

JOO CHIAT RD

**A Penniless Boy,
Chew Joo Chiat**

Philip Chew

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A Penniless Boy, Chew Joo Chiat
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Publisher's Note

Philip approached us with an idea in May 2014. He wanted to publish a book on the story of Chew Joo Chiat.

We met Philip over tea in Sinpopo, a hipster retro cafe along Joo Chiat Road. As we spoke, we realised that the book was more than the story of his great-grandfather. It was the story of an uncle who learned how to blog at the age of 73.

- 10 This uncle is like you and I; indeed, you and I can be like Philip—once our desire to uncover our family past has been triggered, we too have the capacity to trace our ancestral roots and become a node for connecting our family relations.

Preface

In 1877, my great-grandfather Chew Joo Chiat arrived in Singapore from Amoy, China, at the age of 20, without a penny in his pocket. He had a dream and worked towards it. It was a Singapore dream, to which he fulfilled and became wealthy. His significant contributions to the nation's economic, commercial and financial development made him an early pioneer of Singapore.

Chew Joo Chiat passed away in 1926, about 9 years before I was born. I remember growing up in a house at Joo Chiat Road, where his portrait stood on an ancestor worship altar. Every morning, I would watch my elders offer prayers to him with lighted joss sticks.

I did not feel connected to Chew Joo Chiat in any way except to the fact that he was my great-grandfather and he was responsible for my existence. He was just like any other stranger to me, a cold portrait on the altar. For much of my life, my family history did not interest me at all and I considered my relationship with Joo Chiat to be very remote.

An article in *The Straits Times* was published on 2 April 1999—it jolted me. In an interview that was reported, the article stated that Chew Joo Chiat only had one child, a daughter. This stirred an immediate response within me: “If he had no son at all, where did all his descendants surnamed Chew, me included, come from?”

12 I thought that it would have been of no use if I had written in to correct the misinformation as I needed more information. As I delved deeper into my research on Joo Chiat, I found more factual errors about him circulating on internet websites. A few of which stated that Joo Chiat was a wealthy Peranakan land owner.

Chew Joo Chiat had left Amoy and landed in Singapore some 50 years or more. He was a Hokkien, as reported in an article in *The Straits Times*, dated 11 February 1926¹. Therefore, he cannot be a Peranakan.

I found other informational gaps about Joo Chiat in newspapers, magazines, books, websites and oral records.

1 Untitled, *The Straits Times*, 11 February 1926, Page 8

I decided to put right all these inaccuracies about my great-grandfather. I consulted my cousin, Ivan Chew, who showed me the way to blogging. On 1 March 2008, I started a blog titled *mychewjoochiat*. Thus began my arduous journey, retracing my roots and searching for his name in available sources like books, newspapers as well as records kept by clans and associations.

Through *mychewjoochiat*, I discovered that my great-grandfather was a jack of all trades and a successful entrepreneur.

Through *A Penniless Boy, Chew Joo Chiat*, I want to share my great-grandfather's incredible rags-to-riches story. I want his descendants to know that and learn from their ancestor, who had sailed from China to Singapore at the age of 20, a penniless young man. He had a keen business sense, made a fortune and died a wealthy man. He had fulfilled his Singapore dream and became an eminent pioneer in the history of Singapore. More importantly, despite his wealth, Chew Joo Chiat continued to lead a humble and frugal life.

Philip Chew, 2017

1

My Chew Joo Chiat

I have been in retirement since early 1993. On the fateful morning of 2 April 1999, I came across an article in *The Straits Times*: in it, a reporter interviewed a great-granddaughter of Chew Joo Chiat. The interviewee said Joo Chiat is believed to have died in the 1950s, had one daughter only—the late Madam Chew Quee Neo—and was dubbed the King of Katong in his heyday.

The further I read, the more puzzled I became. All the facts stated were neither accurate nor substantiated. Chew Joo Chiat's obituary stated the date of death as 5 February 1926. Furthermore, if Joo Chiat only had one daughter, then what would that mean for me and all the relatives on the Chew side of the family?

Although I did not know much about my great-grandfather then, I knew, with absolute certainty,

that he had at least two sons and two daughters with his first wife, and a daughter with his second.

Another fallacy was Joo Chiat being the King of Katong. Not only had I never heard of such a title, but in my subsequent research, I also found no published report of this said title anywhere else.

On that very same day, I received a phone call from my cousin, Helen Teo. Helen's mother, Chew Poon Neo, was elder sister to my father, Chew Ann Siong. Helen was passionate about our heritage and family history. She told me that she was upset after reading the article. She asked me if I could do something about this, but I felt helpless—even if I could correct the misinformation, the damage had already been done. The masses had already been misinformed about Chew Joo Chiat.

My desire to set right the facts would overcome my initial inertia. This desire would be fed by other accounts, also misinformed.

Joo Chiat: A Living Legacy

In 2001, Joo Chiat Citizens Consultative Committee published *Joo Chiat: A Living Legacy* in association

with the National Archives of Singapore (NAS). The contents were mostly based on the recollections of former Joo Chiat residents, extracted from oral recordings they had done with the Oral History Department of NAS. However, memory is an unreliable creature. What we remember may be inaccurate.

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Lee Beow Guan, Chew Joo Chiat's grandson, said that his grandfather had ten children, when Joo Chiat only had seven—three sons and three daughters with his first wife, and a daughter with his second wife. The same great-granddaughter interviewed by *The Straits Times* reporter in April 1999 remembered her great-grandfather lived at a house along Tembeling Road. But Joo Chiat had passed away in 1926 long before she was born, and she would not have met him in person because he had no great-grandchildren at the time of his death.

