

Biography and Representation: A Nanyang University Scholar and Her Configuration of the Sinophone Intelligentsia in Singapore

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Abstract

This study uses the corpus of writings and range of activities of a Nanyang University scholar as the lens to refract the transfiguration of the Chinese-educated intelligentsia in Singapore over five decades of English-educated PAP hegemony. It is a weaving of biography and representation, bringing to the forefront Lee Guan Kin's educational experience and public intellectual activism, and pairing these with her scholarly analysis of them. Her insider's perspective would allow for a greater appreciation of the dilemma, anguish, aspirations and intra-dynamics of this segment of the Chinese community amidst the larger national environment of declining Chinese language competency.

Keywords: Chinese language and culture, education, intellectuals, Nanyang University (Nantah), Xiamen University, Lee Guan Kin, Lim Boon Keng, Lee Kuan Yew, People's Action Party (PAP), Singapore

Introduction

The Sinophone intelligentsia in Singapore have been commonly referred to as the "Chinese-educated intellectuals" and were the product of British colonial policies on migration, education, and ethnic management. In contrast to the much smaller privileged group which received colonial state education in English, they were educated in community-funded Chinese middle schools, or graduated from the Chinese-medium Nanyang University (Nantah). They surged to the forefront of post-World War Two struggles for decolonization and independence, constituting a segment of the political left in the nationalist movement. With the attainment of self-government in 1959 and independence in 1965, the governing English-educated leadership of the People's Action Party (PAP) moved to neutralize this Chinese-educated political left and to shift the entire education system towards English as the primary medium of instruction.

Nantah initially resisted various PAP restructuring measures but it was eventually shut down in 1980 through a merger. By 1987, all non-tertiary branches of ethnic education (Chinese, Malay and Tamil) were coalesced into a single English-language "national stream" with the "mother tongue" of each respective ethnic group serving only as a "second language". While the production line of the Chinese-educated intellectuals had ground to a halt by the 1980s, they maintained a demographic presence and remained a significant variable to be taken into account in the calculus of electoral politics right up to the present, even though it was on diminished numbers and strength with every passing year.

This study uses Lee Guan Kin's corpus of writings and range of activities as the lens to refract the transfiguration of the Chinese-educated intelligentsia over five decades of English-educated PAP hegemony. As a scholar trained in Nantah and who returned to work in her alma mater, she was herself a member of the group. It is thus a weaving of biography and representation, bringing to the forefront her educational experience and public intellectual activism, and pairing these with her scholarly analysis of them. Her insider's perspective would allow for a greater appreciation of the dilemma, anguish, aspirations and intra-dynamics of this segment of the Chinese

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community in post-colonial Singapore, and can contribute towards the young nation's intellectual history which has yet to be written.

Biographical Sketch of Lee Guan Kin

The choice of having Lee Guan Kin as the Nantah scholar in focus is premised on her educational background and academic standing. A bibliographic survey of ethnic Chinese studies in 1989 noted that there has always been a group of writers in Singapore who were deeply interested in historical studies but who were much more comfortable writing in the Chinese language, even while using bilingual sources. Of the senior generation, Hsu Yun-ts'iao (1905-1981) and Tan Yeok Seong (1903-1984) were singled out; four others were named as the "most notable" among the younger scholars, one of them being Lee Guan Kin.¹

At the age of 23, Lee was among the five leading honours degree graduates of Nantah in 1971, and awarded a university gold medal. The celebratory graduation group photograph of these five appeared in the national English-language newspaper on the same page in which the PAP Minister of Education tried to reassure the Chinese-speaking community that "the last barrier in Nantah's road to full status" had then been removed with the granting of professional recognition to its accountancy graduates.² Founded in 1955 as the only Chinese-medium tertiary institution outside of China and Taiwan, the university had travelled a long and arduous road. The British colonial authorities only reluctantly permitted its establishment, and withheld government funding and recognition of its degrees for admission into the civil service. The PAP of Lee Kuan Yew adopted a similar policy on coming to power in 1959. Using three unfavourable committee review reports from 1959, 1960 and 1965, it was single-minded in engineering a major overhaul of the university, including reducing what was seen as the China focus in its curriculum and the overwhelming ethnic Chinese profile of its student enrolment, and introducing English language as the major medium of instruction.³ Lee Guan Kin's 1971 graduation cohort was the twelfth batch of Nantah graduates – among the "Last of the Mohicans" as the university's teaching medium was switched officially from Chinese to English in 1975 and its 1978 intake of students relocated en masse on a joint campus immersion scheme to the University of Singapore. In 1980, Nantah was subsumed and in effect was shut down through merger with the University of Singapore to form the National University of Singapore.

Lee's training as a historian and the plight of her alma mater converged to mould a heightened sensitivity towards Chinese vernacular education and Chinese-educated intellectuals. Her return in 1998 to the very same campus as a full-fledged faculty member of the newly-implanted Nanyang Technological University (NTU) prompted her to go public with her sentiment towards Nantah and the study of history. She revealed that her widowed mother who brought up seven children had contributed to the historic fund-raising campaign to launch Nantah, and that as a student she lived on the campus for seven years on scholarship funding, supplemented by income from giving private tuition. She declared that Nantah to her would always be a "piece of sacred land and a cultural bastion" and that on her graduation she did not anticipate that "its days would be numbered even though the demon of illness was steadily eroding its young life". She lamented:

¹ Leo Suryadinata, "The ethnic Chinese in the ASEAN states" in Leo Suryadinata, ed., *The ethnic Chinese in the ASEAN states: Bibliographical Essays* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), p. 30. The other three leading young scholars who were identified were Lim How Seng, David K.Y. Chng and Kua Bak Lim.

² "A red-letter day for five honours graduates", *Straits Times*, 1 Aug. 1971.

³ For detailed analysis of the 1959 and 1965 reports, see Zhou Zhaocheng, "Kuayue guojia jiangjie de yishi xingtai jueli: Yi Nanyang Daxue Balisige baogaoshu weili" (Transnational boundary competition for ideology: Case study of the Prescott Report) and Huang Jianli, "Nanyang University the language divide: Controversy over the 1965 Wang Gungwu Report", in Lee Guan Kin, ed., *Nanda tuxiang: Lishi heliuzhong de shengshi* (Imagery of Nanyang University: Reflections on the river of history) (Singapore: NTU Centre for Chinese Language and Culture and Global Publishing, 2007), pp. 137-164, 165-220. The 1960 Gwee Ah Leng Report awaits an in-depth study.

[Nantah's] children were helpless and had to watch painfully how it struggled, dried up and died, with its life taken away eventually by the cancer of history . . . History loves to play jokes but I was unwilling to give it up. I am being very silly to be chasing the past in this utilitarian society. What can we do since many children of Nantah have this silly streak? I am left with only history. Hence, I opted to go to Hong Kong University in my middle age to follow my teacher and again plough into the study of history.⁴

It was twenty years after her graduation with a Nantah Master of Arts degree that she set out to obtain her PhD degree at the Hong Kong University. In that lengthy interlude, she worked as a subject teacher in history and Chinese language in Hwa Chong Junior College. She saw a close parallel between the junior college and Nantah, regarding the former as a "junior Nantah" with strong Chinese ethnic roots and a mission to promote Chinese language and culture. The college had also been conceived by Chinese businessmen and located within the campus of the Chinese High School, founded by Tan Kah Kee. Its façade "radiated an oriental character" reflecting its mission of "helping to preserve traditional culture and core values". Its students were to be "proficient in both Chinese and English", with a 'sound ballast in their traditional culture'.⁵

During her years as a teacher, she joined several other Chinese-educated intellectuals in launching the Singapore Society of Asian Studies in 1982, instead of working from within the South Seas Society which had been in existence since 1940.⁶ The complex dynamics behind the parting of ways and the establishment of this new organization have yet to be sorted out and written.⁷ In the following decades, the new society became the more active centre of scholarly activities. As a founding member, Lee was deeply involved and at various times served as its treasurer, head of research, vice-president, and president. Her first monograph based upon her MA thesis was published by the Society in 1991 as part of its publication outreach.⁸ On its twentieth anniversary, Lee as president recalled that the impetus for its formation was to promote the study of the humanities and social sciences which had been lagging in Singapore's pursuit of economic development and technical education. She emphasized that the use of both Chinese and English languages in the Society's events and publications was "a conscious decision in an English language-dominant environment."⁹

After securing the PhD degree, she joined NTU as an assistant professor in December 1998 with the initial expectation of helming a special research project on the history of Nantah. She attained the rank of associate professor by January 2003 and was appointed as Director of the Centre for Chinese Language and Culture and concurrently Head of the newly-set up Division of Chinese in November. In endorsing her double appointment, NTU President Su Guanling cited her "idealism", "familiarity" and "excellent understanding" of Nantah, as well as her scholarly expertise.¹⁰ In October 2007, she stepped down from the second appointment but retained the first.

Lee Guan Kin had thus surged ahead of the pack. She attained a high public profile as a socially engaged scholar whose pronouncements on the community of Sinophone intelligentsia had an impact. In this, she was aided by two factors. First was the backing and influence of her teacher-mentor Wang Gungwu, the founder and

⁴ Lee Guan Kin, "Changes in human relations, No change in the reluctance to leave", *Lianhe zaobao*, 31 May 1995, written for the 40th anniversary of Nantah.

⁵ Lee Guan Kin, "Reminiscence of the past", in *15th anniversary arts festival of Hwa Chong Junior College* [1989], pp. 9-11.

⁶ "Lee Guan Kin appointed as head of Nantah Department of Chinese", *Lianhe zaobao*, 6 Nov. 2003; "Teacher-student relations with Wang Gungwu", *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (Malaysia), 15 Jul. 2001.

⁷ Leander Seah Tze Ling, "Historicizing hybridity and globalization: The South Seas Society in Singapore, 1940-2000", MA thesis, Department of History, National University of Singapore, 2005, pp. 95-96.

⁸ "Publication of book on Lim Boon Keng's thoughts", *Lianhe zaobao*, 4 Mar. 1991.

⁹ *20th anniversary souvenir magazine of the Singapore Society of Asian Studies* (Singapore, 2002), pp. 1-3.

