

Interculturalism, Empire and the Nation State:

A Portrait of the Lim Cheng Ean Family

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Abstract

Late 19th century George Town, the capital city of Penang, a state in present-day Malaysia, began as an “inter-cultural” space based upon trade. Trade brought regional centrality to the city as different ethnic groups brought with them their trading networks. As they lived side by side, the city became a site of transactions between them. Trade may have been the basis for their interface but it was a common English education and civil activities that gave rise to inter-cultural activities. This paper begins with a brief description of George Town’s development as a regional hub for education, culture and politics. Taking one example of a Penang Straits Chinese family, particularly one branch of the Penang Lim family, this paper is an attempt to describe how the “interface” of cultures produces exceptionalism. Whilst Lim Cheng Ean was already a cultural hybrid, the son of an immigrant Chinese father and a local-born nyonya mother, he was exposed to British colonial culture through English education. His marriage to the British Guyanese-born Roslind Hoalim created a home environment that was truly distinct in colonial George Town. It is no wonder that his children all made their own mark as products of their “cultural interface”. Going beyond mere historical description, this paper will conclude with a section analyzing the values that made this family’s exceptional history.

Introduction

This paper describes the process of cultural identity formation in a colonial immigrant community with reference to the Lim Cheng Ean family. The Lim family lived in George Town, Penang. This Unesco world heritage site is unique for its multicultural legacy. George Town provided the “intercultural interface” where Chinese migrants, Malays, British colonials and Eurasians lived cheek by jowl, sharing in a common purpose of making a success of their tropical home.

By focusing on one Penang Straits Chinese family over a hundred year period, this paper hopes to demonstrate how cultural interactions and individual decision-making shape cultural identity. More importantly, how the relationship between changing political economy and cultural reproduction influences intercultural and identification. In this case, how English education and the English class system influenced one particular Penang Straits Chinese family.

However, it must be stated at the outset that the Lim Cheng Ean family is an extraordinary case, whose intercultural values and lifestyle may be more pronounced than is generally the case with the wider Straits Chinese community. But as case studies often show, the achievements of this one family demonstrate what is possible within the context of empire and nation state. More importantly, the leadership qualities that this family exhibited reflect trends and patterns of behaviour that was later to become fashionable. In short, they were ahead of their time.

In this paper, “intercultural” refers to the broad experience of meeting and melding that happens between specific ethnic cultures. “Intercultural” is used in a variety of academic enquiries including communications, social anthropology, literary theory and business studies; each loading the term with its own distinctive meaning. There is an underlying misunderstanding in many of these definitions that “intercultural” refers to the meeting of two or more distinct and discrete cultures. This is a paradox as cultures are never pure and that what we are witnessing is, very often, something evolving and part of an “inter-cultural” process. This is particularly useful when studying the evolution of cultural identity over time. In the case of this Penang Straits Chinese family, that cultural identity is hybrid, many-layered and actively defined by each family member. For each of them responded to the very different opportunities and demands of their generation, gender and level of education.

Ultimately, the Lim Cheng Ean family exhibits a wide range of “identities” within the Penang Straits Chinese continuum, which is itself part of a wider British colonial and later, Malaysian national identity. In each step of the way, what is defined by them to be their cultural identities – what they identified as markers that distinguished them from other people – changes, sometimes meeting dead-ends or evolving into different cultural forms. Consistent with other hybrid peoples, this family case study reveals a rich tapestry of “identities”.

But first, the story needs a context that serves to explain how this very exceptional family was able to develop such a wide range of identity markers,

particularly their own “contrarian” personalities and the ideologies that hitherto developed.

George Town as “inter-cultural” space

George Town is the capital city of Penang, a west Malaysian state comprising an island and a narrow strip of land on the Malay Peninsular. George Town is the oldest British settlement in Malaysia, having been established in 1786 by Captain Francis Light on behalf of the English East India Company. It has always had a multi-ethnic population and this is reflected in its built heritage, the largest concentration of pre-WWII architecture in Southeast Asia. Thus there is visible physical continuity between the generations, with many Penangites looking around them and recognizing the contributions of earlier generations.

