



**AN INTERVIEW WITH
HONG WENG KUEN
OF CINEMAS AND SWIMMING POOLS**

Interview Record Sheet

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Name	Hong Weng Kuen	Company	Kinta Swimming Club
Date / Time	11 October 2005	Place	117 Anderson Road, Ipoh, Perak
Interviewer	Commander Ian Anderson RN (Rtd)		

Presented By



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CERTIFICATION

The original of the following certificate, signed Hing Weng Kuen, is part of the bound master copy of the interview held in the ipohWorld library.

To whom it may concern:

This is to certify that the above is an accurate record of the interview that took place in 2005 together with Commander Anderson and the subsequent clarifications he carried out with me.

.....
HONG WENG KUEN

..... 5/11/12
DATE

Hong Weng Kuen

Of Cinemas and Swimming Pools

This booklet is based on the interview took place in the offices of Kinta Swimming Club, 117 Anderson Road, Ipoh and was conducted entirely in English. In addition to the interview follow-up discussions were held with Weng Kuen over several days. Inadvertently the interview having been written up, printed and agreed was never published. We apologise for that omission.

A third generation Malaysian Chinese, Hong Weng Kuen is an unusual person who, at 83 years young, still goes to his office everyday and continues to drive forward on a project that has taken up much of his latter years and which he should see come to fruition in just a very few months from now. Maybe then he will put his feet up occasionally and relax.



Hong Weng Kuen, ACS Standard 9, 1941

Born in Chamberlain Road, Ipoh, the second son of Yoong Kam Seng, on 8 September 1922, Yoong Weng Kuen (as his father named him) was first educated in Yuk Choy School and then transferred to the Anglo Chinese School (ACS), Lahat Road, in 1930, where he studied for 11 years, completing his education just one week before the Japanese invaders arrived in Ipoh in December 1941.

He remembers his school days with fondness, “We started our school life in Primary One progressing to Primary Two and then Standard One, Two, Three, etc. right up to Standard Nine where we either took the Junior Cambridge or Senior Cambridge School Certificate. I was a happy go lucky, playful student and never focussed on my studies. I spent most of my free time in the Kinta Swimming Club even during exams time. There were no proper swimming classes for budding swimmers and most of us either taught ourselves how to swim or aped some of the better swimmers in the pool.”

However, despite the fond memories the threat of war did impinge on his last few months in school as he continues, “During the last six months of my school life, the Indian Army occupied the ACS buildings as part of the war preparations. All the ACS students were then sent to attend classes at the then ACGS (Anglo-Chinese Girls School) now called MGS premises. While the girls attended classes in the morning, the boys occupied the same classrooms in the afternoon. There were stories of girls leaving secret phantom notes for the boys in the afternoon and vice versa. Writing secret notes and leaving them in the desks seem to be the common method of clandestine courtship.”

It was later in life when he and his brothers decided that Yoong (which translates to 'The Bear') was a difficult name for people to pronounce and spell and, at one stroke, decided to rename themselves Hong. From that day on he was Hong Weng Kuen and his elder brother, also born in Ipoh, became Hong Weng Him.

The Yoong family were very early immigrants to Malaya as Yoong Chong Hin, Weng Kuen's grandfather, first arrived here as a very young man, early in the second half of the 19th Century, and then after staying for a while and liking what he saw, returned to China, married a Cantonese girl and after a while returned to Malaya with his wife and young son and settled here, most likely being employed in the tin mining business. Of Hakka descent Weng Kuen does not exactly know where, in China, is his ancestral home, as Hakka people are famous for being wanderers, but he believes it is from a district known as Moi Yen.



**Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank
Before the Japanese Invasion**

Once the Japanese had captured Singapore and secured Malaya, most people were put to work by the invader and in Hong Weng Kuen's case he found himself working for the Yokohama Specie Bank, in the premises of what previously had been the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, until the Japanese commandeered it. Like many Malaysian people who suffered under the Japanese, Weng Kuen says very little about the difficulties experienced during those days and preferring to focus on the happier moments.

