

Author’s Rejoinder to Ernest Chew’s Review of *The King’s Chinese: From Barber to Banker, the Story of Yeap Chor Ee and the Straits Chinese*

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In his review of my book (*SOJOURN* 36, no. 3, pp. 552–55), Ernest Chew provided names of prominent Straits Chinese who he believes fit the description of *King’s Chinese*. These distinguished gentlemen included Song Ong Siang, Tan Cheng Lock, Lim Boon Keng and Cheah Cheang Lim. Chew regarded them as such on the grounds that they were born in the Straits Settlements; were English educated, preferably Queen’s scholars; were members of the Legislative Council; were loyal to the British Crown; and were awarded British honours for their achievements and services to the empire—including knighthoods for some of them. Owing to the fact that Yeap Chor Ee was a China-born migrant, and believing him to be a “subject of the Ch’ing emperor”, Chew suggested that he did not fit the definition of a King’s Chinese.

I respect Chew’s interpretation but maintain my stance based on the original definition of that phrase.

The expression *King’s Chinese* was coined in 1906 by G.E. Raine, a lawyer from the firm of Messrs Allen and Gledhill and a resident of the colony of Singapore. In his article, Raine used the term in reference to the “millions of loyal Chinese” comprising all those under British rule, including those who emigrated from China as “*singkehs* and coolies” (1906). Raine began his article by using a mystical creature to address the Chinese—the “lemon-coloured sphinx” who started life in the colony as labourers. But under

British rule, they found “incentives to advancements”. He goes on to describe their journey in the colony—from starting a “chop” (Chinese business) to a family. Towards the end of the article, Raine changed his tune to one of admiration by referring to these migrants as “builders of empire”. Drawing attention to some of their achievements, he noted that they were able to attain a “position of trust and dignity”, with many being the “soul of enterprise and thrift and public spirit”. They were also “passionately loyal to the King and country of their adoption” and that “they produce for us the lion’s share of our revenue”.

For all intents and purposes, Raine created the phrase *King’s Chinese* to pay tribute to the Chinese as a way of summing up their loyalty, devotion and contributions towards the British Crown and colony. It was an all-encompassing term directed at a specific community during a particular era in a particular outpost; it was not meant to focus only on a specific subgroup who possessed certain credentials within that community.

Thirty years later, Roland Braddell borrowed the phrase for his speech at a Rotary Club dinner held in honour of Song Ong Siang after his conferment of a knighthood. Braddell referred to the Straits Chinese community (Song included) when using the term (1936). Song himself penned an article titled “King’s Chinese: Their Cultural Evolution from Immigrants to Citizens of the Crown”. Not only did Song acknowledge that it was Raine who conceived the term but Song himself also used the term to refer to the Chinese community as a whole. Song went further by recognizing King’s Chinese as “capitalists, traders, miners, agriculturalists, artisans and labourers” (Song 1936).

It is on the basis of Raine’s definition that I conceived the title for my book about Yeap Chor Ee and the Straits Chinese. Yeap’s early life bore an uncanny resemblance to the lives described by Raine and those of thousands of other Chinese in the community. Yeap may not have been a Queen’s scholar, but he was a pioneering benefactor of education, donating towards the formation of the colony’s first university, Universiti Malaya, in order for the nation

to prepare for self-government. His other contribution was social stability. He was a naturalized British subject and, unlike some of his contemporaries, he did not have much affinity for the politics of China. Yeap spent well over sixty-five years of his life in British Malaya, devoting his resources and efforts towards its development. Penang was his adopted home and also his final resting place.

It is also worth noting that when Raine coined the phrase, no British honours were awarded to any local-born Chinese. The only individual to have earned that recognition was a China-born man named Hoo Ah Kay. Otherwise known as “Mr Whampoa”, Hoo was the only recipient of the Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George (CMG), an honour awarded to British subjects who have rendered extraordinary services abroad or in the Commonwealth. Like Yeap, he was a naturalized British subject.

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