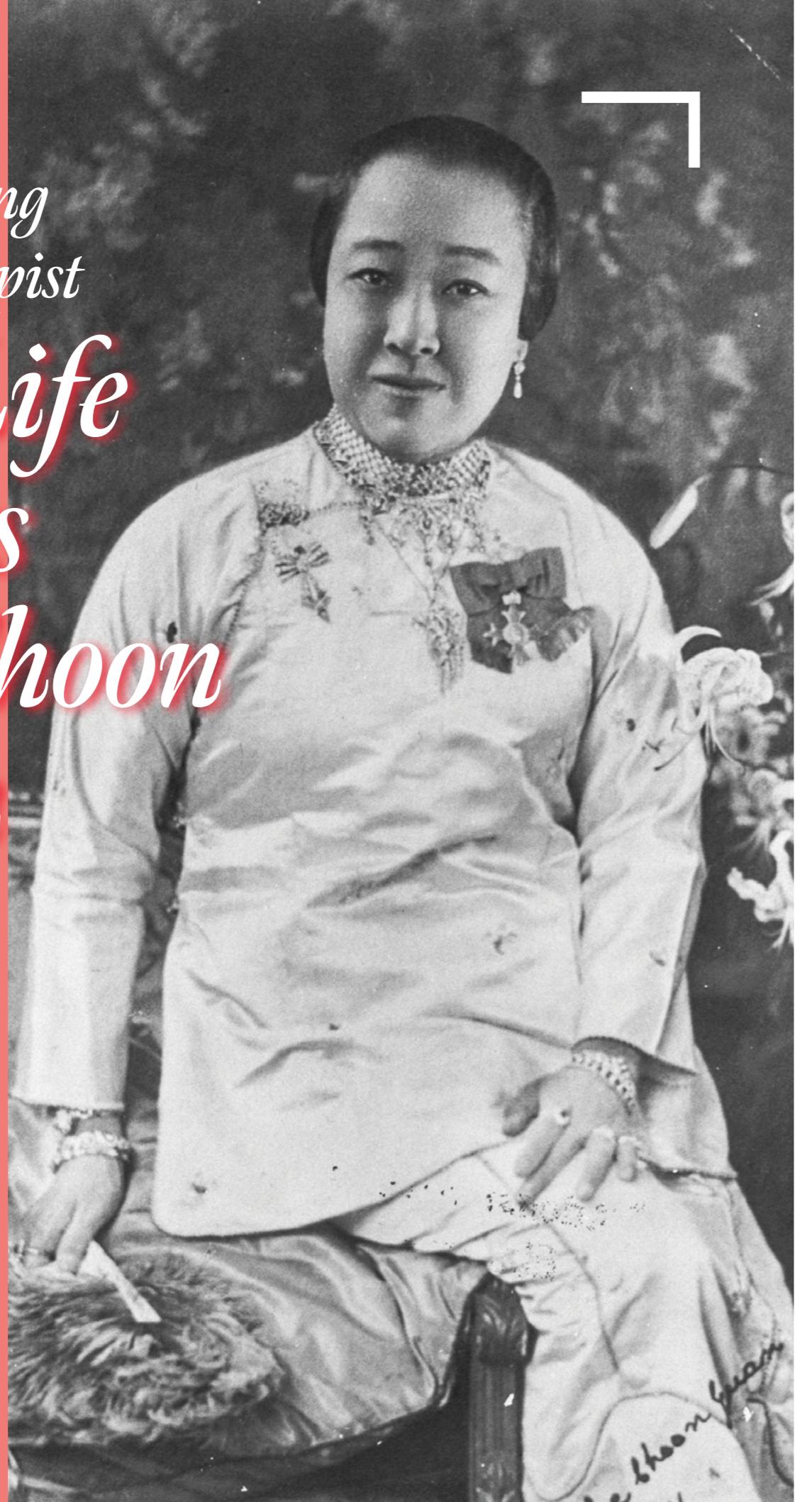


# A Pioneering Philanthropist The Life of Mrs Lee Choon Guan

One of Singapore's first women philanthropists, Mrs Lee, née Tan Teck Neo, supported a wide range of charities.