Penang like Malacca and Singapore, being a British Straits Settlement, was not merely shaped by colonial trade but was an urban centre in its own unique style. While Singapore was created by a methodical process of urban planning, George Town’s development was more haphazard. Nonetheless, in the last quarter of the 19th century Penang had become much more important than a port for the dispersal of imperial trade. It was also a regional centre of an export economy, as well as the main port for tin and later, rubber in North Malaya¹⁾.

In its early years, George Town was very much a mixed population more oriented towards India than China. Up till 1840, Indians made up the majority of its population although there was a sizeable Malayan population comprising migrants and settlers from the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra and Southern Thailand. The early Chinese families were of mixed parentage having settled and moved from Kedah and Phuket to George Town. There was also a small Eurasian community, who followed Captain Light from Phuket and Kuala Kedah to the island. But, as its present road name suggests, its main population was from South India and Bengal.

Meanwhile there was a sizeable rural Malay community living mostly in the east of the island and across the Penang Channel in Province Wellesley (modern-day Prai). By the 1840s, with the end of Siamese raids into Kedah, Malay migration from Kedah ended. But the Malay population remained largely rural and tied

1) See Loh Wei Leng, “Penang and the Region, trade and shipping 1786–1863,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*....

to agricultural activities. It was in the 1840s that tin mines were opened in Perak and this attracted mass Chinese migration. This led to an exponential increase in Chinese population as Penang emerged as the main transshipment hub for Chinese migrants in the region. Later, in the 1890s, there was another influx of Chinese migrants this time to meet the needs of commercial agriculture such as tobacco and rubber planting in the Malay States as well as North Sumatra. George Town changed demographically with the Chinese becoming numerically and economically the most significant group although they were divided along the lines of dialect-group, clan and occupation.

Urban society in Penang resembled the late 18th century English “public sphere” ranging from coffee shops to the stock exchange. The features of this public sphere were dominated by the concerns of the middle class. There was firm belief in the benefits of free trade policies as well as an optimism linked to scientific and technological discoveries. The establishment of a Settlements-wide police force (1872) and a department devoted to Chinese affairs - the Chinese Protectorate (1877) - sapped the influence of Chinese secret societies and other para-legal institutions. Law became as important as infrastructure in creating an ordered society.

Essentially, the Straits Settlements were developing beyond the pioneering stage, as the frontiers of British influence expanded further into the Malay Peninsula. But instead of displacing the existing social structures, the British utilised the various clan and speech-group associations, as a means to govern the Chinese, by establishing the Chinese Advisory Board (1889). This meant employing the elders of the Chinese community within their colonial administration to act as intermediaries, controlling the Chinese population and reducing the influence of the secret societies. Finally, in 1890 the colonial government decided to make secret societies illegal by amending the 1869 Dangerous Societies Suppression Act, which previously had merely been registered.

British intervention now boosted the process of Anglicization in the urban areas. The Straits Settlements had become the headquarters of many western firms as well as Chinese, Arab, Armenian, Jewish and Indian Muslim business interests. An imperial cosmopolitan culture was being created not only through a legal framework but also through English schools. Between 1870 and 1890, social clubs of various kinds sprouted, dedicated to horse-racing, sports and socialising. Quite a number of them were limited to European members and a hierarchical

society, with the English at the top, came into being. The British incorporated the local elite into this social hierarchy but imposed social barriers along racial lines. To gain the cooperation of the locals, their leaders were presented with medals and decorations. To discourage anti-colonial activities, the Banishment Act was introduced and applied to those whose activities were not in the best interests of the British Empire. Even a few Malay rulers were exiled. By limiting the election of municipal commission to ratepayers only, the British and their nominated councilors were able to maintain control of the reins of government. In this way, the administrators were kept one step ahead of any local unease or discontent. Administrative changes to the benefit of western mercantile interests, represented by an International Chamber of Commerce were gradually introduced.

The Effects of Intercultural Exchanges

The Lim Cheng Ean family were of Hokkien stock. Like other communities in Penang, the Hokkiens came under pressure to adapt to this new situation. They had one advantage over other Chinese dialect-groups because of their long-standing working relationship with the colonial administrators and western traders. The Penang Hokkiens were among the first Chinese to send their children to English schools. Since 1816, when the Penang Free School was established, the Penang Hokkiens had donated generously to the school. They also filled the role of court interpreters and served in the colonial administration as clerical workers. English had become the main legal and administrative language replacing Malay. Continuous contact with westerners and English-education gave the Penang Hokkiens a perceptible lead over the other Chinese dialect groups and further strengthened their economic presence in Penang.

