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Taiping boy making waves down under

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TAIPING-born doctor Richard Lim Soon Huat is bridging the cultural gap between Australians and Asians, and he could well become the next Deputy Chief Minister of the Northern Territory. K.C. BOEY speaks to the doctor-turned-politician.

RICHARD Lim Soon Huat is a driven man; driven by a passion to be "a change agent".

The idealism intrinsic to the Hippocratic oath that he took as a medical doctor would impel him to drive change as a global citizen.

Yet the realism that he has come to accept as a politician persuades him to work for change within the realms of the possible.

But Lim, the Taiping boy who has worked his way to become deputy leader of the opposition - potential Deputy Chief Minister - of Northern Territory in Australia, sees no conflict between the two.

"You need the ideals to push (the boundaries of) reality," Lim tells the New Sunday Times from his home in Alice Springs, in the heart of the Australian Central Desert.

Pushing that boundary, Lim, drawing from his "privileged position" of having been born Malaysian and having immersed himself in multicultural Australia after 41 years in the land down under, wants to be "a conduit" for Australia into South-east Asia and Asia, and vice-versa.

"I will be able to open doors where others may have failed," he says.

Lim - now Richard Lim Soon Huat, with his given names at birth written in Chinese characters in the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory website - recalls the time when then Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad (now Tun) stopped over to refuel in Darwin on his way to Auckland, New Zealand.

Prime Minister John Howard had just won Government in 1996. Howard's state colleagues, then in Government in the Northern Territory, were keen to help make an impression on Dr Mahathir in building the relationship with Malaysia.

Lim, elected to the NT Parliament two years previously, was on the cusp of becoming a minister.

"The Chief Minister (Shane Stone) and I were on the aerobridge waiting to greet the PM (Dr Mahathir) as he disembarked," Lim recalls.

"The CM said to me, 'I will greet him first, and then we'll walk to the VIP lounge where I will introduce you to the PM.

"Who was I to argue? I was a backbench member in the presence of the exalted.

"Anyway, the PM walked up to the aerobridge towards us. As he approached, he stuck his hand out to me and said, 'You must be Dr Richard Lim from Taiping. We are almost neighbours, and fellow GPs. How are you?'"

That floored Lim. Lim was not sure if much could be made of that meeting, but two years later he was able to secure an appointment for subsequent Chief Minister Denis Burke to meet Dr Mahathir when the Chief Minister was going through Kota Kinabalu on a visit to Sabah, Sarawak, Hong Kong and China.

Now in opposition, with Lim's Country Liberal Party having lost office to the Labor Party in 2001, Lim draws confidence from those times in his quest to be a "conduit".

"Given the opportunity, I believe I can (be a conduit)," he says before setting off to visit his family in Taiping (early this month).

"Australia is now my home but I feel an affinity for Malaysia."

It has been a long journey from when, as a 16-year-old in 1963, the St George's Institution boy headed for boarding school in Brisbane.

At that time, the boy with the "gift of the gab" worked his way through medical school at the University of Queensland, did his internship in Brisbane, traineeship in Adelaide in South Australia, went into general practice in way-out places, worked through the public system in Alice Springs, went back into general practice and, through his involvement in community work and local government, ended up in politics.

In 2000, he became the first minister of Chinese descent - and first expatriate Malaysian - in an Australian Government.

Last September, he was made deputy leader of the opposition. Lim is confident that next year the CLP will regain Government, and he will be Deputy Chief Minister.

Within the triangle of influence between Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra, on the eastern coastal strip of the Australian island continent, the Northern Territory may be no more than a backwater of 200,000 people in a population of 20 million.

But Lim is fervent, if nothing else, as a Territorian.

Non-Territorians may concede some value in the Territory - especially its multicultural capital Darwin - as a staging post for Australia into Asia.

And Alice Springs is on the world tourist map as the "sleep town" for the rock formation "wonder of the world" and spiritual home of the Aborigines.

They were hardly what drew Lim to the Australian Central Desert. He'd always had that trailblazer in him, shunning the city lights for the bush.

