

## RICE WINE AND DANCING GIRLS

“A shy, introverted Asian who cannot drink...but only one part is true” is how the author of *Rice Wine and Dancing Girls* describes himself.

After retiring from corporate life, Wong Seng Chow decided to pursue his passion for travel and writing, and the combination of these interests led him to become a freelance journalist. His travel-related articles have appeared in the in-flight magazines of Malaysia Airlines and SilkAir.

Weaving an entertaining tale based on his father’s life as an itinerant cinema manager, Wong Seng Chow uncovers the man behind the patriarch.



*These are the stories my father never told me.*

# RICE WINE AND DANCING GIRLS

Wong Seng Chow



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*In memory of Bong Kai Hong  
Born in the year of the Metal Pig  
Died in the year of the Fire Pig*

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## Preface



*“Looking back all these years, events of my life flashed through my mind like a cinemascopic [sic] picture.”*

**T**hese were the opening lines on the first page of a slim exercise book, written in the neat, cursive handwriting of my father. Undoubtedly, his life story contains all the ingredients of a celluloid drama: a young man shackled to his hometown, finds redemption and renewal when he is propelled into the big, wide world filled with a kaleidoscope of characters, ranging from

movie stars and governors to gangsters and headhunters. Armed with just a foldable camp bed and mosquito net, his wanderings take him into unfamiliar and sometimes dangerous territories.

Some of the anecdotes relating to his service with Cathay have already been retold in the organisation's 55th anniversary limited-edition coffee-table book (*Cathay: 55 Years of Cinema*, by Lim Kay Tong and Yiu Tong Chai, 1991) whilst a broad sweep of his life, from childhood to retirement from Cathay in 1978, has been recorded by the Oral History section of the National Archives of Singapore in a series of interviews in the last quarter of 2005. Given the opportunity, he would regale friends and visitors with vignettes of the years spent as a roving cinema manager in the fifties and sixties. This was the most colourful period of his life and one that he was proudest of. However, as a child I was too young to understand; as a teenager too rebellious to care; and later as an adult too busy to listen. Thankfully, he kept copious, albeit scattered notes—some handwritten, some typewritten—of those eventful days. What is presented here is based on salient episodes of his life woven against the backdrop of historical events. It is the tale of a belated quest for self-worth by a man with a character flaw. Here, then, are the stories that my father never told me.

Wong Seng Chow

# Prologue

The old man seated in the wheelchair pulls himself forward with a shuffling motion of his bare feet. Gliding across the living room, he stops in front of the television set sitting on the lower alcove of the display cabinet and reaches for the battered remote control with his mottled hand. His thick spectacles can no longer compensate for his deteriorating vision, making it difficult for him to make out the tiny lettering on the remote without the aid of a magnifying glass. In fact, he has two: a standard lightweight magnifying lens with a plastic grip commonly found at stationery stores, and a heavier one of craftsman-quality that came with a varnished wooden handle and its own zip-up pouch. His son had searched high and low to get him the second, more powerful instrument as a present for his 95th birthday. But he doesn't make use of either one of them for the task at hand. Instead, his thumb travels over the familiar series of bumps on the remote's stained surface, as if following the markings of a treasure map, until he locates the correct button and presses it. The screen flashes to life with a crisp rasp of electrons and he turns up the volume to mask the depressing silence wrapped around him. It's not that he lives alone but he's left mostly to himself by the other members of the

family, the lives of his son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren swirling around him like kites caught in a whirlwind of activities that he cannot be part of, whilst he remains rooted to a past that they have little interest in. There was a time when he had his wife to talk to...although it couldn't really be called a conversation when he had to constantly repeat and explain things to her because she was hard of hearing and showing signs of dementia as well. Still, she had provided a focus for his attention.

