

A Biography of Tan Kah Kee



The Standard-Bearer of the Overseas Chinese and Glory of the Nation

Chapter 1

Jimei Fishing Village: A Minnan Boy in the Village School



On the twelfth day of the ninth lunar month in the thirteenth year of the Tongzhi reign (1874), a baby boy was born in a traditional Minnan courtyard house in Jimei, Tung-an County, Quanzhou Prefecture, Fujian Province. His father, Tan Eng Kiat (courtesy name Ju Song), named him **Tan Kah Kee**, courtesy name **Ko Chi**. In the years to come, this child would become one of the most influential overseas Chinese leaders of the twentieth century.

Jimei was then a small fishing village at the entrance of Amoy Bay. Surrounded by the sea on three sides and connected to the mainland on the fourth, it was a place where generations of villagers made their living from fishing and small-scale farming. Life was simple and often difficult.

The Tan family had once enjoyed relative prosperity. Both Tan Kah Kee's grandfather, Tan Chiam Choo, and his father had ventured overseas in search of opportunity. By the time of his birth, however, the family's fortunes had declined, and the household was no longer as prosperous as it had once been.

At the age of nine, Tan Kah Kee enrolled at **Nan Hian Village School** in Jimei. Under the guidance of his teacher, Tan Leng Bun, he studied the *Three Character Classic*, the *Four Books*, and the historical text *Gangjian Yizhi Lu*. In later years, he described himself as being “slow by nature, but diligent in study.”

Yet classical literature did not captivate him as much as the stories told by elders about the distant lands of Nanyang. Whenever returning migrants spoke of Singapore, Malacca, or the bustling ports beyond the South China Sea, the young boy listened with fascination. Tales of opportunity, hardship, and adventure stirred his imagination far more than the passages of ancient texts.

Though the education available in the fishing village was modest, it planted deep roots of Chinese culture within him. The boy who grew up among the fishing boats and tidal flats of Jimei would one day cross the seas, build a vast commercial empire, and become one of the most respected leaders of the overseas Chinese world. Yet throughout his life, he never forgot where he came from.

In 1890, at the age of sixteen, Tan Kah Kee received a letter from his father summoning him to Singapore.

For the first time, he left his native village and sailed southward across the sea.

At that moment, he could not have known that the unfamiliar land of Nanyang would become the stage upon which he would write one of the most extraordinary chapters in the history of the overseas Chinese community.

Chapter 2

Building a Nanyang Empire: From Kian Ghee Rice Shop to Rubber King

“Indian servants seemed to flourish wherever European masters gathered, while Chinese everywhere practised thrift, though their women dressed with elegance and refinement...”

These were among the early impressions that struck Tan Kah Kee upon his arrival in Singapore. He quickly realised that Chinese residents occupied a position far below that of the Europeans in the colonial hierarchy. More troubling still, he observed that the Chinese community itself was often divided and fragmented. For the thoughtful young immigrant, these observations sparked reflections on how one might change both personal destiny and the future of the community.

At the age of seventeen, Tan entered his father’s business, the Shun Ann Rice Shop. For more than a decade, he devoted himself to learning every aspect of the trade.

Initially entrusted with managing the warehouse and maintaining accounts, he soon demonstrated exceptional diligence and aptitude. Before long, he had mastered the various facets of commercial operations, from purchasing and inventory management to finance and customer relations.

A turning point came in 1904.

At the age of thirty, Tan resolved to strike out on his own.

Recognising the growing demand for canned pineapples, he identified an opportunity that others had overlooked. Borrowing \$7,000, he boldly established the **Sin Lee Chuan Pineapple Factory** and acquired the **Jit Sun Company**. Remarkably, the factory was completed within two months and turned a profit in its very first year of operation.

This marked the beginning of his entrepreneurial success and provided the first significant capital that would fuel his future ventures.

Thereafter, Tan expanded rapidly. He established the **Kian Hoh Rice Shop**, developed the **Hock San Pineapple Estate**, and founded the **Jit Chun Pineapple Factory**. His commercial interests grew steadily, and his business empire began to take shape.

Yet it was the rubber industry that ultimately propelled him to the summit of commercial success.

In 1906, at the age of thirty-two, Tan entered the rubber plantation business.

