

Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship

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

NL: Tell us something that we might not know about the Teochews.

Jason: Many people think of Teochew as a dialect of Mandarin without written words. The fact is Singapore had a letter-cum-remittance industry centred around Teochew immigrants that thrived from the 1830s till as late as the 1980s. Like Hokkien and Cantonese, Teochew has a literary form that traces its roots to the Tang dynasty from even before the 10th century. Its spoken vernacular is probably even older. On the other hand, linguists have established that Mandarin only evolved in northern China after the 13th century. So it is rather problematic to say that Teochew is a dialect of Mandarin.

NL: Could you tell us about your current research?

Jason: Believe it or not, there is an oral account from Teochews in Singapore that a group of Teochews from Siam were settled here under Temenggong Abdul Rahman before Raffles arrived in 1819. This was documented in a 1950 local title, *Teo-chews in Malaya* (马来亚潮侨通鉴). My research investigates the veracity of this claim, and the findings are not quite what most might expect!

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

Jason: My research revisits an old historical topic and I need to rely heavily on primary source documents of the British and Malays from the 19th century as well as local Chinese publications in the mid-20th century. Thankfully, the National Library not only has an extensive collection of these materials, but has in recent years collaborated to publish a set of old writings by Raffles where I found critical new information about events in 1819.

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

Jason: Why not? I believe everyone should take time to explore something that excites or intrigues them. The experience will not only enrich their own lives, but their findings will also benefit others, especially the generations after us. A more knowledgeable society is always a better society.

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

Jason: Back in the 19th century, beyond being a British colony, Singapore was a melting pot of numerous Asian people. While learning to live alongside one another, members of every early community maintained their own existence and kept intimate connections to their countries of origin. My research touches on the linkages of the early Teochew migrants from here to Siam, Riau and their Teochew homeland, and how they formed an interesting relationship with the native Malays. I hope it encourages more Singaporeans to take time to discover the stories of our forefathers, especially the many untold ones of the common man. Singapore is Singapore not only because we are Singaporean, but also because of our diversity that anchors this identity.