Friends and relatives who visited him marvelled at his obvious devotion to his wife, which was why her sporadic outbursts of resentment over his constant fussing were incomprehensible to him. But she had passed away three years before and his few surviving friends were locked in their own struggle with old-age infirmities, restricting contact between them to well-worn pleasantries over the phone. Such conversations lasted less than a minute, during which he would interject with phrases like "You take care, thank you," inviting closure for fear that their next sentence might be consumed by an awkward silence, revealing the emptiness of their lives.

Whilst the telephone provides a connection to his friends and a fleeting uplift of spirit, the television marks the passage of time through its weekly cycle of programmes. Both offer a break from the pattern of his days that seem like a blur of raindrops, each one the same as the next. Sometimes he sits motionless in front of the screen, as if absorbed, staring with rheumy eyes at the moving

images and listening to dialogue that he no longer consciously registers. During moments like these his mind slips into a fugue that transports him to another time and place.

## EPISODE I

# Soft Drinks and Dancing Girls

*Following the Japanese surrender in August 1945, life in the British colonies of Malaya and Singapore slowly returned to normal. By 1946 public utility services had been fully restored and the strong world demand for tin and rubber helped the Malayan economy along a rather uneven road to recovery; problems like food shortages still persisted, which in turn caused widespread strikes calling for higher wages to deal with escalating food prices. However, this background of turbulence did not dampen the hopes of those who were intent on rebuilding their lives after having emerged from the vicissitudes of the Second World War.*

### **Pebble**

I sat at the usual place in the coffee shop, as was my habit these past few weeks, and watched the town folk of Seremban rouse themselves for a new day. The smell of toast and corn-roasted coffee hung in the air as the morning tide of customers rolled in for their sugar and caffeine boost. Across from me at the next table, a man grumbled to his companion about the cost of eggs

as he tilted his saucer and slurped down a runny yellow-white concoction laced with soya sauce and pepper. The scraping sound of wooden stools being pushed back announced the departure of an earlier group of customers, whose places were snapped up by new arrivals even before the breakfast debris could be cleared from the table. The shop buzzed with lively chatter, reflecting the general post-war optimism that things would soon be back to how they'd been before. But returning to my normal life was not what I had in mind.

I was a teacher before the war. My alma mater, St Paul's Institution, had been steadily acquiring a reputation for excellence in academic and sporting achievements, and though it had expanded its facilities to accommodate the rising number of enrolments, the school continued to face a shortage of staff. I lacked the credentials to become a bona fide teacher but the Brothers of the school took into account that I was an outstanding former "Paulian" student, so they accepted me as a lay teacher and assigned me to teach English to the primary classes. I was paid \$60 a month (the currency in use at that time was the Straits dollar which later became the Malaya and British Borneo dollar) that I guessed was commensurate with my lowly status as a student-teacher. I might have just been able to squeeze out a simple, carefree bachelor's life on that paltry sum if not for the fact that I was already a married man with two kids. In order to support my family I had to give private tuition on the side as well.

However, I still found the time to be with my friends and regularly dropped by at the local recreation club, leaving the children under the care of my wife. Such was the routine of my life before it was abruptly disrupted by the Japanese occupation of Malaya and Singapore in 1942. The military administration set up to govern the conquered territories decreed that English could no longer be taught as a subject, and schools were forced to adopt a Japanese-dictated curriculum. I had no wish to be part of their propaganda machinery disguised as education and resigned from my post. To make matters worse, parents stopped sending their children to my home for English tuition for fear of punishment, leaving me without any source of income and at a loss as to how I was going to feed myself and my family.

One of my closest friends, Chen, also left his job as a result of the war but for a different reason. After obtaining his degree from America, Chen went to work for an engineering firm in Singapore. He had barely established himself in the company when news broke that the Japanese had landed in north-west Malaya and were sweeping down the peninsula. Fearing that he might be stranded in Singapore, Chen bolted back to his family home in Seremban, a move that seemed to defy logic since he was leaving a heavily defended city and heading north towards a vulnerable town in the path of the Japanese advance. Nevertheless, Chen felt that he would be relatively safer in his hometown, far removed from what he anticipated to be an inevitable arena of bloody

conflict—the strategic island port of Singapore and last bastion of Allied resistance. It proved a prudent decision.

