

Lim Boon Keng



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Background

Lim Boon Keng (Dr) (林文庆; *Lin Wenqing*) (b. 18 October 1869, Singapore—d. 1 January 1957, Singapore) was an eminent figure of the [Straits Chinese](#) community.¹ Trained as a medical doctor, Lim was also a public intellectual and writer who championed Confucianism and supported Sun Yat-sen's revolution in China.² He served as a member of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council for 14 years, and pushed for social reforms such as female education and regulations on opium consumption with the aim of improving the lives of the Chinese community.³

Early life and education

Lim Boon Keng, alias Meng Qin (梦琴), was born in Singapore. His grandfather, Lim Mah Peng, had emigrated in 1839 from Fujian province, China, to Penang, Malaya, to earn a living where he married a Straits-born Chinese woman. Lim Mah Peng then moved to Singapore when his only son, Lim Thean Geow, was born.⁴

The earliest education Lim received was a brief period spent at a school set up by the [Hokkien Huay Kuan](#) (clan association), where he learnt Chinese classics. He then began his English education at the Government Cross Street School and thereafter enrolled in [Raffles Institution](#) in 1879.⁵ His studies at Raffles Institution were nearly terminated when his father passed away and the family faced financial difficulties. The then school principal, R. W. Hullett, intervened and Lim was able to continue with his education.⁶

Lim graduated from Raffles Institution and was awarded the [Queen's Scholarship](#) in 1887.⁷ He studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland and graduated in 1892, earning a bachelor of medicine and bachelor of surgery degree with first-class honours.⁸

Medical career and health reforms

Lim returned to Singapore in 1893, setting up his private practice on [Telok Ayer Street](#).⁹ In 1896, he entered into a partnership with T. Murray Robertson and co-owned The Dispensary at [Raffles Place](#).¹⁰ Lim later established Sincere Dispensary (九思堂西药房; *Jiisitang xiyaofang*).¹¹ Also known as Kewsutong, the dispensary was located on [Hill Street](#), with a branch on [Chulia Street](#).¹²

Between 1907 and 1910, Lim taught at the [Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School](#) (later renamed King Edward VII Medical School) on a gratis basis.¹³ Lim was outspoken about the ills of [opium smoking](#)¹⁴ and was a key figure in Malaya's anti-opium movement that first began in the 1900s.¹⁵

Political involvement

In 1895, at the age of 26, Lim was appointed as a Chinese member of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council.¹⁶ He served in this position until his resignation in 1903. Lim was reappointed to the council in 1915 when [Tan Jiak Kim](#) resigned from his seat,¹⁷ and served until his departure from Singapore in 1921.¹⁸ He also held various other positions such as municipal commissioner (1905–1906)¹⁹ and was a member of the Chinese Advisory Board from 1896.²⁰

A staunch supporter of the British, Lim participated in major events related to the British colonial government, such as the coronation ceremonies of King Edward VII (1902) and King George V (1911).²¹ During World War I (1914–18), Lim helped to implement war taxation and rallied support from the Straits Chinese community for the Allies' war efforts.²²

Lim was hugely influenced by the reform movement in China during the late 19th century, and developed close ties with the movement's key figures, Sun Yat-sen and Kang You-wei, both of whom visited Singapore in the 1900s.²³ In 1911, following Sun's successful revolution that overthrew the Qing dynasty, Lim was variously appointed as a medical adviser in the Peking (now Beijing) government, inspector-general of the hospitals in Peking and president of the Peking government's Board of Health. He also became the personal physician and private secretary to Sun, the first president of the Republic of China.²⁴

Back in Singapore, Lim was a founding member of the Tongmenghui (同盟会) set up by Sun in 1906²⁵ and subsequently served as its president after the group became

the Singapore branch of the Kuomintang in 1912.²⁶

In 1921, Lim resigned from the Legislative Council and left for China's Fujian province to join Amoy University (now known as Xiamen University) as its president at [Tan Kah Kee](#)'s invitation. After heading the university for 16 years, Lim returned to Singapore in 1937.²⁷

Social reforms

Education

Lim believed that education was the key to improving the general character of individuals and thus advocated for various educational reforms. Concerned about the lack of female education in Singapore, Lim, together with [Song Ong Siang](#) and other prominent members of the Straits Chinese community, founded the [Singapore Chinese Girls' School](#) in 1899.²⁸ He also started organising Mandarin classes at his home that year,²⁹ as he thought that English-educated Chinese also ought to be proficient in Mandarin.³⁰

Culture

Influenced by the reform movement and revolution taking place in China in the late 19th century, Lim campaigned for the cutting of queues (or *towchang*, long hair worn in a back braid required of men during the Qing dynasty) as a symbol of reform.³¹ Lim also saw the practice of Confucianism and reformist ideals as means to improve the lives of the Straits Chinese and larger Chinese community. Lim and Song founded [The Straits Chinese Magazine](#) in 1897.³² He used the magazine as a platform to express these ideologies,³³ and wrote about the social ills of opium³⁴ as well as the importance of female education.³⁵

Lim also had a hand in the formation of various societies and other publications. These include the Chinese Philomathic Society (1896), an intellectual group centred on reformist ideals;³⁶ the newspapers *Thien Nan Shin Pao* (《天南新报》; 1898; with [Khoo Seok Wan](#)) as well as *Jit Shin Pau* (《日新报》; 1899–1901; proprietor);³⁷ and the [Straits Chinese British Association](#) (1900).³⁸

World War II

During the Japanese Occupation (1942–45) in Singapore, Lim was pressured to become the leader of the [Oversea Chinese Association](#). He was tasked with raising 50 million Malayan dollars for Japan on behalf of the Chinese community.³⁹ While Lim and his committee managed to raise a portion of it, the full amount was eventually reached with a loan of 22 million Malayan dollars from the Yokohama Specie Bank.⁴⁰

Commercial ventures

Lim partnered [Tan Chay Yan](#), then already an established rubber planter in Malacca, to open rubber plantations in Singapore; in 1909, they formed the company, Serangoon Rubber Plantations.⁴¹ When the Malayan rubber industry boomed in the early 20th century, Lim reaped the profits.⁴²

Together with other prominent Straits Chinese, Lim was also involved in other industries such as timber⁴³ and banking – the latter being the Chinese Commercial Bank,⁴⁴ Ho Hong Bank⁴⁵ and Oversea Chinese Bank.⁴⁶ He was a founding member of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, which was established in 1906.⁴⁷

Selected bibliography

In addition to his other endeavours, Lim also wrote books and published numerous essays. Some of his articles published in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* were written under pseudonyms such as Lin Meng Cheng, W. C. Lin, M. C. Lin and Historicus.⁴⁸