¹⁰ "Lee Guan Kin appointed as head of Nantah Department of Chinese", *Lianhe zaobao*, 6 Nov. 2003.

doyen of Chinese overseas studies.¹¹ Wang was the external examiner for Lee's MA thesis; he was subsequently the supervisor of her PhD thesis from the University of Hong Kong where he was Vice-Chancellor.¹² Lee has reciprocated Wang's nurturing with high personal respect, and admiration for his scholarship.¹³

Lee's high profile was also a result of the extensive newspaper coverage she received from the early 1990s. She proved to be media savvy. With cumulative experience and a willingness "to step out of the ivory tower and get in touch with the social reality", she was ever-ready to provide information, grant interviews, and repackage some of her academic writings for popular consumption.¹⁴ Concomitantly, there was a strong desire on the part of the Singapore media to track and highlight her ideas and activities, especially on the part of the Chinese-language newspapers. This symbiotic relationship was derived in part from the way the Chinese-speaking society had all along been underpinned by mutual support from among its three key community pillars – the Chinese educational institutions (of which Lee was a constituent), the Chinese media, as well the Chinese clan associations, guilds and business organizations. Moreover, several editors and writers working in the Chinese media were Nantah alumni, or had been Lee's students.

Her research interest centred on the Singapore Chinese community both past and present. The embedded contemporaneous dimension and her disposition to take a public stand on issues inevitably led her to go beyond the strictures of academia and to step up as a public intellectual, at times even to venture into the realm of prescriptive public policies. However, she did not rush into it, and instead bade her time.

Framing Identity as the "Preservation of Roots" and Calling for Optimism

It was only from the beginning of the 1990s that Lee Guan Kin judged it opportune to get into the public limelight, which she did with a systematic review of the condition of the Chinese-educated intellectuals in Singapore. As a teacher at the Hwa Chong Junior College and a leading member of the Singapore Society of Asian Studies, she offered her first substantive analysis, which was to become her signature emphasis on root-preservation as an identity anchorage for the Chinese intelligentsia.¹⁵

She traced the binary of "Chinese-educated" versus "English-educated" to British colonial times by pointing to the paucity in funding, facilities, infrastructure and staff salary for Chinese-medium schools, and in opportunities for higher education for their graduates. She defined "Chinese-educated intellectuals" (huawen zhishi fenzi 华文知识分子) (English media reports tended to use the less accurate, shorthand term "Chinese intellectuals") as "those who had received Chinese education at the secondary school level or higher, having a certain level of cultural inner values and depth in thinking, and sharing the traditional scholar's sense of suffering and mission". In terms of occupation, they were spread among "the communities of academics, politicians, educators and even commerce and industry".

¹¹ On Wang's premier role in this field, especially on formulation of terminology, see Huang Jianli, "Conceptualizing Chinese Migration and Chinese Overseas: The Contribution of Wang Gungwu", in *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, 6.1 (May 2010): 1-21.

¹² "Teacher-student relations with Wang Gungwu", *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (Malaysia), 15 Jul. 2001; Interview with author, 30 Jan. 2008. According to Lee, her co-supervisor Chiu Ling-yeong, Chair Professor of Chinese at the Hong Kong University, handled only the administrative aspects of her graduate studies. On the tension between Lee and Chiu, see Chew Cheng Hai, *Rensheng jiyi: Yige huawen jiaoxue zhe de huiyi* (Lifetime memories: Memoir of a Chinese-language educator) (Singapore: Global Publishing, 2011), p. 55.

¹³ On her admiration of Wang's scholarship, see "From A New History of Hong Kong to discussing the construction of Singapore history", *Lianhe zaobao*, c. May 1998; "More than just a load of old baggage", *Straits Times*, 10 May 1998; Lee, "From Hong Kong History: New Perspectives to the Construction of the History of Singapore", in *Asian Culture*, 22 (1998): 170-175. For her alignment with Wang's views on the utilitarian value of history, see "Patching up memory in an age of oblivion", *Lianhe zaobao*, 23 Jul. 2000; "Doubts: The compulsory lesson of history education", *Lianhe zaobao*, 17 Nov. 2002.

¹⁴ Interview with author, 30 Jan. 2008.

¹⁵ The following paragraphs are spliced from the accounts in *Huaxiaosheng* (Chinese school students), no. 49 (Oct. 1990): 53-55 and no. 74 (Nov. 1992): no pagination.

Her diagnosis was that their fortune had at some point plunged into a steep decline, even to the brink of disappearance. “The bastion of roots – i.e. system of Chinese schools” had been steadily dissolved and there was a sense of “fear and panic and [thus] an impatience to protect mother culture”. However, while “the collapse of the Chinese school system created a sense of crisis of having the roots chopped off”, she regarded “the [PAP’s] bilingual policy of Chinese as a second language as having brought hope for the preservation of roots”. She and a number of others deemed this policy from the 1960s as positive because (a) Chinese language had shifted from being an elective to a compulsory subject for all students (b) it had become a compulsory examination subject with significant weighting and a criterion for entry into the next level of education, and (c) it was now taught to a much wider spectrum of population. However, she pointed out that from the start, there was considerable confusion and agony over the bilingual policy for it gave “new sparks of hope to them but yet deviations in implementing the policy and a drop in standard had again shaken their heart. Disappointment and hope had thus interplayed incessantly.”

She used terms such as “advance” (jinqū 進取) and “retreat” (tuisuo 退縮) to describe the mentality of “root-preservation” (baogen 保根) and tactics of responding to changing state policies (such as increasing teaching time for Chinese language, enhancing the weighting in common examination, amending criteria for academic advancement, as well as simplifying and Romanizing Chinese characters). She ended on an optimistic, prescriptive note that the Chinese intelligentsia should “discard the pessimism, depression and sadness of yesterday” because (a) Chinese language and culture had proven to have an intrinsic attraction and everlasting value, (b) the utilitarian dimension of Chinese language and culture was becoming increasingly visible, (c) Communism and anti-Chinese incidents were on the decline and Chinese language and culture were no longer regarded as a monster, and (d) the importance of Chinese language was being increasingly appreciated internationally.

While urging caution in dealing with the English-educated PAP government, she publicly endorsed the PAP’s bilingual policy as implemented from the mid-1960s as well as the Special Assistance Programme where students of nine Chinese secondary schools in 1979 and another ten primary schools in 1990 were taught Chinese language and culture at a higher level of competence.¹⁶ She also cited Lee Kuan Yew’s National Day Rally Speech on 26 August 1990 where he emphasized the need for a “cultural background” to confront challenges of the future and lamented: “if I have the opportunity of beginning all over again, going back to 1965, today will certainly be different, I would certainly have kept the Chinese primary schools”. She expressed gratification that “Premier Lee had again reaffirmed the importance of mother culture”.

Her configuration was more systematically laid out in her academic paper, “Changes in Chinese Education in Singapore and Attitude of Intellectuals towards the Preservation of Roots, 1959-1987”, for a 1992 conference organized by the Tung Ann District Association. She observed that enrolment in primary Chinese-medium schools had plunged steeply from 45.9% in 1959 to 30.0% in 1965 and to only 2.0% in 1983. Many Chinese schools had closed while others adjusted to the reality by stripping away their Chinese label and switching over to the English medium. By 1987, the PAP government completed its four-year plan to put an end to vernacular education and merge all schools into a single English-medium national stream with the compulsory learning of a second language based on one’s ethnic group. On the one hand, the precipitous decline and eventual death of Chinese schools generated a profound sense of crisis about the cutting off of Chinese roots. On the other hand, the compensating promotion of bilingualism provided a basis for hope towards root-preservation. Hence, some of the Chinese-educated intelligentsia responded to the changes either by drowning themselves in “hopelessness and funerary mood” or hanging on to “a thin ray

¹⁶ By 2008, there were a total of 10 secondary schools and 15 primary schools under this programme. *Straits Times*, 12 Feb. 2008.

of hope". Yet others vacillated, moving from one state of mind to the other and adopting a "retreat" or "advance" approach depending on the circumstances. "Hopelessness and hope intertwined incessantly on the road to root-preservation", but she again chose to end on a positive note, pointing to signs of a new dawn. She argued that there had been a positive turnaround in the number of voices in favour of root-preservation during the years leading up to 1987, proclaiming that "Noah's Ark had braved the stormy seas and was sailing forth".¹⁷

Facing Contestation over Assertiveness and Labelling

However, there was a group of Chinese-educated intellectuals who was in a much more combative mood. Their discontent and anger first surfaced in public discourse coincidentally on the very day when Lee was presenting her paper on "Changes in Chinese Education". This was at a parallel forum organized jointly by the Hwa Chong Alumni Association, the *Lianhe zaobao* newspaper and the Singapore Chinese Teachers Union on the theme of "The Future and Status of Chinese in Singapore". Teo Kar Seng, a former Nantah graduate then teaching at the Department of Economics and Statistics of the National University of Singapore, decried the low social status of Chinese language in Singapore and demanded that the Chinese-educated should "rebuild their self-confidence" which had been "destroyed by the dominance of English in Singapore over the past 20 to 30 years". Lawyer Tang Liang Hong, an active Chinese community leader, joined the fray by "agreeing that the Chinese-educated should be more assertive in the learning and using of Mandarin" and "there was nothing wrong with the Chinese, the majority race in Singapore, promoting their own language and culture among themselves".¹⁸ This was the prelude to his further combative outburst at a July 1996 conference as well as his 1997 general election missteps, and his eventual political exile.¹⁹

The July 1996 conference on "Identity: Crisis and Opportunity" organized by the Hwa Chong Junior College Alumni Chinese Society was the occasion when Lee Guan Kin's identity interpretation as being anchored in root-preservation was seriously challenged.²⁰ A group of youngsters tried to break away from Lee's representational framework to the point of discarding the burden of being labelled as "Chinese school students/Chinese-educated" (huaxiaosheng 华校生). The four main organizing committee members (Quah Sy Ren, Lee Huay Leng, Lim Woan Fei and Lim Song Hwee) had studied at the Hwa Chong Junior College. But they had different secondary school backgrounds and career development and were representative of the increasing blurring of line between the Chinese-educated and English-educated.