The destruction of the bridge link between Singapore and the mainland only temporarily delayed the expected Japanese assault. A week of fierce fighting followed before the British finally surrendered on the fateful day of 15th February 1942. Coincidentally, it was also the first day of the Lunar Year of the Horse but instead of enjoying festive celebrations, the ethnic Chinese in Singapore found themselves the target of Japanese retribution for providing substantial charitable aid to China, a country still struggling against Japanese imperialism in the ongoing Second Sino-Japanese War.

Back in Seremban, the town folk adjusted to their new situation after the initial panic, that saw children and loved ones being packed off to villages in the jungle or hiding in nearby caves, and attempted to carry on with their lives as best as they could. Chen failed to find work relevant to his background as an engineer so he ventured into business instead. With some help, he set up a transport company that delivered rubber from the plantations to the port warehouses for ongoing shipment. Knowing of my plight, he recruited me into the company as a clerk. I was grateful to be working again, having been unemployed for several months, but my relief was short-lived. I discovered that I wasn't that much better off than before as my meagre clerical wage barely paid for the inflated war-time prices of basic commodities. Rice, salt and

sugar, items previously taken for granted because they had been readily and cheaply available, were now hard to come by. Once again I was forced to look for ways to supplement my income, which was how I ended up moonlighting as a croupier in one of the many gambling stalls that populated the amusement fair behind Lemon Street.

The fair was a permanent fixture in the Seremban landscape; it existed before the arrival of the Japanese invaders and remained open for business under Japanese rule as if nothing had happened. The assortment of brightly lit stalls drew people in nightly like moths to a flame. They came to mingle with the crowd, browse the wares on display, sample some titbits and perhaps try their luck at one of the game stalls. But most of all, the residents of Seremban came because it gave them a sense of normalcy. The gambling stalls in particular were kept busy by the regular punters who reasoned that the Japanese presence was not something they could do much about anyway, and continued to pursue their passion with an even greater fervour.

I manned a *pai kow* gambling table. The game is related to Baccarat but uses domino tiles instead of cards. The tiles are shuffled and stacked into a wall four tiles high by eight tiles long. Each player receives a stack of four tiles that are split into pairs of a high hand and a low hand to be compared against the banker's set. I was familiar enough with the mechanics of the game having been exposed to it from young when I used to watch

my mother play whilst clinging to her *samfoo* dress. As indicated by its name—which means to “make nine”—winning hands are those that have domino pips adding up closest to the number nine. However, this apparently simple ranking is complicated by special winning combinations that are given fanciful labels such as “heaven”, “earth”, “man”, “goose” and “flower”, to give some examples. Typically, there would be cries of jubilation from the punters when they won but more often than not they were hunched in sullen concentration, riffling through their carefully hoarded savings of pre-war currency, which was worth far more than the official Japanese “banana” notes, to fund future bets that would hopefully recoup their losses. Such intense desperation made me glad that I was on the other side of the table earning a fixed per diem wage as a croupier. Not that I didn’t gamble—I was fond of “washing mahjong tiles” with friends at the club—but this was neither the time nor place to risk money I could ill afford to lose.

When the war ended, Chen no longer had a reason to remain in Seremban and headed straight back to Singapore to resurrect his nascent career. Unlike him, I wasn’t anxious to pick up where I’d left off. Somehow, a sense of discontent had been awakened in me and I had no desire to return to the teaching fold. When I recalled the years I spent eking out a living on the fringe of academia, I wondered what would have happened if not for the interruption of the war: would I have continued to sleepwalk through life as a

lay teacher and part-time tutor? I didn’t know the answer. What I did know was that the momentum of circumstances in the last few years compelled me to move on—like a pebble that had been dislodged and forced to tumble towards fresh ground in its search for a new equilibrium. It wasn’t going to be easy with my limited qualifications and no other work experience beyond teaching and clerical work. Citing my skill as a *pai kow* croupier would have added some colour but little extra value to my resume. Not that I bothered to send out any resumes for I relied on my network of hometown friends to spread the word and like the spiders I used to catch when I was a boy, I spun my web and waited.

