

## **IN MEMORY OF LIAW YOCK FANG (1936-2016)**

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### **EMINENT ICON IN THE UNITY OF CULTURE AND LITERATURE**

The Malay literary world experienced a great loss, when news of his death was announced. It is sad news for the Malay literary world, when another scholar of Malay studies, Dr. Liaw Yock Fang passed away on 23 April 2016; exactly a month after the passing of the literary figure, Dr. Muhammad Ariff Ahmad on 23 March 2016.

### **BACKGROUND**

Dr. Liaw Yock Fang was born in Singapore on 14 September 1936. He received his early education at Kwang Hwa Primary School, Dungun, Terengganu (passed in 1951), the Chinese High School, Singapore (1956), after which he attended Nanyang University, Singapore (1959-1960). Later he continued his studies at the Arts Faculty, Universitas Indonesia and obtained the Bachelor of Arts degree (1963) followed by the Master of Arts degree (1965). He then went on to Leiden University, Netherlands and obtained his Doctorandus in 1971 and Doctor of Arts, Malay/Indonesian Studies in 1976 from the same university in 1976.

Dr. Liaw was popularly known as “Pak Liaw”. His involvement in Malay letters began since the end of the 1950s when he wrote an article on Malay language and literature in Chinese which was published in series in the *Nanyang Siang Pau* newspaper while he was still studying at Nanyang University, Singapore. He had also written in English about Malay and Indonesian literature in the magazine, *Kesusasteraan Nanyang* (Nanyang

Literature) where he was acting as the publisher. These include Indian Epic in Malay Literature (no.1, 1959); Introduction to Indonesian Literature (no.2, 1960); Two Contemporary Indonesian Writers (no.2, 1960); Poems from Indonesia (translation) (no.3, 1960). His writings were also published in *Mimbar Indonesia*, Jakarta: “Domba2 Revolusi” *Mimbar Indonesia XVI*, no.4 (April 1963); “Tiga Penjair Angkatan Terbaru Sastrawan Indonesia” (i) *Mimbar Indonesia XVII*, no.2-3 (Feb-March 1964) and “Tiga Penjair Angkatan Terbaru Sastrawan Indonesia” (ii), *Mimbar Indonesia XVII*, no.4-5 (April-May 1964).

Dr. Liaw Yock Fang served as a lecturer at Nanyang University Singapore from 1966 till 1981; then he taught in a temporary capacity at Jabatan Pengajian Melayu, (Malay Studies Department) National University Singapore, after which he was appointed as senior lecturer in 1982 and then became associate professor before retiring in 1996.

## STUDIES AND WRITINGS

Throughout his career and after his retirement, Dr. Liaw continued to be active in studying literature and writing until he produced more than 20 books and hundreds of papers, articles, book reviews or academic and general writings in the field of Malay and Indonesian studies. His writings and contributions are most prominent in three fields: classical literature studies, grammar studies, and Malay language textbook compilation for schools and reference books on Malay and Indonesian language for adults.

Dr. Liaw wrote on modern and classical literature. Together with H.B. Jassin, he wrote the book *Ikhtisar Kritik Sastera* (1970) and translated Chairil Anwar’s poetry (1974). Dr. Liaw was an indefatigable philologist who made an important contribution in the legal literature genre through his studies on the texts of *Undang-Undang Melaka* (1996, 2003) and *Undang-Undang Laut* (2003). His biggest contribution is the book *Sejarah Kesusasteraan Melayu Klasik* (History of Classical Malay Literature) (1975) which was later expanded and published in Jakarta in two volumes (1991, 1993). The latest edition of this book was published by Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia (2001).

This book became a basic reference book or text that was made compulsory in schools and many universities in South east Asia. The English translation of this book was done by Razib Bahari and Harry Aveling with the title *A History of Classical Malay Literature* and was published by ISEAS in 2013. The Chinese translation was published in Beijing.

From the Malay-Indonesian linguistics aspect, Liaw had studied syntax, grammar and morphology. His contribution is clearly seen in the book *Nahu Melayu Moden* (1985, 1994) which is used as an example of structural grammar in universities in Malaysia for comparison with the books *Tatabahasa Dewan*, *Pelita Bahasa* by Za'ba and *Nahu Melayu Mutakhir* by Asmah Haji Omar. He had also written 12 Malay/Indonesian textbooks and Malay-Indonesian grammar in English for adult readers and the book *Pelajaran Bahasa Melayu* which was used as additional reading text at primary schools in Singapore (1983-87) and secondary schools (1985-89).

Liaw Yock Fang and Yang Quee Yee are the two prominent figures from Nanyang University or Nantah who were the most consistent, productive and able to represent their colleagues (Chong, 2003:155). Due to his achievements and diligence, Dr. Liaw was invited to be guest writer for the magazine *Pelita Bahasa* (1997, June 2000 until April 2001) and as columnist for *Berita Harian*, Singapore (2006-2007). Yayasan Karyawan had also invited Dr. Liaw to edit *Undang-Undang Melaka* and *Undang-Undang Laut* (2003). From 2008 until the end of his life Dr. Liaw was still studying the differences between Malay language and Indonesian language.

I had the opportunity of being Dr. Liaw's student while I was studying at National University Singapore for the Bachelor and Master of Arts at the end of 1970s and the beginning of 1980s. I learned a lot from his diligence and love for Malay literature, in particular classical Malay literature. Dr. Liaw was also someone who was friendly and approachable with his students and often encouraged us to continue to study Malay language and literature in depth. His friendliness and good nature will always be remembered by those who knew him.

Dr. Liaw was also active in language activities in Singapore. He became a member of the Malay language committee which later became MBMS (Majlis Bahasa Melayu Singapura) or Singapore's Malay language committee until his death. In 2011, Dr. Liaw was bestowed a special award by the MBMS for his huge contribution to the development of Malay language and literature in Singapore.

Prof. Ismail Hussein once referred to the late Dr. Liaw as a "literarian and pioneer in culture" (*Warta Gapena*, March 2004). His name is also recorded in the *Ensiklopedia Indonesia*, oleh Penerbitan Buku Ichtihar Baru Van Hoeve, Jakarta, 1983 and also in the entry in *Ensiklopedia Bahasa dan Sastra Melayu* terbitan Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

The late Dr. Liaw Yock Fang was admired and respected by society and has left a wealth of valuable Malay works and material. His name will always

be etched as a scholar and teacher of Chinese origin who loved and diligently studied and raised society's knowledge of Malay language and literature. He is certainly an eminent icon in the unity of culture and literature who crossed the boundaries of race and religion.

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