At a time when many still viewed rubber as a speculative crop, he made a remarkably farsighted prediction: the twentieth century would belong to the automobile, and rubber would become one of the world's most important industrial commodities.

Acting on this conviction, he acquired 180,000 rubber seeds and began cultivating plantations on a large scale.

His gamble proved correct.

Around 1915, as Europe became engulfed in the First World War, many businesses reduced production or suspended expansion plans. Tan Kah Kee took the opposite approach. Seeing opportunity amid uncertainty, he invested heavily in the industry, acquiring nine rubber factories and spending more than \$100,000 upgrading their equipment and facilities.

When global rubber prices eventually recovered, the rewards were immense.

By 1925, Tan Kah Kee controlled approximately 15,000 acres of rubber plantations. His business network extended across five continents, employing more than 30,000 workers. His net worth exceeded twelve million Straits dollars, making him one of the wealthiest Chinese entrepreneurs in Southeast Asia and earning him the title **“Rubber King of Nanyang.”**

More importantly, Tan pioneered a new business model.

He became the first Chinese entrepreneur to integrate rubber cultivation, manufacturing, and international trade into a single enterprise. Breaking with established practice, he bypassed the European trading houses that traditionally controlled overseas commerce and dealt directly with foreign buyers himself.

In doing so, he not only built a vast commercial empire but also demonstrated that overseas Chinese entrepreneurs could compete successfully on the global stage without relying on colonial intermediaries.

The fisherman's son from Jimei had become one of the most powerful businessmen in the South Seas.

Chapter 3

Repaying His Father's Debts: A Monument to Integrity in Business

Among the Chinese community of Singapore, few stories are as frequently recounted as Tan Kah Kee's decision to repay his father's debts.

In 1903, the Shun Ann Rice Shop operated by his father, Tan Eng Kiat, collapsed due to poor management and accumulated debts exceeding 200,000 Straits dollars—a staggering sum at the time.

Under British colonial law, a son was under no legal obligation to repay the debts of his father. Tan Kah Kee could have walked away without bearing any responsibility for the failed business.

Many relatives and friends advised him to do exactly that.

“Your father is bankrupt,” they told him. “These debts are not yours to repay.”

But Tan saw the matter differently.

He declared:

“Regardless of how long it may take, if it lies within my ability, I am determined to repay every debt in full, so that no regret may remain.”

At the time, Tan himself was still a young entrepreneur struggling to establish his own footing in business. His resources were limited, and success was far from guaranteed.

Beginning in 1904, he embarked on a difficult path. While building his own enterprises, he simultaneously set aside funds to settle his father’s obligations. Every profitable venture, every successful transaction, and every hard-earned dollar brought him one step closer to fulfilling the promise he had made.

After several years of relentless effort, he achieved what many had thought impossible.

By 1907, Tan Kah Kee had repaid every outstanding debt left by his father, together with the accumulated interest.

News of the achievement spread rapidly throughout the overseas Chinese communities of Southeast Asia.

People were astonished—not merely because of the amount involved, but because of the principle behind it. In an age when the law released him from all responsibility, he had chosen to honour a moral obligation instead.

The episode transformed public perceptions of Tan Kah Kee.

Merchants trusted him.

Business partners respected him.

Community leaders admired him.

The story of “repaying his father’s debts” became the foundation of his commercial reputation and the moral authority that would later enable him to mobilise overseas Chinese communities, raise vast sums for education, and lead public causes on an unprecedented scale.

For Tan Kah Kee, integrity was never an abstract virtue.

He once remarked:

“The development of an individual, a society, a nation, or any enterprise depends entirely upon four principles: loyalty, sincerity, trustworthiness, and righteousness.”

As for himself, he believed he could strive only to embody four simple virtues:

“Sincerity, trustworthiness, fairness, and loyalty.”

These principles guided him not only in business but throughout his entire life.

Long before he became known as the Rubber King, the great philanthropist, or the leader of overseas Chinese communities, Tan Kah Kee had already established the quality that would define his legacy above all others:

an unwavering commitment to honour and integrity.

Chapter 4

Saving the Nation Through Education: The Birth of Jimei Schools

Yet commercial success was never Tan Kah Kee's ultimate destination.