By Yu-lin Ooi



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**“W**herever there is useful social work to be performed, and it can be performed by ladies, you will find Mrs Lee Choon Guan well to the fore. She is one of the leading spirits of the Children's Aid Society, and has played an important role in all the recent developments which have as their aim the emancipation and education of Chinese woman [sic] in Singapore.”<sup>1</sup>

This was what the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* wrote in their series, “Personalities of Singapore”, in January 1934. The newspaper added that Mrs Lee Choon Guan was the first woman to ever be featured in the series, and the only Chinese woman in Malaya who had so far been honoured by His Majesty the King.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs Lee was no stranger to the limelight. The media frequently wrote about her – from her fashion choices to her mission to improve the lives of Singapore women. This was not the first time she had made the news, and it would certainly not be the last.<sup>3</sup>

## A Woman of Change

The press's fascination with Mrs Lee may be attributed to the fact that she was one of a handful of local women living a new and modern way of life in early 20th-century Singapore when most of her contemporaries were still bound by societal rules, norms and expectations.

When Chinese and Peranakan (Straits Chinese) women were still confined at home and described as “quite out of touch with the society of men”,<sup>4</sup> Mrs Lee was not only frequently seen in public with her husband, but also out and about with friends. When education was thought to be wasted on girls, she was not only literate, but fluent in English and also well travelled. When Chinese women as a whole had no formal economic status, she personally gave money to various causes and was recognised for doing so, both by colonial society and the local press.

More importantly, Mrs Lee was one of very few women able to bridge the gap between Singapore's British leaders and the general population, at a time

(Facing page) Portrait of Mrs Lee Choon Guan, 1920s. She was made a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 1918 for her charity work and contributions to the British Red Cross during World War I. The medal is pinned on her blouse. Lee Brothers Studio Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980005527 - 0086).

when there was mostly mutual incomprehension. In the early decades of the 20th century, she created a link between Western and Asian sensibilities. For instance, she adopted new ideas from the West such as education for girls, social welfare and philanthropy, and introduced these in her unique and understandable way to Singapore society. She was not a dour do-gooder, but led by example with such glamour and style that the trends she set were eagerly followed by others.

## Scion of an Influential Family

Mrs Lee's unusual mindset was the product of an unusual childhood. Born Tan Teck Neo in Singapore in 1877, she was the third daughter of the Melaka-born Peranakan entrepreneur Tan Keong Saik. He had moved to Singapore when it became a crown colony under direct British control in 1867. Tan Keong Saik soon became a prominent leader of the new Chinese community, a member of the Chinese Advisory Board and a Justice of the Peace.<sup>5</sup>

Tan Keong Saik was a far-sighted man who believed that an English education would be advantageous not only to his sons, but also to his daughters. This was revolutionary as respectable families at that time confined their girls to the home. In 1885, a solution presented itself in the persons of Methodist missionary William Oldham, his wife and fellow missionary Sophia Blackmore. They had come to Singapore from missions in India.

Oldham happened to meet Tan Keong Saik, who asked Oldham to be his personal tutor. He also persuaded the Oldhams to start a boarding school for his sons, which later became the Anglo-Chinese School.<sup>6</sup>

Blackmore was invited to teach Tan Keong Saik's daughters at home, which was how the young Tan Teck Neo learnt English, mathematics and history in the 1880s. She became a fluent and intelligent conversationalist “on all matters of interest” without breaking convention, while her peers were forbidden from learning anything but the domestic arts.<sup>7</sup>

Tan Keong Saik also supported gender equality, becoming one of the first members of the newly formed Po Leung Kuk – the Society for the Protection of Girls and Women established by the Chinese Protectorate in 1888. The society was a refuge for slave girls and victims of forced prostitution, whose work Tan Teck Neo continued to support after her marriage.<sup>8</sup>

## Stepping into High Society

In 1900, Tan Teck Neo married Lee Choon Guan, a Straits Chinese businessman established in shipping and banking, and an esteemed

member of the Chinese community.<sup>9</sup> In Mr Lee, Tan Teck Neo found not only a wise and cosmopolitan husband, but also an ally and partner.