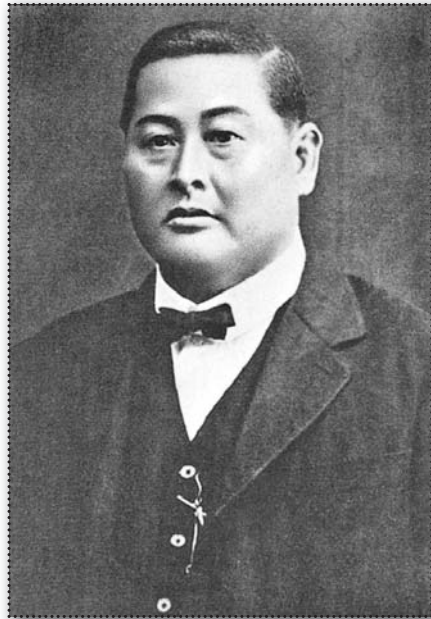
Misinformation everywhere

As I trawled the internet in the course of my research, I found similar factual errors and inaccuracies in several websites. One website, for example, claimed that “Joo Chiat Road was named after Chew Joo Chiat, a wealthy Peranakan land owner.” I also know

of establishments such as a Peranakan restaurant, that have laid claim to Joo Chiat's 'Peranakan' roots.

But who is Chew Joo Chiat?

Chew Joo Chiat was a penniless boy who left Amoy², and died in Singapore as a wealthy immigrant businessman. ❖



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A close-up of the portrait of Chew Joo Chiat located on the ancestor worship altar in the house that Philip grew up in.

2

Untitled, *The Straits Times*, 11 February 1926, Page 8



**So Who is Chew
Joo Chiat?**



2

Chew Joo Chiat Leaves Home

Agrarian life in mid-19th century China was tough. The Qing court was weak, inept and corrupt. Its government faced constant threats of foreign aggression. The political and social turmoil intensified the hardship borne by its people. Living conditions were difficult in the rural areas, and many Chinese peasants in the Southern provinces crossed borders to neighbouring Thailand and Myanmar with hopes of seeking a better life. Some risked their lives and crossed turbulent seas to start anew in the foreign lands of the Philippines, Malaya (now Singapore and Malaysia) and Indonesia.

Some villagers in Ho San, Xiamen, which was Chew Joo Chiat's home, also ventured overseas to work. They would remit money regularly. Some became wealthy and would bring opulent foreign-made gifts whenever they returned.

When he left China for the first time, Chew Joo Chiat was the eldest son in a family of eight. He assumed the responsibility of care for his parents, two younger brothers, his wife and two sons. Their farm needed more helping hands, so he had children to till the land. Joo Chiat was a rational and pragmatic person. Determined to turn his family fortunes around, he believed that going to Singapore was necessary, even though his family was reluctant to let him go.

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Living conditions for Joo Chiat's family continued to deteriorate, and he left his birthplace in 1877 at the tender age of 20. He arrived in Singapore with the barest of possessions. The pain of separation must have been hard for him to bear.

Most poor Chinese migrants had to pay for their passage to Singapore through recruiters or agents. The recruiters would make a profit by first paying for the migrants' tickets to Singapore. Each migrant's debt, including recruitment fees, would be transferred from the recruiter to the local employer. The migrants had to work until they paid off their debts. Depending on how unscrupulous their agents or recruiters were, this would take anything from two to four years.

Joo Chiat did not want to be bonded as a labourer working in plantations. He wanted to be a businessman, as fast as possible, so that he could make a fortune quickly. He raised money prior to his departure to pay for his own passage to Singapore, the land of his dreams. He packed clothing, an umbrella, some precooked dumplings and biscuits to eat when hungry. He prayed at the ancestor altar at home for good luck and blessings, before making his way on foot to the port in Xiamen.

The boat he boarded must have been crowded, with passengers jostling for space. I dread to imagine what they would have done when they needed to use the toilet. However, Joo Chiat was preoccupied with more important matters. He had a mind of his own. He was ambitious and was already thinking and planning for his future. ❖

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**A direct
descendant of
Chew Joo Chiat,
Philip Chew was
born in 1935 and
is a pioneer of
Singapore in his
own way.**

A Penniless Boy, Chew Joo Chiat tells the story of a forgotten pioneer of Singapore. It shows how Philip's fact-finding exercise becomes a search for roots, unearthing lost relations and strengthening the family bonds of the Chew family. His example will inspire you with the desire to uncover, safeguard and pass on your own family stories.



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Born in 1935, Philip Chew, the great-grandson of Chew Joo Chiat grew up in Joo Chiat. After the Japanese Occupation, he went to Raffles Institution and obtained a school certificate in 1954.

By profession, he was a clerk in Singapore City Council and later, a Health Inspector in Ministry of Health.

Philip retired in 1993 and spent his golden years volunteering in organisations such as Lions Befrienders, Gospel Mission to the Blind, Singapore Council of Women Organisation and Temasek Polytechnic.

Since 2008, Philip has written two blogs. *My Golden Years* and *My Chew Joo Chiat Story*. His interests and experiences have inspired his literary work, which centres on the family, its history and passing his knowledge down to the younger generations.

Philip still blogs, volunteers and shares his stories with the world. *A Penniless Boy, Chew Joo Chiat* is his first published book.

<http://mychewjoochiat.blogspot.sg/>