By accident or design, from life partner to career choice and recreation, Lim has bucked convention.

At boarding school in De La Salle College doing his "subsenior" preuniversity studies, and at residential hall Union College in university, Lim was deliberate not to limit his association with fellow Malaysians and Singaporeans, at the risk of being branded snobbish by his peers.

He married Sharon, a sheep farmer's daughter, after a "whirlwind romance". They met at Mater Misericordiae Hospital in Brisbane he was an intern and she was training to be a midwife and there were the early objections from the farm community to "half-caste" children.

In January, they celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary. Lim is proud that he now gets on very well with his in-laws.

He's proud, too, of the two "great young women" - Kinta Hui Hui and Letisha Hui Chen - that he and Sharon have, and a son - Michael Arne - that they've come to know over recent years.

At play, Lim would take to the skies. He is a pilot, having once owned two aeroplanes.

He'd once put his love of flying to practical use, having been designated aviation medical examiner. And he'd been a member of the International Fellowship of Flying Rotarians.

Of his humble beginnings, Lim, 57, would cry poor. Delivered by the traditional midwife at the family home - a Jalan Iskandar shophouse - in Taiping, he remembers growing up in the neighbourhood streets, frequenting Burmese pool and "any of the pools that we could get a group together to go to".

"Even the town (Coronation) pool," recalls Lim. "I did not enjoy the 'privileges' of the New Club pool until I returned for holidays from Australia for the first time after three years in Brisbane."

It was only then that the family was "affluent enough to attain

membership" of the club.

Lim's contemporaries cycling to school from the fringe new villages of Pokok Assam and Aulong wouldn't have thought the life of a town boy going to school in a trishaw was one of deprivation.

His father, Lim Kong Chan, started out as a petrol pump attendant. But the two-pump service station in Jalan Iskandar, Lee Pean & Co, was owned by an uncle. And the elder Lim also helped his father run a taxi service.

He worked his way to becoming a partner in Lee Pean, and was the driving force in sending his six children overseas for studies, even if he might not have paid the whole way for Lim.

The elder Lim, a Georgian himself, had always wanted to be a doctor. He was bright, and was a certainty to get a scholarship to study medicine, says the younger Lim.

But World War II intervened. The children came along, and his ambition passed to driving his children to "succeed".

The elder Lim, now 83, and wife, Phuah Saw Guat, 79, will celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary this year.

"I grew up with the 'knowledge' that I was going to be a doctor," Lim recalls of the time when he was no more than five years old.

So it was that the young Lim was sent to school a year earlier than most. His family used its influence and he was accelerated through another year.

Thus, throughout Lim's years at St George's, he was always the youngest student.

Former schoolmate Tan Kooi Chan remembers "The Boaster" for his "gift of the gab".

But Tan, who now lives in Melbourne, is surprised Lim is in politics for as he progressed through to his later years in school, he withdrew more into himself.

Tan, however, concedes that this is an observation from afar. He had been in school with Lim from primary school. But after Form Three, Tan had been streamed into the arts, and Lim into science.

Science classmate Ong Seng Say remembers "a good friend" with a thoughtful, generous nature.

Ong, now a pharmacist in Kuala Lumpur, tells of the time Lim's family bought him a set of Encyclopaedia Britannica. Lim would invite his classmates home to use the encyclopaedia.

"There will be those who do not know him well who might construe that as bragging," says Ong, who with another classmate, Tan Choong Soon, went with Lim to De La Salle College.

Lim was never one for whom it was easy to cultivate close relationships, as he himself tells of his wedding "in the middle of nowhere" in the farming community near Cummins in South Australia.

Lim was alone in the groom's party. "I was not too concerned to invite any of my friends," Lim recalls. "Not that I had bosom buddies."

Ong is not surprised. Good friends that they were through school, college and university, they have not kept up with each other since their parting of ways. But neither is Ong surprised where Lim's career has led him.

"He is determined in what he wants to achieve," says Ong. "He understands what it's like being in a team to get anywhere; the importance of teamwork."

