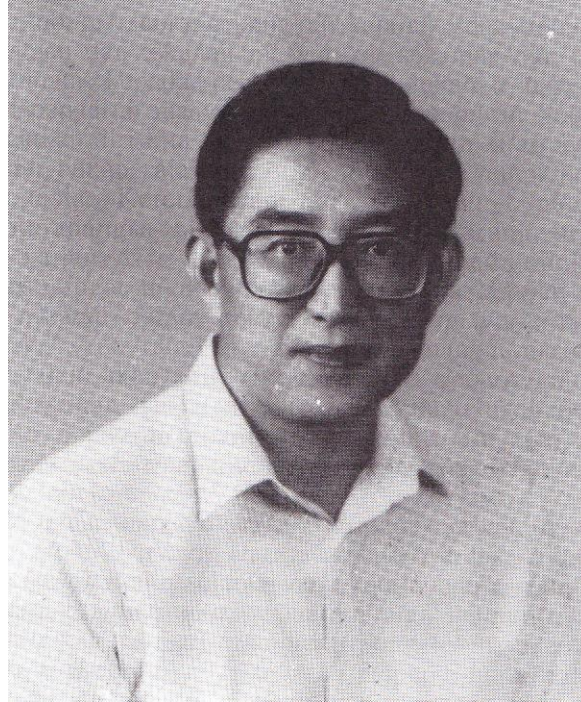


## **PROFESSOR CHEAH BOON KHENG (1939–2015): IN MEMORIAM OF A REMARKABLE HISTORIAN**



The international scholarly world and in particular Malaysia's academic fraternity regrettably lost a great scholar with the passing of Cheah Boon Kheng on 27 July 2015 aged 76. He succumbed to a year-long battle with cancer. Professor Cheah, through his research and publications, was a highly respected and renowned historian in the country as well as in the international academic community.

Born in Klang, Selangor, Cheah began as a journalist with the *The Straits Times* (1956–1967) where he was exposed and familiarised with the rigours of research and investigation not unlike the skills demanded in the discipline of history. He read History and English literature at University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur graduating with honours in 1969. Dr. Lee Kam Hing, then a tutor at the History Department in 1967, described Cheah as possessing two sets of qualities, namely "the instinct of a good reporter who knows how to choose what subject to pursue, and a mature, skilled and experienced student who writes very well."<sup>1</sup>

Between 1970 and 1974, Cheah straddled the twin worlds of journalism and academia. While still a journalist (1970–1974), he undertook tutoring at the History Department (1971–1973). It was then that he embarked on a Masters. In 1973 he was appointed assistant lecturer. Having obtained his MA in 1974, he went on to pursue doctoral studies at the Australian National University (ANU),

Canberra under the wings of two well-known Southeast Asianists, Anthony Reid and David Marr. It was then that Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) offered him a teaching position. Hence, having obtained his PhD in Southeast Asian History in 1979, Cheah returned home to take up a lectureship in USM's History Section in the School of Humanities. He subsequently became associate professor in 1984, and professor in 1990. He retired in 1994.

Professor Cheah was an acknowledged specialist of the Japanese occupation (1941–1945) of Malaya and of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) with notable works such as *The Masked Comrade: A Study of the Communist United Front in Malaya, 1945–48* (1979), *Red Star Over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict During and After the Japanese Occupation* (1987), and *From PKI to Comintern: The Apprenticeship of the MCP, 1924–1942* (1992).

He contributed scores of articles to numerous highly regarded journals *inter alia* *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (JSEAS), *Review of Malayan and Indonesian Affairs* (RIMA), *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (JMBRAS) and others. *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation* (2002) and *Tok Janggut: Legends, Histories and Perceptions of the 1915 Rebellion in Kelantan* (2006) are the last of his book-length works. He carved a niche as one of the preeminent scholars in the modern political history of Malaysia.

But Professor Cheah was not tied down to his forte of political history and ever willing to explore other fields that are marginalised in order to ensure a balanced understanding of our national history. At a time when "Ranke" was in vogue and mainstream historians were pursuing political histories in Malaysian universities in the 1980s, he introduced a refreshing trend in Malaysian historiography utilising social theory and the "history from below" approach to produce *The Peasant Robbers of Kedah, 1900–1929: Historical and Folk Perceptions* (1988) that focused on social banditry and rural crime. It was a breakthrough of sorts and a shot in the arm for social history and subaltern studies in Malaysian academia then. In the next decade he addressed overlooked themes such as the role of women in palace politics and the problematic concept of "feudalism" in Malay society. The latter formed the core of his professorial address that was delivered in 1994.<sup>2</sup>

Professor Cheah was one of the movers of USM's oral history project (1982) that aimed at collecting information relating to the Japanese occupation in northern Peninsular Malaysia, viz. northern Perak, Penang, Kedah, and Perlis. His interview of Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, Malaya and Malaysia's first prime minister in 1983 was published as *Reminiscences of Tunku Abdul Rahman 1941–1945* (1989).

