

In Memoriam

Dr Cheah Boon Kheng

Dr Cheah Boon Kheng, historian, and a member of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (JSEAS) Honorary Advisory Board, passed away peacefully on Monday afternoon, 27 July 2015, at the age of 76, after a year-long battle with cancer.

Born on 24 July 1939, Dr Cheah started work in 1956 as a journalist with the *Straits Times* in Singapore, where he remained for 12 years. In 1967, age 28, he embarked on his tertiary studies, reading History and English Literature at the University of Malaya (UM). His tutor at UM, Dr Lee Kam Hing, recalled how Dr Cheah not only had the instinct of a good reporter to recognise what subject was important to pursue but also possessed the maturity, skill, and experience to write well. ‘His style of writing was readable and done very often on short notice,’ Dr Lee remembered. After obtaining his B.A. (Hons) in 1970, Dr Cheah resumed his career in journalism, this time with the *Straits Times* in Kuala Lumpur, but stayed only for three years. His interest was increasingly drawn to academia and he started to tutor for the History Department at UM (1971–1973) while still working as a journalist. In 1973, he became a full-time student once more to pursue his Master of Arts degree. In fulfilment of his M.A., which he obtained in 1974, Dr Cheah wrote an excellent thesis on ‘The Malayan Democratic Union 1945–1948’, a riveting study of the first political party to be established in post-Second World War Singapore. A revised version was subsequently published in 1979 as *The masked comrades: A study of the Communist United Front in Malaya, 1945–48*, Dr Cheah’s first book. After a brief stint as an assistant lecturer at the History Department in UM (1973–1975), Dr Cheah embarked on his doctoral programme on a research scholarship at the Australian National University (ANU), Canberra, under the supervision of Dr Anthony Reid and Dr David Marr in 1975, obtaining his Ph.D. in 1979. In 1978, he joined the History Department, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang, and continued to serve there until his retirement in 1994. He was promoted to associate professor in 1984 and professor in 1990. During his academic career, Dr Cheah also held fellowships at Yale University — as Visiting Fulbright Research Fellow at the Council on Southeast Asian Studies between 1984 and 1985 and Visiting Fellow at the Yale Center for International and Area Studies from 1989 to 1990.

An authority on Malayan communism and Malaysian history and historiography, Dr Cheah has written and edited some 19 books, including his groundbreaking *Red Star over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict during and after the Japanese Occupation, 1941–1946*, now in its fourth edition, a definitive account of resistance and inter-communal relations in Malaya during the final stages of the Japanese

Occupation and its aftermath. Based on a revised version of his doctoral thesis, Dr Cheah's absorbing and insightful study, first published in 1983, remains a must-read for an understanding of Malaysian politics and society. As *JSEAS* reviewer Dr Yeo Kim Wah put it, 'The prose is concise and smooth-flowing, the research wide-ranging and thorough, the factual foundation well-grounded and firm, the analysis fully-documented and of a very high standard.' J.M. Gullick called it 'an excellent and authoritative work'. Whilst Dr Cheah was trained to write political history in the Rankean tradition, his curiosity as a scholar steered him to venture into other fields of history as well, and to employ other methodologies, as evinced by the publication of his 1988 book, *The peasant robbers of Kedah, 1900–1929: Historical and folk perceptions*, a pioneering attempt to write a social history of rural Kedah 'from below' utilising the tools of social theory. Dr Cheah's prodigious output extended not just to the production of monographs but also to the 50 or so essays he contributed as chapters in books, articles in journals, including several in *JSEAS*, and in numerous other scholarly platforms. Touching on a wide spectrum of themes and time periods, they reflected the breadth of his interests and curiosity: pre-colonial history and politics, social banditry, the role of women in palace politics, 'feudalism' in Malay society, the Japanese interregnum, post-war Malay nationalism and politics, ethnicity, imperialism, communism, political parties, Malay rulers, nation-building, history and memory, human rights, textbook controversies, and Malaysian historiography. Indeed, as Dr Lee Kam Hing related, 'Boon Kheng was the country's foremost scholar on Malaysia's modern political history. He published extensively and regularly from the time he was doing his PhD right up to recently when ill health slowed his pace of work. His publications were of consistently high scholarly standard and the many titles he produced remain, and will stay, as standard texts and references.'

In retirement, Dr Cheah remained actively engaged in various scholarly endeavours and service to the academic community. Notable were his appointments since 1990 as one of the vice-presidents of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (MBRAS) and as the editor of its *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1999. In 1998 and 1999 he held professorial research fellowships at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore. He welcomed the opportunity to teach as well. In 1998, as Visiting Foundation Professor at the Southern Chinese Diaspora Unit, Faculty of Asian Studies, ANU, he taught a whole course for one semester. When he returned to USM as Visiting Professorial Fellow, Centre for Policy Research (2002–2003) and Visiting Professor, School of Humanities (2004–2005), he gave guest lectures to history undergraduates, advised and supervised graduate students and conducted workshops for young lecturers on research and publications. From 14 July 2008 to 13 July 2009, Dr Cheah was Visiting Professor at the Department of History, National University of Singapore (NUS), where he taught third and fourth year undergraduate modules on Malaysian history, supervised academic exercises, gave talks at various academic forums, and was one of the speakers in the Department's Cold War public lecture series held at the National Library, which saw a capacity crowd turning up to listen to his fascinating recapitulation of Malaysia's role in the Cold War in Southeast Asia. His seminar talk to the History Department at NUS a few months later was just as

well-received, especially when it had such a tantalisingly arresting subject: 'Comrade Wright — The British Secret Agent Who Loved Women'.

The indefatigable scholar that he was, Dr Cheah remained an active researcher throughout his retirement years. His *Malaysia: The making of a nation* (2002) was the first in a series of histories on nation-building in Southeast Asia published by ISEAS. Professor A.J. Stockwell, who reviewed the book, remarked that Dr Cheah 'has produced a book that is a tribute to the discipline, skill, and humanity of the historian. . . in addressing contentious issues, Professor Cheah Boon Kheng has reached balanced judgements'. His second and last single-authored book produced during retirement is *To' Janggut: Legends, histories and perceptions of the 1915 rebellion in Kelantan* (2006), an inquiry into the meaning of historical truth by exploring different versions of a popular legend concerning a minor uprising in the state of Kelantan during the First World War. Dr Cheah also devoted considerable effort to editing books. His last published book, appropriately, is his edited monograph, *New perspectives and research on Malaysian history* (2007).

In August 2012, Dr Cheah was appointed to the *JSEAS* Honorary Advisory Board. Over the years, he had not only contributed essays and book reviews to *JSEAS* but also rendered invaluable help to the journal by recommending reviewers for various article submissions and books. He was himself a frequent reviewer of manuscripts for *JSEAS*. His passing is indeed a huge loss to the international academic fraternity and to the community of scholars working on Malayan/Malaysian history. Dr Cheah will be fondly remembered as a warm and unassuming colleague and teacher, and a consummate scholar thoroughly dedicated to his craft. We in *JSEAS* will miss him.

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