In a pre-conference interview, they stepped forth to question the very term "Chinese-educated" by problematizing its definition and pointing to the extraordinary rigidity and unjustified historical burden being placed on the shoulders of people who were boxed into such a category. They desired to leave behind the past taints and to acknowledge the presence of a "new breed of Chinese-educated" (xinpinzhong huaxiaosheng 新品种华校生) who were more outward-looking, multicultural, and eager

¹⁷ "Chinese intellectuals and their mentality of preservation of roots", *Lianhe zaobao*, 27 Sep. 1992; "1959-1987 were painful years for Chinese intellectuals here", *Straits Times*, 27 Sep. 1992; Lee Guan Kin, "Xinjiapo huawen jiaoyu bianqianxia zhishi fenzi de baogen xintai, 1959-1987" (Changes in Chinese education in Singapore and attitude of intellectuals toward the preservation of roots, 1959-1987) in Yeo Song Nian, ed., *Chuantong wenhua yu shehui bianqian* (Changes in traditional culture and society) (Singapore: Tung Ann District Association, 1994), pp. 47-97. To her, this article was then regarded by many as being "very daring" and one which would put her job security at a high risk, interview with author, 30 Jan. 2008.

¹⁸ "Mandarin, says lecturer", *Straits Times*, 27 Sep. 1992.

¹⁹ During the 1996 conference, Tang called on the Chinese-educated not to carry the sedan chairs which the English-educated sat on. He went on to contest unsuccessfully in the 1997 General Elections and quickly left the country when confronted with a multitude of law suits against him filed by the PAP leaders. See Huang Jianli, "Dilemma and anguish of the Chinese-educated", in Bridget Welsh, James Chin, Arun Mahizhnan and Tan Tarn How, eds. *Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong years in Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), pp. 339-340.

²⁰ "Asking the Chinese-educated not to be burdened further", *Lianhe zaobao*, 17 Jul. 1996, supplement.

to join the mainstream. While remaining committed to the use of Chinese as a medium of communication, they hoped to transcend municipal and daily life matters and to avoid dwelling on “how to prolong five thousand years of Chinese culture, how to invest in China, and issues relating to healthcare and martial art”. Their most provocative conference panel was entitled “The Last of the Gypsies – The Myth of the Chinese-Educated Persona”, with a synopsis suggesting that “under the strictest definition, the term “Chinese-educated” may ultimately fade into history; but will the post-independence new generation be able to produce a “Chinese-educated” community of a different nature? Perhaps the Chinese-educated persona has always been a myth.”²¹

The older Chinese-educated intelligentsia, including Lee Guan Kin, was unsettled by such bold assertions. They feared that the youngsters were abandoning the fundamental identity of being Chinese-educated and walking away from the sacred historical mission of upholding Chinese language and culture. Although she wrote a follow-up piece which tried to position herself as an arbitrator of peace between the young and the older generation, Lee’s own immediate response was also generally critical of the former. She suggested that these youngsters may not have wanted to be termed as “Chinese-educated” because they “disliked the negativity, sadness, anger as well as submit-to-reality stance of the traditional Chinese-educated”. She defended the traditional Chinese-educated by referring to their glorious moments of contributions in the past even though there were some negative features. She felt that “Chinese-educated did not necessarily represent the bad dimension” and warned that one should not “be too anxious to throw them into the rubbish bin. What should be discarded are just the negative emotions.” As to whether the term “Chinese-educated” would fade into history, she said she preferred not to place too much emphasis on labelling and would rather let the youngsters embark on their own journey to constructively inject new elements into it.²²

Stressing Ethnicity and Other Requisite Qualities for being a Chinese Intellectual

The clash over labelling was widened during the 1999 conference on “Role of Chinese-educated Intellectuals in the twenty-first Century”. Some of the 200-odd participants rose to challenge the ethnic ascription as framed in the conference topic by arguing that the term “Chinese-educated intellectuals” was fundamentally inappropriate because it segregated intelligentsia in a country by race or language, downplaying the universal humanistic traits demanded of a true intellectual.

Those aligned with Lee Guan Kin’s thinking defended it, including Goh Eng Seng, an associate professor in Chinese studies at the National Institute of Education, who argued that “there was a place and need for Chinese-speaking intellectuals who were at home with the language”. Ho Woon Ho, who had moved from Hwa Chong Junior College to head Henderson Secondary School, was also “adamant that there was a place for both Chinese culture and intellectuals”. She declared: “As a Singaporean, I will of course learn from other cultures. But as a Chinese, I want to preserve Chinese culture and its traditions.” She pronounced that if those who were effectively bilingual were willing to recognize themselves as Chinese-educated

²¹ See conference poster. The two papers presented at this particular panel are Kwok Kian Woon, “Myth, memory and modernity: Reflections on the situation of the Chinese-educated in post-independence Singapore” and Quah Sy Ren, “Cunzai yu maodun zhong de huaxiaosheng: Yige Xinjiapo shi de xiandai diaogui qingjing” (The Chinese-educated in an existence of contradiction: A modern paradox of Singapore). Both papers have been analyzed in Huang Jianli, “Dilemma and anguish of the Chinese-educated”, pp. 345-347.

²² “What should be discarded is the negative emotions”, *Lianhe zaobao*, 17 Jul. 1996, supplement; “Anticipating the re-emergence of Chinese-educated intellectuals”, *Lianhe zaobao*, 21 Aug. 1996. See also her comments in “Young Chinese intellectuals in search of an identity that is uniquely theirs”, *Straits Times*, 21 Sep. 1996.

intellectuals, they should “in addition to playing the role of intellectual, add a sense of mission to preserve and promote the excellent Chinese ethnic culture”.²³

As one of the nine forum speakers with her paper on “The Changing Roles of Chinese-educated Intellectuals in Singapore”, Lee Guan Kin also defended the ethnic-hyphenated dimension. She reminded her audience that ethnicity was in the first place strongly embedded within the Singapore historical context of education and multiracialism. During the colonial and early postwar era, the term “Chinese-educated intellectuals” technically referred only to the intelligentsia who had migrated from China or graduated from the system of Chinese schools in Singapore. However, with the single nation-stream of education and the disappearance of Chinese-medium schools, it was increasingly used to refer to those who had graduated from schools under the Special Assistance Programme and to new migrants from China.²⁴

While she urged flexibility in judging them at different historical stages, Lee went on to lay down specific conditions on who should be regarded as a Chinese-educated intellectual: (a) those who could “master/manage” (jingtong/zhangwo 精通/掌握) only the Chinese language, (b) those who could master/manage the Chinese language but also “understand/roughly comprehend” (tongxiao/luetong 通晓/略通) the English language, and (c) those who could master/manage both languages but had the habit of using the Chinese language to think and write. Her definitions thus revolved tightly around the Chinese language, again tagging on the root-preservation angle. To her, “Chinese culture had undergone a trauma” and thus such intellectuals should also have the special sense of mission in “preserving the spoken and written Chinese language as well as its roots”, even though she softened her stance by qualifying that this should become neither an “ultimate demand” (juedui tiaojian 绝对条件) nor a “mental restraint or psychological burden” (jingshen shufu huo xinli baofu 精神束缚或心理包袱).²⁵

Lee listed seven criteria on who should qualify as an “intellectual” in general and this included those with the ability to be brave enough to critique without being hindered by considerations of power, opinion, interest and status. Applying them in her review of the situation in Singapore, she judged that prewar Chinese-educated intellectuals were very active with multiple roles, including political, cultural, educational and social. However, their postwar sphere of action was increasingly circumscribed. She pointed to their failed political struggle against the English-educated intellectuals, singling out Lim Chin Siong’s arrest with many others under the Internal Security Act, and how “the problems caused by leftist and anti-communist sentiments that swept the region served to restrict the role of Chinese-educated intellectuals here”. She also noted the dampening effects of “diminishing contacts with China” and how they even lost their role in education with “the number of Chinese-medium students falling drastically” after 1959, especially when “Chinese schools were history” by 1987 and with the closure of Nantah. Moreover, “the domestic and international political climate saw the suppression of Chinese arts and culture in the “60s and “70s”. In general, Chinese-educated intellectuals became “timid and self-preserving” as well as “pessimistic and defensive”, although some persevered with cultivating the love of Chinese language and culture in the classroom.²⁶

²³ “Any need to segregate elite by race?”, *Straits Times*, 1 Mar. 1999; “Role of Chinese-educated intellectuals in the 21st century”, *Lianhe zaobao*, 1 Mar. 1999. This 28 February 1999 conference was jointly organized by the Hwa Chong Junior College and its alumni body as part of the college’s 25th anniversary celebrations.

²⁴ Lee Guan Kin, “The Chinese intellectual” in *Straits Times*, 7 Mar. 1999; Chinese version as “Changing roles of Chinese-educated intellectuals in Singapore”, *Lianhe zaobao*, 14 Mar. 1999; Lee Guan Kin, “Tuishuo yu jinqiu: Lun Xinjiapo huawen zhishi fenzi ji qi juese de yanbian” (Retreat and advance: An analysis of the changing role of the Singapore Chinese-educated intellectuals), in *Huaqiao huaren lishi yanjiu* (Overseas Chinese History Studies) 3 (Sep. 2002): 28-37.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

In her assessment, a “turnaround came in the 1980s and 1990s with the PAP political leadership promoting Confucianism and Asian Values” and with Chinese-educated intellectuals such as Wu Teh Yao, Low Poi Fong, Ho Woon Ho and Pan Shou being “allowed some degree of space”. She urged Singapore Chinese intellectuals to continue their practice of being the “traditionalist intellectuals” (as in the particular way she had interpreted Edward Shils’ writings) who could shoulder the burden of tradition and mission. With their increasingly effective bilingual command, she believed that the Chinese intellectuals “can also function as the second group, the technocratic intellectuals, like their English counterparts”. She believed the time had come for the Chinese-educated to “revive the intellectual tradition of the pioneers and pick up the courage and spirit to question and criticize”, and to play the role of being public intellectuals. With her judgement that the Singapore government at the turn of the new millennium had gained in “confidence and maturity” and would allow “professionals to comment beyond their professions”, she forecast:

The decline of Chinese-educated intellectuals in the early years would be reversed and they would have a bigger stage and a more comprehensive role to play. A trip into history is to learn and reflect, and when we complete the journey, we must take with us a commendable spirit and leave behind the negative mentality. Chinese-educated intellectuals must search for their own path and place in the new century.²⁷

Missing out on being “Modernist Establishment Intellectuals Strolling at the Edge”

Quah Sy Ren’s presentation on “The Periphery of Society and the Centre of Modernity: Singapore’s Chinese-Educated Intellectuals in Context” offered the sharpest contest to Lee Guan Kin’s representation. Quah was an alumni of Hwa Chong Junior College and an organiser of the 1996 conference on “Identity: Crisis and Opportunity”. On completion of his MA at the National Taiwan University and PhD at Cambridge University, he joined the National Institute of Education as a teacher trainer in 1999. In 2000 he and a group of younger generation Singaporeans who are proficient in both Chinese and English launched a society and journal named “Tangent” to offer alternative reflections on contemporary issues in society. In 2003 he joined Lee Guan Kin as her colleague in the NTU Division of Chinese.