In 1852, identification with the West became political when the British extended citizenship by naturalisation throughout the Empire. Till then, the Chinese had no conception of a political identity in the European sense. Chinese national identity was essentially based on Chinese culture. This included following age-old customs, celebrating the Lunar New Year, paying homage to the ancestors and to a certain degree expressing subservience to the Ching Court by wearing the pigtail and shaving the forehead. The British idea of imperial citizenship, borrowed from the Romans, was alien to the Chinese. Western national identity based on the nation state had its attractions.

The Penang Hokkiens were among the first to take advantage of this and

began flying the Union Flag on board their junks. As British subjects, they had extra-territorial rights in the local kingdoms where they traded. The Penang Hokkien merchants took full-advantage of their dual-nationality when trading in the newly opened Fujian port of Amoy (Xiamen) in China. The benefits of being a British subject were not limited to business but also included equal treatment under British law. By 1857, British citizenship in Penang was limited to those who could prove that they were born in the Straits Settlements. The term Straits-born came into popular use when voting in the municipal elections was limited to expatriate ratepayers and Straits-born British subjects. The Penang Hokkiens had majority access to the vote because of their Peranakan Chinese ancestry. Subsequently, colonial administrators began to equate the Straits-born Chinese with the Penang Hokkiens²⁾.

In 1857 English education became a prerequisite for social mobility. In that year, there was a proposal to limit the franchise in municipal elections to the English-educated. The Straits-born Chinese could not take part in this proposal, because they could not find a suitable candidate to represent them on the council. Only in 1883 were two English-speaking Straits-born Chinese elected to the commission. By this time, there was a sizeable multiethnic English-educated community in Penang. Within the Chinese community, most of the English-educated were Penang Hokkiens. The divide between the English educated and the Chinese educated was also becoming apparent. Each had their own unique cultural identity, although united by the social language of Penang Hokkien. The English-educated Straits-born Chinese soon became the Straits Chinese and called themselves as such.

While a large portion of the Straits Chinese had Peranakan Chinese roots, the colonial cosmopolitan environment influenced their identity. But Penang's unique Hokkien culture meant that the division between the English-educated and the Chinese-educated at the turn of the 20th century was not as great as that in Singapore. There, the Malay-speaking Baba Chinese made up the majority of the Straits Chinese community. Because in Penang, the dominant language among the Chinese was Penang Hokkien, the Penang Chinese community as a whole was

2) Vaughan writing in the 1870s associated Penang Hokkien culture, singling out their Peranakan features, as markers of the Straits-born Chinese. See J.D. Vaughan, *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese in the Straits Settlements*, Singapore: Mission Press, 1879.

more unified than in Singapore. The Penang Chinese were better able to form a Chinese Chamber of Commerce. It was also ahead of its southern rival in the ownership of newspapers and more importantly had the support of a readership to sustain them³⁾. The Penang Straits Chinese also formed economic cooperatives to compete with western firms. They were able to maintain their independence far longer than their Singapore counterparts in the principal branches of the regional export economy involving shipping, banking, rice-milling, tin-smelting and later rubber planting. It was only after WW1 that western firms, armed with superior technology as well as legislative power, were able to out-rival the Penang Straits Chinese. By then, a unique Straits Chinese identity marked by Peranakan heritage, Penang Hokkien and English education had been established.

Setting Roots

Penang's free port status, lower taxes and most importantly, its offer of British citizenship, attracted Chinese businessmen from Sumatra, Southern Thailand and the burgeoning Malay States. While it attracted the rich, it also attracted the hopeful. Among the many Chinese immigrants who came to Penang was Lim Hin Leong (also known as Phuah Hin Leong) (1844–1901), Lim Cheng Ean's father. Although a "Lim" by descent, Phuah Hin Leong went by his adopted family name. The Phuahs had given him shelter at a time when he was fleeing danger in his native village. But he continued to cherish his biological family and this story of filial piety is still proudly recounted by his grandchildren. In the 1850s, he made the perilous journey across the South China Sea in a junk and arrived in Penang a penniless immigrant. Unlike earlier immigrants, he entered into a more organised colonial society.

