

**Francis Cooray and Khoo Salma Nasution, *Redoubtable Reformer: The Life and Times of Cheah Cheang Lim*. Penang: Areca Books, 2015. 225+xvii pages. ISBN 978-967-5719-20-2.**

In recent years, interest in autobiographies and biographies of politicians has steadily grown among readers all over the world. These are particularly so popular in the West that these are now considered the “dominant area of non-fiction broadcasting and publication, from television to the Internet” (Hamilton 1). One of the main reasons for such popularity lies in the fact that societies in the West are eager to find out the reality between the truth and the societies’ imagination of their celebrities and politicians. This very fact is partly responsible for the successes of the following autobiographies in the United States: Bill Clinton’s *My Life: The Early Years* (2005); which reached the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list), and *My Life: The Presidential Years* (2005); and Hilary Rodham Clinton’s *Living History* (2004). The election of Barack Obama in 2008 – the first Afro-American to become the president of the United States, brought renewed public interest in his life. It was no surprise therefore, that Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, originally published in 2004 became an instant best-seller following Barack Obama’s election in 2008 as the US President. Similarly, Obama’s *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, published in 2008 not only provided a peek into his life and times but also offered a peek into his world view, and gave the outlines of foreign policy of the newly-elected president. The iconic figure of Nelson Mandela evinced a world-wide interest in the life and time of this great leader. Therefore, when his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, was published in 1995, the readers throughout the world embraced the book with enthusiasm.

The key leaders of Malaysia and Singapore are not far behind their Western counterparts. They have published autobiographies, and their biographies have also been published. Among many autobiographies, the following are noteworthy: Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad’s *A Doctor in the House: Memoirs of Dr. Tun Mahathir Mohamad* (2011), Lee Kuan Yew’s *The Singapore Story: The Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (1998) and *The Singapore Story: The Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew Vol. 2: From Third World to First, 1965-2000* (2000). Biographies such as *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master’s Insights on China, the United States and the World* (2013) by Graham Allison, Robert T. Blackwill and Al Wyne, and Tom Plate’s biographies of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and Lee Kuan Yew titled respectively *Dr. M: Operation Malaysia, Conversations with Mahathir Mohamad* (2011), and *Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew: Citizen Singapore: How to Build A Nation* (2013) also enjoy considerable attention. These books provide

fascinating insights into the political views and policies of two of the key nation builders in Southeast Asia.

A biography may be defined as “our non-fictional output devoted to recording and interpreting real lives” (Hamilton 1). Biographies generally range along a continuum from scholarly to popular to super-pop. *Redoubtable Reformer: The Life and Times of Cheah Cheang Lim* is a biography with a difference. It does not fall into any of the categories of biography just mentioned. It is neither a scholarly nor a popular biography. Rather it is the story of, as the title suggests, of an awesome reformer living in Federated Malaya. Aptly titled *Redoubtable Reformer: The Life and Times of Cheah Cheang Lim*, the book depicts the times and the life story of Cheah Cheang Lim (1875-1948). Unlike other biographies, the *Redoubtable Reformer* is divided into two parts, written by two different authors. The first part of the book (1-66) titled “The Life of Cheah Cheang Lim,” is written by Francis Cooray. The second part (67-136), is by Khoo Salma Nasution, and it is titled “The Times of Cheah Ching Lim” (note the difference in the spelling of Lim’s middle name). Though written by two different authors, their narratives are more similar than different. As a result, the book remains persuasive, cogent and enjoyable.

Cheah Ching Lim’s father was Cheah Boon Hean, the eldest son of Cheah Teah. In 1821, Cheah Teah had emigrated from the Chooi Thau village in China to Penang. Like many others, he had moved to Penang in search of a better life. He soon established a successful business mainly dealing with cloth and pepper. “In the course of his business, Cheah Teah, unlike the present day Chinese immigrants, returned to his home in China and took unto himself a wife” (4). Cheah Teah’s eldest son, Cheah Boon Hean, not only became a highly successful businessman in Penang but also “one of the most respected Chinese citizens of his day” (6). A trusting man, he however lost his fortune. When he died he was buried in Taiping. Cheah Ching Lim was one of his eight children.