One experience he remembers well is that during the occupation, through the father of a colleague and friend of his at the bank, he also took a part-time job in two gambling dens in the Celestial Cabaret (Part of Lam Looking Bazaar) and the Foong Seong Villa, both in Laxamana Road, not he hastens to add, as a croupier or gambler, but working in the office issuing gambling tickets in exchange for Japanese invasion money. The Japanese and a number of still-rich local people were regular customers at the two popular gambling establishments and he saw many different people who called at his office window to exchange their Japanese 'banana' money. However, he recalls that he resigned from that job

and left the gambling business some 6 months before the war ended with the Japanese surrender in 1945.

After the Japanese surrender, there was much confusion in Malaya and Ipoh for a while and consequently Weng Kuen left the bank and found himself out of work. However, his elder brother had already established himself as a professional photographer, working from the Sin Chow Photoshop in and consequently, to fill in the time, Weng Kuen joined his brother in the photography business. But good news was soon to come and after three months assisting his brother, in late 1945, he secured a position with the Shaw Organisation as the assistant Manager of the Isis Theatre in Ipoh, a pre-war theatre, (which later became the Rex Cinema). He stayed with the Shaw organisation until retirement in 1978. Consequently he is very knowledgeable about the organisation and the brothers who founded it.



The Isis Theatre, Ipoh, c1939

and left the gambling business some 6 months before the war ended with the Japanese surrender in 1945.

Thinking back, Weng Kuen reminisces that there had been some early cinema shows in 1910 but that it was really the Shaw Brothers, Runme and Run Run that really got cinema underway in Ipoh. Before the war the brothers had the Rex (leased from its owners) the Isis (a converted warehouse), Eu Tong Sen Hall and the Sun Cinema (originally called the Oriental). Added to these was Jubilee Park with its Grand and Broadway Theatres. Cinemagoers were therefore well catered for in pre-war Ipoh. However, like everyone else, between 1942 and 1945, the Shaws, their theatres and amusement parks were forced to work under the Japan Film Distribution Company. During this period only propaganda films and a few Indian films were shown.

After the war the cinemas started up again one at a time and the Shaws planned to move back into their four establishments as soon as they could. However, the owner of the Rex had given a new lease to a rival company who had renamed the building the Odeon. The brothers lost the subsequent court case and after some renovation, renamed the Isis as the Rex.

With very clear memories Weng Kuen recalls “Jubilee Park has an interesting background as originally this was a spare piece of land belonging to the Russell family (of Boh Tea) that the Chinese community took over in 1934, under the guidance of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce to sell hawkers’ food and other goods in support of a fund to be used as flood relief in mainland China. Subsequently, with the crisis over, this land changed hands and a single-storey, wooden building was erected on it and the site became the Ipoh Amusement Park. This was bought over by Shaw Brothers and in 1936 became Jubilee Park, named in celebration of the Silver Jubilee of King George V.”

He continues, “Jubilee Park also contained the Jubilee Cabaret where ‘Taxi Dances’ were regularly held and clients bought tickets at \$1 for three dance coupons (or \$10 to book one girl all evening). Other attractions in the complex included a Chinese Opera House, a Boxing Ring, a myriad of stalls and for a time a Carousel (which was removed as it kept breaking down) and pinball machines and jukeboxes blaring out all the latest songs. The Opera House also doubled as a theatre for visiting shows and it was here that the famous Rose Chan would perform when she was in Ipoh. Today not one of these grand old entertainment venues remain in operation, mostly having been converted into furniture showrooms or bridal shops.”



Jubilee Park, Ipoh, 1947

This photograph taken in 1947 shows the wooden building under Shaw Brothers management and it is interesting to see that among the many films advertised is the 12-part serial ‘The Law of the Wild’ which was made in 1934 and featured Rex, a wild stallion, and Rinty, a police dog, as pals who worked together to save their master from a murder charge - one episode of twelve was shown each week.

Not long after this photograph was taken, Shaw Brothers demolished the wooden building and rebuilt the larger Jubilee Park which still stands today as a Shaw Brothers building, but no longer provides the entertainment of days gone by.

So in 1946, Hong Weng Kuen found himself in an expanding industry desperately short of employees and so after 6 months with the Isis cum Rex he was moved to the Sun Cinema, again as Assistant Manager, the Sun being the oldest cinema in Ipoh. As a young single man with no ties it was not surprising that six months later he was to move again, this time on promotion to manager of the Lido Cinema in Sitiawan, Perak and then, for 11 years he managed Teluk Anson's (now Telok Intan) two cinemas the Rex and the Royal. It was during this period that he married his Ipoh girlfriend whom he had known since before he had moved to Sitiawan.



