

Two prestigious official positions, three esteemed plaques of honor, and a fleeting directorship

Our grandfather, Yeo Cheow Kaw, alias Yeo Soo Seng/Yeo Tean Ann, held a unique and intriguing place in the officialdom of Fujian Province during the early Republic of China. With two official positions and three plaques of honor to his name, his story is both fascinating and shrouded in mystery.

Twenty years ago, my sisters and I embarked on a journey to our hometown, visiting Xiayang Village in Haicang, Fujian Province. As we explored our grandfather's former residence, we finally laid eyes on the plaque our father had often spoken about. This plaque, proudly displayed, bore the title "Industrial Director" of Fujian Province—a prestigious acknowledgment bestowed upon our grandfather by President Yuan Shikai.

The title of 'Industrial Director' signified holding a position akin to today's provincial commerce minister, marking a remarkable honor. However, delving into the archives for our grandfather's biography yielded no records of him holding such a title. Historical records from the late Qing Dynasty to the early Republic of China consistently pointed to someone else occupying the directorship of Fujian Industry. The cloud of doubt lingered until several years after the publication of "Our Grandfather Yeo Cheow Kaw", when sporadic reports in Singapore newspapers from 1912 to 1913 unveiled the narrative of our grandfather's brief tenure in the Chinese government.

The early 20th century was a tumultuous period in China, marked by regional strife and conflicts between warlords. Provincial governments found themselves entangled in conflicts with central powers in Peking (Beijing) and Nanking (Nanjing). In July 1912, the first year of the Republic of China, Sun Daoren was appointed as the governor of Fujian by Yuan Shikai. Our grandfather received his appointment via telegram, only to discover upon arrival in Fuzhou in December 1912 that another person, Mr. Li Hui, had assumed the directorship role. Grandfather stood in temporarily during Mr. Li's absence, calling for overseas Chinese to contribute to industrial development and even pledged himself to eight million dollars towards the building fund of Longyan Mining Rail.

As Sun Daoren was dismissed at the end of 1913, our grandfather's official career was cut short, prompting his return to Rangoon.



杨昭固后人在祖厝前合影

A visit to Xiayang in June, 2015



In the Hall of Yeo Gongsi, Sit Teik Tong, in Yangon (Rangoon)

<p>本坡 長通叻 ○仰光新集棧行東楊君子真能克 教育總會會長中華學堂監督同里會總理 大副總理不日於文明公益事業無不竭 資本品行素優待人以誠謙和接物 在任貨業司長楊君欲辭委茲借其文案員沈 一圖就職附登報端是日抵叻行經暫住瑞 永茂內明日仍搭原船回國云</p>	<p>歷充該埠商會總理繼甸教 育總會會長中華學堂監督 同盟會總理德望 (該埠 閩籍一大團體) 總理平 日于文明公益事業無不竭 力提倡創辦且富有資本品 行素優待人以誠謙和接物 閩都督久聞其名特為勸駕 委任實業司長 楊君欲辭 弗獲 茲借其文案員沈揚 九君為之贊助赴閩就職 附雙春輪船是日抵叻 行 旌暫住玻璃后街楊君分号</p>	<p>閩粵 閩省會仍請岑領軍速制 △閩省議會致電岑 岑公領軍後巨盜敢肆要犯劫獲更已見整頓 國名財政益趨我常防地行政思裁兵計畫正 聞匪聞人惶恐萬分聞知所措極望少開即來日 乘在湘通制局安妥籌允否之始若公聞地任 職辦聞人舉意公勿辭職電不難聞企圖時 保人留心實業 △國民黨總子張鴻泉林子超方 到編建實業公司委製出品該公司將兩次試客 推中其評語三先生於實業素有關心極其欣 於益業尤有研究深致該公司製煉之精火後之 通之無不及將來編建實業發達可操左券云 楊子真與實業司 △仲光僑商楊子真前經孫 司長楊已到及面署實業司長李懷經中央任命 孫君對於茲舉大有左右公勝之勢云</p>	<p>閩粵 閩粵 “楊子真與實業司 △仰光僑商楊子真前經孫 都督電聘為實業司長 楊 已到廈而部署實業司長李 懷業經中央任命難以取銷 現孫都督對於茲舉大有左 右為難之勢云”</p>
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Among several News from LatPo in Singapore, 1912-1913, reporting the office tenure

Earlier, upon his summons to Fujian, our grandfather began building a substantial villa in Xiayang, anticipating a longer stay. After his return to Burma in 1914, he built a larger villa in Kokhine, a suburb of Rangoon, expressing a commitment to stay permanently. The Xiayang villa, adorned with the earliest plaque denoting his official title, narrowly escaped destruction during the Cultural Revolution, thanks to the unwavering courage of our cousin OonKang, residing in the villa then. We were told of the following aptivating tale of courage in the Former Residence of Yeo Cheow Kaw.

The Red Guards clamored for OonKang to remove the stone tablet. Standing tall and resolute, he boldly declared, "No, I won't take it down. What are you going to do?" The atmosphere hung thick with tension, as the Red Guards, mere young boys, hesitated in the face of Cousin OonKang's indomitable righteousness.

Finally, one of the Red Guards broke the silence, cautioning, "If you don't take it down, you will have to cover the words with a piece of red cloth!" Unfazed, OonKang accepted the challenge, responding with a determined, "All right!"

In this act of defiance, Cousin OonKang safeguarded the most crucial piece of material evidence—a testament to our grandfather's official appointment. The stone tablet, standing proudly on the lintel of the main entrance, remained unscathed, preserved amidst the turbulent times.

Today in Yangon (Rangoon), the Yeo Clan Gongsì, Sit Teik Tong, displays a second plaque, in gold, with "Director of Industry" inscription, together with another gold plaque, designating our grandfather as the "Senior Advisor to the Governor Office." Meanwhile, a third plaque, also declaring him as the "Director of Industry," once hung in the Yeo's ancestral hall in Xiayang, was unfortunately lost during the land-reform period.

Thus, the legacy of our grandfather's official positions and honors lives on through these plaques, bearing witness to a remarkable chapter in the history of Xiayang hometown and our family.

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By 仰索, rewriting from <https://yeocheowkaw.org/匆匆官场一过客>, with an acknowledgement of ChatGPT's editing an earlier draft.

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