

**The Straits Philosophical Society  
& Colonial Elites in Malaya**

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# The Straits Philosophical Society & Colonial Elites in Malaya

*Selected Papers on Race,  
Identity and Social Order 1893–1915*

EDITED BY

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# PREFACE

This book has had an unusually long gestation period. It all started in 1976 when Lim Teck Ghee, at that time teaching at the University of Penang as it was then known, was working in the Penang Library in 1976 and stumbled across a box of old papers that the library staff intended to dispose of. The papers included what were the original copies of some of the proceedings of the Straits Philosophical Society, a society founded in 1893 by colonial officials with the objective of engaging in critical discussion on matters related to philosophy, history, literature, science and the arts.

The value of the papers was recognized and communicated to the Library management to ensure that they would be properly handled and preserved for posterity.

Further examination of the papers—there were 17 sets—revealed that some of them had never been published and that it would be worthwhile to reproduce them because they provided insights into the thinking of some of the most influential people in the Peninsula on a variety of subjects and issues of importance during that period. The fact that their subject matter was still being debated, and in some instances arousing controversy in academia and the public sphere, attested to the need to make them available to a larger audience.

Since then, the publication of the papers has been a challenge. The first choice of publisher—the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society—was not successful as it was then felt that too much emphasis was being given to the publishing of colonial sources. At the same time, a number of early collaborators in the publication dropped out in part because of the common inability to commit time to the research. More time was lost with Lim Teck Ghee's departure from the academia world and Malaysia in 1996.

A chance meeting between Lim Teck Ghee who returned to Malaysia in 2005 and Timo Kortteinen, Professor with the Department of Sociology, University of Helsinki when the latter was undertaking field research in Malaysia in 2007 revived the prospect of a publication on the papers. The two decided to conduct further research on the papers and to collate a selection of Penang and other located papers that would be suitable for publication.

Unfortunately Timo who played an important role in shaping the structure of the book and who also provided notes for the initial draft introduction was not able to see his contribution through to this end product.

His untimely death in 2009 resulted in a further delay to the publication as the collection of materials for the publication was returned to his family in Helsinki.

Fortunately, a colleague of Timo, Professor Timo Kaartinen with the Department of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Helsinki, was able to step in at this difficult stage to obtain the materials from his widow. He arranged for them to be sent to Malaysia and was also instrumental in helping the project obtain funding assistance from the Academy of Finland to defray the costs of further archival work, and editorial assistance to publish the book.

Although Timo Kortteinen is not with us at this final stage of the enterprise, we think he will be happy with the outcome of his efforts here. We are hopeful that the book is seen to fit well with Timo's larger corpus of scholarship which has helped advance the boundaries of social science in Southeast Asia.

Special appreciation is due to Matti and Katriinan Kortteinen and Timo Kaartinen without whom this book would not be possible. Also to the Academy of Finland for its grant assistance in the finalization of the book. Universiti Pulau Pinang provided a modest grant which enabled the typing of the original papers found in the Penang library.

Lastly we want to thank the two reviewers of the draft book for their useful suggestions which have helped us in improving the manuscript for publication as well as Wang Gungwu and Anthony Reid for providing their endorsements to appear in the published book.

*Lim Teck Ghee*  
*Charles Brophy*

## ABOUT THE EDITORS

Dr Lim Teck Ghee's career has straddled academia and international development organizations. He has held a Social Science Chair at the University of Malaya and was a Visiting Fellow and Professor at various universities. Following his departure from academia, he worked with UNESCAP and the World Bank. His works include *Peasants and Their Agricultural Economy in Colonial Malaya, 1874-1941* (1977), *Reflections on Development in Southeast Asia* (1988, editor), *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, Present and Future* (2009, as co-editor). More recent works include *Challenging the Status Quo in Malaysia* (2017), *Anatomy of an Electoral Tsunami* (2018, as co-editor) and *Dark Forces Changing Malaysia and Malaysia Towards GE15 and Beyond* (with Murray Hunter, 2022).

Charles Brophy is an independent scholar with a focus on the political and intellectual history of modern Malaysia and Singapore. He holds a Masters in Colonial and Global History from the University of Leiden. His work has featured in *Modern Asian Studies*, *Mekong Review*, *Imagined Malaysia Review* and *New Mandala*.