The Sun Cinema, Ipoh

In 1958 Weng Kuen was posted back to Ipoh as manager of the newly opened (designed by B. M. Iversen and built in 1957) Lido Theatre, the largest cinema in Perak with a seating capacity of 1,215 seats. Here he remained until his retirement from the industry in 1978. Around that time a third class seat, close to the screen, cost 65 cents. The stiff neck gained from two hours or more of looking up at the screen came free. The Lido finally closed in 2001.



**The Lido Theatre
Opening Night, 1957**



**A 1960 Picture of the Eastern Hotel,
Later Renamed the Garden Hotel**

An entrepreneur at heart Hong Weng Kueng wanted to do more than just manage the Lido and so set up a company "HWK, Exhibitor and Distributor" with the objective of bringing the cinema to those who could not easily get into town to catch a movie at the Lido. Consequently, despite the danger from Communist Terrorists, HWK, armed with a projector and screen would venture out into the plantations to show movies to the rubber tappers and labourers. Then he branched out to the Cameron Highlands where he provided regular evening shows in the Eastern Hotel which during the war had been Kempetai (Japanese Secret Police) headquarters.

Not content with just two jobs he also started and ran four more companies from his premises in Anderson Road, Ipoh: Selangor Granite Quarry, Kuala Lumpur; Ipoh Jewellery Manufacture; Kinta Sports Centre; and Percetakan Strand Printer, Ipoh. A busy man indeed!

But apart from running cinemas and a variety of different ventures, Hong Weng Kuen and his wife had not been idle in family matters and had produced a family of four children beautifully spaced as girl, boy, girl, boy. The eldest, Hong Li Lin was educated at Ipoh's Convent School and is a happily married piano teacher living in Vancouver, Canada. Their eldest son, Hong Suen Yuen went to Anderson School Ipoh and is now resides in Singapore where he is an airline pilot with Singapore Air Lines. Hong Le Wan, their second daughter also went to the Convent School and is now a housewife in Australia. Finally second son, Hong Soon Keong, after being educated in UK, was married and now works in Kuala Lumpur in the field of Business Management and Computers.

But what of Hong Weng Kuen and his relaxation pastimes and hobbies, and what is the project that he works so hard on every day in the 21st century? The answer to both questions is the same, The Kinta Swimming Club. Founded in the 1930's this was no ordinary club with high joining fees and monthly subscriptions reserved for "Whites Only", but this was a club for the ordinary people of Ipoh.

The Kinta Swimming Club (KSC) was founded in the early 1930's, when a group of prominent tin miners came up with the idea, over lunch, of building an Olympic sized swimming pool and clubhouse. At that time there was nowhere in Ipoh for the local people to swim other than the river. Thus the first committee was formed, headed by Foo Wah Cheng as President, supported by Wong Peng Sum and Yeoh Khuan Joo. This small committee applied for a lease of land (3 acres) from the government and this being approved for 60 years, the project was started in 1934 and in 1936 Malaya's first Olympic size swimming pool was opened by the Sultan of Perak, Sultan Iskandar Shah. The project cost about \$25,000, raised by donations and the sale of debenture bonds. A tremendous achievement by anyone's standards. Hong Weng Keong joined the club in 1936, as a Student Member, (at 30 cents per month subscription) and became one of the founder members of the Club. Not surprisingly his family members followed in his footsteps, all learning to swim at the club.



Kinta Swimming Club 1936



Kinta Swimming Club Reopened in 1947

The design of the pool was very unusual for there was no filtration plant as a continuous flow of fresh water was fed, by pipe, to the pool from Leong Sin Nam's mines near the Keladang Hill. This cost \$100 per month. From 1936 to the Japanese invasion, the club went from strength to strength with competitions between the swimming clubs of Singapore and Penang and inter-school competitions competing for the Wong Peng Sum trophy. However, the war meant closure of the club from 1941 to 1945 and the pool deteriorated and became a rubbish dump. The club was abandoned.