He firmly believed that **“education is the foundation of nation-building.”** Once he achieved financial success, his first instinct was not to pursue greater wealth but to invest in the future of his people through education.

The roots of this commitment could be traced back much earlier.

In 1894, when Tan Kah Kee returned to his native village to marry, he made a decision that astonished those around him.

After years of hard work, he had saved 2,000 silver dollars and intended to hold a respectable wedding celebration. Upon returning home, however, he discovered that the local village school had been closed for two years because of financial difficulties. The children of Jimei had nowhere to study.

Faced with this reality, he abandoned his wedding plans and donated the entire sum of 2,000 silver dollars to reopen the school.

It was the first educational donation of his life.

In hindsight, it also foreshadowed the mission that would define his legacy.

In 1912, inspired by his conviction that education was essential to national renewal, Tan Kah Kee established **Jimei Primary School** in his hometown.

What began as a single school soon evolved into an educational movement.

Over the following years, he successively founded girls' schools, teacher-training colleges, secondary schools, kindergartens, fisheries schools, commercial schools, agricultural and forestry institutions, and colleges devoted to Chinese studies. Beyond classrooms, he also funded the construction of a power station, a hospital, a science museum, a library, and a large sports stadium.

In what had once been a remote fishing village, he created an educational complex unlike any other in China.

This remarkable institution became known as **Jimei Schools**—later celebrated throughout the Chinese world as **Jimei School Village**.

Tan Kah Kee's vision for Jimei was extraordinarily ambitious.

He believed that an educational centre should possess “the grandeur and spirit of a great university.” Campus planning was therefore given careful attention. Buildings were designed to harmonise with the natural landscape, and Tan insisted that the schools should face the sea without obstruction, symbolising openness, aspiration, and connection to the wider world.

His educational philosophy extended beyond academic instruction.

He sought to cultivate moral character, practical skills, physical fitness, and patriotic spirit. To him, schools were not merely places of learning; they were institutions for shaping citizens capable of rebuilding and strengthening the nation.

In 1923, Jimei Schools received an unprecedented distinction.

The educational complex was designated a “**Permanent Peace School Village.**”

At the time, this recognition was virtually unique. An entire educational system, established and funded solely by an overseas Chinese philanthropist, had gained international acknowledgment and respect.

For Tan Kah Kee, however, this honour was never the objective.

His goal remained unchanged: to use education as a means of uplifting society and strengthening China.

What had begun with the reopening of a small village school had grown into one of the most influential educational enterprises ever created by an overseas Chinese leader.

The fisherman's son from Jimei was no longer merely building schools.

He was building the future.

Chapter 5

Strength of the South: The Founding of Xiamen University

If Jimei School Village was the first movement in Tan Kah Kee's educational symphony, then Xiamen University was its second movement—and undoubtedly its most magnificent.

In 1919, Tan Kah Kee made a decision that would leave a lasting mark on Chinese educational history:

he would establish a university founded and supported by Chinese people themselves.

At the time, Fujian Province did not possess a single university. Students seeking higher education had little choice but to travel to other provinces or study overseas. Tan was determined to change this situation and provide Fujian with an institution of higher learning worthy of its people.

To realise this vision, he committed an extraordinary sum of **four million dollars** as the founding fund for the university.

The amount was no ordinary donation. It represented virtually the entirety of his accumulated wealth in Nanyang at that time.

For Tan Kah Kee, however, education was not an expense—it was an investment in the future of the nation.

To ensure the success of the project, he assembled some of China's most respected educational leaders. Distinguished figures such as Huang Yanpei and Cai Yuanpei were invited to serve on the preparatory committee. He also persuaded his close friend, the renowned Singaporean physician and educator **Lim Boon Keng**, to accept the position of founding president.

On 6 April 1921, Xiamen University officially opened its doors in Jimei.

From the beginning, Tan envisioned the university as far more than a regional institution. He wanted it to become a centre where Chinese culture and modern knowledge could flourish together.

The university motto he adopted was “**Zhiyu Zhishan**” (*Pursuit of the Highest Good*), drawn from *The Great Learning* in the *Book of Rites*:

“The way of great learning lies in manifesting virtue, renewing the people, and resting in the highest good.”

Through this motto, Tan expressed his belief that a university should do more than impart knowledge. It should also cultivate character, moral responsibility, and public service.

