

OBITUARY

Dr Chang Kiaw Lan, 31 July 1927–14 August 2003

Dr Chang Kiaw Lan was appointed Botanist to the Singapore Botanic Gardens Service on 7 July 1959 and as Keeper of the Herbarium in 1970. She retired on 30 July 1987. Throughout most of her career she was based at the Botanic Gardens at Cluny Road, attached to and in charge of the Herbarium there, whence she made the acquaintance of a great number of taxonomic botanists and other botanical visitors from throughout the world. Her role in editing the *Gardens' Bulletin, Singapore* for 17 years was particularly significant because it was during a period when taxonomic research at the Gardens was at an ebb and yet the Bulletin was the only actively produced, dedicated botanical journal in Southeast Asia.

Kiaw Lan was born in Koetaradja (today called Banda Aceh) in north Sumatra, to Mr Thio Kie San, Kapitan or leader of the Chinese community there, and Madam Jong Lie Nio, when Indonesia was under Dutch administration. She was their second daughter and youngest of six children (including an adopted first child). Kiaw Lan attended early schooling there, which was interrupted by the Second World War, and continued her education in Penang, Malaysia, from January 1948 until July 1953. (It was in Penang that she began to use the name Chang Kiaw Lan consistently, one of several translated phonetic versions of her name in Chinese that included Thio Kiauw Lan, Tjong Kiauw Lian and Tjong Su Yun!) She moved to Singapore to read Botany and Philosophy at the University of Malaya (1953–1958) and in 1959 gained an Upper II Honours in Botany. She obtained a Certificate of Naturalisation under the British Nationality Act to stay in Singapore in May 1959 just prior to her joining the Botanic Gardens Service and in December, 1959, became a Singapore citizen. Her first field trip as a botanist in the Botanic Gardens appears to have been during 21–28 September 1959, in the Sedili area in Johore, in the company of Mohamad Shah, a plant collector who eventually rose to become Herbarium Assistant and Research Officer and who would ably assist her with the functions of the Herbarium throughout her career there.

Following her appointment to the Botanic Gardens, under H.M. Burkill's directorship, she was awarded a British Commonwealth Scholarship from October 1962 to July 1964 for a PhD in Botany at the University of Cambridge. She worked under the supervision of E.J.H. Corner, Professor of Tropical Botany at the Botany School, an exceedingly talented botanist with wide interests covering mycology and seed plants. Corner had served as an Assistant Director at the Singapore Botanic Gardens and was already well known as the author of *Wayside Trees of Malaya* by the time the Second World War overtook events in Singapore in 1942. Kiaw Lan was attached to Newnham College and completed her thesis, "The Structure and Taxonomy of *Lentinus* Fr." (xii + 247 p., 65 pl.) in July 1965. The thesis provided a resume of



Chang Kiaw Lan at the Singapore Herbarium upon return from Cambridge, 1965 (A); at her desk, December 1974 (B); attending a friend's reception, sometime 1970s (C); and while on tour in Vietnam shortly after retirement (D). (Courtesy of Christina Tan)

characters of taxonomic value in the classification of the gill-fungus *Lentinus*, which is well-represented in Malaysia and Singapore, and provided a new definition and typification for the genus, previously poorly circumscribed. It also confirmed the value of hyphal analysis as a taxonomic method. Then, accurate identification of the Asian tropical species was virtually impossible because there were no keys.

She resumed her service at the Gardens on 21 September 1965, coming back to a rather active schedule trying to settle in, but based at a temporary work station in the library while the office she was to occupy in the new three-floor Herbarium (completed in 1964) was still used by James Sinclair. He had been Curator since

1948, retired in 1963, was re-employed until 1965, when he worked in an honorary capacity until 1967. In August/September 1966 she attended the Eleventh Pacific Science Congress in Tokyo, where she presented a paper on "Criteria for the classification of *Lentinus* species". There, she also attended the Marine Park Symposium and the 1st U.S.-Japanese Algal Culture Conference in Ueno Park. Her trip was sponsored by the Singapore Industrial Research Unit and financed by the American Embassy and the Asia Foundation. During 1-5 October in the same year, she collected fungi in the Cameron Highlands, Peninsular Malaysia, together with Professor Corner and Dr Chew Wee Lek, the first local graduate appointed as botanist in 1956, obtaining his PhD from Cambridge in 1965.

In 1967, the Botanic Gardens was about to enter a trying period. Following her training in mycology, Kiaw Lan had already identified the need to carry out developmental studies of basidiomycete fungi because of the paucity of any information on the tropical species. For this, she realized that facilities for experimental work at the Gardens had to be set up. On the other hand, work on orchid culture (which involved another botanist, Hardial Singh, engaged in 1963) was already well established. That year, when the Singapore government's beautification programme became significant, she was also asked to be in charge of advisory work for the new Tree Planting Campaign.

