

## **'Lim Boon Keng and the Straits Chinese: A Historical Re-appraisal'**

Saturday, 27 January 2007

National Library Board, 100 Victoria Street

### ***Co-organised by***

Department of History, National University of Singapore

National Library Board

### ***Sponsored by***

Settlement of Dr Lim Boon Keng 1921

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From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the later years of colonial rule in Singapore, Dr Lim Boon Keng, was an accomplished and prominent Straits Chinese figure in diverse areas – including medicine, politics, publishing, education and business, and made his mark across British Malaya, Southeast Asia and southern China. In contemporary Singapore, politicians have pointed to Lim Boon Keng as a model of the 'biculturalism' being encouraged through recent changes in the education system.

This conference aims to place Lim Boon Keng within his historical context and consider the position of the Straits Chinese from a broader political and social perspective. Speakers will comprise academics from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Japan presenting new research on topics which include Lim Boon Keng's political and social ideas in Singapore and Indonesia, Straits Chinese nationalism and the Anti-Opium Movement, the political identities of the Straits Chinese in colonial Malaya, and Straits Chinese women's modernity in the early twentieth century.

The conference is part of a series of events at the National Library, Singapore, to mark the fiftieth death anniversary of Lim Boon Keng.

For further information on the conference, please contact Ms Chua Ai Lin at [hiscal@nus.edu.sg](mailto:hiscal@nus.edu.sg).

### **Registration information:**

Please register before 22 January 2007, by emailing [nlprogrammes@nlb.gov.sg](mailto:nlprogrammes@nlb.gov.sg).

Registration is free and includes breakfast, lunch and afternoon tea. Places are limited and will be distributed on a first-come, first-served basis.

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### PROGRAMME

TIME	PROGRAMME
0830	Registration & breakfast
0900	Opening remarks
<b>Introductory address</b>	
0910	'Lim Boon Keng in Past and Present History' <i>A/P Philip HOLDEN (Dept of English, NUS)</i>
<b>Panel 1: Lim Boon Keng &amp; His Times</b>	
1000	'Remaking Singapore? Lim Boon Keng and His Circle' <i>Dr Mark Ravinder FROST (Asia Research Institute, NUS)</i>
1020	'Multicultural Burlesque: Parodying Modernity in Lim Boon Keng's <i>Tragedies of Eastern Life</i> ' <i>Neil KHOR (Faculty of English, Cambridge University, UK)</i>
1040	'A Civilized Chinese: Dr Lim Boon Keng and His Odyssey in Early Twentieth Century Java' <i>Didi KWARTANADA (Dept of History, NUS)</i>
1100	'Anti-Opium Movement and Straits Chinese Vicarious Nationalism in the Early 20 <sup>th</sup> Century' <i>Kenji TODA (Graduate School of Language and Society, Hitotsubashi University, Japan)</i>
1120	Discussant: Dr HONG Lysa (Dept of History, NUS) + Q&A
1200	Lunch
<b>Panel 2: Themes in Straits Chinese History</b>	
1400	" 'Those for Whom Malaya is Home': Reframing the Straits Chinese as Leaders of the Anglophone, Domiciled Community in Singapore, 1920-1940" <i>CHUA Ai Lin (Dept of History, NUS)</i>
1420	'Unofficial Contentions: The Postcoloniality of Straits Chinese Representations in the Legislative Council, 1867-1940' <i>Dr Daniel GOH (Dept of Sociology, NUS)</i>
1440	'Straits Chinese as Protagonists to Promote the Multi-Ethnic State and Its Reality Outside the Straits Settlements' <i>SHINOZAKI Kaori (Europe-Asia Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Luxemburg)</i>
1500	'Phoenix Without Wings: The Negotiation of Modernity Among Straits Chinese Women in Early Twentieth Century Singapore' <i>SEAH Bee Leng (Consultant, International Enterprise Singapore)</i>
1520	Discussant: Dr SAI Siew Min (Dept of History, NUS) + Q&A

<b>Concluding remarks</b>	
1600	Assoc Prof KWOK Kian Woon (Division of Sociology, NTU)
1630	Tea break
<b>Public lecture</b> (in Mandarin with simultaneous English translation)	
1700	<p><b>"The Boon Keng Pavilion at Xiamen University: History Recovered, Nanyang Link Reconnected"</b></p> <p>《南洋风骨，碑亭为纪：林文庆的厦大情缘》</p> <p><i>A/P LEE Guan Kin (Division of Chinese, NTU)</i></p>
<b>1800</b>	<b>END</b>