In its early years, Xiamen University consisted of five colleges—Arts, Science, Law, Commerce, and Education—with a total of seventeen departments. This made it one of the few comprehensive universities in China at the time.

Tan Kah Kee also devoted great attention to the physical development of the campus.

He envisioned a university of grandeur and beauty, one that would inspire generations of students. The master plan that he personally approved took full advantage of the natural landscape. The campus was situated facing the sea, with Gulangyu Island visible across the water and the Wulao Peaks rising behind it.

Today, the iconic setting of Xiamen University—overlooking the sea and embraced by the mountains—remains one of the most beautiful university landscapes in China.

It is also a lasting testament to the vision of its founder.

For Tan Kah Kee, the establishment of Xiamen University was not merely an educational undertaking.

It was a declaration that overseas Chinese could contribute directly to the cultural and intellectual rejuvenation of their ancestral homeland.

From a fishing village school in Jimei to a modern university on the shores of Xiamen, his educational dream was steadily becoming reality.

The foundations of what would later be known as “**The Strength of the South**” had been laid.

Chapter 6

The Great Depression: Selling His Mansions Rather Than Abandon Education

In 1929, the Great Depression swept across the capitalist world, bringing economic devastation on an unprecedented scale.

The rubber industry, upon which much of Tan Kah Kee's business empire depended, was hit especially hard. Rubber prices collapsed from three dollars a pound to a mere twenty cents. Companies failed, plantations closed, and fortunes that had taken decades to build vanished almost overnight.

Tan Kah Kee's enterprises were among those severely affected.

As the crisis deepened, his creditor banks—led by the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC)—offered him a way out.

Their proposal was simple.

If he agreed to discontinue funding **Xiamen University** and **Jimei Schools**, the banks would provide the assistance necessary to rescue his businesses and restore their financial viability.

For many businessmen, the choice would have been obvious.

For Tan Kah Kee, there was never any hesitation.

His reply was firm and unequivocal:

“Businesses may be closed, but schools must never be shut down.”

Years later, recalling the incident, he wrote:

“Some advised me to stop financing the schools in order to preserve my enterprises. I could not bring myself to abandon that responsibility. If the schools were forced to close, my personal guilt for disappointing the youth would be small; my guilt toward society would be immeasurably greater.”

Those words revealed the hierarchy of values by which he lived.

To Tan Kah Kee, wealth existed to serve society. Education was not a charitable luxury that could be abandoned in difficult times; it was a sacred responsibility.

Determined to keep the schools operating, he made enormous personal sacrifices.

He sold three of his private villas in Singapore to raise funds for educational expenses. Property that represented a lifetime of achievement was willingly exchanged for the continued survival of classrooms and students.

The spirit of this sacrifice later came to be summed up in a famous saying:

“Rather sell the mansions than abandon Xiamen University.”

The phrase became a lasting symbol of Tan Kah Kee’s unwavering commitment to education.

From the founding of Xiamen University in 1921 until its transition into a national university in 1937, Tan personally financed its operations for sixteen consecutive years.

During that period, he bore the burden almost single-handedly, even as his own business empire crumbled under the pressure of the global economic crisis.

By the time Xiamen University became a state institution in 1937, much of the wealth he had accumulated over decades had already been poured into schools, scholarships, buildings, and educational programmes.

According to later estimates, the total amount Tan Kah Kee contributed to education during his lifetime exceeded **one hundred million dollars**—an extraordinary sum by any standard.

Few philanthropists in modern Chinese history sacrificed so much of their personal fortune for the cause of learning.

The Great Depression destroyed much of Tan Kah Kee's commercial empire.

Yet it also revealed the true measure of the man.

When forced to choose between wealth and education, he chose education.

When forced to choose between personal survival and public responsibility, he chose responsibility.

And in doing so, he transformed himself from a successful businessman into one of the greatest educational benefactors in the history of the Chinese world.

Chapter 7

The Overseas Chinese War Effort: Leadership of the Nanyang Relief Movement

On 7 July 1937, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident marked the beginning of full-scale war between China and Japan.

Although thousands of miles away in Southeast Asia, Tan Kah Kee immediately recognised that the conflict would determine the future of the Chinese nation. Without hesitation, he mobilised the overseas Chinese community to support the motherland's resistance effort.

