



In Memoriam The Khoo Kay Kim I Knew



Prof. Emeritus Tan Sri Dr. Khoo Kay Kim was a personality I got to know about during my Form Six days in 1982 when his writings were published in an academic magazine named *Diskusi*. I referred to his writings to write essays for assignments as well as to study for examinations. I knew him personally when I did my undergraduate study at the History Department in 1985. His style of lecture was very different from what I had expected and so I did not enroll in any of his courses or attempt to approach him to be my supervisor for my postgraduate research. I nonetheless admired his scholarly personality and research works that undoubtedly changed the landscape of Malaysian history.

I had the chance to get to know Prof. Khoo better when I enrolled for my Master's programme at the department where I spent so much time engaging in conversation with him pertaining to my research – "Free Trade and Free Ports in the Straits Settlements in the late 18 and 19th century". He spent many hours in the microfilm research rooms at the University

of Malaya library. My room was just a few doors away from his. He was the internal examiner for my MA thesis. He appreciated my work and had good things to say about my ability to conduct vigorous research and the potential he saw in me to be a good historian. I also worked as a part time Research Assistant for him on the topic of History of Petaling Jaya before being appointed as a lecturer in the department in 1995.

Prof. Khoo was very generous to provide references when I needed them after I completed my Master's research. He was also kind enough to write a preface for the many books I published in the 1990s. One of these was *Tamadun Dunia* (World Civilization), which became the main reference for Form Six history students from 1998 until 2012. I got to know him better when I pursued my Ph.D. at the same department and again we met frequently in the microfilm rooms.

What I admired most in him during and after my undergraduate days was his openness and welcoming nature. His door

was never locked and you could meet him anywhere, anytime. He would never tell anyone to leave his room or to even excuse him. Most often it would be visitors who had to say thanks and excuse themselves. He was such a kind and a good-hearted person.

I admired Prof. Khoo's self-discipline and time management. He would be in office at 9 am and then head to the microfilm research room at the main library with an umbrella at around 1.30 pm to 4 pm. He would return between 4 pm-5.30 pm. His car, a Mercedes with the number plate WTA 7102, would leave the faculty around 6pm. He was a role model on what it meant to be a dedicated historian.

Moving to Prof Khoo's academic works, one cannot deny that he was an instrumental scholar who contributed enormously to the writings of Malaysian history. He was the first academic to write Malaysian history from the Malaysian perspective or the Malaysian-centric view. In his article entitled "Recent Advances in the Study and Writing of Malaysian



History” published in *Peninjau Sejarah* in 1968 (Vol. 3, No. 1, April), he mentions that writing Malaysian history from the Malaysian point of view did not oblige one to adopt a condemnatory attitude towards the British. He encouraged Malaysian historians to look into various factors, external and internal, social, political and economic, perhaps even psychological to see how they interact to produce our present society and where precisely has the pattern of traditional Malay society been transformed. He was also concerned with the ultra-nationalists who would not hesitate to indulge in self-deceit by pretending that the British never existed here and therefore contributed nothing to the making of modern Malaysia.

His *magnum opus*, *The Western Malay States, 1850-1873* (Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1972) is an excellent study of the impact of commercial development on Malay society and politics in the Straits Settlements and in the western peninsular states of Negeri Sembilan, Selangor and Perak. The work achieves a high-level of objectivity largely due to Prof. Khoo’s adoption of a descriptive-empiricist methodology as well as his use of social theory. It is an authoritative piece of Malaysian socio-economic history. The amount of meticulous research that went into this work is clear by its extensive footnotes.

Prof. Khoo belongs to the Rankean school of thought (Reconstructionist or objective/empiricist school of history) who believed history should be based on empirical evidence or, in other words, by narrating how things really (or actually) happened. Rankean historians’ emphasis on knowledge through interpretation of the written text leads them to reject relativism in history – that is, the rejection of the idea that morality exists in a historical context. For them, no theories

of knowledge should be used to explain the past. Prof. Khoo’s works were thus mostly written using the objective-descriptive narrative style, as opposed to the constructionist/analytical school that employs statistics, model-construction and theoretical frameworks. In short, he did not believe in theories.