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### ABSTRACTS & SPEAKERS

#### Introductory address

##### 'Lim Boon Keng in Past and Present History'

*A/P Philip Holden (Dept of English, NUS)*

The paper provides an introduction to the conference by giving a biographical account of Lim Boon Keng. In addition to exploring the various facets of Lim's life as doctor, politician, publisher, writer, educator, community leader, and businessman, I will also attempt to embed Lim's life within larger movements of history. Born only two weeks after Mohandas K. Gandhi, Lim would live to see a young politician named Lee Kuan Yew elected to office as a member of the Legislative Assembly, and the resolution of the 1956 Suez crisis. Lim's life, I would argue has much to teach us not only about the past, but also concerning our present place, and that of Singapore, within a modern world that is continually being remade.

*Philip Holden is Associate Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore. He has published two books on English-language writing in Singapore, Malaysia, and East Asia during the colonial period, and is presently working on a co-authored literary history of English-language writing in Southeast Asia.*

#### Panel 1: Lim Boon Keng & His Times

##### 'Remaking Singapore? Lim Boon Keng and His Circle'

*Dr Mark Ravinder FROST (Asia Research Institute, NUS)*

By 1914, Singapore had, to some extent, already become a 'renaissance city'. Directly and indirectly, the merchant oligarchy which dominated the cosmopolitan entrepôt had begun to play a major role in the city's cultural efflorescence. At the heart of the city's nascent literary scene, stood Lim Boon Keng, the Straits Chinese doctor, surrounded by a number of equally well-travelled, multilingual literati. Through the spoken and printed word, and through the rediscovery of ancient classical texts, 'Lim and his circle' engaged on a project to remake the Chinese community in Singapore and to reform the wider overseas Chinese population in the Nanyang and beyond.

Such a project resulted in many developments that might resonate with Singaporeans today. Lim and his circle instructed the rest of the Chinese population as to the essential importance of Confucian values both in expressing their sense of 'race' identity and in the reform of their 'superstitious' ways. Mandarin education was promoted over instruction in dialect as was the creation of a bilingual Chinese elite capable of engaging and trading across the British and Celestial empires. Meanwhile, the efforts of what became known as the 'Straits Chinese Reform Party' were observed abroad, helping to secure Singapore's position as a bastion of seemingly rational progress in Asia.

This paper will examine several aspects of Lim and his circle's efforts to remake Singapore and Chinese identity between 1890 and 1914, exploring the eventual impact of such a project and the motivations behind it.

*Mark Ravinder Frost studied Modern History at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. He has published articles on Asian history in journals such as Modern Asian Studies and the*

*Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. He is currently a Research Affiliate with the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. For the past two years he has been a consultant for the National Museum of Singapore, working as Content Director for the new History Gallery.

**'Multicultural Burlesque: Parodying Modernity in Lim Boon Keng's *Tragedies of Eastern Life*'**

Neil KHOR (Faculty of English, Cambridge University, UK)

In 1927, Lim Boon Keng's published the novel *Tragedies of Eastern Life (Tragedies)*. Set in the fictional Malayan port town of Teratai (Malay for lotus), the novel encapsulates the feelings of anxiety and ambivalence associated with early 20<sup>th</sup> century urban Malayan society. The novel's sub-heading, 'a study of social psychology' indicates Lim's strategy of describing each ethnic group and their 'reformation' in response to the advent of British-inspired social changes. Twenty-years before *Tragedies* was published, these same feelings acted as a stimulus for the 'progressive' literature of the *Straits Chinese Magazine* (1897-1907), for which Lim was both an editor and a contributor. Using the wider scope of the novel, Lim was able to debunk the usual stereotypes used by western writers whose contact with Malaysians seldom went beyond their club houses or their dealings with local servants. This paper interprets the novel as a parody or comic imitation. In the light-hearted banter, elements of a morality play can be found, as well as echoes of conversion tales, social satire and romance. It closely resembles those put up in the local *bangsawan* theatre. The novel is also heavily influenced by Lim's insights into the local community gleaned from his experiences as a medical practitioner and community leader. Descriptions of the 'red-light district'; the social debates surrounding prostitution, gambling and alcoholism; issues of female education; Islamic jihad; and other topical issues common to turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Malayan society were judiciously treated. Whilst the *Tragedies* is a valuable document of social history, its literary value lies in Lim's fusion of western, Chinese and local literary influences creating an early Malayan novel.