It was at Lim's nudging that the two of them took up lifesaving - for which Ong ended up as an examiner of the Royal Lifesaving Society - and hockey at university.

Ong attaches no significance in his tale of the young Lim's generosity with his Encyclopaedia Britannica to Lim's later life.

Yet the anecdote resonates with an episode four months into their stay at De La Salle College, to do with a historical figure that Lim today continues to count among inspirations in his life.

Lights out was strict in boarding school. But the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy sent shock waves through the darkened dormitories.

Lim was caught with Ong's portable radio under the blanket and it was confiscated. His pleadings to the dorm master that the news of the assassination was no hoax fell on deaf ears.

The following day at assembly, Lim was vindicated and had Ong's radio returned.

The college shared the Kennedy enjoyment to the nation in his 1961 inaugural address that till today inspires Lim: "My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

That sentiment drives Lim today.

Ask him to assess his achievements and he starts with an exposition of what he understands of achievement.

"I measure achievement as being able to leave this place a little bit better than it was when I first became aware of it," he says.

In that sense, "yes, I have (achieved)".

"I have contributed as a role model," says Lim. "I have contributed by having three well-adjusted children, all successful in their careers ... in their awareness of their need to give back to their community."

A community is like a bank, Lim goes on. "One can only derive benefits from one's community only if one is prepared to invest in it."

"Contribution" and "change agent" pepper the e-mail messages, telephone interviews and conversations this writer shared with Lim and others to get a sense of the man straddling two cultures who sees himself and all of the various ethnic diaspora all over the world "having an obligation to demonstrate that there is nothing to fear in cultural diversity".

"In the ethnic mix of a nation, all men and women are of goodwill," Lim asserts. "Only misunderstanding causes distrust and thus conflict."

"Politics is the art of consensus and compromise. It is beholden on all politicians to use that skill to seek compromise and consensus."

As a doctor from the bush, Lim is a "bleeding heart" on indigenous issues, having "grown up in a cross-cultural environment and experienced (Australia) as a member of the racial minority".

"My former life in Malaysia reminds me of those who do not have; whose lives can be bettered by not only opportunities, but access to opportunities," says Lim.

"I bring that background to my relationship with aboriginal people in Australia, no doubt the most underprivileged class of people in the country."

So where to from here?

Lim is in no doubt. He sees himself as a role model for people in minority groups, that with education, perseverance and determination, the opportunities are there to be grasped.

"I have the distinct privilege of (having been) elected into Parliament by an electorate where my own ethnic representation is less than one per cent," Lim says, by way of explanation that positions of influence are achievable without having to be purchased, nor need for reliance on ethnic support.

"When practising as a doctor, I felt that I was only able to influence the lives of those patients that I looked after.

"In politics, I can influence policies, even from the opposition ... and through our system of national ministerial forums, influence policies at

the federal level."

Popular culture may be prosaic in the national scheme of things, but Lim is proud that he has been instrumental in initiating one distinct feature of the Northern Territory Parliament.

It's the only legislative assembly in Canberra and the States that has its parliamentary session opened each year by a lion dance, and to have the lion dance performed in Parliament during Chinese New Year.

This is in recognition of early Chinese influence in Darwin, dating back to 592 BC, as one study has it.

At a time of the biggest settlement of Chinese in Darwin in the late 1800s, when many arrived as indentured labour, Chinese outnumbered the Caucasian population by six to one.

A member of the lion troupe of the Chung Wah Society in Darwin, Lim takes part in the lion dance in Parliament. Lim is the vice-patron of Chung Wah Society.

Sabah knows Lim well because of dragon boat racing. He once led an NT Government team that won gold at the annual international dragon boat festival in Kota Kinabalu.

And Lim is held in high regard at the Malaysia Club of Queensland in Brisbane, which he is a member.

Lim may have spent one in five years of his life outside of his hometown, but his roots grow deep. He visits every year or two.

He can picture himself this morning gazing up towards Maxwell Hill from the Casual Market in Theatre Street, indulging in satay, ais kacang and nyonya kuih.