The crowd at the coffee shop was beginning to ebb away as individually, or in small groups, people drained the dregs from their cups and left for work. I watched the world slide by, idly stirring the sticky condensed milk submerged at the bottom of my cup before sipping my thick sweet coffee. A sudden slap on my back snapped me out of my reverie and, turning around, I saw that it was Yin, an old schoolmate. Yin sat down and signalled to the coffee-shop boy for his drink.

“Kee Hung, I hear you’re looking for a job. Got tired of drilling grammar to the greenies?” I winced for I had previously done part-time clerical work for Yin at the Negri Sembilan Aerated Water Company—or NSAW for short—before taking up teaching; I hoped that he wasn’t using this opportunity to rope me back to that same old job. I was on the verge of explaining

to him that I was after something a bit more stable and perhaps more rewarding when Yin surprised me with his offer. It was serendipity! He was scouting for someone to fill the position of chief clerk at NSAW. The incumbent was getting on in age and Yin wanted a younger, more alert replacement. The job entailed greater administrative and clerical responsibilities than what I had been used to and even though I was fairly confident that I would be able carry them out, I expressed cautious interest initially. But any doubts that were lingering at the back of mind melted away like a one-cent flavoured ice-ball on a scorching hot day when Yin mentioned the pay—it was twice what I used to earn as a lay teacher!

“When do I start?” I enquired as I hurriedly fished for coins to pay for the drink that the boy plonked down in front of my friend and future boss.

### **Mirror Moon**

Yin was formerly a lawyer’s clerk. It was his father-in-law Goh, who ran NSAW together with his adopted son Ah-Kow, the latter being the mastermind of the formulae and mixes for the Lemonade, Orange, Ice Cream Soda and other soft drink flavours that they produced. When the old man passed away, Yin took over the reins of the company.

As chief clerk, I was in charge of office administration and had the assistance of a bookkeeper as well as an office boy to run

errands. With the memory of hardships shared during the war still fresh in everyone’s mind, the previous chief clerk was retained in an advisory capacity—albeit on a token salary—but was content to remain very much in the background. It was during this period at NSAW that I first met Ah-Yong, a fellow employee. Fate would entwine the threads of our lives again in the near future.

The soft drinks factory was located at the junction of Setul Road and Temiang Road and occupied a sizeable piece of land that it shared with a large one-storey wooden building. The latter housed the Negri Sembilan Cabaret that operated from eight o’clock in the evening until midnight on weekdays but closed an hour later on Saturdays. Sunday was a day of rest. The so-called cabaret was really a dance hall boasting a six-piece resident band led by a Filipino pianist by the name of Adrian. He and his family—a wife and teenaged son—had living quarters in the compound next to the premises, presumably as part of his terms of employment but more likely as a concession to the fact that he was lame in one leg.

The cabaret also employed at least a dozen dance hostesses, comprising mostly Chinese girls and a few Eurasians. They would sit patiently on the chairs lining the opposite sides of the hall, waiting to dance with patrons in exchange for coupons. Each coupon was worth a dollar and they were sold in booklets of five coupons. The girls earned a commission based on the number of dance coupons that they redeemed with the cabaret at the end

of the week. Naturally, the prettier dance hostesses were more popular and raked in higher earnings. My intimate knowledge about the dance hall's operation did not stem from frequent patronage as a customer, but from performing my duties there as a supervisor. As it turned out, the cabaret was operated by NSAW, and Ah-Kow would don his cabaret-manager hat after sunset. So when I was asked to pitch in and lend a hand, it seemed like the natural thing to do.