*Neil Khor* is a PhD candidate in Straits Chinese Literature at Cambridge University. He is the author of *Glimpses of Old Penang* (2002), *the Penang Po Leung Kuk: Chinese Women, Prostitution and a Welfare Organisation* (2003), among other books.

**'A Civilized Chinese: Dr Lim Boon Keng and His Odyssey in Early Twentieth Century Java'**

Didi KWARTANADA (Dept of History, NUS)

This paper will discuss Dr Lim Boon Keng's less-known activity and influence as a propagator of progress among the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia in the early twentieth century. Social and religious reform among the Straits Chinese initiated by Lim brought his fame to the overseas Chinese communities in the neighboring places, particularly among the *peranakans* (local-oriented Chinese) in the Dutch East Indies.

Direct contact between Lim and the *peranakan* from Java had begun in late 1899, when Tan Ging Tiong, a *peranakan* literati visited him in Singapore and asked for his advice on translating Confucianism Tracts. When Lim heard that Chinese in Batavia will establish a modern Chinese school with Mandarin as a medium (1901), he dispatched his personal mentor to help. In his visits to Java he was also involved in the establishment of several modern schools for *peranakan* children. Those cases illustrated Lim's serious attention toward the modern education. Therefore, a close connection between the modern Chinese schools in various places in Java with Lim Boon Keng had developed since then.

Lim also visited Java as an official envoy of the Celestial Empire, when he accompanied visiting Manchu officials in the Indies as liaison cum translator. He traveled widely in Java, received invitations to deliver lecture before various Chinese associations in many places. Lim was a perfect example of overseas Chinese 'transnationalist' in colonial Southeast Asia.

His character and achievement brought admiration not only from the local Chinese, but also the Dutchmen. As revealed by Dutch sources, the Dutch regarded him as a 'civilized Chinese', in a time when they looked down on the Chinese in the Indies. Lastly, this paper will evaluate works on Lim Boon Keng written by *peranakan* authors in prewar Java, in order to know how they placed him in the historical context of the modern Chinese movement in the Indies.

*Didi Kwartanada is a Peranakan Chinese who hails from Central Java, Didi spent his academic life in Indonesia and Japan before coming to the National University of Singapore to pursue his PhD in 2002. His thesis deals with the Chinese intelligentsia and their role in the making of modernity in Java, c.1890-1911. His publications on the Chinese in Indonesia have appeared in Indonesian, English, Japanese and German journals and books.*

### **'Anti-Opium Movement and Straits Chinese Vicarious Nationalism in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century'**

*Kenji TODA (Graduate School of Language and Society, Hitotsubashi University, Japan)*

Just 100 years ago, the anti-opium movement was in the ascendant in British Malaya. This movement had been promoted under some prominent Straits Chinese leaderships, which were based on the medical practitioners' guidances. Lim Boon Keng, Yin Suat Chuan and Gnoh Lean Tuck played important role in establishing the anti-opium societies and curing a lot of addicted people physically and mentally by distribution of some newly invented medicines, lectures on the issue of the opium, and so on.

But this movement seemed unlikely to be undertaken only by a domestic effort and cause. In those days, coincidentally the mainland China's anti-opium movement also started in 1906 as a series of the 'New Policy' reform movement of the late Qing government. At the same time, Japan and the United States of America appeared on the international anti-opium stage as post-British empires. This paper shows how these anti-opium dynamics influenced this Straits Chinese movement. While, the anti-American boycott movement which occurred in 1905 had no small effect on the Chinese societies in British Malaya. This paper also examines the interconnectedness between the anti-American movement and the anti-opium movement from the Straits Chinese viewpoint on 'modernization/civilization', 'China crisis' and 'patriotism', and finally analyzes what kinds of factors supported the anti-opium movement in British Malaya.

By taking such various approaches, this paper examines the multi-layered Straits Chinese identity toward China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Kenji Toda is a PhD candidate at the Graduate School of Language and Society of Hitotsubashi University. He is currently researching the history of language policy in British Malaya. His Masters thesis was on Straits Chinese Identity and Language in British Malaya (2004).*

## **Panel 2: Themes in Straits Chinese History**

### **" 'Those for Whom Malaya is Home': Reframing the Straits Chinese as Leaders of the Anglophone, Domiciled Community in Singapore, 1920-1940"**

*CHUA Ai Lin (Dept of History, NUS)*

In the inter-war years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Straits Chinese community were no longer the natural leaders of the broader overseas Chinese community in Singapore which they had been in the previous century. However, they continued to play a prominent role in Straits society, particularly in demanding Asian political rights in the colonial state. Their leadership had evolved from representing the Chinese community to being the driving force of the Anglophone, 'domiciled' community – comprising individuals of all ethnicities who used English as a *lingua franca* and were permanently settled in Malaya.