He started work as a labourer in Penang harbour. He finally saved enough to buy a small boat, which he used to ferry passengers from the ships to the pier (Lim, "My Parents", in *Penang File*). He was also fortunate to have married Ong Teng Neo, a Penang Hokkien whose father was in the grocery business. Hin Leong was hard-working and took the opportunity to supply rice to pioneering Tamil workers in Western-owned plantations in Province Wellesley. By the 1880s, he had become well-off and had established his mill in the Prangin River area. He also had extensive business networks in Kedah under the patronage of the

3) In the case of the *Straits Echo*, for seventy years from 1904–1974.

Sultan of Kedah. He was thus able to obtain a steady supply of rice from Kedah.

Unlike the Penang Hokkiens who were cocooned within the secret society system, Hin Leong embraced western technology and modernised the business. Together with his Penang Hokkien colleagues⁴⁾ he established Khie Heng Bee, the first rice-mill in Penang. This followed the trend of using Chinese capital to purchase western machinery and improve competitiveness⁵⁾.

Unlike earlier generations of Penang Hokkiens who hedged their bets, Lim Hin Leong's children were all English-educated. From a young age, Lim Cheng Teik, his eldest, assisted him in the rice-milling business. The company also dried and processed pepper from Sumatra, where the family had business dealings. Hin Leong died young in 1901 but he was by then a well-known millionaire philanthropist. As a Hokkien, Lim Hin Leong was better able to assimilate himself into Penang Hokkien culture and had access to wide business opportunities. By associating with the Penang Hokkiens who had close relations with the British and who were fluent in English, he was exposed to the latest western technology. He had little sentimental attachment to China and realised that the western technology was the way forward.

Lim Hin Leong had become part of a Penang Hokkien culture that embraced knowledge from the west. Being more cohesive, they were bold cultural experimenters. Their womenfolk even incorporated western design patterns in their embroidery and beadwork. Because all his children were English educated, the Lim family was more westernised and less China-oriented. Like the Penang Hokkiens, their identification with Penang was very strong. This influenced their outlook and shaped their aspirations. To solidify his family business, a marriage was brokered between the Lim and the Khoo families. Lim Hin Leong's eldest son, Lim Cheng Teik married Khoo Guat Lee, who was also a granddaughter of Koh Seang Tat. This marriage linked the three families together.

By this time, Penang Hokkien culture was dominant in Penang. To the

4) They included Chua Yu Kay, Lim Leng Cheak, Cheah Joo Jin and Cheah Ewe Ghee.

5) This was not the first time the Penang Hokkiens experimented with western technology. In the 1880s, Koh Seang Tek, the brother of Koh Seang Tat, had started the first ice-factory in Penang. His son, Koh Leap Cheng together with Quah Beng Kee, Ooi Hong Lim, Yeoh Seng Lye and Yeoh Seng Soon established the Bean Wah Lee Oil Mill. The mill costing \$400,000 was then the biggest oil mill in Penang.

British, the Penang Hokkiens were also known as Straits-born Chinese. Colonial administrators who studied the Chinese community in the Straits, picked out the unique amalgamation between Peranakan Chinese and Hokkien Chinese cultural features as markers of Straits born Chinese identity. Unlike Singapore, where “Straits-born” referred to Baba Chinese, in Penang the term took in a wide spectrum of individuals. There were Straits-born Chinese who had little association with Peranakan culture although a large proportion did. There were those who were China-orientated and Chinese educated, although most Straits-born Chinese in public life were English educated. As this was such an inclusive group, most of Penang’s business and social organisations were open to all dialect-groups. This included the Chinese Town Hall, the Chinese Club, the Chinese Merchants’ Club, the Chinese Recreation Club and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. While the Penang Hokkien dialect held the Chinese community together, an English educated class was also emerging from within the community. This English-educated class of Chinese soon occupied leadership positions in most of the business and social clubs. An elitist self-perception began to take root among the English educated who identified themselves as British subjects. The British called them Straits-born Chinese and they began to refer to themselves as the Straits Chinese.