Lee Choon Guan and his late wife had had four children together, and now with his marriage to Tan Teck Neo, two more children joined the Lee family: son Pang Soo and daughter Poh Neo. The family subsequently moved into Mandalay Villa at 29 Amber Road, built by Lee Choon Guan's father Lee Cheng Yan as a holiday bungalow.<sup>10</sup>

Mandalay Villa, by the Katong seaside, came to play an important part in Mrs Lee's life, for it was here on its beautiful grounds that she gradually established herself as a peerless hostess. The Lees held what became fabled parties and balls for family, friends, high society and charity at the villa. Mrs Lee served drinks on the verandah overlooking the sea and lined the expansive lawn with rows of tables of sumptuous food from the finest local restaurants.<sup>11</sup>

Mr and Mrs Lee Choon Guan dressed to meet King George V and Queen Mary at Buckingham Palace, 1920. Courtesy of Mrs Alice Chua.



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When Mrs Lee's brother Tan Cheng Kee acquired The Alhambra on Beach Road in 1909,<sup>12</sup> its famous live orchestra often provided entertainment at these gatherings, playing the latest dance music alternating with *ronggeng*, a popular local Malay dance form.

Each year on Mrs Lee's birthday on 18 December, the residents of Kampong Amber would hold a parade in her honour to thank the family for letting them live in the kampong almost rent-free and providing them with work as house staff running Mandalay.<sup>13</sup> These parades were part of the glittering annual birthday balls for Mrs Lee that became highly anticipated events in Singapore's social calendar. Frequent guests included the sultan and sultana of Johor, the chief justice, and the governor and his wife. Mandalay Villa became a special place for many, including a young Lee Kuan Yew (later prime minister of Singapore), who proposed to Kwa Geok Choo on its grounds after a party there.<sup>14</sup>

The Lees travelled frequently. In 1914 when they set sail for Europe, they took an entourage with them, including two of their children and Mr Lee's trusted cousin Lee Chim Tuan, delighting in adventure and discovery.<sup>15</sup> It would be the start of a lifetime of travel for Mrs Lee, who eventually sailed around the world twice.

The Lees were abroad at the outbreak of World War I. Mrs Lee went to England where she volunteered with the British Red Cross to help the wounded. For her wartime efforts and charitable acts, Mrs Lee was made a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 1918 by King George V, becoming the first Chinese woman to receive the honour. She and Mr Lee were even summoned to a Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace in June 1920 where she had the "honour of a personal conversation with Their Majesties the King and Queen" and where the King "expressed the pleasure it gave him to see Mrs Lee Choon Guan in Chinese attire, which he much admired".<sup>16</sup>

Mrs Lee was also the first Chinese woman in Singapore to get her driver's licence, a testament to her independence.<sup>17</sup>

Sometime around 1915, the press started to document the novel appearance of Chinese women at local society functions. Mrs Lee was frequently present at these events with her husband. News reports described dinners with the governor,<sup>18</sup> appearances at talks and attendance at the races in Farrer Park. Mrs Lee quickly became a favourite topic for readers, who were fascinated by descriptions of her fancy attire and the way she mingled comfortably with wives across ethnic groups.

The Lees were often invited to dine with Governor Arthur Young and his wife Lady Evelyn

Young, and they reciprocated with invitations to Mandalay Villa. These led to cordial friendships between the two women, and Lady Evelyn began to call upon Mrs Lee to help steer women's committees. For instance, Mrs Lee represented Singapore women, along with wives of leaders in other local communities, in the consultation with Lady Evelyn on what they should give Queen Mary for her Silver Wedding Day in June 1918.<sup>19</sup>

### Formidable Friends

Mr Lee Choon Guan was a member of the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA), which had been formed in 1900 and some of whose members were English-educated.<sup>20</sup> The association was a vocal force for social transformation in Singapore. It was through her husband's connections with the SCBA that Mrs Lee met other like-minded and educated wives like herself.

