

Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship

Curious about the National Library's Lee Kong Chian Fellowship? Find out what our fellow, Wilbert Wong Wei Wen, has to say about the fellowship and how his research has benefitted from this opportunity.

NL: Could you share with us your honours thesis on Turnbull Thomson and some of the findings garnered from your research?

Wilbert: My history honours thesis is on John Turnbull Thomson (1821–84) and how his time in the Malay Peninsula (about 15 years), shaped the outcome of his thoughts and writings when he was in New Zealand later on. A surveyor, an engineer, an architect, an amateur artist, a writer and a philosopher, Thomson was an important 19th-century figure in Malaysia, Singapore and New Zealand. When he was in Singapore as a government surveyor (1841–55), he oversaw the construction of the Horsburgh Lighthouse on Pedra Branca and Thomson Road, landmarks of his achievements. His map of Singapore is currently displayed at the National University of Singapore's Department of History and on a noticeboard at the National Archives of Singapore. This research was the first time I had actually engaged with materials from the National Library, Singapore. The library has typescripts of Thomson's personal letters in Singapore, mostly related to his activities as a British civil servant, which was crucial to my study because it contained additional information on Thomson's experiences in the region that are not mentioned in his publications.

In my research, I managed to establish a connection between his experiences in the Malay Peninsula and his New Zealand writings. With our world becoming increasingly connected, it is not difficult for many of us today to understand how his experience overseas would have an impact on the way he perceived the world. Most of his post-Malayan publications contained references to the region, from its people and their cultural beliefs to its natural environment. I also argued that the cultural understanding that arose from his close interaction with the locals of Malaya, which include well-known figures such as Munsyi Abdullah (Thomson's Malay language teacher) and Hoo Ah Kay (also known as Whampoa), had implications on his views in New Zealand. Thomson, for instance, would draw his familiarity of the Malay language and the physical features of the inhabitants of Southeast Asia to argue that Maori were descendants of an ancient "negroid" race of Southern India. Another example can be observed in the way he wrote about the Chinese and Malays. I believe his good relationships and friendships he forged with them when he was in the Malay Peninsula led to his positive attitude toward them. Although there were the occasional negative remarks, he would often refer to the Malays as his "friends" in his writings, and did not see the Chinese presence in New Zealand as a matter of concern at a time of anti-Chinese sentiments. Within the context of global history, Thomson's example is a demonstration of how cross-cultural encounters shaped and redefined people's understanding of the world, just as our experiences living and travelling abroad continue to shape ours today.

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NL: Could you tell us about your current research?

Wilbert: I am currently researching on John Crawfurd (1783–1868) and his ideas about the inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula. Crawfurd was a renowned 19th-century Scottish orientalist and intellectual who also served as the second resident of Singapore, from 1823 to 1826. His works, such as his three volume book *History of the Indian Archipelago* (1820), was and still is an important source of information on Southeast Asia. This research touches on an aspect of my broader PhD research topic on British colonial knowledge of the Malay Peninsula.

NL: How has the National Library's collection helped you in your research?

Wilbert: The library has an immense collection of primary and secondary materials that are crucial for my research on John Crawfurd and British colonial knowledge. This collection of local and British colonial publications on the Malay Peninsula is much larger than I originally envisioned, and I have the NLB librarians, especially my research assistant Gracie Lee, to thank for the information and advice they have provided me on the library's collection. I have also received advice from the National University of Singapore Library, which I am grateful for. Thanks to their help, I have discovered a significant number of colonial publications that I had previously not come across, such as *The Straits Chinese Magazine* (1897–1907) and *Malayan Naturalists* (1922–25). Having a more informed awareness of the NLB's vast collection has also informed the direction of my research topic, knowing very well that I have the available sources to support my hypothesis.

NL: Would you recommend this fellowship to your peers and why?

Wilbert: Oh certainly. I have been promoting this fellowship to promising fellow scholars in New Zealand and Australia who would benefit from it, as soon as I knew that applications for the Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship were open. The library has an extensive collection of materials relating to Southeast Asia, and the funding provided is generous. You have the skills of experienced librarians who can provide assistance on the National Library, Singapore materials that you would be working on for your project. If you are not from Singapore, there is also the opportunity to work and network with experts in the country, which I have done. Besides that, this fellowship would enhance a scholar's academic profile, and with academia becoming increasingly competitive, it would be foolish to miss such a golden opportunity.

NL: What kind of impact do you hope your Fellowship will have?

Wilbert: Although it would be grand to have the Lee Kong Chian Fellowship and the publications that come out of it stamped on my academic CV, my bigger concern is to become a better historian so I can serve my discipline and general public well, which is what I am hoping to gain from this fellowship as well as my PhD training at the Australian National University. I am also hoping that the support I receive from this fellowship and the time spent researching at the National Library, Singapore would enhance the quality of my PhD research.