

Restore Lim Lian Geok's citizenship
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COMMENT At the next general election, among the demands for civil rights by the Chinese community in Malaysia, there will be one demand that I hope will not only return justice to Lim Lian Geok but also focus on all the principles that he stood for, namely, reclaim Lim's citizenship that was unjustly taken away from him in 1961.

For the first time, a book in English has been published on a man beatified in the Malaysian Chinese community as the 'soul of the Malaysian Chinese' after his passing in 1985. No other Malaysian Chinese has been accorded that highest honour.

book lim lian geok soul of the malaysian chinese And no other Malaysian Chinese has been so highly respected to be given the privilege of lying-in-state at the Chinese Assembly Hall in Kuala Lumpur before the biggest funeral procession the capital had ever seen for a Malaysian Chinese. The anniversary of his passing has been institutionalised as an Education Festival – an annual celebration of mother tongue education, patriotism and the spirit of struggle he embodied.

His name was Lim Lian Geok, and every year during the Education Festival in December, political parties, associations and school children go to pay their respects at this great man's mausoleum at the Hokkien Cemetery in Kuala Lumpur. He was such an important figure in the Malayan Chinese community that the Tunku had to include him in the 'Malacca Talks' over the constitutional issues in 1955.

And yet this great man suffered the biggest pain any patriot and educator could possibly endure; being stripped of his Malayan citizenship and his teaching licence, after all his contributions towards mother tongue education, civil rights and the Independence struggle in 1961.

But this great man was not your stereotype Malaysian Chinese leader in a suit driving a limousine yearning for power, wealth or honorific titles. I first met Lim when I was interviewing him for my book 'The Chinese Schools in Malaysia: a Protean Saga'. I had read so much about him and heard from my colleagues in Dong Jiao Zong, about his courage and commitment and about how his citizenship and teaching licence had been revoked for all his efforts on behalf of mother tongue education and civil rights.

When I met him in 1984, I was impressed more by the fact that this giant of Malayan history lived in such humble lodgings and had such an unassuming character. He hardly received any media attention.

Indeed, as Yen Ching-hwang says, "Throughout his life, he sought neither power nor wealth for himself. In fact, he despised the rich but stingy Chinese businessmen and the unprincipled Chinese politicians and high-ranking officials and felt ashamed to be associated with them as community leaders."

Largely unknown

lim lian geok book launching 310710 books The documents in this present collection, 'Lim Lian Geok: Soul of the Malaysian Chinese' will be an eye-opener to many, especially the English-educated.

This man who has been revered since his departure in 1985 as the 'soul of the Malaysian Chinese' is largely unknown or misrepresented outside the Chinese-educated community. Some of these documents pre-date Independence and it is interesting to see the issues as they were presented then, especially those of language and citizenship. If it had not been for the political machinations by the British colonial power at the time, the status of Chinese and Tamil language education in this country might have been quite different.

For many, Lim is well-known as a champion of mother tongue education in Malaysia. But from these documents, it is clear that his stand was certainly not chauvinistic but was based on basic human rights, i.e. the right to mother tongue education. Thus, compared to many of his contemporaries and even present leaders, he was way ahead of his time. Another point of note is that at the time of the Malacca Talks in 1955, the common language was considered to be English and Malay schools were still treated as vernacular schools.

Lim's stand on the language question was as follows: "If Malaya needs a common language, it has to be determined by the size of the population using that particular language. Based on such a criterion, Malay will certainly be the first common language, and Chinese the second. But a common language should not jeopardize the existence nor hinder the development of mother tongues and their written forms..."

"Such an issue can be settled amicably with the consensus of all the communities when Malaya achieves independence. On the other hand, if a common language is determined merely by a decree not supported by the people, it amounts to disregard for the traditional culture of the communities. It is also against the UN Charter, thereby antagonising all the communities."

Passionate about being Malayan

Lim was passionate about being a Malayan and deeply concerned about the unity of the people in the independence struggle. He did not agree with the colonial argument that integration of the people meant the acceptance of one common language system:

"We are of the view that the unity of the nation in spirit is the most important factor for the establishment of an independent Malaya. We do not have to resort to the integration of all the communities...The theory about integrated education and common language is but another form of subjugation. The advocacy of such a theory is solely for the purpose of seeking an extension of their rule on the pretext that the nation is yet to be unified and that there are obstacles to nation building..."

He stressed sincerity and truthfulness in dealing with unity among the various ethnic communities and opportunities for interaction among the students of various communities. This brings to mind the proposal by the Chinese education movement in the mid-Eighties for interactive activities between students of different language schools while opposing the 'integrated schools' proposal by the BN government.

Already in those pre-Independence days, Lim had a Malayan perspective and advocated the Malayanising of text books in the local Chinese schools:

"We have appointed representatives from UCSTAM to be involved in the re-editing of Chinese school text books. Currently, these text books have Malayan context and content. This goes to prove that our younger generation is being imbued with a sense of loyalty to Malaya."

A true Malayan, Lim was consistent in his championing of mother tongue education for all Malayan ethnic communities, including Malay-language education:

"Finally, we hope that an attempt will be made to expedite the elevation of Malay education to a higher level. For now, as many Malay secondary schools as possible should be set up."