On 15 August 1937, he initiated the establishment of the **Malaya and Singapore Chinese Relief Fund Committee for China's Wounded Soldiers and Refugees**, assuming the position of chairman.

This was only the beginning.

Over the following months, Tan travelled tirelessly throughout Southeast Asia, meeting community leaders, organising fundraising campaigns, and rallying support among overseas Chinese communities scattered across the region.

His efforts culminated on 10 October 1938.

On that day, 168 representatives from forty-five Nanyang communities gathered in Singapore and formally established the **Nanyang Federation of China Relief Fund Committees**, commonly known as the **Nanyang Relief General Association**.

Tan Kah Kee was unanimously elected its chairman.

Under his leadership, the organisation became the most important overseas Chinese relief body supporting China's war effort.

Soon after its establishment, Tan articulated a rallying cry that resonated throughout the Chinese diaspora:

“Organise the millions of overseas Chinese; unite as one in the revival of our nation.”

The slogan captured both his vision and his determination.

For Tan, the war was not merely China's struggle. It was a test of whether overseas Chinese, despite living far from their ancestral homeland, would stand together in a moment of national crisis.

The response was extraordinary.

Within just a few years, the Nanyang Relief General Association raised more than **400 million Chinese dollars** for China's resistance effort—an unprecedented achievement in the history of overseas Chinese philanthropy.

Yet Tan's contribution extended far beyond fundraising.

In 1939, responding to urgent requests from China, he launched a campaign throughout Southeast Asia to recruit skilled mechanics and drivers for wartime service.

The result was one of the most remarkable chapters in overseas Chinese history.

More than **3,200 Nanyang Chinese mechanics** answered the call.

Known today as the **Nanyang Volunteer Drivers and Mechanics**, they returned to China and undertook the perilous task of transporting military supplies along the Burma Road and the Yunnan-Burma Highway.

Facing enemy air raids, treacherous mountain roads, disease, and constant danger, these volunteers played a crucial role in keeping China's wartime supply lines open.

Without their sacrifice, countless essential materials would never have reached the front lines.

Tan Kah Kee regarded their service as one of the proudest achievements of the overseas Chinese community.

He was equally fearless in the political arena.

At a session of China's National Political Council, he submitted a proposal consisting of just eleven Chinese characters:

“Any talk of peace before the enemy leaves our soil is treason.”

The statement sent shockwaves through Chinese political circles and attracted international attention.

It was a direct and uncompromising condemnation of the surrenderist views being promoted by Wang Jingwei and his supporters.

At a time when many feared speaking openly, Tan chose to stand firm.

His position was clear:

There could be no compromise while the nation remained under invasion.

For this reason, Tan Kah Kee became more than a philanthropist or educational benefactor during the war years.

He emerged as the undisputed leader of the overseas Chinese resistance movement, a figure whose influence extended from Singapore to Chongqing, from Malaya to the battlefields of China.

The businessman who had once built a rubber empire was now leading a different kind of enterprise—one dedicated to national survival and collective sacrifice.

Chapter 8

The Journey to Yan'an: China's Hope Lies in Yan'an

In 1940, Tan Kah Kee organised the **Nanyang Chinese Relief Mission to China**, leading a delegation back to the homeland to visit soldiers and civilians engaged in the War of Resistance against Japan.

The journey would become one of the most significant turning points of his life.

The delegation first arrived in Chongqing, then the wartime capital of the Nationalist Government.

Recognising Tan Kah Kee's immense influence among overseas Chinese communities, the Kuomintang authorities spared no effort in courting his favour. They reportedly set aside 80,000 yuan solely for official banquets and receptions. At the same time, they repeatedly urged him not to visit Yan'an, the headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party.

Yet Tan was not a man easily swayed.

He believed that any fair assessment of China's future required seeing conditions with his own eyes. Refusing to yield to pressure, he pushed ahead with his plans.

On 31 May 1940, he arrived in Yan'an.

There, he was warmly received by leaders including **Mao Zedong** and **Zhu De**. During his stay, he visited Mao at Yangjialing and witnessed first-hand the austere conditions under which the Communist leadership lived.

The cave dwelling that served as Mao's residence was remarkably simple. Inside stood only a worn square wooden table and a collection of mismatched wooden chairs of various sizes.

