

Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship

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

NL: What got you interested in early Chinese printing and publishing?

Ching Seng: As a librarian by profession with a focus on Chinese materials for over 45 years, I have always been curious about printing, publishing and imprints, especially those related to the Chinese language. Over the last 15 years or so, my interest was directed at the study of Chinese in Southeast Asia and through my research, I realised that early Singapore Chinese imprints played an important role in encouraging some Qing intellectuals and scholars to seek knowledge on modern technology such as steamships and Western ideas relating to subjects ranging from history to economics to politics. These opened up Chinese minds and had a hand in making China a modern nation. Hence, I started to pursue the deeper study of this.

NL: Could you share your experiences at the Chinese Library, National University of Singapore?

Ching Seng: Over the last 24 years, I have played various roles at the Chinese Library, National University of Singapore. I assisted the head in running and developing the Library for two years before taking over the headship. After I assumed headship of the Library in 1993, I identified two niche collections, namely the Southeast Asian Chinese Collection and the Chinese Classical collection, and developed them into one of the best in this region. I oversaw collection development, provided consultation and reference services to graduate students and academics on topics related to Southeast Asian Chinese and Classical Chinese Studies. As a member of the senior management team of the NUS Libraries, I initiated and completed the digitisation of the Chinese Library catalogue in 1996. I also created a digitised database of historical documents of Southeast Asian Chinese, the first of its kind. During my last eight years as a part-time senior librarian, I continued my professional role in the areas of collection development, digitisation, subject reference and consultation, as well as nurturing younger librarians.

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NL: Could you tell us about your current research?

Ching Seng: All of us are aware that in early 19th century, Sir Stanford Raffles made modern Singapore a free entrepot that linked Southeast Asia to the rest of the world for trade and commerce. But not many are aware that during the same period of time Singapore also became a centre of printing and publishing in the Chinese Language in Southeast Asia, which had great impact in the region and China. This is due to the fact that most of the imprints are now not available in Singapore and not much research and papers have been conducted and published. My current research, based on primary and secondary materials available at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library's special and open collections, as well as the findings of academic researchers conducted over the past 30 years, looks into the formation and decline of the centre, the kinds of early printing, and their output, distribution networks, readership and impact on various aspects. It will examine the extent of Singapore's contribution to the transmission of modern knowledge, ideas, and culture to mainland China as well as to Southeast Asian Chinese through the early printing of the Chinese language.

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

Ching Seng: Although the National Library does not hold most of the original imprints from the 19th century, it does hold some of representative ones in its Rare Book Collection as well as some reprints by modern publishers in its open collections. The government gazettes, newspapers holdings, online and hard copy catalogues, lists of books compiled by academics and NLB staff, academics findings and research papers held by the library provides comprehensive background information for my research.

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

Ching Seng: I would certainly recommend this fellowship to my peers for the following reasons:

- The Lee Kong Chian Reference Library has good collections on Singapore and Southeast Asia that provides primary and secondary materials to support any research on this region;
- The Library has well trained, helpful and efficient staff to assist in literature searches and obtaining external research materials;
- The facility and ambience are conducive to research.

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

Ching Seng: I hope my Fellowship will encourage more researchers, institutional and non-institutional, local and foreign to come and conduct their research at the LKC Reference Library. I also hope that the result of my research will raise awareness and interest in the value of the early Chinese imprints among academics, librarians and members of the public.