During this period, issues of national identity were brought to the forefront through a combination of political issues on the Malayan, imperial and transnational level. Whilst arguing for greater rights for Asian British subjects in the Straits Settlements, Straits Chinese and Malayan Indians were actively interested in the thriving nationalist movements in China and India, and soon found themselves thrust in opposition to both the Straits colonial government as well as the Malay community. However, it was the thorny problem of Straits Chinese dual nationality which sharpened the issue, and resulted in a redefinition of the existing official and popular understanding which equated nationality, race, language, homeland and political loyalty. Beyond this, the term 'Malayan' was adopted and invested with new political meaning by the domiciled community, as a means to establish their local identity vis-à-vis the Malay community.

***Chua Ai Lin** is a Teaching Assistant at the Department of History, National University of Singapore and is currently completing her PhD in History at Cambridge University. Focusing on the Anglophone, Asian community in inter-war colonial Singapore, her current research looks into modernity, urban life and popular culture, developing the work in her M.A. thesis (NUS, 2001) on Anglophone Asians and national identity in Singapore, c. 1930-1940.*

#### **'Unofficial Contentions: The Postcoloniality of Straits Chinese Representations in the Legislative Council, 1867-1940'**

*Dr Daniel GOH (Dept of Sociology, NUS)*

Conventional historiography represents Straits Chinese political identity as one of conservative and honourable loyalty to the British Empire. This is the legacy of a vocal elite in the Straits Chinese community who cultivated the conservative image in their quest for political recognition from the British authorities in the 1910s. In this paper, I question the conservative image and show that the Straits Chinese unofficials held a range of political positions and developed diverse political identities. Reading the debates of the Council from its inception in 1867 to the tumultuous years of nationalist protests and leftist strikes on the eve of the Second World War, I trace the political contentions over policies affecting the Chinese community in Malaya. These contentions brought the unofficials face to face with the intersecting and contradictory realities of race, class and gender in colonial Malayan society. While the racialised politics of representation compelled them to treat the issues from essentialised Chinese positions, the negotiations of these social realities also led them to question and shift the meanings of their Chineseness. While the application of the rule of racial difference in colonial liberalism constrained and disciplined the multiple meanings of Chineseness in the public arena of the colonial state, these meanings circulate in the hybrid cultural realm of Straits Chinese discourse. These multivocal strands of Chineseness would later form the substance of postcolonial identity formations after the War.

***Daniel Goh** is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the National University of Singapore. He specializes in comparative-historical sociology and cultural studies. He has published on the sociology of religion, environmental politics, and colonial ethnography and state formation, and continues to conduct research in these areas. His other research interests include multiculturalism, civil society and postcolonial culture.*

#### **'Straits Chinese as Protagonists to Promote the Multi-Ethnic State and Its Reality Outside the Straits Settlements'**

*SHINOZAKI Kaori (Europe-Asia Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Luxemburg)*

In the 20th century, nation states covered almost every corner of the world, and each nation had its own definition as to who was a full-fledged member of the nation. Hence, the cultural attributes of members often became an issue. People in Malaya (including Singapore) chose to completely separate the cultural attribution of individuals from membership of the

nation.

One of the origins of such an attitude stemmed from the policy of the Straits Settlements. In 1890s Singapore, the Straits-born Chinese asserted more emphatically their status of being full-fledged British subjects of Chinese descent. The Straits Settlements government accepted such claims and consistently guaranteed that those who was born in the Straits Settlements and those who were naturalized there were all British subjects, regardless of their descent.

One's status as a British subject became much more important outside Straits Settlements, as it was the only natural-born British subjects who could enjoy protection from the British government outside British territory.

However, such understanding between Straits Chinese British subjects and the Straits Settlements government was not shared by British officials in China and the colonial governments in Asia, such as Dutch East Indies, French Indochina, and American Philippines. The status of 'Chinese' was applied to Straits-born Chinese in these states and they were treated as such, in spite of strong assertion of the Straits Settlements government that they were as much British subjects as those of European descent.

The purpose of this paper is to understand self-assertion of the Straits Chinese British subjects in the broaden context of colonial Asia.