At the 1999 forum, Quah had also referred to the writings of Edward Shils but he offered a much more nuanced interpretation by capturing Shils’ central argument that the modern twentieth century (especially from the end of World War II and from 1960 onwards) had witnessed the incorporation of intellectuals into the establishment circle of many countries.²⁸ Singapore was no exception. In the name of promoting a meritocratic society, even traditional organizations that produced intellectuals (such as the universities, media and non-governmental organizations) had become an integral part of the establishment. To Quah, “it is a fact that the entire society has become an establishment. It is therefore unrealistic to aspire to the existence of intellectuals who are totally independent of the establishment and able to offer autonomous criticism”.²⁹

Instead of searching for “public intellectuals” from outside of the system, Quah chose to focus on Shils’ diagnosis that an inner desire to continue their struggle for alternate potentialities, creativity and innovation would remain strong even for establishment intellectuals. Thus these establishment intellectuals could still function as effective critics despite being part of the establishment by “strolling to the edge of the power circuit” and exercising their inherent sense of alienation and critical faculties. Quah emphasized “the importance of remaining psychologically at the periphery for

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Edward Shils, *The constitution of society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), especially ch 4 “Center and periphery”, ch 8 “The intellectuals and the powers” and ch 10 “Intellectuals and the center of society in the United States”.

²⁹ Quah Sy Ren’s presentation published as “Voices from the periphery” *Straits Times*, 7 Mar. 1999.

intellectuals, to be close to the centre and yet retain full faculties of reflection". By dividing the establishment itself into a core and a periphery zone, Quah stated categorically that establishment intellectuals in Singapore could be regarded as having still played an important role. He singled out English-speaking intellectuals like Chua Beng Huat and Kwok Kian Woon (citing the latter three times) as models of "budding intellectuals".³⁰

Quah went on to criticise the Chinese-educated intellectuals for taking "upon themselves the duty of what Dr Lee Guan Kin termed 'preserving Chinese roots'". This was "a passive and compromising position in speech and behaviour" and a capitulation to the hegemonic PAP official discourse on "imbibing Chinese culture and values". To him, the preservation and passing on of Chinese tradition should not have become "synonymous with the identity of Chinese Singaporeans and the Chinese language", and the Chinese-educated intellectuals should not have been overly "sensitised by historical baggage" and "willingly confine their own role to the Chinese community".

Instead he wanted the Chinese language to play a role "in the process of searching for modernity". While accepting that the basic characteristics of modernity were the "discontinuity of the present and tradition" and the "rise of individualism and autonomy", he was optimistic that there would be "a new role for traditions in the search for modernity" if and when "tradition was treated on par with other issues" instead of being regarded as "a rare species of animal on the brink of extinction and must be protected". He regretted that "for the longest time, Chinese-educated intellectuals had withdrawn from the 'world' and confined themselves to a small 'community'", and urged that "it was now time to change this and to take up a more forward-looking and active role".³¹

Quah's challenge did not receive a response from Lee Guan Kin, though at least two other forum participants went on to write commentaries which rejected Quah's ideas and re-stated that the periphery was a zone outside of the establishment where the autonomous intellectuals of Singapore were supposedly lurking and in need of appropriate "channels" to make themselves heard and seen.³² Therefore, instead of the paradigm shift that Quah offered, it was Lee's representation anchored on preserving Chinese language and traditional ethnic culture that remained the dominant mode of thinking. This mode was reinforced by her comparative reflections on ethnic Chinese education across the causeway.

Referencing the Ethnic Chinese in Malaysia

Sensitive to the close historical relationship between Singapore and Malaysia, Lee Guan Kin actively forged intimate academic links with the Malaysian Chinese-educated intellectuals. She encouraged comparative studies of the two Chinese communities and her depiction of the Singapore Chinese-educated was at times in relation to the state of ethnic education in Malaysia.³³ As a child of the Singapore-Malaysia merger-separation era and as a Nantah historian, she had been adamant that Malaya(sia) should always remain a part of Singapore's history education. She expressed annoyance at how the younger citizens were "lacking in historical consciousness and know very little about the past", and "did not even know that Singapore was originally a part of Malaysia".³⁴

³⁰ Ibid. Quah therefore used the term "periphery" in a different manner from Edward Shils.

³¹ Ibid.

³² "Have the intellectuals disappeared?", *Lianhe zaobao*, supplement, 16 Mar. 1999; Chong Chee Pong, "Youguan Xinjapo zhishi fenzi de jidian qianjian" (Some casual observations on Singapore intellectuals), *Yuan* (Origins), (1999): pp. 8-11. See also the two commentaries by Chong Wing Hong, "Dilemmas of Hwa Chong students" and "Looking at intellectuals from various angles", *Lianhe zaobao*, 7 and 14 Mar. 1999.

³³ Interviews with author, 5 and 11 Sep. 2007.

³⁴ "From *A New History of Hong Kong* to discussing the construction of Singapore history", *Lianhe zaobao*, May 1998; "More than just a load of old baggage", *Straits Times*, 10 May 1998; Cited again in "Patching up memory in an age of oblivion", *Lianhe zaobao*, 23 Jul. 2000.

As a Nantah faculty member, Lee interacted actively with her Malaysian counterparts. An early occasion was the December 1999 conference in Kuala Lumpur on "History and Personalities: Historical Research Project on Malaysian Chinese" where her presentation depicted Lim Boon Keng as a Malayan(sian) as much as he was a resident of the Colony of Singapore in the pre-independence era.³⁵ She spoke about the Chinese reformist orientation of Khoo Seok Wan at a June 2000 conference in Kuala Lumpur on "Traditional Culture and Social Changes".³⁶ She also helped to organize the June 2001 conference on "Singapore-Malaysian Chinese: Dialogue between Tradition and Modernity" which was specifically aimed at encouraging comparative studies and hosted by the Nantah Alumni, NTU Centre for Chinese Language and Culture, as well as the Singapore Society of Asian Studies.³⁷ Her research paper was on "The Changing Identity Consciousness of the Singapore Chinese" and she eventually edited the conference volume.³⁸ In the following year, Singapore hosted the conference on "Singapore-Malaysia-Indonesia Chinese Communities: Ethnic Relations and Nation-Building" and her co-authored piece delineated the various ethnic reactions in Singapore and Malaya to the founding of Nantah.³⁹ In August 2003, Lee gave a seminar in Johor organized by the Southern College and the Chinese Source Material Centre, where she defended the Nantah spirit, dispelled charges of Chinese chauvinism, and emphasized the embedded Malay elements within the Nantah polity.⁴⁰

Her various interactions and comparative reflections accentuated her awareness of how far the Chinese language education had declined in Singapore and pointed to the great irony in terms of ethnic composition and political environment. Lee noted that the Malaysian Chinese had a much tougher struggle as a minority community operating within a socio-educational environment with entrenched privileges for the Malays. Yet Chinese ethnic education across the causeway has not only survived but was producing far superior Chinese-educated students than the Special Assistance Programme schools in Singapore. Indeed, the high level of command of Chinese language and culture by Malaysia's independent Chinese school students (duzhongsheng 独中生) soon prompted her to actively recruit these "foreign talent" as undergraduates and graduate students for NTU. She increasingly acknowledged the

³⁵ "Twenty seven scholars examining Malaysian Chinese historical personalities", *Nanyang Siang Pau* (Malaysia), 18 Dec. 1999; Lee Guan Kin, "Lin Wengqing: Zhonghua wenhua fuxingzhe yu xiandai jiaoyujia" (Lim Boon Keng: Promoter of Chinese cultural renaissance and modern education), in Hou Kok Chung, ed., *Chengxi yu jueze: Malaixiya huaren lishi yu renwu wenhuabian* (Adoption and selection: Cultural segment on the history and biographies of Malaysian Chinese) (Taipei: Program for Southeast Asian Area Studies, Academia Sinica, 2001), pp. 1-37.

³⁶ Reports on the conference, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (Malaysia), 24 Jun. 2000; "Contributions of reformism to Chinese society", *Nanyang Siang Pau* (Malaysia), 27 Jun. 2000; Lee Guan Kin, "Qiu Shuyuan de gailiang zhuyi huodong – Cong Xima huaren shehui fazhan de jiaodu pingjia" (The reformist activities of Khoo Seok Wan: A critique from the development perspective of Chinese society in Singapore and Malaysia), in Hou Kok Chung, ed., *Shehui bianqian yu wenhua quanshi* (Interpreting social changes and culture) (Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies, 2002), pp. 189-209.

³⁷ "Various institutions organizing an international academic conference", *Lianhe zaobao*, 28 May 2001.

³⁸ "Book launch seminar by Singapore Society of Asian Studies", *Lianhe zaobao*, 4 Aug. 2002; Lee Guan Kin, "Xinjiapo huaren shenfen rentong yishi de zhuanbian" (The changing identity consciousness of the Singapore Chinese), in Lee Guan Kin, ed., *Xinma huaren chuandong yu xiandai de duihua* (A dialogue between tradition and modernity) (Singapore NTU Centre for Chinese Language and Culture, 2002), pp. 55-76, and serialized in *Lianhe zaobao*, 13 and 20 Oct. 2002.

³⁹ "sSAS organizing a bilingual international scholarly conference", *Lianhe zaobao*, 8 Nov. 2002; Lee Guan Kin and Zhou Zhaocheng, "Zuqun fenhua yu jianguo mubiao fenqi: Nanyang daxue chuanguan qianhou de jiaoli" (The split of ethnic Chinese and their separate goals of nation-building: Contest for the establishment of Nanyang University), in Lee Guan Kin, ed., *Demarcating ethnicity in new nations: Case of the Chinese in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia* (Singapore: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Singapore Society of Asian Studies, 2006), pp. 39-67 [English and Chinese versions].