Because of the school of thought he belonged to, Prof. Khoo often became entangled in controversies with young historians who felt his views were rather outdated. If one were to look into his work closely, it would be seen that he too had subscribed to theory in one form or another without him realizing it. His work *Western Malay States* has a chapter on Topography and Polity, discussing in the aspect of geo-history how the natural environment – rivers, lands and hills – affected the economic life of the Malays and their political system in the western peninsular states. On page 15, he adopts J.M. Gullick’s socio-anthropological theory that a traditional Malay Society was composed of two main divisions – a ruling class and subject class, with the Yang DiPertuan Agong occupying the apex of the political system.

Prof. Khoo, along with R.R. Bonney, did not hesitate to take issue with western scholars in the 1960s and 1970s in many of his writings and seminars organized by the History Department. His works like “J.W.W. Birch: A Victorian Moralizer in Perak’s Augean Stable?”, *Journal of the Historical Society*, Vol. IV, 1965/66; “The Origins of British Administration in Malaya”, *JMBRAS*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 1966 and “Malay Society 1874-1920s”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1974 provide new interpretations in Malaysian history.

He became a rising star in the 1970s when he was the first academic at the department to lecture in Bahasa Malaysia, the national language. He also contributed in enriching Malaysian local

history. It was through his leadership that the early 1970s and 1980s witnessed many works at the undergraduate level dealing with local history. It is not far-fetched to say it was he who introduced the tradition of oral history at the department when there was no relevant unit or center available in the university.

To me, one of his greatest contributions is in highlighting the historiography of Malaysia for students who are keen to pursue their higher studies in history. His writings “Recent Advances in the Study and Writing of Malaysian History”, *Peninjau Sejarah*, 1968; “Recent Malaysian Historiography”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, September 1979; “Local Historians and the Writing of Malaysian History in the Twentieth Century” in *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia*, 1979; “Historiography of Peninsular Malaysia: Past and Present”, *Malaysian Studies: Archeology, Historiography, Geography and Bibliography*, 1985; “Malaysian Historiography: A Further Look”, *Kajian Malaysia*, 1992 and “20th Century Malaysia: A Historiographical Perspective”, *Sejarah*, 2000 are some of the must-read references for researchers who intend to work on Malaysian history.

I also admired Prof. Khoo’s role as a public intellectual. He responded to many historical controversies that gripped public attention. These included among others the controversy over whether Hang Tuah existed, who was the founder of Kuala Lumpur, the issue of *pendatang*/immigrants, whether Malaya was actually colonized and many more. While I would not agree with all his views/interpretations, but by engaging with the subject, he kept the subject alive. Indeed, it was Prof. Khoo who made the attempt to popularize history among the masses. Through the column **History Alive**, which appeared in the *Sunday Star* in 1993, Prof. Khoo along



with Dr. Ranjit Singh Malhi discussed controversial issues in Malaysian historiography. The earlier articles focused on the nature of pre-colonial Malay society and particularly whether it was feudal or pre-colonial Malays who were traders or peasant farmers. In one article, it was suggested that pre-colonial Malay society was neither feudal nor agricultural but maritime and trading in nature. Prof. Khoo also commented on the works of British colonial historians. The public were always looking forward to such writings every weekend. The historical subjects were close to the heart of the lay readers. He also touched on unconventional subjects, including the oldest English newspaper in the country, the first Indian members of the Straits and Federal Legislative Councils, first Malay ruler to study abroad and on why Malaysia has nine rulers and not one of a typical sultanate. He was the father of titbits of Malaysian history.

I got closer to Prof. Khoo with increasing acquaintance when I became the Head of the History Department in September 2015. In all the conversations I had with him, as an academic, he strongly felt that the department's atmosphere now lacked the intellectual vibrancy it had during the 1960s and 1970s. He hugged me when he came to know I was appointed as the new head. He attended the mission statement of the department meeting, which I organized in the same month of my appointment. He was happy to give many inputs to raise the standard of the department. One of the major problems faced by the department in that particular year was the fall in the number of undergraduate students. The department only had 17 students, a big fall compared to more than 50 and even hundreds of students we had before. I embarked on a series of road shows in Forms Six schools in the Klang Valley to encourage students to enroll in history after their STPM (Higher School Certificate) studies.