Such ladies included Mrs Lim Boon Keng from China, the wife of Lim Boon Keng, a successful entrepreneur, doctor and advocate of social and educational reform in Singapore; Lady Helen Song, wife of Sir Song Ong Siang, a lawyer and reformer also known for his contributions to developing Singapore civil society; Lee Choo Neo, Singapore's first Chinese lady doctor; and Wong Bee Ho, who co-founded Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital with her father. Others in their social circle were ladies who had

Mandalay Villa in 1968. It was built in 1902 as a holiday resort by Peranakan businessman Lee Cheng Yan, the father-in-law of Mrs Lee Choon Guan. She lived there until her death in 1978. Lee Kip Lin Collection, National Library Singapore.



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studied in Hong Kong, Macau and Japan, making up a group of cosmopolitan, educated and modern-minded women who became the leading edge of local English-speaking Chinese society in Singapore.

These ladies blazed new paths in their own ways, but it was Mrs Lee who captured the hearts of the press. Her every move was noted – what she wore, where she was going, with whom she met and what she did were all described in detail to eager readers.

Mrs Lee was not an activist as such, but it was through the influence of these new friends that she would start a lifetime of fundraising. When Helen Song sought funds during World War I as part of a Malaya-wide drive to aid the Allied Forces, Mrs Lee helped raise \$6,000 which went towards the purchase of a warplane, christened "Women of Malaya No. 27".<sup>21</sup> It was a proud moment for local women. For the first time, names of women appeared in newspapers, formally acknowledging their contributions in long lists of donors from across Malaya.<sup>22</sup>

In 1915, Mrs Lee and 23 women established the Chinese Ladies' Association (known as the Chinese Women's Association today). Created "for the general improvement of young Chinese ladies", it conducted classes focusing on domestic skills but whose main objective was to encourage girls from different families to meet outside their homes. Mrs Lee became its first president and



**(Above)** Friends and founding members of the Chinese Ladies' Association, c. 1917. (From left) Mrs S.Y. Wong, Mrs Lee Choon Guan, Mrs S.K. Wong and an unknown gentleman. Courtesy of Mrs Ivy Kwa.

**(Above right)** Mrs Lee Choon Guan at her 100th birthday celebration, 1977. Collection of the Peranakan Museum of Singapore. Gift of the Lim Family.

hosted everyone at Magenta Cottage on Killiney Road. It was the first association that allowed girls to mingle outside their family compounds. The association subsequently became a powerful peer network where information was shared, from the latest fashion trends to news of turmoil in China.<sup>23</sup>

In 1916, the SCBA held a charity bazaar to raise money for the Red Cross and St John's Ambulance. Charity bazaars, which had evolved under Queen Victoria, were simple and effective events. Some people sold items to raise money while others bought tickets to attend. Mrs Lee ran a tea stall that was extremely popular and sold tea again at subsequent SCBA fundraisers.<sup>24</sup>

The *Straits Times* noted that "this was the first time that Chinese ladies have come forward to assist in a public charity or other function of the kind".<sup>25</sup> This was a watershed. Women across Singapore soon adopted the charity bazaar as their preferred form of fundraising.

## Supporting Local Causes

In the following years, the Lees were involved in many high society occasions, becoming well known as generous hosts and donors. They enthusiastically supported charitable causes and Mrs Lee often turned fundraising events into grand social occasions.