Once the war was over the club was reopened (in 1947), but was forced to close again in 1951 as it was in need of major work, particularly the provision of a filtration plant. At that time water was supplied from a waterfall and had to be completely emptied and thoroughly cleaned by volunteer members every two months. Wong Peng Sum (President 1938 to 1975) had been striving to raise funds for the renovation to take place earlier, but with insufficient war compensation and inadequate funds it was not until 1951 that the renovation/rebuild could start. The new club, with a full filtration plant, colourful tiles and a new clubhouse was reopened by Ipoh Council Chairman G S Walker in 1957 when it became the venue for many national and state competitions. It was around this time that Weng Kuen first became a committee member.

From 1957 things went well under the guidance of Datuk Yeoh Kian Teck the third President (1975 to 1983) and then Hong Weng Kuen stepped into the breach and has remained President to today. But in 1992 disaster struck as the original lease ran out and was not immediately renewed. The Club had to close. Then followed a long and difficult period for the President who fought for the continuation of the club he had joined back in 1936. Eventually, in 1998, due to his efforts and some of his close friends, the lease was renewed, but having been closed for six years, the club and pool needed major renovation or preferably a rebuild.



Kinta Swimming Club Pool in the 1960's

So a decision was made and plans were drawn up for a brand new club that would provide swimming and recreational facilities for everybody with membership set at realistic cost.



The 1999 Proposal for the new Kinta Swimming Club



**Dato' Ong Ka Chuan Breaks the First Sod.
Hong Weng Kuan is on his Left Dato' Yeoh Kian Teik,
a Past President of the Club is on his Right.
1 May 1998**

A ground breaking ceremony was held on 1 May 1998 officiated by Dato' Ong Ka Chuan (Perak Executive Councillor). The new club was expected to cost around RM3 million at 1999 prices and although there have been many difficulties with shortage of funds since then, Hong Weng Kuen has won through with persistence and dedication, for in 2003 the rebuild started and a brand new club will open within months of this interview, 70 years. after he became a founder member. It now needs new members to join the ranks of long-serving life members like all of Hong Weng Kuen's family. He is sure they will be forthcoming.

Hong Weng Kuen has therefore spent much of his life being involved with KSC. Student and founder member, swimming coach, life-saving instructor and latterly President of the Club. Future members young and old should be grateful for his untiring approach to bring Olympic standard swimming to those Ipoh people who wish to join a club they can truly afford. He is to be congratulated.

The final stage of this interview was to go out to the site in Silibin Road where the new club was under construction. This is what we saw and behind this building the Olympic size pool was also well advanced



October 2005. Construction is Well Underway

A quiet, gentle and unassuming gentleman, Hong Weng Kuen does not surround himself with frills or baubles. His office is very basic and his personal space is very cramped, but it is from there that he has been so successful in meeting his ambitions. However there are two items he proudly showed me when we came towards the end of the interview. Two simple things, but very meaningful to him - his Life Membership Card of the Kinta Swimming Club dated 1973 and his 1975-76 Royal Lifesaving Membership Card. They are reproduced below at approximately 50% of full size.



**Kinta Swimming Club Life Membership
Honf Weng Kuen
7 July 1973**



**The Royal Lifesaving Society Malaysian Branch
Hong Weng Kuen
16 January 1975**

Post Interview Note: The new club finally opened its doors officially on 2 November 2010 at a total cost in the order of RM5million. The MP for Tanjung Malim, Dato' Seri Ong Ka Chuan, officiated at the opening ceremony. He had previously officiated at the ground-breaking ceremony in 1998. Also present were Ipoh's favourite daughter and Bond girl Dato' Michelle Yeoh and her father Dato' Yeoh Kian Teik, a past President of the Club. Today, after 76 years as a member, Hong Weng Kuen remains President of the club and his son Hong Soon Keong is the Vice President.

As part of the opening ceremony Dato' Michelle Yeoh, whose great grandfather Yeoh Khuan Joo was a founder member of the club in the early 1930's accepted the role of the club's patron.

POSTSCRIPT

2012



Kinta Swimming Club in Operation 2012.



Open and Beautiful

We hope you have enjoyed following this lifetime's journey
with Hong Weng Kuen and will visit us again at



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