Prof. Khoo joined those road shows and shared his thoughts with the students on the importance of history. As a result, the number of undergraduate students saw a remarkable fourfold increase in the following years. He was the first to knock on my door to congratulate me when the department was ranked as the top history department in the country in the QS Ranking on subject in 2017.

Prof. Khoo participated in all the activities organized by the department during my tenure as the head from September 2015 until September 2018. He felt the past intellectual vibrancy of the department was revived and eagerly looked forward to more engagements with the public. He also presented many papers in the department's seminars. He was particularly excited with the History Text Book Seminar entitled "The Study of History: Its Relevance and Significance" that I organized with Association of Voices of Peace, Conscience and Reason (PCORE) in 2016; the Teachers History Seminar in 2017 and People's History in 2017 on the subject of Death Railway. The lecture halls and seminar rooms where Prof. Khoo delivered his presentations were mostly packed and many questions were raised from the floor. He was so delighted with the animated environment that he once came to me and said, "Siva, you have to do this more".

My tenure as the head of department ended in September 2018 when I opted for local sabbatical. I needed a break to spend more time with my family. Due to a hectic schedule and workload during the past three years, my health was at times affected. Prof. Khoo too went for a by-pass operation in October at University Malaya Medical Centre (UMMC) and then made a special request through his wife that I pay him a visit at his residence. What followed was a journey I would cherish my whole life, as I got to know the other side of Prof. Khoo.

The local sabbatical was a blessing in disguise. I had ample of time to meet him many days in a week, be it in the morning, afternoon or night to discuss many subjects pertaining to history and some casual chat.

The operation took a toll on Prof. Khoo's body. He was nevertheless determined to return to the department, but his health condition did not permit him. He did try his very best to engage with the public. He gave interviews and had time to meet some close friends. I could see that he was becoming weaker day by day. But I also saw a strong fighting spirit in him. He was sharp and even cracked jokes.

He was looking forward to meet me more often. It was all smiles when I popped over for a visit at home or at University Malaya Medical Centre. He had a craving for American groundnuts, which I occasionally bought for him. I did not know he liked corn and he enjoyed it very much when I brought that for him. I celebrated his 82nd birthday with my daughter at his place. He enjoyed the cake I brought for him. It was a moment to rejoice.

In all the many visits I had, I must say Prof. Khoo's better half, Puan Sri Rathi Khoo, stood by him at all times. Her love for him has no bounds. She accompanied him during the many follow-ups at UMMC, attended to his medication and ensured he had his meals on time. She made sure that he was always happy. There were many occasions when both shared their happy moments they spent with their friends, relatives and children. Prof. Khoo will interject to correct the years the event took place.

I was unable to visit him on the 15th of May when he was admitted again at UMMC due to a bad cough. I left for South India for a week for an academic visit. I was shocked when Puan Sri

informed me upon my return that he had lung infection and his condition was bad. I rushed to UMMC and was devastated to see him on nebulizer. Puan Sri told him that “your favorite student Siva is here”. “Siva has to come again and again”, he replied. I guess he missed me. I was at the hospital for the rest of the day. My last visit was when he was admitted to the ICU on the 26th of May (Sunday) at 7pm. I spent half an hour with him. He could hear me and even tried hard to open his eyes to look at me. He finally lifted his hand to hold me. I was touched. Deeply.

I was happy that I was there for him during his final days. It was an honour that I was requested by Puan Sri Rathi Khoo to carry his casket along with his three sons during his final rites at Nirvana Memorial Centre on 1st June 2019.

There are a lot of writings and acknowledgements by the public praising Prof. Khoo’s achievements. I think what matters for someone who is aging is the time we spend to keep them happy.

As the saying goes, “*never ignore a person who loves you, cares for you and misses you, because one day, you might wake up and realize you lost the moon while counting the stars*”.

Rest In Peace, Prof. Khoo.

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