***Shinozaki Kaori** is a Visiting Fellow at the Europe-Asia Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Luxemburg (Joint campus program with Xiao En Cultural Endowment, Malaysia). She obtained MA degree in Area Studies from University of Tokyo, and will finish her PhD soon at the same university. She is now working on history of Penang at the beginning of 20th century, focusing on the commitments of "foreigners" to construct local social order.*

### **'Phoenix Without Wings: The Negotiation of Modernity Among Straits Chinese Women in Early Twentieth Century Singapore'**

*SEAH Bee Leng (Consultant, International Enterprise Singapore)*

Current scholarship has often neglected the social history of women in colonial Singapore since inclusion of Straits Chinese women in the historiography would challenge traditional periodisation of women's history in Singapore. The Straits Chinese community formed a distinct and economically important element of the Chinese population under British rule. In order to maintain their elite status, Straits Chinese clung firmly to their traditions particularly in the domestic sphere. Due to the domestic nature of this culture, Straits Chinese women became custodians of this culture and followed customs religiously. However, by the 1900s, Straits Chinese women became a site of contested identities, trapped between tradition and modernity. These women began negotiating with traditions and customs in creative ways, albeit with some limitations. To understand this transformation, it is necessary to examine internal developments within the Straits Chinese community as well as international influences that acted on this group of women.

***Seah Bee Leng** became fascinated with Peranakan culture as a child growing up amidst the sounds and smells of a Peranakan shophouse cum restaurant. She graduated with a Master of Arts in History from the National University of Singapore (NUS) and her Masters thesis examined the negotiation of modernity among Straits Chinese women in early twentieth century Singapore. Bee Leng received the George Edwin Bogaars Book Prize during her undergraduate programme at NUS.*

**"The Boon Keng Pavilion at Xiamen University: History Recovered, Nanyang Link Reconnected"**

*A/P LEE Guan Kin (Division of Chinese, NTU)*

Not too long ago, a quaint-looking pavilion, Wen Qing Pavilion, was erected in Xiamen University to memorialize its founding president, Lim Boon Keng. In 1921, Lim Boon Keng embarked for China, waving goodbye to a glorious life in Singapore, bidding farewell to the British colonial government which groomed him, and leaving behind his Baba relatives and friends. Together with Tan Kah Kee, Lim Boon Keng worked hard for the establishment of the Xiamen University and saw it through its sixteen tough years as a private institution. Lim's selfless spirit and devotion earned him the deep respect of Tan. Unfortunately, China was swept by an anti-Confucianism current after 1919 which turned the tide against the strong advocate of Confucianism from Nanyang. Seeds of historical amnesia were planted when Lim clashed with Lu Xun, and Lim was subsequently forsaken by history. Yet, a man of integrity can withstand the test of time. Lim's efforts and sacrifices for Xiamen University, his respect and devotion to Chinese culture finally gained wider understanding and Xiamen University embraced him with the erection of a pavilion as a memorial to him.

**《南洋风骨，碑亭为纪：林文庆的厦大情缘》**

厦门大学校园内，不久前竖立了一座精美的亭子——文庆亭，纪念创校校长林文庆。1921年，林文庆舍弃他在新加坡的风光岁月、告别栽培他的英国殖民政府，离开他的 Baba 亲友，踏上遥远的中国旅程，回应华夏历史的召唤。林文庆与陈嘉庚为厦门大学并肩作战，熬过大学 16 年余艰苦的私立时期。他的无私与奉献，深受陈嘉庚的敬佩。不幸的是，踏入 1920 年代，中国思想界掀起了反古批孔的热浪，几乎淹没这位南洋儒学运动的领导人。林文庆与鲁迅的矛盾，竟埋下往后遭历史遗弃的悲剧。然而，正直的人经得起时间考验，历史毕竟是公正的。林文庆为厦大的牺牲和付出，他对中国古文化的尊重与热爱，终于为世人所谅解。厦门大学终于为他建亭立碑，让他回返校园，让他安息。

*Lee Guan Kin obtained her PhD at the University of Hong Kong. She is currently Associate Professor and Head of the Division of Chinese at the Nanyang Technological University. She is also the Director of the Centre for Chinese Language and Culture, NTU. Her major publications on Lim Boon Keng are The Thought of Lim Boon Keng - Convergency and the Contradiction between Chinese and Western Culture (1991) and Responding to Eastern and Western Cultures in Singapore: A Comparative Study of Khoo Seok Wan, Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang (2001). Her research interests lie in the studies of ethnic Chinese in South-east Asia, especially Chinese intellectuals and the history of Nanyang University.*