Supervising a cabaret in the evenings was in sharp contrast to my mundane daytime clerical work. On quieter nights at the beginning of the week I could relax and enjoy listening to Adrian, who was an excellent pianist, performing with his band whilst the scattering of local customers twirled and sashayed across the spacious dance floor with their chosen partners.

The atmosphere took a much livelier turn towards the end of the week, with the hall filling up with noisy British servicemen intent on having a good time. Their high spirits, fuelled by alcohol, would inevitably ignite tempers sparked by a perceived insult, competition over a girl, or a host of minor reasons that didn't make sense in the sober light of the following day. Although I have a fairly large build and my height of six foot allowed me to look squarely in the eyes of most British servicemen, I figured being a bouncer wasn't part of my extended duties. Whenever trouble erupted, I would dial for the Military Police, shouting over the phone in order to be heard above the background din

of a drunken brawl whilst keeping an eye out for the wayward trajectory of bottles and glasses flying about!

I didn't mind doubling up as a cabaret supervisor even though I wasn't paid any over-time wages. I saw it as returning the favour to Yin for giving me the position of chief clerk based on friendship and a handshake. The months flew by as I settled into a routine of dealing with soft drinks by day and dancing girls by night. Before I knew it I was entering my second year with NSAW and it seemed that I had found my niche. Unfortunately, events were once again conspiring to unsettle my life.

Competition in the aerated water market was heating up, with NSAW having to contend with a host of other manufacturers as well as the threat from the rapidly expanding Fraser & Neave. In trying to manage both the soft drinks factory and the cabaret, Yin was beginning to encounter cash-flow problems. This, in turn, affected the NSAW staff whose salaries were either delayed or only partially paid. Yin wasn't a heartless man but he was desperately juggling his finances to keep his two business operations afloat. It was always his intention to pay back in full what he owed in wages...when things got better. Since my income just about covered my expenses, the vagaries in salary disbursement often left me short of cash, and my struggle to make ends meet was accompanied by a dizzy feeling of *déjà vu*. Only this time I couldn't slip out to moonlight as a croupier because I was already fully occupied as a supervisor at the cabaret.

There is a mythical belief that a man at the age of thirty-five is at the prime of his life cycle. In adolescence a boy struggles with his transition to manhood and is faced with the question of identity: “Who am I?” On reaching thirty-five years of age, he takes stock of his accomplishments by asking the question: “What am I?” I was already thirty-six. Joining NSAW had seemed like a good move and I trusted that, with diligence and hard work, I would progress within the company.

The reality was that both Yin and Ah-Kow were firmly at the helm of what was essentially a family business, and I had no prospect of advancing further. Wishful thinking, buoyed by my eagerness to assume the post of chief clerk, had clouded my judgment and when I eventually realised that I’d stepped into a dead-end job, I quietly tucked away my fettered hopes and tried to make the best of it. After all, it was still better than teaching. However, the pressure of unpaid bills steadily piling up broke the dam of my equanimity. Accepting the status quo of the company’s management hierarchy was one thing, but with the very future of the company being threatened and no end in sight to erratic salary payments, I couldn’t help but sink into a pensive mood. I still continued to faithfully discharge all my duties, although the additional task of being a supervisor at the cabaret now seemed like a chore, and even Adrian’s tickling of the ivories failed to revive my spirits.

One night I made some excuse to leave the dance hall before

closing time. It was too late to head to the local recreation club to meet up with friends and I was reluctant to go straight home. Wandering aimlessly, I came to an open field that doubled as a car park by day and was shunned as a deserted lot by the distant streetlamps by night. Guided mainly by moonlight, I stubbornly picked my way across the uneven ground, pausing midway to take a deep breath. I glanced up at the refulgent orb that hung suspended in the night sky and found it staring back at me, its ethereal radiance illuminating my inner turmoil. The feeling of haplessness was exacerbated by the vacuum in my relationship with my wife. It had been an arranged marriage, the machination of parents who thought they were doing what was best for everyone even if that meant sacrificing the feelings of the two people directly affected. I suspect that my failure to harvest the security of the future for the family because I’d dropped out of college, and my subsequent inability to secure a decent job, prompted my father to cash in on my eligibility as an unmarried twenty-four-year-old man. He brokered a deal that involved a handsome dowry from the owner of a Chinese medicine hall in a neighbouring town, who was eager to see his twenty-three-year-old daughter wedded.

