the role of the many people like [Gunn Chit Wha] who...played their part in helping our nation through the challenges of independence and beyond.”*

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