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MEMORY OF

seah eu chin

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The story of Shawn Seah's family is inextricably linked to Singapore's. Descendants of Seah Eu Chin, one of Singapore's earliest pioneers whose name has been enshrined in our history books and in Singapore's landscape, Shawn and his family have a history of service and contributions to Singaporeans, a tradition that has stood unbroken for almost 200 years.

#### Shawn Seah's Family

Seah Eu Chin first came to Singapore in 1823, a youth of 18 years. Common wisdom holds that most immigrants to Singapore from China then were economic migrants, people seeking to leave the strife and poverty in the mainland to have better lives overseas. Seah, however, was not of the same mould.

A son of a provincial official in Swatow, he was from a comparatively privileged background, part of a social class whose members would often choose to become scholars and part of the governing elite. Seah, however, bucked the trend; perhaps to seek adventure, perhaps to leave the instability of China, he set sail for Singapore.

It is speculated that of all the British possessions then, Seah picked Singapore because it was the most prominent and bustling trading post in the region, one that held promises and opportunities that would attract a man of Seah's drive and ambitions. As history would eventually turn out, Seah's decision was a boon to the fledgling colony. When he landed in Singapore, he began his career as a clerk and a bookkeeper. In time and with the assistance of his employers, he eventually became a capable and very wealthy businessman in his own right by 1835, eventually becoming the "King of Gambier and Pepper" in Singapore's agricultural sector.

#### A History of Service

Seah's legacy, however, is not his business acumen nor his amassed wealth, but a family tradition that has contributed to the people of this island. Deciding against returning to China, he married into local nobility and settled in Singapore. In 1845, he founded and established the Ngee Ann Kongsi, the charitable foundation which still stands today as a pillar of philanthropy and assistance.

Recognised as the leader of the Teochew community, he was called upon by the British to quell riots in the Chinese community through mediation, a role that he succeeded in because of his sterling reputation as a man for the people. Certainly, Seah Eu Chin was very much a man for the people; having made much of his wealth in Singapore, he devoted his efforts, and indeed much of his life, to improving the community. From the provision of donations and social services to keeping the peace and order in Singapore's tumultuous early days, Seah played an instrumental role in developing the foundations of today's modern city-state.

Likewise, his sons and subsequent descendants gave equally distinguished service to Singapore. Seah Peck Seah, a son and Shawn's direct ancestor, was a famous businessman and owner of his own steamship company in the late 19th century. A Justice of the Peace, he gave his time to mediate conflicts and was the Secretary to the Straits Chinese Business Association (SCBA), the forerunner of today's Peranakan Association, and was very active in other community and educational work – a very early and effective version of the grassroots leaders that we know of today. Seah Liang Seah

was yet another son that continued his father's drive to better the lives of his fellow man. He took over the running of the Ngee Ann Kongsai and founded the previously-mentioned SCBA. Seah Liang Seah created some of Singapore's most pivotal moments – he was the first Singapore-born Chinese member of the Legislative Council, member of the early Municipal Commission, and funded the King Edward Medical School, the precursor of the renowned NUS today.

### The Family Today

In modern times, the scions of Seah maintain a lower profile than their ancestors; nonetheless, the tradition of contributing runs strong. Shawn's father started his career in SIA; after a short stint, he subsequently entered the profession of education, in which he remains an active proponent of lifelong education. Shawn's father donates extensively to Boys' Town, and like his ancestors, he tries to better the lives of the unfortunate.

Shawn himself has dedicated his own career and passions towards the nation. His career in the Public Service has brought him through various portfolios with the ability to change lives. Like his father, he started out in the Ministry of Education as a teacher; he subsequently served in the Ministry of Defence, and now reviews policies on migrant workers at the Ministry of Manpower. In his personal capacity, he is committed to preserving and promoting Singapore's heritage and identity, with a book on Seah Eu Chin published and another on Seah Liang Seah on its way.

It is often quoted that Singapore has no resources but her people, and that Singapore is only as successful as those who are determined to make it so. When Seah Eu Chin first arrived in Singapore as a youth, it is unlikely that he strove to become a public figure and a philanthropist. Yet, driven by a passion to do his bit, he eventually became such a person; just as importantly, he started a family that continues his values to the present day. In their own ways, Shawn and his family represent the ideal of active citizenry – a family dedicated to improving the lives of people in their country and of those around them. His family story is a story of service that has continued unbroken throughout the generations, and an inspiring representation of how a people can build their country.