⁴⁰ "Lee Guan Kin appointed as head of Nantah Department of Chinese", *Lianhe zaobao*, 6 Nov. 2003; Lee Guan Kin, "Nanda jingshen: Xima liangdi huaren gongyou de lishi yichan" (The Nantah spirit: The common historical legacy of the ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia), in Academic Group of Tan Kah Kee International Society, ed., *Nanda jingshen* (Nantah Spirit) (Singapore: World Scientific and Tan Kah Kee International Society, 2003), pp. 28-37.

precipitous decline in the standard of Chinese language in Singapore, and pronounced that there was a “cultural fault zone” in the Singapore Chinese-educated intellectuals, implying a near complete break between the older and younger generations.⁴¹ Malaysian educators and politicians made a similar observation. In his 2012 pre-election campaign, the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak openly boast about Malaysia being the only Southeast Asian nation that has allowed Chinese education to remain as a part of its national school system and he commented sarcastically “Where is the Chinese education in Singapore? Where? Gone with the wind.”⁴²

Lee tried to develop a more graphic form of representation in packaging her comparative reflections. In her introduction to the edited volume based on the June 2001 conference comparing Singapore and Malayan(sian) Chinese communities, she suggested “an inverted-Y path model” in which both communities had travelled along more or less the same path of indigenization and sharing a “China-Local” hybrid focus before Singapore’s separation and independence in 1965. The differences between them became preponderant only after they parted ways at the forked junction. In particular, she lamented that the entire Chinese education system in Singapore had dissolved while the Malaysian Chinese despite their minority and “other races” status had put up a vigorous and successful defence of maintaining independent Chinese schools and media.⁴³

Similar thoughts were expressed in her 2004 conference paper which centred on Nantah history through four eras: Founding of Nantah (1950-1965), decolonization (1955-1965), separation and independence of Singapore (1965-1980), and Nantah spirit after its closure (1980-present).⁴⁴ Here again, she acknowledged the eventual steep decline in standard and vigour of Chinese education, culture and identity in post-independence Singapore as measured against the colonial era and the Malaysian counterpart community.

There was another incidence of impact from across the causeway which had even greater consequence on Lee’s representation. This refers to Lim Boon Keng of the Sino-Malay Peranakan community, of which many families had their origins in colonial Penang or Malacca before migrating southward to Singapore. Lim with his late-life rediscovery of Sinic roots became Lee’s convenient device to reconfigure the Chinese-educated intellectuals in Singapore as members of a newly proposed “bicultural elite”.

From “Chinese-Educated” to “Bicultural Elite” via the Lim Boon Keng Model

Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong officially floated the notion of cultivating a new “Chinese-proficient elite” in his 1997 National Day rally speech. In subsequent media coverage and public discourse, this was transmuted into the “new Chinese-educated elite”, “Chinese language elite” and “Chinese cultural elite”, before settling more or less on the term “new bicultural elite”. In line with his elevation of Asian Values as the basis

⁴¹ Reports on the conference, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (Malaysia), 24 Jun. 2000; “Contributions of reformism to Chinese society”, *Nanyang Siang Pau* (Malaysia), 27 Jun. 2000; Lee Guan Kin, “Qiu Shuyuan de gailiang zhuyi huodong – cong Xima huaren shehui fazhan de jiaodu pingjia”, pp. 189-209; “Nantah beginning its research project on Nantah history”, *Lianhe zaobao*, 25 Jul. 2000 mentions the need for mobilizing Malaysian Nantah alumni support; Interview with author, 30 Jan. 2008, reiterates her fortification of ties with Malaysia was partly stimulated by the need to recruit students and to mobilize support for the proposed renaming of NTU.

⁴² “Najib pledges support, funds for Chinese schools”, *Today* [a Singapore tabloid that is distributed free], 22 Oct. 2012. This blunt observation was left out in Singapore’s national newspaper, see “Najib woos Chinese vote with \$12m for schools”, *Straits Times*, 22 Oct. 2012.

⁴³ Lee Guan Kin, “Jiekai Xinma huaren bijiao yanjiu de xumu” (Opening chapter for the comparative studies of ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia), in Lee Guan Kin, ed., *Xinma huaren chuantong yu xiandai de duihua*, pp. 1-13.

⁴⁴ Lee Guan Kin, “Nanyang daxue tuteng: Xinma guojia bianjie de xuni yu xianshi” (Images of Nanyang University: Imagination and reality in Singapore and Malaysian national boundaries”, in Lee Guan Kin, ed., *Nanda tuxiang: Lishi heliuzhong de shengshi*, pp. 291-334.

of Singapore's national ideology, Goh's call was to produce "a core group of Chinese Singaporeans who are steeped in and knowledgeable about Chinese culture, history, literature and the arts" so that the country could "maintain its Asian heritage".⁴⁵ Lurking behind this was the rise of China as an economic giant and the need for Singapore to have leaders with empathy and sensitive understanding of China to grapple with impending politico-economic challenges.

Initially it was unclear why it was necessary for the island city-state to have a set of new Chinese elite when most of its current pool of Chinese-educated intellectuals had already been advocating the preservation of Chinese tradition and cultural values. As the public discourse unfolded, it became evident that the PAP was trying to adjust to the fact that its next generation of Chinese political and community leaders would be the products of PAP-style bilingual education with a much weakened command of the Chinese language, and yet needing to comprehend the rise of and gain access to the Sinic world in the twenty-first century through mastery only in the English language. With this decline of the standard of the Chinese language and closure of all Chinese-medium schools by the late 1980s, the political reality is that the term "Chinese-educated" was becoming outdated and a misnomer. "Bicultural elite" was deemed a better match with reality as it substituted culture for language, with the former accessible through English.

Lee Guan Kin had earlier more or less accepted PAP's bilingual education policy despite being aware of its limitations. She now responded enthusiastically to this new state-driven initiative by recommending a historical personality to match: Lim Boon Keng, whom she had studied closely for the previous thirty years. Her 1974 MA thesis (published in 1991) and 1997 PhD dissertation (then soon-to-be-published) enabled her to quickly step forward in 1998 to advocate a Lim Boon Keng identity template for national adoption.⁴⁶

Lim was born into a Peranakan family in 1869; his grandmother and mother were Nyonya who migrated to Singapore from Penang and Malacca respectively. He was educated primarily in English-medium schools before becoming the first ethnic Chinese in Singapore to be awarded the Queen's Scholarship to study medicine at the University of Edinburgh. At Edinburgh, he was not accepted as a Chinese and this prompted him to learn Mandarin and read Chinese literature upon his return in 1893. He became the bridge between the British and the Chinese worlds in Singapore and Malaya. He maintained firm contact with the British colonial authorities through participation in the Legislative Council and the Chinese Advisory Board and attended the coronations of King Edward VII (1902) and King George V (1911). He played a key role in the Peranakan community through the Straits Chinese British Association, the Chinese Philomatic Society, and Straits Chinese Reform Movement. Simultaneously, he built intimate links with the China-born migrant society through his involvement in Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, promotion of the learning of Mandarin, the Confucian revival movement, the republican revolutionary movement, and answered community leader Tan Kah Kee's call to lead his Xiamen (Amoy) University in China from 1921 to 1937. He suffered but survived the Japanese Occupation period and continued with the promotion of Chinese culture as the first president of the China

⁴⁵ "Need for Chinese-proficient elite", *Straits Times*, 25 Aug. 1997.

⁴⁶ The MA thesis has been published as Lee Guan Kin, *Lin Wenqing de sixiang: Zhongxi wenhua de hui liu yu maodun* (The thought of Lim Boon Keng: Convergence and contradiction between Chinese and Western culture) (Singapore: Singapore Society of Asian Studies, 1991), 249 pp; The PhD dissertation as Lee Guan Kin, *Dongxi wenhua de zhuangji yi Xinhua zhishi fenzi de sanzong huiying: Qiu Shuyuan, Lin Wenqing, Song Wangxiang de bijiao yanjiu* (The clash of Eastern and Western cultures and three responses from Singapore Chinese intellectuals: A comparative study of Khoo Seok Wan, Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang) (Singapore: NUS Chinese Studies Department and Global Publishing, 2001), 413 pp. Her unpublished graduating BA (Honours) thesis of 1971 compared Lim's reformism with that of Kang Youwei. This repeat focus on Lim has led her detractors to criticize the narrow base of her scholarship, see for example Chew Cheng Hai, *Rensheng jiyi: Yige huawen jiaoxue zhe de huiyi*, p. 54.

Society founded in 1949 and as its patron until his death in 1957.⁴⁷ English remained his dominant language but his later impressive acquisition of Chinese language and culture cast him as a “biculturalist” between the two worlds of the West and East, while the traces of his hybridized, Peranakan, Sino-Malay background remained submerged or ambivalent.

Lee Guan Kin's first major promotional effort was at the December 1998 National University of Singapore conference on “East-West Tradition, Transformation and Innovations” with a paper on “Singapore Chinese-educated Intellectuals Response to East-West Culture”, barely a few days after she assumed her first academic appointment.⁴⁸ As she had already argued in the conclusion of her doctoral dissertation, she declared that a “Lim Boon Keng model” as distilled from her study should become the dominant template for twenty-first century Chinese-educated intellectuals in Singapore. Brushing aside the “Khoo Seok Wan model” which she said was predominant in pre-independence Singapore and the “Song Ong Siang model” of the immediate the post-independence era, she pronounced the Lim model as the most relevant for configuring the newly proposed bicultural elite and the best for meeting the forthcoming East-West cultural challenges.

Even though the published version of her paper is more subtle and nuanced, she had denied neither public news reports on her direct alignment of Singapore's elder statesman Lee Kuan Yew with the historical Lim Boon Keng nor her tribute to Lee Kuan Yew for having paved the way for her proposed model:

Lee Kuan Yew and Lim Boon Keng have much in common. Both are English-educated Straits Chinese who later turned towards learning Chinese, and had a good measure of the reality inside and outside of the country. They transcended the divided communities, infused them with advance Western thinking, reformed the Western decadent atmosphere, recognized China's reform and opening, promoted Chinese-English bilingual education, launched a speak Mandarin campaign and Confucian movement, and encouraged Straits Chinese to go to China to develop the country. It was under the design of Lee Kuan Yew that the Lim Boon Keng model had steadily become the mainstream model in terms of numbers and substance.⁴⁹

This conference presentation was widely publicized in both the Chinese and English media and the coverage was repeated at the launch of her book based on her dissertation in 2001. A reviewer of the new book noted that “although she does not draw a direct comparison in the book, she notes parallels in the lives of Dr Lim and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew”.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ There are numerous biographical sketches on Lim; a brief useful one is that by Kwok Kian Woon in Lynn Pan, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (Singapore: Archipelago Press and Landmark Books, 1998), p. 203.