Unity in Diversity

lim lian geok book launching 310710 panelists
In the struggle for Malayan citizenship just before Independence, Lim played a key role in urging the diverse ethnic communities to unite as can be seen in the 1956 Declaration by the National Congress of Chinese Societies:

"...we have become brethren as a result of our co-operation in the course of nation building. Our future generations will work and play together on this beloved land for a long, long time to come."

These are words from the heart when the Congress called for efforts to improve the living standards of the Malays on the eve of Independence:

"...we have to admit that the Malays with their sincerity have long commanded the respect of all the communities. Extreme imbalance exists in the economic conditions of the various communities in Malaya; particularly the standard of living of the Malay community is way behind the others. This is a fact. Our heartfelt sympathies lie with them. We sincerely hope the government will address such imbalance, and render them assistance so that they are able to catch up with the other communities within the shortest time possible."

It is unimaginable today for a Malay-language press to invite any leader of Dong Jiao Zong to write an address to its readers on the occasion of Hari Raya Puasa. It is a tribute to the stature of Lim Lian Geok, at the time a Chinese community leader and a supporter of Malay mother tongue education, that he was invited to address the readers of Utusan Melayu (published in Jawi script) on May 4, 1956:

"...we must develop the idea and objective of co-existence and co-prosperity; we must regard all communities as one family, enjoying the same rights and performing the same obligations...If we expect all communities to take up their responsibilities in times of crisis, we must instil confidence in them that all of us enjoy the same benefits available in this country. This is the only way to lay a strong foundation for forging a Malayan nation."

It is also worthy of note that Lim stresses the fact that true unity of the nation is based upon mutual respect and equal civil rights. He says this during the struggle for independence in a Malay-language newspaper written in the Jawi.

This is especially ironic since I was detained without trial under the Internal Security Act for saying the same thing in 1987!

Culture is a Healer

Lim was also invited to speak at Tamil school events. In his address to the Selangor Tamil School Teachers' Association, he treats culture as a healer and of benefit to all:

"We are activists in the cultural sphere. Culture is always benign in nature; it is always beneficial and harmless to the populace. We are for culture, and not against it."

And how often do we hear educationists or artists say they do not want to be involved with anything political! Compare such sentiments with Lim's stirring theme at the Jiao Zong Annual Congress on Dec 12, 1956: "The Fight for Independence is our Top Priority!"

As the country was fighting for Independence, this great patriot conceptualised the 'Two Great Missions of Education' thus:

"One, to inculcate in our children a sense of loyalty to Malaya...We must make our children realize that Malaya is their only motherland; Two, to inculcate in our children the concept that they are to survive and prosper with other communities. Malaya is a country plagued by complex ethnic problems. In nation building, the various communities must work closely together in order to achieve progress...Within the four seas, all men are brothers."

In one of the documents in this collection, one learns how on hearing that a Malay student from humble origins named Hang Tuah had attained entry to Nanyang University, Lim was ecstatic and called on the Chinese public to lend him a helping hand. His press statement likened the three main communities in the country to three siblings in the newly emerging nation. He urged the university to give Hang Tuah a special scholarship for the cause of inter-cultural understanding.

Worthy role model

During the Japanese Occupation, Lim served in the Service Corps tending to the dead and the wounded. He himself was wounded in Singapore while defending his motherland. Even though his citizenship had been so rudely wrenched away, his love for Malaya was unconditional:

"I love Malaya so much that I wish to spend the remaining years of my life here. Otherwise, I would not have spent tens of thousands of dollars over a period of four long years in the hope of retaining my citizenship."

The Malaysian Chinese community has picked a worthy, own home role model in Lim. From his life and times, we can identify those attributes to emulate:

* Humility and Sustainable Lifestyle: He was a simple man who led a humble existence to the end of his life, living a sustainable lifestyle and avoiding the flashy existence of the consumerist world.

* Integrity, Perseverance and Dignity: These core values were nurtured in his home upbringing and the educational principles taught at his teaching college, Jimei College, Xiamen.

* Commitment to workers/teachers' rights and right to association: He was a modern unionist who was concerned for the welfare of the Chinese school teachers, especially their low pay and conditions and was instrumental in the formation of the KLCSTA in 1949.

* Commitment to mother tongue education and culture: He spoke up also for Malay and Tamil language education, and practiced true multi-culturalism.

* Commitment to civil rights: He led the opposition to the Barnes Report in 1951 and the Education Ordinance in 1952, the Education White paper in 1954 and the Education Act 1961. He was not afraid of any crackdown by the colonial power or the Alliance government.

* Sense of mission and responsibility: LLG took up the presidency of the KLCSTA in 1950 and the UCSTA in 1953 as he sensed the crisis facing Chinese education and he was prepared to face incarceration and repression by the state.

True patriot

Finally, Lim reminds us all that the true patriot is not one who flies the flag dutifully on Independence day but one who is prepared to make sacrifices for truth, justice and equality:

"I feel honoured to be able to make sacrifices for the sake of truth, and justice. It is certainly no humiliation. The concept of equality of all communities I advocate is universal, fair and reasonable. Though it may not be a reality now, it will certainly develop to fruition in the future. My body may wither through age, illness and death, but my soul will march on..."

Isn't it time the government restore Lim Lian Geok's Malaysian citizenship that was so unjustly taken away?

DR KUA KIA SOONG, a former MP, was principal of the New Era College, Kajang. He is also a director of human rights group Suaram. Kua edited the book 'Lim Lian Geok: Soul of the Malaysian Chinese', which was launched today. Photos above.

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