Whilst the ceremony that took place followed customary Chinese rituals, the fashion was distinctly Western; I was sombre in my dark suit, wing-collared white shirt and black bow tie whilst she was stiff in her ankle-length, high-collared white

wedding gown crowned by a cloche with a trailing tulle veil. She looked trapped in her bridal garment, just as she was trapped by her circumstances; denied a proper education, she was restricted in her options of what she could do with her life and a touchy temperament did little to endear her to potential suitors. As for me, I was robbed of volition to resist by the milieu that shaped and defined me. To oppose the marriage was not only going against my father's wishes, it was also a rejection of my place in Seremban society ... it just seemed easier to go along with the whole thing. The marriage was consummated and to the delight of my parents, they were presented with two grandchildren—a boy, followed by a girl two years later. I have no doubt that there are many examples of arranged marriages where, over time, couples develop a genuine affection if not mutual respect for each other, but this was not the case with us and it was only through our children that we could bridge the gulf of our incompatibility.

My brooding turned to comparing myself to friends who were doing well in their chosen line of work; Chen had branched off with two partners to set up a civil engineering and general construction firm in Singapore whilst a childhood playmate, Ng, had become a successful contractor in Seremban. In contrast, I always seemed to just get by. Such things had never really bothered me before. As long as I provided for the family and could enjoy the company of my many friends, I was relaxed about my lot in life. Why grasp for the moon when you know it is out of reach?

Still, I realised I wasn't getting any younger and I shuddered to think that I might end up grasping at straws instead. The irony of it struck me. My attempt to improve my situation merely sent me on a box-step waltz that brought me back to square one, and whilst it wasn't my fault that things turned out the way they did at NSAW, it didn't make me feel any better. Weary of all this inutile introspection, I decided to head home.

### **Deus Ex Machina**

The end of 1947 saw Dato Loke Wan Tho, whose name is synonymous with Cathay, ready to roll out his aggressive expansion plans. The title "Dato" was only conferred on Loke Wan Tho in 1962 but I've always fondly and respectfully remembered him as Dato Loke, whilst at the same time, I use the term Cathay<sup>1</sup> for convenience even though the company was not known as "Cathay Organisation" until 1959. His general manager, the scholarly looking Ede, was exploring the towns all over Malaya with the view of acquiring cinemas for the organisation, or at least buildings that could be turned into cinemas. Ede made a stop in Seremban and after making enquiries was directed to Yin. As luck would have it, there was a large, unused wooden shed in the NSAW compound and Ede met up with Yin to negotiate for the lease of this building with the intention of converting it into

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, "Shaw" is used in place of "Shaw Brothers" or "Shaw Organisation".

a cinema hall. Yin was more than happy to sign an agreement. I couldn't help but be aware of what was going on and banking on the fact that Cathay would need a manager for its Seremban cinema (to be called the Odeon) when it was ready, I did something I'd never done before in my life: I approached a stranger for a job. It was a desperate move on my part but then I reasoned that there was no harm in asking. After patiently listening to my earnest pitch for the post of manager in the future Odeon, Ede advised me to submit a formal application to the Cathay head office in Singapore. I took heart that he hadn't rejected me outright. With that consoling thought, I mailed my application and crossed my fingers.

Even though I knew it would take time for my letter to be delivered and processed, I checked my mail every day. A week crawled by, then another, with each passing day bleeding hope from me till I was left pallid at the ignominy of not just being rejected but ignored as well. The cosmic jester must have been at work for the reply arrived the moment I stopped waiting for it. Tearing open the envelope, I nervously unfolded the single piece of paper; the neatly typed words jumped up from the page and threw me on an emotional roller coaster of both elation and despondency. The missive tersely explained that all new cinema managers had to undergo training in Singapore first, and Cathay was pleased to inform me that I'd been accepted as a management trainee at the start of the following year—just a few months away.