Lim Cheng Ean

Whilst English education played an important role in the creation of a clerical class among the Straits Chinese, it also encouraged the adoption of western culture. The most obvious development was the wearing of western style suits, the smoking of cigars, use of the walking stick and the wearing of bowler hats. The Straits Chinese had also stopped wearing the queue. The English-educated also imported western furniture, dined western-style, joined in field sports, rode horses, imported horse-drawn carriages and drank wine. They traveled widely, visiting western landmarks and seeing for themselves how westerners in Europe lived.

There was a small minority among the English-educated Straits Chinese who sent their children to English universities. The trend of trading families sending their younger sons for tertiary education gave rise to a professional class and widened the divide between the English-educated and the Chinese-educated. The English-educated saw themselves as progressive, well-off and culturally more

sophisticated than the Chinese-educated.

Lim Hin Leong was exceptional as he had a Cambridge-educated son in Lim Cheng Ean (1889–1987). Lim Cheng Ean (1889–1982), was sent to St. Xavier’s Institution, a La Salle school located in Farquhar Street. The La Salle brothers had established the school in 1852. Cheng Ean excelled in his studies and eventually went on to read law at Clare College, Cambridge. While in London, Cheng Ean recalls a most interesting event:

It was in the early part of 1911, when I was still in London and had not gone to Cambridge yet that I was invited, together with some Chinese students, by an English woman to her house for tea...The hostess brought out a kind of album, wherein previous guests had affixed their signatures, some even giving vent to complimentary remarks...When my turn came for me to give a specimen of my signature, I signed my name in English with a flourish. My hostess looked at it and then said that she would like to see it written in Chinese also. Here I was stumped, for all the Chinese I had learnt to read and write I had completely forgotten during the subsequent 12 years in an English school...I was glad I was invited to her tea party and asked to write my name in Chinese, otherwise I would never have realised that there were people in the world who expected Chinese to know Chinese (Lim, “My Life” in *Penang File*)

While this account might strike the contemporary Malaysian Chinese as strange, it demonstrates the influence of English education on the Penang Straits Chinese. Stranger still was Cheng Ean’s choice for a marriage partner in Rosalind Hoalim. Having met in the United Kingdom, their marriage was unusual in an era where marriages were often brokered by their parents for business or cultural reasons. A conventional example was Lim Cheng Teik, Lim Cheng Ean’s eldest brother. Cheng Teik was married to the granddaughter of Koh Seang Tat, then the wealthiest and most influential Straits Chinese in Penang. Cheng Teik also married *chin chuey* style, moving into the Koh family home. Thus Cheng Ean’s decision to marry Rosalind Hoalim was something novel, a love match rather than a strategic proposition.

British Guyanese Connection

More interesting is Rosalind Hoalim's cultural background. Her family migrated from China following a small Hakka Christian trend that landed them in British Guyana. Rather propitiously, the capital city of Guyana was also Georgetown but the society that developed in this South American city was very different. There the communities had more opportunities to meld culturally. The Hakka Chinese, a small and rather isolated from the constant flow of Chinese migration, had more reason to integrate. Whilst in George Town Penang, the number of Chinese migrants were increasing exponentially and the hybrid Peranakan Chinese had more reason to maintain their Chinese heritage.

Rosalind like her husband found common ground in their English education and the cultural connections that empire had created across the globe. They read the same authors, was familiar with the sporting activities and the parades that was happening throughout the British Empire almost like clockwork. The activities of the town hall and the active participation required of each citizen in this transitional period from pioneering into a more solid state of administration meant that both of them shared similar political consciousness.

Whilst Cheng Ean was reading for a Law degree at Cambridge, Rosalind was in the United Kingdom to qualify as a medical practitioner at Edinburgh University. They met in London, fell in love and decided to get married in the midst of the First World War. Their first child, a daughter Lim Phaik Gan, was born in 1915. By all means, this young couple was unconventional, worldly and cosmopolitan. Rosalind benefited from her family's Christian background and their belief in equal opportunities for women. Cheng Ean, the youngest son of a wealthy Straits Chinese, had the financial and academic wherewithal to make unconventional decisions.