When Mao hosted a meal in his honour, the fare was equally modest.

The meal consisted of a few simple vegetable dishes and a bowl of chicken soup. According to later accounts, even the chicken soup had been provided by an elderly neighbour who, upon hearing that an honoured guest from Nanyang had arrived, insisted on contributing something special.

The experience left a deep impression on Tan Kah Kee.

During his week in Yan'an, he visited schools, factories, military institutions, and local communities. He spoke extensively with officials, teachers, workers, soldiers, and ordinary citizens.

What he observed differed profoundly from what he had seen elsewhere.

He later wrote that Yan'an possessed a spirit unlike any other place he had visited:

“There, everyone was equal. People treated one another like brothers. They worked diligently and endured hardship together in the cause of construction and national salvation, achieving remarkable results.”

The atmosphere of dedication, discipline, and collective purpose convinced him that he was witnessing something historically significant.

Upon returning from the visit, Tan recorded his impressions in his memoir, *Memoirs of an Overseas Chinese*.

Reflecting on his experience, he wrote:

“The more I observed, the more deeply moved and excited I became. Even in my dreams my thoughts returned to that place. I rejoiced for the future of our great Chinese nation. China has found its saviour; victory is assured. China's hope lies in Yan'an.”

The statement became one of the most famous remarks associated with Tan Kah Kee.

At a time when many overseas Chinese remained uncertain about China's political future, he had reached his own conclusion through direct observation rather than propaganda or hearsay.

Whether one agreed with his assessment or not, the journey demonstrated a defining characteristic of Tan Kah Kee's character:

he insisted on seeing the truth for himself.

Just as he had built businesses through careful judgement and founded schools through personal conviction, he approached China's political future with the same independence of mind.

The visit to Yan'an was not merely a wartime inspection.

It was the moment when one of the most influential overseas Chinese leaders of the twentieth century made his historic judgement about the future direction of China.

Chapter 9

The Founding of New China: His Final Years in Public Service

In 1949, the People's Republic of China was established.

At the invitation of Chairman **Mao Zedong**, Tan Kah Kee returned to China to participate in the preparatory conference of the **Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)**, one of the most important political gatherings in the formation of the new state.

For Tan, this marked the fulfilment of a lifelong aspiration.

After decades spent supporting China's modernisation, educational development, and national salvation movements from abroad, he was finally able to contribute directly to the rebuilding of the nation.

In the years that followed, he served in a number of prominent public positions, including **Member of the Central People's Government, Member of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, Vice Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and Chairman of the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese.**

Although already advanced in age, Tan devoted most of his remaining energy to the construction of the new China.

In 1950, at the age of seventy-six, he returned permanently to his hometown of Jimei.

There, he resumed a routine that reflected the same diligence and determination that had characterised his entire life.

Armed with a walking stick, he inspected construction sites daily, visiting schools and development projects throughout the area.

Contemporaries recalled that he rarely missed a day.

As one account noted:

“Except in times of illness, severe pain, or storms, not a single day passed without his inspections.”

Under his guidance, an ambitious programme of expansion was launched for both **Xiamen University** and **Jimei Schools**.

The results were remarkable.

Within just five years, Xiamen University completed more than thirty new buildings, including the iconic **Jiannan Auditorium**. The new facilities added over 62,000 square metres of floor space to the campus and transformed the university into one of the leading institutions of higher learning in China.

At the same time, Jimei Schools underwent unprecedented expansion.

Between 1950 and 1965, the total area of newly constructed school buildings exceeded three times the amount that had existed before.

Even in old age, Tan remained what he had always been—a builder of schools and a champion of education.

Then, in 1959, tragedy struck.

At the age of eighty-five, he fell seriously ill.

Doctors diagnosed him with **squamous cell carcinoma**, a form of cancer.

The news was devastating, yet Tan's thoughts remained focused on the cause that had defined his life.

Lying in his sickbed, he dictated his final testament.

In keeping with the principles he had upheld for decades, he chose not to preserve his wealth for personal heirs.

Instead, he directed that all his remaining assets be donated to **Jimei Schools**.

Even as death approached, he continued to place education above personal interest.

