

# Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship

**Curious about the National Library's Lee Kong Chian Fellowship? Find out what our fellow, Dr Ivana Prazic, has to say about the fellowship and how her research has benefitted from this opportunity.**

**NL: You studied Art History in Serbia and Bangalore. What made you interested to research Asian history and theology?**

**Ivana:** During both my graduate and undergraduate studies in art history I learned how, for the most part of human history, in the West as much as in Asia, art mattered as an expression or a substance of the divine and a vehicle of human devotion. As an art history student in Serbia, where the focus of the curriculum was the art of the Byzantine world, we studied the programme of fresco paintings characteristic of Christian Orthodox temples in a way that assumed a profound knowledge of Orthodox Christian theology. To understand the meaning of the images of divine history — which not only embellished the walls of churches, but also signified the church as a sacred space — entailed knowledge about God, the saints and Biblical stories. To comprehend how these programmes transformed over time required a good knowledge of the changing historical circumstances of the Byzantine Empire and the related world within which these images were created. Similarly, to study the artistic production of the most historical periods of the Indic world meant learning about theological, hence iconographic differences between Jain, Buddhist and Hindu images as much as the dynasties that sponsored this production. Islamic art and architecture of the Indic world were integral parts of the curriculum, which also entailed instruction in the tenets of Islam.

In short, my basic training was in history and religion as applied to the analysis of art and architecture in different polities of the world. My MA training in Indic art, culture and history lies behind my interest in learning more about other polities in Asia in the next stage of my academic trajectory. I was particularly determined to learn about the historical and religious exchanges and encounters through which different societies were informed. Some of this interest was also sparked by my four-year stay in Indonesia. It is no surprise, then, that in the course of my doctoral studies at the University of Sydney, religion became the foremost analytical field of my scholarly enquiry and its historical study my chosen approach.

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## **NL: Can you tell us about your current research?**

**Ivana:** My PhD dissertation investigates the emergence of mosques named after the historical figure of the Ming dynasty Admiral Cheng Ho (Zheng He) in Indonesia. I also explore temples dedicated to the spirit of this historical figure, known as “Sam Po Kong” or “Sam Po Kong Kong” in different Chinese communities across the archipelago. Understanding the place of the Chinese-Indonesian Cheng Ho-related piety entailed learning about what it meant to be “Chinese” in the historical and political context of Indonesia. Confucianism approached and practiced as a religion played an important role in the historical formation of Chinese-Indonesian identity.

When the late 19th- and early 20th-century Chinese intellectuals and reformers in the Netherlands Indies struggled to articulate and establish Confucianism as a modern religion of the Chinese, they often collaborated in various manners with Dr. Lim Boon Keng, the foremost Straits Confucianist at the time. Part of my current academic interest is to learn more about the exchanges and contacts between Confucian reformists on both sides of the Straits of Malacca at the turn of the 20th century.

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

**Ivana:** Whereas in my dissertation I was only marginally familiar with Lim Boon Keng's involvement in the early 20th-century Confucianist movement in the Netherlands Indies, during my research at the NLB I had a great opportunity to study Lim's ideas about Confucianism. The National Library's rich collections, including digitised old newspapers, are great sources for the study of the emergence of modern Confucianism in the Straits in general and in the works of Lim Boon Keng in particular.

Here, I learned that the father of the Western scholarly study of Confucianism, James Legge, started his missionary and intellectual career in Malacca. Legge's view of Confucianism as one of the religions of the world, as well as the religion that defined Chinese identity, was integral to the nascent scholarly discipline of “science of religion”. My research on Lim Boon Keng's formulations of modern, reformed Confucianism as the best religion for not only the Chinese, but also all progressive peoples of his time, owes much to his comprehensive knowledge of the science of religion and Legge's works on Confucianism.

Whereas recent histories of Confucianism and biographies of Legge gloss over his career in the Straits, the research I undertook as a Lee Kong Chian Research (LKC) Fellow enabled me to retrieve the impact of Legge's scholarship on Lim Boon Keng's conceptualisation of Confucianism as a modern, reformed religion and an object of academic study. Lim's scholarly works on Confucianism are overlooked in the recent historical study of Confucianism as a global political force.

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

**Ivana:** I will wholeheartedly work on spreading the word about this wonderful fellowship. I think that the LKC fellowship offers a great opportunity for in-depth research on a Southeast Asia-related topic through access to NLB resources and research facilities and services. Its location in Singapore as the foremost global centre of Southeast Asia studies is an additional advantage due to the number and quality of academic events—workshops, seminars, lectures, conferences—that can be attended in the duration of the fellowship at a number of institutions, such as the NUS, NTU and ISEAS. Also, by offering access to the libraries of these academic institutions, the NLB's resources for the study of Southeast Asia are complemented and significantly enhanced. Other sources can be obtained through the NLB inter-library service, making it greatly equipped for a comprehensive study of a chosen Southeast Asia-related topic.

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

**Ivana:** I hope to follow up on this research by completing a comparative history of Confucianism in Southeast Asia by looking at its secular and religious dimensions in Singapore and Indonesia respectively.