

Biographical Notes

Tan Sri Dato Lim Phaik Gan (1915-2013) – Lawyer/ Malaysian diplomat

Born in London in 1915, Lim was the first of eight children of lawyer Lim Cheang Ean and Rosalind Hoalim.¹

Lim (PG) had a privileged upbringing in Penang.² Her grandfather, Phuah Hun Leong, was a wealthy rice merchant, and her father was a lawyer and the Chinese member for Penang on the Straits Settlements Legislative Council in the 1930s. Lim's mother was a trained doctor who was dedicated to various social welfare causes.³

Lim attended Penang Convent before going to Girton College in Cambridge to read law and history. Lim was also an accomplished pianist and a fencing enthusiast.⁴ While studying at Cambridge, Lim met Wee Eng Lock who was then training as a lawyer. The couple married in Singapore in 1938.⁵ Lim gave birth to their son Wilfred in 1939.⁶

After the war, Lim returned to the United Kingdom for her Bar examinations at Lincoln's Inn. In 1949, she also received her Master of Arts degree from Cambridge.⁷ While in UK, she joined the Malayan Forum, and served a stint between 1951 to 1952 as editor of the forum's newsletter, *Suara Merdeka*.⁸

As a lawyer, Lim made her name as an advocate for social justice causes. Her first case in 1948 was an appeal for Lee Meng, who was detained for alleged communist activities. Lim was the junior lawyer assisting the Queen's Counsel, Sir Dingle Foot, on the case. Although the team eventually lost, the case made headlines and resulted in the introduction of the jury in Malaysia for cases that were given the death penalty.⁹

In 1968, Lim handled another prominent case in which 11 young men were sentenced to death for consorting with Indonesian infiltrators and possession of arms. After much lobbying, the youths received royal pardons from the Sultans of Johor and Perak.¹⁰

Besides these prominent cases, Lim worked as legal advisor to various trade unions from 1954 to 1971 including the National Union of Plantation Workers, Railwaymen's Union of Malaya, the Transport Workers' Union and Customs Union of Malaya. Sometimes, she provided pro bono services for financially strapped unions.¹¹

In the 1960s, Lim was politically active as a member of the Labour Party of Malaya. She stood for election in the seat of Sentil in 1964 under the banner of the Socialist Front, but lost the seat to the Alliance Party.¹²

¹ *Southeast Asian personalities of Chinese descent*, p. 652; Lim, P.G., *Kaleidoscope: The memoirs of P.G. Lim*, Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (2012), pp.45-46.

² Lim, *Kaleidoscope*, pp. 46-47.

³ Ngui, Clarence, "A woman for all seasons," *Malaysian Business* (16 April 2004), p. 57; Lim, *Kaleidoscope*, p.58.

⁴ *Southeast Asian personalities of Chinese descent*, p. 652; Wee-Lim", *The Straits Times*, 9 October 1938.

⁵ "Wee-Lim", *The Straits Times*, 9 October 1938.

⁶ Lim, *Kaleidoscope*, p. 98.

⁷ Lim, *Kaleidoscope*, p. 87.

⁸ *Southeast Asian personalities of Chinese descent*, p. 652.

⁹ "Fire in the belly drove fight against injustice", *New Straits Times*, 20 Sept 2009; Lim, *Kaleidoscope*, p. 151.

¹⁰ "First woman ambassador", *Sunday Mail* (Kuala Lumpur), 25 May 2003; Lim, *Kaleidoscope*, pp.xiv, 237-240.

¹¹ "Fire in the belly drove fight against injustice", *New Straits Times*, 20 Sept 2009; Ngui, "A woman for all seasons"; Lim, *Kaleidoscope*, p. 163.

¹² First woman ambassador", *Sunday Mail* (Kuala Lumpur), 25 May 2003.

Although not a politician, Lim continued to be active in public service. She was one of two women appointed to the National Consultative Committee, a temporary governing council established after the May 13 riots in 1969.¹³ She served on the Malaysian Bar Council, and was a member of the Royal Commission inquiring into non-Muslim marriage and divorce laws (1970).

In 1971, Lim was appointed Malaysia's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United States, and the first Malaysian woman to hold the rank of ambassador. Subsequently, she was appointed the Malaysian ambassador to Yugoslavia, Austria, Belgium and the European Economic Community.¹⁴

After her retirement from the Malaysian Foreign Service, Lim was appointed as director of the Kuala Lumpur Regional Centre for Arbitration in 1982, serving until 2000. By this time, the Centre had achieved "international recognition as an independent and neutral arbitral institution".¹⁵

Throughout her life, Lim was a supporter of the arts. In 1954 she was appointed to the National Arts Council and sat on the council till 1966 when its functions were taken over by the National Arts Gallery. At the National Arts Council, Lim met and subsequently married Austin Turnbull in 1958. The couple had a daughter Caryn (b. 1959) but divorced in 1964.¹⁶ Lim then served as deputy chairman of the National Arts Gallery from 1963 to 1971.¹⁷

Lim was the recipient of Merdeka Award 2009 that recognized individuals and organisations who have contributed to the growth of Malaysia and inspired greatness in its people.¹⁸

Lim passed away in Perth, Australia on 7 May 2013.¹⁹

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¹³ Ngui, "A woman for all seasons".

¹⁴ Ngui, "A woman for all seasons";

¹⁵ Lim, *Kaleidoscope*, pp.351, 373-4

¹⁶ Lim, *Kaleidoscope*, pp. 161-162.

¹⁷ Lim, *Kaleidoscope*, pp. xiv, 157-159.

¹⁸ "Fire in the belly drove fight against injustice", *New Straits Times*, 20 Sept 2009; "First woman ambassador", *Sunday Mail* (Kuala Lumpur), 25 May 2003.

¹⁹ "Malaysia's first woman envoy dies at 97", *The Star (online)* (9 May 2013).