⁴⁸ “Local Chinese-educated intellectuals having learnt the spirit of incorporation of diverse elements”, *Lianhe zaobao*, 12 Dec. 1998; “Encounters of China with the West” by Kao Chen in *Straits Times*, 19 Dec. 1998; Full length publication of her conference paper in ‘singapore Chinese-educated intellectuals’ response to East-West culture”, *Lianhe zaobao*, 10 Jan. 1999.

⁴⁹ “Local Chinese-educated intellectuals having learnt the spirit of incorporation of diverse elements”, *Lianhe zaobao*, 12 Dec. 1998. See a similar line of reportage in “Cultural challenges at the turn of the century”, *Lianhe zaobao*, 3 Jan. 1999.

⁵⁰ “Launching of the first three volumes of study on Southeast Asian Chinese” and “Three new books on the study of Southeast Asian Chinese”, *Lianhe zaobao* 11 and 18 Feb. 2001; “The Chinese divide: Three Men, three models”, book review by Kao Chen, *Straits Times*, 8 Apr. 2001; The next major media blitz on her Lim model was in the June/July 2001 Conference on ‘singapore-Malaysia Chinese’, whose proceedings were compiled and launched in August 2002. Her presentation on “The changing identity consciousness of the Singapore Chinese” was not immediately published but it appeared later as a chapter in Lee Guan Kin, ed., *Xinma huaren chuantong yu xiandai de duihua*, pp. 55-76, and was serialized in *Lianhe zaobao*, 13 and 20 Oct. 2002; In writing his encyclopaedia entry on Lee Kuan Yew, Kwok Kian Woon also drew a direct comparison between the two in terms of English-medium schooling, learning Chinese in later life, inclination towards the majority Chinese-speaking community, as well as promotion of Mandarin and Confucianism. See Lynn Pan, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, p. 209.

Her effort in crafting a national template for the new bicultural elite in the form of the Lim Boon Keng model bore fruit when Lee Kuan Yew himself embraced the centring of Lim during his opening of the June 2004 conference to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Centre for Chinese Culture and Language of the Nanyang Technological University. Lee Kuan Yew's speech was broad in scope, touching on utilitarian economic issues and engaging in the usual PAP-style of ethnic balancing by briefly mentioning the Indian and Islamic worlds in addition to that of the Chinese. The key focus, however, was his public embrace of the Lim Boon Keng model. While he avoided any direct link or comparison between himself and Lim, he pronounced that "one historical model of the bicultural elite that we need to replicate is Dr Lim Boon Keng". Acknowledging that the bilingual education system he forged had only given "our students enough Mandarin for social, not business purposes", he said: "we need more modern day bilingualists/biculturalists like Dr Lim Boon Keng to deepen and widen our links with China", calling for the nurturing of "a few hundred students from each year's cohort to a higher level of Mandarin and a deeper appreciation of China's history and culture, especially recent history and cultures, so that they can engage in China's growth".⁵¹

Lee Kuan Yew's endorsement of the Lim model could thus be regarded as a moment of triumph for Lee Guan Kin. However, ironically, it also proved to be a moment of sadness for her and a large segment of the Chinese-educated community. During the question-and-answer session, Lee Kuan Yew was confronted with the issue of the possible renaming and reversion of "Nanyang Technological University" to "Nanyang University", with allusion to his responsibility for the closure of Nantah. Lee's immediate reply was that the issue of renaming would be left to the university community. However, less than three weeks later, the government abruptly announced its decision not to revert to the name "Nanyang University", aborting the on-going attempt to resurrect the phoenix from the ashes. The campaign collapsed almost overnight.⁵²

Lee Kuan Yew's endorsement of the Lim model paved the way for a commemoration in 2007 for the fiftieth anniversary of Lim's death, where he was eulogised as "The Sage of Singapore". The occasion was organized by the National Library Board, Lim Boon Keng Foundation (chaired by Alex Tan, who is a lawyer by training and the son of Lim's right-hand man, the late Tan Yeok Seong), History Department of the National University of Singapore, Singapore Heritage Society and Musical Theatre Society. Lim's descendants and family friends put up a strong presence. The commemoration included a book launch of the republished edition of Lim's *The Chinese Crisis from Within* (London: Grant Richards, 1901; his first book written at the age of 31). The preface of this re-issue was by Wang Gungwu and the introduction by Lee Guan Kin (crowned by the media as "Lim Boon Keng scholar and champion") was entitled "A Chinese Journey: Lim Boon Keng and His Thoughts".⁵³ The commemoration events also included a two-month exhibition on "A Life to Remember", a scholarly conference on "Lim Boon Keng and the Straits Chinese: A Historical Reappraisal", and a fully-booked tour of 22 Lim-related pit stops, including the Emerald Hill, Club Street, OCBC Bank headquarters, King Edwards VII College of Medicine, and Choa Chu Kang columbarium. Stella Kon stamped her authority as the surviving great granddaughter by actively participating in almost all the events, including introducing her own concert of songs in a musical performance "One Voice", inspired by the life

⁵¹ "Many cultures, one common aim" and "Few can be effectively bilingual", *Straits Times* 24 Jun. 2004; Cheong Suk-wai followed up with a full-page feature on "Lim Boon Keng: Bicultural broker" in *Straits Times*, 26 Jun. 2004. Cheong noted that Lim needed an interpreter to speak to student protests in Xiamen in 1926, suggesting that "he was not quite fluent in Mandarin throughout his life".

⁵² "Nantah name back on the back burner", *Straits Times*, 13 Jul. 2004. See Huang Jianli, "Dilemma and anguish of the Chinese-educated", pp. 341-345.

⁵³ Lim Boon Keng, *The Chinese crisis from within* (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2006), there is as yet no Chinese translation of this volume; "LBK exhibition to be held next month", *Lianhe zaobao*, 13 Dec. 2006; "Government and people in joint commemoration of Lim Boon Keng", *Lianhe zaobao*, 21 Jan. 2007; "The Sage of S'pore gets a proper tribute, at last", *Straits Times*, 23 Jan. 2007.

and times of Lim. Kon avowed to “use music, song and drama to implant the legend of this iconic Singaporean into the country’s imagination”.⁵⁴

The entire series of commemoration activities was ironically essentially conducted in the English-language medium. At the moment when Lim attained a previously unimaginable height as the iconic bicultural broker of the tropical island city-state, it was his original and dominant command of English that was privileged. His 1901 book was reissued only in English. The exhibition displays were also only in English, including the genealogy of the Lim family. This greatly irritated a part of the Chinese-speaking community and prompted a local clan leader Han Tan Juan to write a newspaper feature “Half a Lim Boon Keng?” arguing that the use of both English and Chinese would have been more befitting for the occasion.⁵⁵ A graduate student from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was similarly annoyed that the academic conference was conducted entirely in English except for the closing public lecture of Lee Guan Kin, and with what was to him an overemphasis on the narrow, localized Singapore and Southeast Asian dimensions of Lim, to the neglect of the larger and more important intellectual and cultural milieu of China per se.⁵⁶ This critique missed the fact that Lee Guan Kin since the mid-1990s had been active in reconstructing a fragment of absent history tying Lim and the Singapore Chinese-educated intellectuals more closely to the ancestral land of China.

Reconstructing China Ties and Rehabilitating Lim Boon Keng at Xiamen University

The historical relationship between China and the Chinese community in Singapore was patterned on distancing and connecting. For about fifty years after its modern founding in 1819 by the British colonialists, Singapore’s expanding Chinese population had to fend for themselves because of minimalist British policy and their status of having broken the Chinese legal code against emigration. It was only when China reformulated its management of foreign relations after the Opium Wars that the first Chinese consulate in Singapore was established in 1877. Soon after, an intense battle for the hearts and minds of the overseas Chinese businessmen and intelligentsia was waged between the imperial Qing court, exiled reformists and republican revolutionaries. Ties intensified with the 1911 revolution and subsequent struggle against the warlords, reaching a zenith when the new Kuomintang party-state from the late 1920s to the 1940s mobilized the overseas Chinese against the various phases of Japanese intrusion.

Then ties between Singapore and China became diluted again with the post-World War Two decolonization and nation-building as well as the clouds of the Cold War in Asia. The proclamation of the Malayan Emergency, establishment of the PRC, and outbreak of Korean War converged to cut off almost all China ties and re-orientated the overseas Chinese population towards their place of residence. On the domestic front, the English-educated PAP led by Lee Kuan Yew aimed to neutralize the Chinese-educated political left with its battle cry against “Communism, Communalism and Chauvinism”. It was only after its victory was firmly established by the early 1980s that the PAP recalibrated its multiculturalism to one emphasizing ethnic roots and embracing the discourse on “Asian Values”.⁵⁷ This was paralleled by Deng Xiaoping’s

⁵⁴ “The Sage of S”pore gets a proper tribute, at last” *Straits Times*, 23 Jan. 2007; *Biblioasia*, 2.4 (Jan. 2007): 9; Commemoration programme leaflet; Stella Kon has also written a novel based upon the life and times of Lim, *The scholar and the dragon* (Singapore: Raffles, 2000). Papers of the scholarly conference have yet to be published.

⁵⁵ “Half a Lim Boon Keng?”, *Lianhe zaobao*, supplement, 2 Feb 2007. Lu Lishan made a similar observation in her report in “Government and people in joint commemoration of Lim Boon Keng”, *Lianhe zaobao*, 21 Jan. 2007.

⁵⁶ “What can we do for Lim Boon Keng?”, by Yan Chunbao, *Lianhe zaobao*, 2 Feb. 2007.

⁵⁷ On how the discourse had contributed towards the making of a “non-liberal communitarian democracy” in Singapore, see Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 31-35, 118-121.

reopening of China and the restoration of official diplomatic ties between Singapore and China in 1990. The PAP government accepted that the Chinese community in Singapore had matured enough to differentiate between cultural China and political China and even argued that the Singapore Chinese had played a big role in transforming China during the 1911 Revolution and the early republic. These big imaginings led to the 1997 transformation of a dilapidated villa briefly occupied by Sun Yat Sen into the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall to serve as “a cultural shrine for all ethnic Chinese Singaporeans”.⁵⁸

That changing domestic context and resurrected foreign diplomatic relations provided the civic space for Lee Guan Kin to begin a sustained campaign from 1995 to remind Singaporeans and the PRC authorities that Lim Boon Keng was once at the centre of Sino-Singapore cultural and intellectual ties. Driven by the avowed desire to restore “the justice of history”, her campaign objective was to rehabilitate Lim’s historical position by recapturing the forgotten sixteen years of his leadership at Xiamen University in China.

