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The Singapore 'Herstory': From Sophia Raffles to Kwa Geok Choo and Beyond

By Emrys Chew

Synopsis

Tributes continued to pour in for the late Kwa Geok Choo, wife of Singapore's Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and mother of Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. Following her demise on 2 October 2010, the remembrance of her life's example and achievements draws attention to the significant but understated roles of women in the 'Singapore Story'.

Commentary

THE TERM 'HERSTORY' originated in the late 1960s, gathering momentum through the 1970s and 1980s as a feminist critique of male-dominated historical narratives. While the term is not derived from the Greco-Latin root word *historia* (meaning knowledge by enquiry), it is nonetheless a deliberate play-on-words – 'her' rather than 'his' story – to emphasise historical analysis of the roles of women or accounts told from women's perspectives, thus reflecting a growing interest in more inclusive gender studies.

In that respect, the title of Noel Barber's *The Singapore Story: From Raffles to Lee Kuan Yew* (1978) is open to two main charges that render it 'exclusive' rather than 'inclusive'. Firstly, it could be accused of adopting an elitist approach to history, underscoring the role of leading public figures while downplaying or ignoring the study of historically voiceless groups. Secondly, it could also assume a patriarchal – possibly chauvinistic – bias towards the masculine gender, when women then constituted 48% (and today constitute 51%) of Singapore's resident population, comprising citizens and permanent residents. It should be argued that women have played vital, complementary roles alongside their male counterparts, making the tapestry of Singapore's story all the richer for their contribution.

Singapore's Leading Ladies

The wives of the 'founding fathers' furnish a more prominent example. Sir Stamford Raffles had died in debt and disfavour as far as Britain's East India Company was concerned, but Lady Sophia did much to cement his historical reputation by writing an authoritative, influential biography of her late husband. She commissioned a commemorative statue in Westminster Abbey whose inscription credited him with founding 'an emporium at Singapore' and regenerating indigenous society through the application of liberal-utilitarian principles.

In more recent times, Kwa Geok Choo has earned the epitaph 'mother of the nation' for the part she played in enabling her husband to govern independent Singapore. A brilliant scholar and successful lawyer in her own

right, she was described by Minister Mentor Lee as his equal and 'a wife who could be a sole breadwinner and bring the children up'. Alice Woon likewise enabled the late Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee to serve as policy architect of many of Singapore's public institutions and strategic establishments, when he was 'at his creative best' in the words of their son Kian Chee.

Piroska Feher, originally Hungarian, was crushed by her mother-in-law telling her she could not accept half-caste descendants, but Piroska's example was doubtless a heartfelt inspiration to her husband, the late Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam's vision of the multi-racial global city. Puan Noor Aishah, wife of Singapore's first President Yusof Ishak, has long dedicated herself to social work, including patronage of numerous school awards and organisations such as the Red Cross and Girl Guides.

Other public servants should be remembered as well. Elizabeth Choy was a wartime heroine during the Japanese occupation, but later served as an educator and nominated legislative councillor (1951-55). Chan Choy Siong, one of the first female elected representatives (City Council, 1957-59, Legislative Assembly, 1959-65, then Parliament, 1965-70), and Chua Seng Kim (Mrs. Seow Peck Leng), the first female opposition member (1959-63), were pioneer women's rights activists who campaigned successfully for the 1961 Women's Charter.

Among the second-generation women MPs were Aline Wong, Dixie Tan, and Yu-Foo Yee Shoon. Seet Ai Mee, as Acting Minister for Community Development (1991), was the highest-ranked female politician in Singapore's history until the appointment of Lim Hwee Hua as a full cabinet minister (2009). Kanwaljit Soin, Singapore's first female nominated Member of Parliament (1992-96), has played a key role in promoting social concern for issues such as violence against women. Representing the national interest abroad, Singapore's top diplomats have included women ambassadors like Chan Heng Chee, Jaya Mohideen, and Mary Seet-Cheng.

Singapore's Unsung Heroines

Avoiding the charge of elitist history, recognition is due also to the many women whose hard work has helped to build Singapore, both as a colony and an independent nation-state. The Samsui women are a case-in-point.

Arriving as Chinese immigrants between the 1920s and 1940s, some worked as domestic servants but most supplied cheap labour for the construction industry and other jobs requiring heavy lifting. They acquired a high moral reputation for refusing jobs involving drug (especially opium) trafficking, prostitution or other vices -- even if it meant living in poverty and cramped conditions. Most never married, though they kept in contact with family back in China.

Singaporean women today, however, increasingly face the dual pressures of professional careers and homemaking. Notable in helping to address these challenges of modernity are the endeavours of the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO), whose members past and present represent a wide spectrum of professional interests, encompassing the worlds of business, faith, social welfare, law, education, science, medicine, sports, culture and the media.

Thus it is particularly poignant to read the message of sympathy sent to Minister Mentor Lee by the SCWO: "We extend our heartfelt condolences to you and your family for the loss of a beloved wife, mother and grandmother. Madam Kwa will always be remembered as an inspirational and extraordinary woman who was committed to both her career and her family. She was a pillar of support in your political career, and did this in a quiet manner. She was a woman of grace, intelligence and strength. We admire her for all the sterling qualities that she upheld as a dedicated and successful professional, a loving and devoted mother and wife. The gift that she gave to our nation is unmatched and immeasurable."

In this message, we hear a chorus of Singaporean women whose voices convey a sense of shared appreciation and collective identification -- a grief observed, a life remembered -- in their Singapore story.

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