Then, on 2 May 1968, she was seconded to the Primary Production Department, engaged in mushroom cultivation research. Kiaw Lan's duties in 1968 included studying the pests and diseases of cultivated plants, investigating the commercial production of edible mushrooms, and mycological research and routine maintenance of fungal collections. She was particularly interested in the mushroom genus *Termitomyces*, noting, "It is well-known that the termite mushroom is the most delicious in tropical countries." The name of the mushroom alludes to its association with the subterranean nest of *Odontotermes* termites, which do not build conspicuous mounds. The fungus is cultivated in so-called fungus gardens in the nest chambers of these termites, and helps in the digestion of cellulosic material brought in by the termites. But just over a year later, on 1 July 1969, she was returned after Dr Chew drew attention to an "acute shortage of botanists in the Botanic Gardens". In 1970, Chew assumed the duties of Director and Kiaw Lan became the Keeper of the Herbarium. So her duties continued to be defined around mycology but the contexts were different and rather wide-ranging.

Ironically, her role became more significant as taxonomic research waned in Singapore, particularly after the retirement of Burkill and departure of Chew, just before the Garden came under the organisation of The Parks & Recreation Service in 1973. The new department was overwhelmingly dedicated to the development of a superior Garden City that has come to be Singapore's signature theme. In 1970, Geh Siew Yin was appointed botanist, but she was moved to administrative duties as Assistant Commissioner of the Garden in 1973. By 1975, Hardial Singh was also

transferred to non-research duties in the expanding Parks & Recreation Department.

Hence, while one important aspect was fulfilled, resulting in a very successful urban and suburban horticultural management, the other, which would have been based on a traditional strength in tropical botanical research, faded. In retrospect, both areas could have flourished, as Singapore could well afford such development and was central, in terms of service and expertise, to a rapidly developing resource-rich region. Whereas, previously, many standard works on the botany of the region, such as *Wayside Trees of Malaya*, *Malayan Wild Flowers*, and numerous taxonomic revisions in the *Gardens' Bulletin*, were crafted by botanists at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, the 1970s and 1980s saw a dearth of such activity. In that period, the taxonomic output from the Gardens itself declined sharply and the key regional work of the time, the four-volume *Tree Flora of Malaya*, a project spanning over twenty years and involving 19 botanists, had no Botanic Garden participation in authorship. (It was to be in the late 1980s before the resuscitation process for the taxonomic and floristic research functions in the Garden began gathering momentum, leading to renewed botanical activity so evident since the 1990s.)

In her 1948 Pupil's Report Book at the Convent School, Penang, where Kiaw Lan first came to study from Sumatra, she was said to have "faulty accents" and it was recommended she paid more attention to reading and pronunciation. From this uncertain start, she made great progress in mastering English until, later, even members of the English Department at the University of Malaya admired her command of the language (Zaibun Siraj, *pers. comm.*). She was outgoing and found all manner of expression interesting. In *A Private Landscape*, a 1967 anthology of contemporary Malaysian poetry by David Ormerod, who taught in the English Department at the University of Malaya, Kiaw Lan contributed a poem called "The woman who cried Adohi", a tongue-in-cheek poke at male perception, under the pen-name Muh Lan. Kiaw Lan spoke English, Dutch, French, Chinese (Mandarin and the Hokkien and Hakka dialects), Indonesian Malay and some German. If there was a single area that was Kiaw Lan's forte, it would have been language, and this was much recognized as she became involved with the editing of the *Gardens' Bulletin, Singapore*, the Botanic Gardens' official journal.

Ranu Dally, one of her best friends from early youth, recalls that they appreciated the Malay/Indonesian cultures by virtue of their background (Ranu from Kelantan, Kiaw Lan from Sumatra). Kiaw Lan was much fascinated by things Indonesian and was always captivated by interesting hand-made textiles, including especially cloths with bold patterns (called *ikat*), which she collected, and other objects of art from the region. In this and in Dutch-Indonesian adaptations and habits, she found much common ground with another special friend, Singapore philanthropist Ted di Ponti. She had also learnt pottery under John Shelly in Devon in August 1963, close-up photography with the Nature Society in 1978, and newspaper design and layout in a course run by the School of Journalism of the Times Press Foundation in

December 1984.