In 1921, at the invitation of the university’s founder Tan Kah Kee, Lim Boon Keng put his medical practice, businesses and social activities in Singapore behind him to assume the presidency of Xiamen University. He carried his Confucian reformist thinking over with him, and helped to establish the Institute of Studies on Classics (Guoxueyuan 国学院) within the university. However, his mindset and activities were then becoming anachronistic as China was experiencing the anti-Confucian attacks of the May Fourth Movement. He soon came into conflict with Lu Xun, the towering May Fourth figure and leader of the leftist intellectual movement who abruptly resigned from Xiamen University after four months. Although Tan Kah Kee publicly defended Lim, who served as the president until 1937, this clash with Lu Xun and the accompanying two rounds of major student protests in 1924 and 1926, as well as China’s emergence as a communist republic after 1949, literally erased Lim from the history of Xiamen University.

Lee Guan Kin felt that this absent history was a great historical injustice. She had previously touched on Lim’s contribution to Xiamen University and his loss of status in her published MA thesis but felt that this was not enough. In 1995, following the style of imperial Chinese mandarin remonstrance of ten-thousand-words (wanyanshu 万言书), she published a serialized, three-part newspaper feature to demand for the rehabilitation of Lim in Xiamen University. The feature was interspersed liberally with photographs of her standing beside the Lu Xun statue on Xiamen campus (to highlight her demand for a similar one for Lim) and of her posing in front of his former house on an offshore Xiamen island. She also dug up documents in the archives of Lim’s bequeathing of that house to Xiamen University. She bluntly contrasted Xiamen University’s total “forgetting” with Singapore’s traces of “remembering” of Lim through road naming, wax figure in the Sentosa Pioneers Museum, mention of him in school textbooks and television documentaries, as well as effusive eulogies when he died.⁵⁹

Conscious of the controversies surrounding Lim Boon Keng’s collaborationist activities in Singapore during the Japanese Occupation and how this might also affect Xiamen University’s judgement, Lee painted a positive picture of this episode. After his return to Singapore in 1937, Lim was said to have openly criticised Japan between 1938 and 1941, praising the Chinese war effort, taking part in relief fund-raising, and organizing the defences for Singapore. At the outbreak of the war in Southeast Asia, Lim was too old and lacking in financial resources to escape. He was singled out by

⁵⁸ Huang Jianli and Hong Lysa, “History and the imaginaries of “Big Singapore”: Positioning the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall”, in *Journal of southeast Asian studies*, 35.1 (Feb. 2004): 65-89; a shorter edited version available as chapter 9 in Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli, *The scripting of a national history: Singapore and its past* (Hong Kong and Singapore: Hong Kong University Press in conjunction with NUS Press, 2008), pp. 181-204.

⁵⁹ “Asking history for justice on behalf of Lim Boon Keng”, Three parts, *Lianhe zaobao*, 9 Jul. 1995, supplement; 23 Jul. 1995, supplement; 30 Jul. 1995, supplement.

Japanese troops who threatened to shame his wife, posted special agents in his house to monitor his movement, eventually forced him to chair the Overseas Chinese Association and raise \$50,000,000 for them. Lee depicted the immediate postwar Lim as an unhappy, broken person who indulged in wine and dance, pretended to go crazy, and attempted a few suicidal jumps off buildings. She cited oral history recordings of others who had forgiven Lim and also the eulogies praising him as “the sage of Singapore” and “Singapore’s grand old man”.

One and a half years after that first local media blast, Lee Guan Kin was eager to claim a quick victory for her rehabilitation campaign. This was after she had returned from the regional conference of the International Society for the Study of Overseas Chinese organized by Xiamen University in November 1996 where she made her first direct appeal in China through her paper on “Lim Boon Keng and Xiamen University: The Root-searching Route of a Straits-born Chinese”. Wang Gungwu who had previously written on “Lu Xun, Lim Boon Keng and Confucian Thoughts” supported her in his keynote speech by noting that Tan Kah Kee was highly revered in Xiamen for his singular focus of loyalty towards China while Lim was a different type of overseas Chinese who was more complex but yet more representative. If the university were to recognize the contributions of the former but not the latter, then this would be a limited and superficial understanding and of no help to Xiamen University’s aspiration to be a centre of studies on the overseas Chinese.⁶⁰

Immediately prior to her departure from the conference, Lee received news that the university had decided to rehabilitate Lim Boon Keng by implementing three measures: Erecting a plaque at the offshore residence which he had donated, tapping into a frozen endowment fund created by Lim’s will based upon three-fifths of his 50-acre property in Singapore, and erecting a pavilion to commemorate him. Overjoyed, Lee accorded this rehabilitation the same level of historical significance as the PAP’s decision to endorse Sun Yat Sen with a commemoration of the 130th anniversary of his birth and a programme to restore the villa he briefly occupied in his sojourns to Singapore.⁶¹ She pronounced that “in politically mature nations, history should be independent of politics” and these rehabilitations “represented the magnanimity of the two sets of political leaders in facing the new century”.⁶² She reinforced this claim of success in a March 2000 newspaper feature about Lim gaining “recognition fully”.⁶³ The pavilion would be built in “a good location with lots of student traffic” and the decision is “long overdue”. Yet victory proved to be elusive and a distance away.

Indeed, by the 80th anniversary celebration of Xiamen University in April 2001, there was still no official mention of Lim being rehabilitated, even though several prominent Singapore business and scholarly personalities were invited to attend the celebration. No firm decision or concrete steps had in fact been taken in the six years since her opening appeal in 1995. The 80th anniversary commemoration prompted another flurry of activities by Lee, supported by Wang Gungwu and the Tan Kah Kee Foundation to press the issue. But the best they could secure was an understanding

⁶⁰ Lee Guan Kin, “Justice done: The case of LBK”, *Lianhe zaobao*, 15 Dec. 1996; Lee Guan Kin, “Lin Wenqing zouxiang Xiamen daxue: Yige Xinjiapo haixia huaren de xungen licheng” (Lim Boon Keng heading towards Xiamen University: The root-searching path of a Straits-born Chinese), *Journal of the South Seas Society*, 52 (1998): 4-21. Wang had paid attention to this issue since the 1980s, Wang’s interview with author, 29 Jan. 2008.

⁶¹ Huang Jianli and Hong Lysa, “History and the imaginaries of “big Singapore””, p. 65. The next traceable occasion when Lee Guan Kin made a direct reference to this villa and PAP government’s thinking was her speech at Ai Tong School’s 88th anniversary, “Patching up memory in the age of oblivion”, *Lianhe zaobao*, 23 Jul. 2000. She urged that the renovated villa ‘should not be left standing without words’ but should be used to tell children about ‘singapore’s important role in the world’s epochal event and the brave and selfless deeds of the Chinese intellectuals of that era’.

⁶² Lee Guan Kin, “Justice done: The case of LBK”; Lee Guan Kin, “Lin Wenqing zouxiang Xiamen daxue: Yige Xinjiapo haixia huaren de xungen licheng”, pp. 4-21.

⁶³ “Clash of minds” by Kao Chen, *Straits Times*, 12 Mar 2000.

that the planning of location and design of a Lim commemorative pavilion was under way.⁶⁴

That renewed push by Lee Guan Kin with support from several quarters still yielded no result even when her Lim Boon Keng model was embraced in 2004 as the template for the new bicultural elite of modern Singapore. She persisted with her urging that Xiamen University should fulfil its promise soon so that “all Singaporeans will then be able to visit Xiamen and the pavilion which honours the Sage of Singapore”.⁶⁵ China’s central and local authorities obviously had their own rhythm of governance and pace of action, especially over issues which were deemed to be politically sensitive.

It was only in April 2005, on the 84th anniversary of the university’s founding, that a Lim Boon Keng pavilion of modest scale was unveiled in a quiet corner near to the cluster of five recently rebuilt Tan Kah Kee buildings.⁶⁶ The long delay and substantive difference in infrastructural and spatial scale is a reminder of how the PRC judges the two men in history differently. Nevertheless it was a step forward, and Lim’s residence on an offshore island was at the same time earmarked for restoration. In November 2006 the university inched forward again by holding a scholarly conference in commemoration of Lim’s pioneering effort in promoting “national learning” when he set up the Institute of Studies on Classics in 1926. At the conference, it was officially announced that Xiamen University would be following the recent waves of PRC interest in reviving Confucian studies and restoring this Institute of Studies on Classics. Lee Guan Kin representing the Department of Chinese of NTU was a co-organiser of this conference and one of the key speakers. She pronounced that “the huge wheels of history are rolling forward and Lim Boon Keng’s contributions towards Xiamen University are now increasingly being recognized and affirmed”.⁶⁷

The Singapore reporter who covered this event was initially excited about this development and about to file his report to home base that Lim’s “contributions and historical standing” in leading Xiamen University for sixteen years had now been “totally affirmed” (*quanmian kending* 全面肯定). However, almost immediately he had to delete the two phrases: “historical standing” and “totally”. A bucket of cold water had dampened his enthusiasm. First, he had noticed that Lim’s portrait was not hung up among the rest of the university luminaries. Then he met staff members who reminded him of the politics of “national sentiments” (*guoqing* 国情). The collaborationist role that Lim had played in Singapore during the Japanese Occupation had never quite been forgiven or forgotten, and he remained in the category of “Chinese traitor” (*hanjian* 汉奸).⁶⁸

Nevertheless, the unveiling and naming of the Lim Boon Keng Pavilion permitted Lee Guan Kin to claim success and attempt a closure for her decade-long campaign at the 2007 Singapore commemoration of fiftieth anniversary of the death of Lim. She was invited to deliver the closing public lecture in Chinese at the academic conference and she chose to speak on “The Boon Keng Pavilion at Xiamen University: History Recovered, Nanyang Link Reconnected”. In an interview promoting the lecture and other commemorative activities, she stressed that this was a special occasion with deep meaning as “government, scholars, and public had all agreed that Lim Boon Keng was worthy of them working together”. Alluding to Lee Kuan Yew’s 2004 endorsement of Lim as the model for modern Singapore to replicate, she also expressed her gratitude that “scholars were not the only ones pushing for the importance of history,

⁶⁴ “Xiamen University celebrates its 80th anniversary” and “Xiamen University will build the LBK pavilion”, *Lianhe zaobao*, 7 Apr. 2001.

⁶⁵ “Lim Boon Keng: Bicultural broker”, by Cheong Suk-wai, *Straits Times*, 26 Jun. 2004.