Among other causes, they gave to the Children's Aid Society, the YWCA Building Fund and St Andrew's Mission Hospital. Mrs Lee laid the foundation stone of the hospital in August 1922, donating funds towards its completion.<sup>26</sup> Mr Lee was passionate about developing local education and he financially supported the building of schools. In 1919, he gave a generous \$60,000 to start Raffles College, which was established in 1928.<sup>27</sup>

On 27 August 1924, however, everything came to an abrupt halt. Mr Lee suddenly died just aged 56. Mrs Lee was only in her forties. Of Mr Lee, the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* wrote: "The influence of his death will be very widely felt for he was a man of many activities and interests, having been for a very large number of years a warm supporter of all movements which had for their purpose the betterment of the Chinese in the country." The newspaper described Mrs Lee as "a most enthusiastic supporter of all her husband's social and public activities".<sup>28</sup> After his death, Mrs Lee withdrew from society and nothing was heard about her in the press for some time.

## A Different Singapore

It would take a few years before Mrs Lee reappeared in society, accompanied by family and stalwart friends, and still found much to do. The Qing dynasty had ended, schools for girls were on the rise and suffrage was in the air. But she felt that social infrastructure for women and children in Singapore was still inadequate, so she focused on improving social welfare.

Mrs Lee was appointed to the Committee of Ladies under the Women and Girls Protection Ordinance in 1930, oversaw maternity care at the Kandang Kerbau Hospital (present-day KK Women's and Children's Hospital), encouraged women to train as midwives by giving them scholarships and hosted fundraisers for the Po Leung Kuk at Mandalay Villa for rescued girls to enjoy the seaside.<sup>29</sup> She continued to aid the Child Welfare Society, an organisation that provided critical intervention for local children before any form of social welfare existed in Singapore.<sup>30</sup>

Mrs Lee also returned to hosting grand parties at Mandalay. Her beloved annual birthday balls resumed in 1930, and were attended by governors, judges, royalty and social luminaries who toasted their hostess, decked out in jewels and medals, while fireworks exploded in the skies.<sup>31</sup>

But everything would change again. Singapore fell to the Japanese on 15 February 1942 and the Lees escaped to India. Now it was Mrs Lee's granddaughter Alice who picked up the baton and volunteered with the Red Cross.

## Leaving a Legacy

Mrs Lee was 68 years old when she returned to Singapore in 1945. Mandalay Villa was in shambles and Singapore was now looking away from the British towards independence. The Peranakans, at their zenith in a British colonial world, were disappearing as a distinct group, absorbed into the growing Chinese community.

Mrs Lee restored what she could of the villa and continued to support welfare-related activities, involving her grandchildren in the family's generous ways. She celebrated her 100th birthday on 18 December 1977 and died just two months later on 27 February 1978.<sup>32</sup>

Today, Mrs Lee's philanthropic work carries on through the Mrs Lee Choon Guan Trust Fund, established in 1984, and the Mrs Lee Choon Guan Fund set up by her great-grandson Keith Chua with the Community Foundation of Singapore in 2011.<sup>33</sup> Her great-grandchildren continue to look for new ways to help society. For her contributions to advancing the welfare of women and supporting women's causes, Mrs Lee was inducted into the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame in 2018.<sup>34</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 "As I Was Saying," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 24 January 1934, 8. (From NewspaperSG)
- 2 "As I Was Saying."
- 3 Mrs Lee was also known as the "Diamond Queen" as she often wore the many jewels lavished on her by her husband. For a more detailed record of her contributions to philanthropy as well as of other women of her time, please see "200 Years of Philanthropy in Singapore," Centre for Computing for Social Good & Philanthropy, accessed 10 September 2025, <https://www.ccsgp.comp.nus.edu.sg/200-years-of-philanthropy-in-singapore>.
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- 14 "Mrs Lee Choon Guan," *Straits Times*, 19 December 1931, 12; "Mrs Lee Choon Guan," *Straits Times*, 19 December 1932, 12. (From NewspaperSG); Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions: Straits Times Press, 2015), 92–93. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 959.5705092 LEE)
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- 16 Song, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, 542; "Social and Personal," *Straits Times*, 7 August 1920, 8. (From NewspaperSG)
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