Upon their return to Penang, Cheng Ean and his wife soon settled into a much more formal setting. World War I had ended but so had the pre-war imperial cosmopolitan world view. British colonial administrators who began replacing the old guard were subjected to rigorous examinations and it was much harder for the maverick to rise to any meaningful station in the administration. Interactions between the "white" and "non-white" communities may have been more frequent but it was also more formal. Calling-cards, Lim Phaik Gan recalls, "was now required". Strict colour bar was enforced at clubs, associations and organisations. In short, society became more hierarchical.

Nonetheless, this suited the Straits Chinese who now saw themselves as “a better class of Chinese”. “Imitation is the best form of flattery”, said Wilfred Blythe, a former Chinese Protectorate Officer. Cheng Ean and his contemporaries took part in British sporting activities such as amateur horse racing, polo and cricket. They built hilltop bungalows complete with fire-places, and entered into the colonial administrative class.

Cheng Ean soon founded a law firm in Penang, was made municipal councillor and eventually was appointed to the Straits Settlements Legislative Council as a non-executive member. The Straits Chinese could also be openly critical of the administration. In 1933, Cheng Ean caused a stir in the Legislative Council when he walked out in protest at the colonial government’s reluctance to fund Chinese vernacular education. Nonetheless, Cheng Ean remained very much a “King’s Chinese”, well known for his cosmopolitan views.

The chief reason for this walk out was a disagreement with British colonial policy towards vernacular education. Perhaps realising how important vernacular education was to maintaining cultural identity, Cheng Ean was adamant that the British keep their word to establish a multicultural educational policy as promised by Sir Stamford Raffles. In fact, Cheng Ean referred to Raffles’ promise of a college that encouraged learning in Malay, Chinese and Indian languages. Furthermore, Cheng Ean felt that since taxes were collected from all citizens regardless of their ethnicity, it was only fair that the British support vernacular education of all communities.

This was contrarian thinking and when the crunch came, Tan Cheng Lock, his Malaccan counterpart, abandoned him. He walked out alone nonetheless. In 1936, despite this fall from grace, Cheng Ean was elected president of the Penang branch of the Straits Chinese British Association. He spear-headed the case for special representation of Straits Chinese interests in the Legislative Council and was partially successful in pushing for a “Malayan” agenda, where as British subjects there should be equality amongst the races. For that he earned the ire of the Malays in Penang, who felt him to be an arrogant man. But, he continued to provide pro bono legal services to the poor and rose to becoming a magistrate. The accolade “People’s Lawyer” was his in older age. He retreated from the community after the War and lived the rest of his long life in semi-isolation up in Claremont, his Penang Hill bungalow. Nonetheless, his children would carry the torch.

The Children

Lim Cheng Ean and Rosalind Hoalim had eight children, five boys and three girls. Seven reached adulthood whilst the youngest died due to illness. The eldest is Lim Phaik Gan, a daughter followed Lim Kean Hock, a son. This pattern was repeated with girls coming before boys. Lim Phaik Lim was followed by Lim Kean Chye, Lim Phaik Cheen, Lim Kean Siew, Lim Kean Chong and lastly, Lim Kean Hoon.

All of them grew up in a typical hybrid Straits Chinese milieu. Lim Phaik Gan recalls buggy rides to her paternal grandmother's home in Millview, Prangin Road. There, she was exposed to the rituals and lifestyle of the wealthy nyonya grandmother, who also had Eurasian relatives; one of her grandmother's nephews being the great-great grandson of Captain Francis Light. Today, that family connection has been lost and exists only as Lim Phaik Gan's memory. Mrs Phuah Hin Leong was a formidable woman, who kept the "keys to the ladder" tied to her belt. She smoked high-grade opium, gave big parties and carried on the philanthropist role of her late husband.

Their parents like their grandmother inspired the children to reach for their ambitions. There was no question about education, which Rosalind considered key to the development of young minds. She also insisted that the children be trained in music. All excelled at the piano. Cheng Ean also owned horses and the children enjoyed horse-riding. This was soon replaced by fast cars. Shooting was also another sport that the boys excelled in, with Kean Chye winning medals later in British contests. It will not be possible to describe all the activities of the Lim Cheng Ean family. Suffice it to say that the Peranakan heritage inherited from their grandparents coupled with the free-spiritedness of their British Guyanese mother gave this set of children opportunities to think differently from their contemporaries. This is most apparent when they are put beside their cousins, many of whom lacked the drive and idealism of this family.

