

MEET THE FAMILY OF 3,000

BABA RONNEY TAN KOON SIANG REPORTS ON THE FIFTH TAN TOCK SENG FAMILY REUNION | PHOTO BY DARRELL TAN

Dressed in a long, blue silk robe with an ostrich plume fan in one hand, the bespectacled gentleman offered me his outstretched hand and smiled, "Hello, I'm Tan Tock Seng. Pleased to make your acquaintance." I couldn't believe my eyes! It was as if one of Singapore's most famous pioneers had just stepped out of his own portrait to mingle with his descendants.

In September 2017, a grand reunion of Tan Tock Seng's descendants took place in Singapore. Organised every three years by Roney Tan Kee Lian, this was the fifth reunion of the Tan clan. To date there are 3,136 individuals spread across the globe, who are registered as descendants of Tan Tock Seng, including a 91-year old and 2-year old who attended the reunion.

Spread over a week, activities included numerous lunches, teas, heritage walks and visits, including a visit to the Peranakan Museum and the Tan Tock Seng Heritage Centre at the hospital named after him. The hospital was founded in 1844 with substantial donations from the founder and his son Tan Kim Ching.

THE KING & I

One of the highlights of the week was a talk about Tan Tock Seng's illustrious descendants. Miyata Toshiyuki of Tokyo University shared the story of Tan Tock Seng's eldest son, Tan Kim Ching, a powerful Singapore merchant who had gained favour with King Chulalongkorn of Siam and was granted ministerial status. He was also appointed the first Siamese Consul General in Singapore and the Straits Settlements. It was he who had introduced Englishwoman Anna Leonowens to the Siamese King to educate his children. The unique relationship between governess and king was made famous in the 1956 Hollywood hit film, *The King and I*.

Historian Kua Bak Lim spoke about Tan Boo Liat, the great-grandson of Tan Tock Seng. He was a merchant, community leader and *bon vivant* who owned horses. Like his grandfather, he had exemplary ties with Siam and was bestowed a ministerial rank by the Siamese king.

He also threw his support behind Sun Yat Sen who rallied the Chinese people to overthrow the decaying Qing dynasty in 1911.

Rounding off the talk was retired academic Pat Lin (daughter of Queen's Scholar, Maggie Tan)

who singled out female luminaries of the Tan clan. She regaled her relatives with witty *cherita dulu kala* (stories of yesteryear) on the evolving nyonya identity.

Lawrence Tan, the London policeman who family members have nicknamed the "English Tan" charted the Tan family tree online. His research is valuable not only to his clan, but to history and genealogy buffs like me.

The week-long reunion culminated in a grand dinner where I met "Tan Tock Seng", who was actually an actor, Henry Heng. Henry was so convincing, especially when he gave an inspiring speech to the descendants who had filled the dinner hall at the National University of Singapore Students' Union. The night's entertainment also included a sing-along session of Peranakan and evergreen songs led by Roney Tan, David Tan and Rosalind Leong, with instrumental support from Ted Ha on bass and Raphael Leong on the keyboard.

I was invited to the dinner by my cousin, Robert Lee Kim San. I am not a direct descendant of Tan Tock Seng, but my great-great-grand aunt from Melaka, Chua Seah Neo, had married Tan Kim Ching, Tan Tock Seng's eldest son. My family has had the honour of

working for two generations of Tan Tock Seng's descendants. My grandfather managed Tan Chay Yan's rubber estate, and my own father worked for his son, Tan Hoon Siang for 38 years.

The Tan clan reunion was very successful, and many went home with good memories and new connections. As many of the old Baba families are inter-related, I had the pleasure of meeting several distant cousins from Melaka and Singapore.



Tan Tock Seng descendants from Singapore, Malaysia and USA cut the cake at the grand reunion dinner. Actor Henry Heng (in the cap) played Tan Tock Seng during the event.



Portrait of Tan Tock Seng. Oil on canvas.

Editor's Note: See a photograph of Tan Kim Ching & family on page 34