It was the final expression of a conviction that had guided him from the moment he reopened a village school in Jimei more than sixty years earlier:

that the greatest legacy a person could leave behind was not wealth, but the education of future generations.

Chapter 10

The Final Testament: An Eternal Monument of the Spirit

On 12 August 1961, Tan Kah Kee passed away in Beijing at the age of eighty-seven.

The man who had spent a lifetime building businesses, founding schools, supporting national causes, and serving society had reached the end of his remarkable journey.

Yet even in his final days, his thoughts remained fixed upon education.

Before his death, he left behind a will that revealed the values he cherished most. Among its most moving provisions was the following instruction:

“After my death, Jimei Schools must continue to operate. Jimei United Bank in Hong Kong is the property of Jimei Schools. Its annual dividends and profits shall be used as funding for the schools.”

The statement reflected a conviction that had guided him throughout his life: educational institutions should possess a secure and sustainable foundation, capable of serving future generations long after their founder was gone.

His concern for education was matched only by his strict standards regarding family wealth.

Tan established an extraordinarily austere family code:

“For family members, each person shall receive twenty-five dollars per month. Should any descendants return to reside in China in the future, the same allowance shall apply. However, if they are receiving a salary from the school, that amount shall be deducted.”

The instruction astonished many.

Here was a man who had once commanded a fortune worth millions, yet the monthly allowance he left for his descendants amounted to only twenty-five dollars per person.

To Tan Kah Kee, wealth was not something to be accumulated by future generations. It was a resource that should be directed toward public benefit and national development.

Following his death, tributes poured in from across China and the overseas Chinese world.

Among the most famous was the inscription written by Chairman **Mao Zedong**:

“Banner of the Overseas Chinese, Glory of the Nation.”

Those eight Chinese characters—*Huaqiao Qizhi, Minzu Guanghui*—have since become inseparable from Tan Kah Kee's name.

Few phrases could have captured his life's achievements more precisely.

More than half a century later, his influence remained undiminished.

In 2014, during the 140th anniversary of Tan Kah Kee's birth, President **Xi Jinping** sent a letter to the Jimei Alumni Association, calling upon overseas Chinese communities to carry forward the “**Kah Kee Spirit.**” He urged them to cherish their love for the motherland, uphold their commitment to national service, and work alongside the Chinese people toward the goal of national rejuvenation.

Tan Kah Kee himself may have departed, but the legacy he left behind continues to shine.

In Xiamen, **Xiamen University** remains celebrated as the “**Strength of the South.**”

In Jimei, the sound of students reading aloud still echoes through the campuses he built from a humble fishing village.

Across the world, overseas Chinese communities continue to regard him as a model of public service, patriotism, and philanthropy.

Over time, the phrase “**Kah Kee Spirit**” has come to embody the values he championed throughout his life:

sincerity in dealing with others, perseverance in undertaking responsibilities, devotion to one's homeland and ancestral roots, and a willingness to dedicate personal wealth to the advancement of education.

These ideals have become more than a personal legacy.

They have become part of the spiritual inheritance of the Chinese nation itself.

And so, while Tan Kah Kee's life came to an end in 1961, the ideals for which he lived continue to inspire generations far beyond his own time.

His schools endure.

His institutions endure.

His spirit endures.

And through them, the fisherman's son from Jimei continues to shape the future of countless lives.

Reference

1. Southeast Net — “Professor Zhu Shuiyong of Xiamen University Interprets Tan Kah Kee’s Patriotic Spirit Through History and Culture”
2. Xiamen University News — “The Life and Achievements of Founder Tan Kah Kee”
3. People’s Daily Overseas Edition — “Tan Kah Kee: Banner of the Overseas Chinese”
4. Xiamen Daily — “Tan Kah Kee: Pioneer of Modern Urban Development in Xiamen”
5. People’s Daily Overseas Edition — “Remembering Tan Kah Kee’s Passionate Commitment to the War of Resistance”
6. WeChat Public Platform — “Tan Kah Kee: Banner of the Overseas Chinese, Glory of the Nation”
7. Xiamen University News — “Perseverance from the Sickbed and Eternal Remembrance”
8. Baidu Baike — “Tan Kah Kee”
9. WeChat Public Platform — “Investment Stories: Tan Kah Kee’s Business Philosophy and Patriotism”