Cheah Ching Lim was born in Taiping, Perak, on 6 December 1875. He was educated at the Taiping Central School where he learned both English and Malay. From 1890 to 1894, he worked in the post office at his native place. Later on he became Private Secretary to Foo Choo Choon, being appointed assistant manager in 1896 and attorney in 1900. He was the chairman of the Ipoh Foundry Ltd., and a director of the Tanglin Rubber estate Syndicate Ltd. His business affairs were managed by his brother Cheah Ching Hean and his brother-in-law Khoo Soon Keng. He had his residence in Penang and Ipoh. His hard work paid off and he was able to establish himself as a businessman in Taiping. By the time he established himself as a businessman, Malaya was slowly turning into a modern society; new roads, railways and other means of transportation were being set up, making it easier for the people to move around in the country. As a result, people began to take interest in their surrounding and the various issues affecting their society. One of the social

issues then affecting the people was opium addiction among the Chinese and Malay population. During the period 1907-1908, meetings were held to discuss this problem, and one of the important gatherings of prominent local Chinese nobles was organised in 1908. There one of the ten important resolutions on the Opium Question was proposed by Cheah Ching Lim. He also “felt very keenly the disastrous results of the gambling farms and fought hard for their abolitions even before the campaign against opium began, with the help of European well-wishers of the Chinese” (41). The response of the British Resident in Perak to his letter on gambling is included in the book (42-43).

In addition to eradicating opium and gambling addictions from the Chinese society, Ching Lim was concerned with health and education issues of his society. The authorities had built hospitals in Ipoh, Batu Gajah and Gopeng. These hospitals mainly dealt with diseases like beriberi, dysentery and fever. However, due to an increasing demand from the immigrant Chinese community to build a maternity hospital in the area, in 1904 a Chinese Maternity Hospital was established. The land for the Chamberlain Road site for the hospital was donated by Cheah Ching Lim. A non-profit organisation, the maternity hospital continues to provide services to the community. Ching Lim always appreciated the value of education. In 1919, he set up the Cheah Boon Hean Scholarship at King Edward VII School in Taiping in his father’s honour, the same school where he had received his early education. Cheah Ching Lim was a homely man but had a modern outlook. However, throughout his life Ching Lim remained a Chinese gentleman of the old school. He was a patron of a number of prominent Chinese associations in Malaya. One of his characteristics was to set himself up as an example for the younger Chinese generations. In 1924, he responded to an invitation made by Colonel C.W.C. Parr, the British Resident of Perak, to attend a parade of a combined Selangor and Perak Chinese platoons of Malayan Voluntary Platoon. The public attendance of this parade was poor. At the age of 49, Cheah Ching Lim decided to join the Chinese Platoon as a private. He did it to encourage volunteerism among the young Chinese. In 1924 he was granted a commission with the rank of a second lieutenant, and appointed Officer Commanding (OC) of Chinese Platoon I. Although Cheah Ching Lim set up his business in Perak, he had his home in Penang, where he died on 16 November, 1948.

As noted in *Redoubtable Reformer*, Cheah Ching Lim can be said to represent the Northern Straits Chinese, a segment of the Chinese in Malaya which deserves to be better represented in Malaysian studies. For a long time, the Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia have been attracting a lot of interest from politicians and scholars alike. With the rising economic prowess of the People’s Republic of China, the role of the Chinese communities in developing countries and their economic ties with China are of much interest and a talked about topic. This book, though a biography, places special emphasis on social,

economic and to a lesser extent political aspects of the Chinese community in Perak and Penang in Malaysia. Full of photographs, it provides a fascinating glimpse into a by-gone era in Perak and Penang.

### **Works Cited**

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