Kiaw Lan took charge of the Herbarium, a vast specimen archive of the botanical wealth of the Malaysian-Indonesian region, and the Gardens' botanical library for a long time, when development opportunities for these were scarce. She was a prolific correspondent and prompt in addressing requests from visitors to the Gardens and Herbarium. She was kept busy with the *Gardens' Bulletin*, and was careful, judicious and accurate in her editorial work and correspondence, which became one of its hallmarks. Later, looking back, she was especially proud of several works relating to a former supervisor she admired greatly. Together with David Mabberley, Kiaw Lan had also edited the Corner Festschrift (*Tropical Botany, Essays presented to E.J.H. Corner for his Seventieth Birthday*, Gardens' Bulletin Vol. 29), published in 1977. She helped bring out Corner's *The Freshwater Swamp-forest of South Johore and Singapore*, which was issued as the Bulletin's Supplement No. 1 (1978). She also assisted in the preparation of other works, such as the much applauded Proceedings of the 11th World Orchid Conference held in Singapore (published in 1985). After 1987, the *Bulletin* came under the editorship of Geh Siew Yin, with whom Kiaw Lan had worked for some years prior to retirement. Geh also assumed Keepership of the Singapore Herbarium from 1987, amid other duties.

Outside the Gardens, Kiaw Lan was treasurer or committee member of the Singapore Branch of the Malayan Nature Society from 1970 to 1980, including being Branch Chairman for 1976-77. She served on the committee of the Alliance Francaise de Singapour as member or treasurer between 1971 and 1980, and was one of its registered School Managers. In 1976, she was honoured by the French government as a Knight in the National Order for Academic Excellence. She was also a member of the Amateur Radio Society and the University of Singapore Society. Kiaw Lan was also involved in the Nature Reserves Board as secretary for a number of years.

After she retired at age 60, Kiaw Lan tried various editing assignments, including technical writing and editing with a company that printed user manuals for radio equipment, and editing the odd book and magazine issue outside Botany. She learnt various word-processing software programmes on computer and even word-processed some books for the Braille Production Unit of the Visually Handicapped Society. She took more interest in the apartment complex where she stayed, as a member of its management council, found occasion for treating friends to her cooking, but also went on tours from Singapore. Old botanical acquaintances continued to call on her, and she enjoyed accommodating one or two as they visited the Herbarium for work. She continued to entertain her visitors at the Cricket Club, which she often used as a member.

Several jobs gave her a sense of familiarity. Kiaw Lan was sought for indexing the 3rd edition of Corner's *Wayside Trees of Malaya*, which was published in 1988 by the Malayan Nature Society. For such a classic work, it was unfortunate that the cover picture on Volume 1 was captioned with the wrong name (*Alstonia angustifolia*

instead of *Alstonia angustiloba*) during production. When Kiaw Lan wrote a personal note to explain the mistake, a very magnanimous professor wrote back to one of his favourite former students: "*I never supposed that the mistake. . . was your doing. . . Perhaps the photographer made the mistake. Anyhow it is a battered old tree that has lost its top and not a picture that I would have chosen. However, old trees must not be scorned. . . I have always been proud of the book and Ed. 3 is your gift and more to S.E.Asia.*" Later Corner sent another manuscript, Moments Botanique, a biography of botanical tales from the Malay Peninsula to the Solomon Islands and South America, for Kiaw Lan to word-process from handwritten material, as he believed she could interpret his handwriting well enough and she offered good comment and suggestion. Another job was the compilation of the master index accompanying the issue of the final (fourth) volume of the *Tree Flora of Malaya*, published in 1989 by Longman.

It was to be in the 1990s before positions in taxonomic botany became available again in the Singapore Botanic Gardens. It was during this period, after the departure of Burkill and Chew, and when the new effort for the Garden City ironically overshadowed other aspects at the Botanic Gardens, that Chang Kiaw Lan remained steadfast in her role as the Keeper of the Singapore Herbarium and a fixture in the affairs of the Gardens' Bulletin. Today, both herbarium and journal continue their development, having emerged from the very edge of botanical history.

Kiaw Lan suffered a minor heart attack on 17 February 1987 and was diagnosed with cancer in April 2002, when also a condition of dementia became more obvious, with recurring memory lapses. She was indeed most fortunate to have had a special friend in Christina Tan, who with her husband Christopher Lim accommodated Kiaw Lan into their lives, and later arranged for her consistent care in July 2002. Kiaw Lan was admitted to Hospice care in July 2003, and died on 14 August 2003. Kiaw Lan leaves behind a brother, Paul Gaudiamo (Indonesia), and a sister, Meta de Visser (U.S.A.), nephews, nieces, and their families; her other siblings have passed on. In her will, she left her body to medical research and also wished for a gathering of her friends to be arranged. Many of her family members and friends were present at the Memorial Gathering for her on 19 August 2003 at the Orchard Guild House on Grange Road, Singapore. The venue was chosen by Christina to recall Kiaw Lan's liking for meeting with friends at the original Guild House of the National University of Singapore Society at Evans Road, not far from the Botanic Gardens.

*Does not, then, the charm of life remain for me long and lasting,
when my burdens are gone, my surroundings are quiet, my body is
free and my heart leisurely?*

§ Lin Yutang, “The Importance of Living”

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