Lim Phaik Gan like all her sisters was educated at home and at the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus at Light Street. The latter was the first English school for girls in East Asia. At home, her British Guyanese mother insisted that all her children receive a musical education. Phaik Gan excelled at the pianoforte and was particularly fond of Beethoven. Helping her with her school work was her father, who tutored her in Shakespeare and other English classics. Phaik Gan excelled academically and set the standards for her siblings. She was among the

first girls in Penang to sit for the London Matriculation Examinations and went on to Girton College Cambridge to complete her education. She graduated having read Law and History.

Of the boys, Kean Hock, the eldest, went on to read Medicine and eventually migrated to the United Kingdom. Kean Chye and Kean Siew went up to Cambridge where they read Law. At Cambridge, Kean Chye was active amongst the socialist circles and became politically active supporting the Left. Kean Siew, who went up after World War II, was also attracted to Left wing politics. But he was also studious achieving a rare double first in English and Law. Kean Chong, the seventh child and by default the baby of the family after Kean Hoon died, read Engineering at the University of Melbourne. He signed up to join the Royal Australian Air Force and ended up in Europe throughout the war. After flying missions over the Kiel Canal and other raids over Germany, he returned to Australia to finish his degree. All this time, he had an admiring eye on his politically active older brother Kean Chye, joining the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU) when that was set up in Singapore in 1946. When the MDU was outlawed, Kean Chong decided to move to China following in the footsteps of Kean Chye.

Kean Siew, on the other hand, returned to Malaysia and joined the Labour Party in Penang. There he rose up the ranks of the party and led many successful municipal council elections. Known for his formidable wit and strong public speaking skills, Kean Siew was a much feared opposition leader. He was elected into the Malaysian parliament in 1959 and led the Socialist Front from 1957–64. He built his political base in Penang and lived there all his life.

Whilst the boys each charted their own paths, Lim Phaik Gan married a Singapore-based lawyer and, for several years, lived as a homemaker in 1930s Singapore. After the war, she decided to return to the United Kingdom to sit for her Bar examinations. It was at this time during the late 1940s that she became politically active. She edited *Suara Merdeka* the journal of the pro-independence Malayan Forum. She also became a member of the Labour Party. But it was as a lawyer that Phaik Gan carved a name for herself back home in Malaysia. She championed the cause of the labour unions, fighting for fairer wages and better healthcare. She is best remembered for defending 13 men sentenced to hanging for their anti-Malaysia activities. Phaik Gan declined the offer to head the Malaysian Labour Party and her only foray into the political arena was in 1964 when she stood for the state seat of Sentul and narrowly losing to the Alliance candi-

date.

In 1969, in the aftermath of the bloody May 13 Race Riots, Lim Phaik Gan was appointed to the National Consultative Council (NCC) which drew up the controversial New Economic Policy and the Rukunegara (national values). The NEP's main objective was to eradicate poverty regardless of race and to end the identification of economic activity with any one ethnic community. In 1971, Phaik Gan was appointed Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations with the rank of ambassador, the first such honour for a woman. She had broken a glass barrier for women both in the law and now in the diplomatic arena.

Her two sisters led rather more quiet lives. Phaik Cheen migrated to the United States where she became a homemaker. Phaik Lim read medicine at Edinburgh University and qualified as a medical practitioner serving at the Penang General Hospital. Other than for a short stint in China, Phaik Lim lived in Scotland and Penang.

Conclusions

This description of the Lim family demonstrates how Anglophone Straits Chinese cultural identity was shaped by English education and built upon the opportunities that presented themselves in cosmopolitan George Town for the better part of the 20th century. It was a cultural identity that manifested itself as “contrarian”, rational and outspoken. All these values eventually led the children of Lim Cheng Ean to move into the political arena, something that Cheng Ean could not do effectively within the colonial framework. That the children all gravitated to the political Left, particularly the brand of socialism that had become popular in the United Kingdom in the 1930s and 1940s, led two of the children to set up the Malaysian Labour Party whilst three others served in Mao's China. This paper has illustrated how within three generations, the Lims have moved beyond mere middle-class aspirations and found their calling in the process of nation-building.

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