That was the good news. The bad news was that I would only be receiving my training allowances after I'd begun my internship. In other words, I had to bear all initial expenses myself. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, for surely I was the victim of that same cosmic jester who had toyed with my patience, to have the prospect of a new career cruelly dangled just out of my reach knowing that I couldn't even pay for the train fare to Singapore!

I am not what you might call a religious man. Although I'd attended a Catholic mission school, I did not subscribe to its faith. I observe the Chinese traditions because it's part of my cultural heritage but I don't harbour any strong beliefs in Buddhism or Taoism. If anything, you could say I veer towards aspects of Confucianism. In Cantonese, my spiritual orientation would be labelled as "half sky hung", meaning that I'm stranded between heaven and earth—being neither here nor there—which pretty much summed up my predicament. As such, I did not pray to any deity or make votive offerings for my salvation but I did bemoan my situation to friends, making light of it to hide my disappointment. One such friend with whom I shared the story of my aborted attempt to join Cathay was Ng, the contractor.

Ng and I went back a long way, having known each other since we were seven years old. We used to fly kites together, assembling them from bamboo strips and paper, and would reap gleeful delight to see our flimsy contraptions soar and dance their aerial jig. Kite flying was a favourite activity of mine until it turned

gladiatorial when older boys in the neighbourhood started using strings treated with glass to cut the lines of other kites. Faced with the repeated fate of having our strings severed and our kites tumble helplessly out of control, we retired from the scene. My father got angry when he found out and decided to give me a chance to fight back by similarly coating my kite string with glass. The process involved pounding glass bottles; boiling gum; soaking the kite string in the gum; running the string through the glass powder and finally laying out the string to dry. Unfortunately, he wasn't very good at it. The glass powder stuck in clumps and the weight of the glue-soaked string tended to drag the kite down.

So Ng and I turned to collecting picture cards instead. They were usually included as inserts in cigarette packs and originally depicted famous Chinese generals, but later featured male and female film stars. We would scavenge for discarded cigarette packs, hoping to find the cards still inside. Duplicate cards in our possession were traded, or used to play a game with other boys where we would all crouch behind a line marked on the ground about five feet from a wall and then see who could flick his card nearest to the wall. The winner would claim all the cards in play. It wasn't as challenging as flying a kite but at least we were still having fun.

Ng listened with a sympathetic ear and when I was done playing the raconteur, he dug into his trousers and pulled out a brick of banknotes secured by rubber bands. It wasn't unusual to see him

carry wads of money since he often had to settle payments with his labourers directly. Slipping off the rubber bands, Ng peeled off a number of bills and pressed them into my hand saying, "This is for you." I was flabbergasted since I was simply sharing my woes without any ulterior motives. Nevertheless, Ng had generously bankrolled my internship in Singapore to the tune of a hundred dollars, an amount that was almost equivalent to my salary (if I was lucky enough to receive it) at NSAW. Whenever I look back on this episode in my life, I am reminded of the classic movie plots where the hero's quest, stalled by capricious circumstances, is given fresh impetus by some unexpected and timely external intervention. I was no hero but Ng's largesse was unexpected and timely. I pocketed the cash with a murmur of thanks and promised to repay him as soon as I could. He merely smiled and patted me on the shoulder.

"Let's get this straight, Kee Hung. It's not a loan. It's a going-away present." Ng's paragon gesture of friendship was to be indelibly etched in my mind, and it was only ten years later that I had the chance to repay him in kind ... but that's another story.

And so in January 1948 I boarded a train to Singapore, taking along with me one suitcase, a foldable camp bed, a mosquito net, my tennis racket and the conviction that I would be able to hold my head high when I returned to manage the Odeon in Seremban. Little did I realise that I was embarking on a one-way trip.