⁶⁶ “The restoration of Institute of Studies on Classics in Xiamen University”, *Lianhe zaobao*, 26 Nov. 2006.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*; For this conference, Lee spoke about “Lim Boon Keng’s The Crisis from within: East and West culture blend”.

⁶⁸ “Historical personalities and “guoqing””, *Lianhe zaobao*, 30 Nov. 2006, Lee Chih Horng was the *Lianhe zaobao* reporter who was then based in Guangzhou.

but political figures with influence were also praising the contributions and example set by the pioneers".⁶⁹

A complete closure proved difficult. There were murmurs from the audience about the danger of hagiography and the problems with Lim. It also provided an opening for reflection on larger issues. Lee Guan Kin's former Hwa Chong Junior College student Lee Huay Leng, who had risen to leadership position within the Chinese-language media and co-founded the Tangent society, wrote a commentary which warned about seeking official political endorsement and the need for some distancing. To her, "this commemoration was not to bestow a great man status on such a bicultural, cross-disciplinary and trans-national person". It was meant to provide an opportunity for Singaporeans to engage in a journey of self-discovery of Singapore history and thus enhance their sense of civic participation and belonging. She judged that "official colouring was not strong at all" in this commemoration and it was meaningful to have "civic organizations in the driver seat throughout the processes", with the opening ceremony not being graced by "any political figures that may be weighty but know little about history". Nevertheless, she warned that Singapore had been having the same ruling political party for the past forty years which thus monopolized the discourse, leading to people's confusion about the role of political figures, historical participants and historians. To her, "in the long run, this would only do harm to the objective construction of history for the island state." She urged that "government should avoid getting too involved politically" while the people should "avoid habitually seeking recognition from the government or often stealing glances to watch the government's reaction".⁷⁰

An explicit objection from among the Chinese intelligentsia to Lee Guan Kin's rehabilitation of Lim Boon Keng was lodged by Chua Ser Koon, a history graduate from Nanyang University who did her postgraduate training in Japanese universities. One of her major scholarly contributions was to complete the editing of a huge source-based manuscript left by the late Hsu Yun-ts'iao on the Malayan Chinese resistance to Japan from 1937 to 1945. She had strong credentials and links with the Japanese academia as well as universities in China. It may well be possible that her contrarian views had been sought by Xiamen University when they were pondering over Lee's campaign to rehabilitate Lim. In response to Lee's closing public lecture and other commemorative activities, Chua mounted a critique in the newspapers of Lee's revisionism, focusing on the Japanese Occupation era, emphasising the nature and activities of the Overseas Chinese Association headed by Lim, his words and activities which had aided the Japanese, as well as his post-war dramatic withdrawal and confessional lamentation. She felt that, in historical judgement, one should neither overemphasize how Lim might have been "forced" by circumstances nor adopt an overly generous attitude of "understanding" his actions. In her view, "Lim Boon Keng's experience was indeed a tragedy but, since it was a tragedy, it should not be turned into a comedy". "The evaluation of a historical personality is not to remove the dirt and sculpture him into a perfect statue but to restore his original look".⁷¹

The Chinese-educated intellectuals in Singapore were not the only ones who had reservations about Lee's efforts to rehabilitate Lim. Across the causeway, Hou Kok Chung of the University of Malaysia, who had collaborated with and was respectful of Lee's works, observed that "Lee Guan Kin had avoided the controversies and

⁶⁹ "Government and people in joint commemoration of Lim Boon Keng", *Lianhe zaobao*, 21 Jan. 2007

⁷⁰ "A self-discovery" by Lee Huay Leng, *Lianhe zaobao*, 28 Jan. 2007.

⁷¹ Chua Ser Koon, "Remembering LBK: How to evaluate a historical personality?", *Lianhe zaobao*, 22 Feb. 2007; For the volume with more than 1000 pages of source materials, see Chua Ser Koon (and Hsu Yun-ts'iao), eds., *Xima huaren kangri shiliao, 1937-1945* (Malayan Chinese resistance to Japan, 1947-1945 – Selected source materials) (Singapore: Cultural & Historical Publishing House, 1984).

commented that Lim Boon Keng experienced “relatively bad luck towards the late stage”. To Hou, “this kind of description truly left many lingering voices in the air.”⁷²

Conclusion

As a Nantah scholar, Lee Guan Kin’s configuration of the Sinophone intelligentsia was on the one hand grounded upon her scholarship and position as a professional historian conscious of the yardsticks of detachment and objectivity; on the other hand, she was also simultaneously standing on an insider’s platform. Her biographical profile placed her in the same category as her subject of analysis and representation. The issue of “insider-outsider” paradox with its inherent advantages and limitations is unavoidable. But she more than anyone else has had the substantive body of writings and range of activities to serve as a useful lens through which to view the transfiguration and contestations of the Chinese-educated intelligentsia over the past five decades of English-educated PAP hegemony.

The axis of her identity analysis and representation rested on the “root-preservation” concept. She equated the system of Chinese schools as “bastion of roots” and reckoned that its steady erosion from the 1960s had created a profound sense of crisis over the cutting off of Chinese roots. Therefore, the Chinese-educated intellectuals were inevitably and should necessarily be infused with the sacred mission of preserving the twin targets of Chinese language and Chinese culture. That ethno-centric, mission-loaded parameter became her choice of a defining identity marker, while the community’s emotional state of mind in response to state policy challenges and its degree of mission achievement at varying points in time became her basic history template in her analysis of this social segment.

Lee’s emphasis on root-preservation had led to several blind spots and unintended outcomes. First, she was unable to fully grasp and appreciate the contesting alternative offered by the younger generation of Chinese intelligentsia. The young Turks had wished to move away from the ethno-centric, tradition/backward-looking and utilitarian perspectives. They were urging an upgrade to a modernist, trans-ethnic platform to discuss issues of higher universal humanistic order and to be reconfigured as “modernist establishment intellectuals operating at the core but strolling at its edge and maintaining their critical faculties”. Second, her vigorous exaltation of Lim Boon Keng as a historical model for the state-proposed “bicultural elite” was not only framed within an East-West binary, but also overly simplified and essentialized in terms of emphasizing Lim’s devotion to “root-searching” for Chinese language and culture in his later life while glossing over the persistence of his hybridized Sino-Malay Peranakan elements.

Third, in her quest for greater socio-political operating space for the Chinese intelligentsia and their root-preservation mission, she generally maintained goodwill with the political establishment and aligned herself explicitly with several problematic PAP policies. She endorsed the bilingual policy, questioning only its implementation details instead of interrogating its rhetoric and problematizing its fundamental thrust. She also accepted and rode on the PAP policy of “Asian values” and “return-to-ethnic-roots” from the 1980s

⁷² “Knowing Father’s Words At Last”, *Nanyang Siang Pau* (Malaysia), 13 May 2002, later published in Hou Kok Chung, ed., *Wenhuaren de ganqing shijie* (Emotional world of the cultured man) (Kuala Lumpur: 2002), pp. 137-142. Lee said that Hou at the conference had indicated general acceptance of a more positive view on Lim’s war record, interview with author, 30 Jan. 2008.

as well as the policy of cultivating bicultural elite and rebuilding intimate Sino-Singapore ties from the 1990s. However, such an alignment and optimism appeared jarring and incongruous when contrasted with the continuous precipitous decline of Chinese language and culture as reflected in curriculum dilution, family language usage surveys and even her comparative observation of ethnic Chinese education in Malay-dominated Malaysia.

The PAP would have been appreciative of Lee's general support for its various policies as well as her rallying call to maintain a mood of optimism. It has not had cause to deny her the socio-political space to articulate her views in public discourse. However, fortified by such endorsements from a key member of the Chinese community and with it a corresponding sense of added legitimacy, the ruling elite has continued with its fundamental approach of privileging and entrenching English language across the entire society despite constantly waving the rhetoric banner of bilingualism. The lexicon shift of national discourse from "bilingualism" to "biculturalism" from the late 1990s and the parallel discussion on cultivating a "bicultural elite" signalled a decoupling of culture from language and a further slide in the learning of Chinese language. Henceforth, only a small elite group of a few hundred students each year would be privileged to master Mandarin at higher level and undergo overseas immersion. The curricular option for the vast majority had become "China Studies in English" where they would be given a general appreciation of Chinese history, culture and political economy but accessing this knowledge essentially through the English language.⁷³

Another subtle but significant retreat came with the most recent policy recommendation by a governmental "Bicultural Taskforce" to place greater emphasis and a large injection of funds into bilingual learning at the lowest educational level, that of pre-school kindergarten toddlers.⁷⁴ This came amidst another round of familiar public agony over the difficulties and resentment of teaching Chinese to unreceptive teenage students at junior college, secondary and primary school levels.⁷⁵ Lee Guan Kin's root-preservation and twin objectives of promoting both the Chinese language and culture had thus receded further.

Despite living in a globalized world with the rise of China and with demands for binocular perspective and multilingual skill, the ethnic Chinese population of Singapore has been increasingly limping forward only on the single leg of Chinese culture with its access points wired almost exclusively to the dominant English language. This brings to mind the metaphor that perhaps "half a loaf is better than none," and it also confirms an imminent end to having a substantive bloc of Sinophone intelligentsia in Singapore.

⁷³ "Primed to bridge East and West" and "Controversy over the idea of a bicultural elite", *Straits Times*, 20 Nov. 2009.

⁷⁴ "Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism seeks proposals to fortify bilingual learning at preschool level", *Lianhe zaobao*, 7 Jul. 2012; "A bilingual and bicultural policy that matches the march of times", *Lianhe zaobao*, 10 Jul. 2012.

⁷⁵ An extreme example of students burning all their Chinese school textbooks as soon as the examination was over in order to express "their deep resentment in being tortured by ten years of Chinese language learning from the primary to secondary level" was narrated in "Chinese language, let it burn!", *Lianhe zaobao*, 3 Apr. 2012. The commentary also mentioned a National Institute of Education study which concluded that the current bilingual education system in Singapore had allowed for only one hour of Chinese lesson per day and thus effectively amounted only to a monolingual education (original reportage in "Two language experts: Mother tongue usage in schools insufficient", *Lianhe zaobao*, 17 Dec. 2011). Similar sentiments were expressed in forum letters "Do we have bilingual advantages?", *Lianhe zaobao*, 17 Mar. 2012 and "Let us not deceive ourselves and others that we have bilingual advantages", *Lianhe zaobao*, 20 Mar. 2012.

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