During his tenure, the History Section at USM was conspicuous in research, publications and teaching. Professor Cheah provided admirable academic

leadership to colleagues from within as well as from without. The 1980s and 1990s were times when reference materials in Bahasa Malaysia were wanting, and much encouragement were given to writing and publishing in the national language. Fluent in both Malay and Jawi, he led by example in collaborating with Abdul Rahman Haji Ismail in publishing *Sejarah Melayu – The Malay Annal* (1998); the latter undertook the Romanisation and he as editor. In teaching he explored new themes including protest movements that proved innovative and popular with students.

In recognition of his scholarship, Professor Cheah held numerous academic appointments, including Visiting Fulbright Research Fellow at Yale University (May 1984–January 1985); Visiting Fellow at Yale Center for International and Area Studies (November 1989–May 1990); Visiting Lecturer, Asian History Centre, Faculty of Asian Studies at the Australian National University (July–November 1998); and post-retirement, Visiting Professor at the National University of Singapore (1994–1995).

Between 1990 and 1993, he was chief editor of *Kajian Malaysia*, one of the premier journals of Malaysian studies published by Penerbit USM (USM Press). A member of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (MBRAS) since 1976, he served as Honorary Editor of the highly respected *Journal of the Malaysia Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (JMBRAS). In 1991, he was elevated as one of the vice presidents of MBRAS. Besides editing a number of monographs, he contributed immeasurably to further uplift MBRAS and JMBRAS in the international scholarly stage.

I first came to know Professor Cheah (then Dr. Cheah) in 1986 when I enrolled for his course on Malaysian political history, from the Malacca sultanate to 1941. There was nothing spectacular about the course topics but it was Professor Cheah who was spectacular; he possessed the innate ability to transform mundane topics through the use of new approaches and interpretations in his teaching making them remarkable, thought-provoking, if not, memorable. His course *Protest Movements* played to capacity crowds as no student wanted to miss any of his captivating lectures. Simplicity in language that aided easy comprehension was the key to both his lectures and writings that provoked curiosity in the audience to further analyse and pursue the points he raised and/or commented on.

Humility on the part of Professor Cheah was conspicuous as he neither was condescending or haughty in dealing with his charges whether inside or outside the class room. In fact he was ever ready to assist students in their quest for knowledge, and highly accessible even beyond the formal visiting hours. His amicable personality and willingness to share fostered a close rapport with his students regardless of being undergraduates or postgraduates. I am one of his many students who are indebted and grateful for his helping hand. My study of Malay

secret societies in the northern peninsular Malay states of the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century was inspired by him during a discussion back in 1988. Upon completion of my Masters' thesis that benefitted much from his suggestions, it was again him that proposed publication in the MBRAS monograph series. I am extremely touched as he had considerable confidence in my work and my capability in historical research. Moreover, when I joined the History Section in 1991, I was entrusted to assist him in his course including conducting some lectures. He only attended my initial lecture and thereafter had full confidence in me to handle the rest. I vividly recalled his advice to me on the need to be a serious historian and the importance of integrity in the profession, both characteristics I adhered in my career. Professor Cheah continued his unwavering encouragement to me despite moving to the Klang Valley (Bukit Kemuning) following his retirement. Due to his strong support, I was awarded a Visiting Fellowship at the Singapore National Library in 2009.

His passing was a loss to many but he will be fondly remembered for his scholarship, and more importantly, his humility.

*Bawa resmi padi, semakin berisi, semakin tunduk  
Makin berilmu makin merendahkan diri*

Abide the ways of the rice stalk, the more laden it gets,  
the more it bows its head

The more one acquires knowledge, the more humble one becomes

May his soul rest in peace.

**Mahani Musa**

School of Humanities

Universiti Sains Malaysia

4 August 2015

**Editor:** Professor Cheah Boon Kheng is survived by his wife Ai Lin Kho, son Cheah Lu Shun, daughter-in-law Carol Tang and granddaughter, Esther.

## **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> "Historian Cheah Boon Kheng Dies," *The Star*, 29 July 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Cheah, B. K., *Feudalisme Melayu: Ciri-ciri dan Persejarahannya* (Pulau Pinang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 1994).