

Draft copy. Please obtain permission to cite, please don't post it online.

Ushering in the New Age of Chinese Women Lawyers: The First British Malayan Chinese Lady Barristers and their Pursuit of Legal Education 1923-1934

Li CHEN

INTRODUCTION	1
VENTURING WEST IN SEARCH OF INSTITUTIONALIZED LEGAL EDUCATION	2
<i>The Pathbreaking Lim Sisters</i>	2
<i>Two Trailblazing Singaporean Duo</i>	4
<i>Ipoh-born Wong Beng Sim</i>	7
TACKLING THE BAR EXAMINATION	7
SEEKING A BACHELOR OF LAWS DEGREE	10
LEGAL EAGLES TAKE FLIGHT	13
<i>An "Epoch-Making" Moment for Women Lawyers</i>	13
<i>Fledging Lady Lawyers of Singapore</i>	17
CONCLUSION	23
APPENDIX I	24

Introduction

The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act passed by the British Parliament in 1919 signalled the victory of British women after years of fighting to seek inclusion in legal education and profession.¹ This monumental legislation provided that –“A person shall not be disqualified by sex... for admission to any incorporated society...” The first breakthrough came when Miss Ivy Williams gained the coveted title of Barrister at Law on 10 March 1922.² Williams’s inspiring speech on her call to the Bar was covered in detail by a newspaper in the Straits Settlements – “This has been the dream of my life, and my father's dream for me. Now that the dream has come true, I am dumbfounded.”³ Williams took the occasion to appeal to the Benchers of the Inner Temple “on behalf all those women who would come after her, and pleaded that they should be given every help and encouragement in the difficulties they would have to face.”⁴

The coverage of such profound progress made by women in this historically male-

¹ *Women and The Legal Profession*, THE MANCHESTER GUARDIAN, 14 December 1903, at 8.

² *Social and Personal*, THE STRAITS TIMES, 14 March 1922, Page 8,

³ *Dr. Ivy Williams*, THE SINGAPORE FREE PRESS AND MERCANTILE ADVERTISER, 22 June 1922, at 9.

⁴ *Id.*

dominated field must have been greatly inspiring and encouraging for young Chinese women as well. With the apparent racial barrier having been already crumbled by Wu Tingfang since 1874 when he was accepted into Lincoln's Inn, and again in 1877 when he was successfully called to the English bar,⁵ Chinese women also stepped up to the game shortly after the gender barrier was also torn down. In the ten years following the enactment of the said Act, five Chinese women, who all happen to be from the British Malaya, would venture forth to pursue legal education in London. Four would eventually go on to earn the coveted title of barrister-at-law, while three would also bring home a Bachelor of Laws (LLB) degree each. As we approach the centenary of this legislation, this paper seeks to resurface the stories of these five Chinese women beneficiaries. It details their odyssey from the British Malaya to the British Empire's metropolis to seek their wings to become legal eagles and traces their education trajectory as they fought to break into the male-dominant legal education world in London. Finally, this paper would shed light on how these fearless Chinese lady barristers went on to soar in their lives, be it by fighting for their right to gain admission to the legal profession in other jurisdictions or by shining their unique feminist light in their respective chosen career paths.

Venturing West in Search of Institutionalized Legal Education

The Pathbreaking Lim Sisters

Despite the change in legislation in late 1919, not a single woman from the British Malaya had ever strived to receive legal education in Great Britain until the Penang-born Lim Beng Hong's audacious attempt in 1923. Her sister, Lim Beng Tek, later followed suit in 1930. These two pioneering Chinese sisters were born to a rather well-to-do family. Together with their brother, they all had the privilege of receiving legal education at the University College London, the Inner Temple and the Council of Legal Education, and were all subsequently called to the English and Penang Bars, a rarity for their time indeed.

Lim Beng Hong also known as B. H. Oon was born on 12 January 1903 in Penang, the Straits Settlements. She was the daughter of Lim Kim Soa, a prominent merchant in Penang. She was educated at the Government Girls' School, Penang (later renamed St. George's Girls' School) and passed her Cambridge Senior Local Examination with a distinction in Religious Knowledge in December 1920.⁶ Afterwards, she worked as a teacher at her alma mater before sailing off to England to start her legal education in 1923.⁷ Her decision to take this path untrodden was likely facilitated by the guidance she probably received from her brother-in-law, Goh Guan Ho, who had studied law at

⁵ Li Chen, *Lawyers as the Emerging Diplomatic Elite in China: The Making of the First Chinese Barrister at the English Bar*, 2 CHIN J COMP LAW (2014).

⁶ University of London, University College, Lim Beng Hong's First Entry Form, dated 29 October 1923 (on file with the author).

⁷ *Id.*

the University of London, received his LLB degree in September 1916,⁸ and was called to the Bar in England that same year.⁹

In September 1923, Lim Beng Hong and her younger brother Lim Khye Seng¹⁰ went to London for legal education on the steamer *Fushimi Maru*.¹¹ Lim Beng Hong first set out to register with the University College London as a first-year law student on 29 October 1923.¹²

Next, Lim Beng Hong sought admission to an Inn of Court in London. Being mindful of conceivable challenges of getting admitted by an Inn of Court, she had obtained a strong letter of testimonial from Percy Julian Sproule, Senior Puisne Judge of the Supreme Court, Straits Settlements, illuminating how well-connected her family was with the Christian church and the ruling class in Penang, and vouching for her suitability for admission to an Inn of Court as a law student:¹³

They are children of elder member of the Chinese Congregation of St. George's Church, Penang, of the Church of England.

These two young people are admirable specimens of the better class of our Straits-born -Chinese British subject. Their aim is the English Bar, with a view to practice out here in Malaya. There are no women who are members of our Bar but as yet no woman has applied. They hope to enter my own foundation of the Middle Temple. I am glad to recommend them as likely to be upright & honourable members of a great profession.

It appears that Lim Beng Hong and her brother initially planned to follow in the footsteps of their brother-in-law to seek admission to the Middle Temple. Even their referee was from Middle Temple.¹⁴ Nevertheless, either they encountered difficulty in gaining admission to the Middle Temple or they changed their mind on arrival in London, Lim Beng Hong eventually sought admission to the Inner Temple on 14 November 1923 instead.¹⁵ Curiously, her younger brother Lim Khye Seng only applied for admission on 8 December 1923 and was granted admission on 18 January 1924.¹⁶

Her younger sister Lim Beng Tek/Teik, also known as Ming Te Baguley, was born on

⁸ University of London, University College, Goh Guan Ho's Registry File (on file with the author).

⁹ Sir Ronald Roxburgh, *THE RECORDS OF THE HONOURABLE SOCIETY OF LINCOLN'S INN*, Vol. II, *ADMISSIONS FROM A.D. 1800 TO A.D. 1893 AND CHAPEL REGISTERS*, at 814.

¹⁰ University of London, University College, Lim Khye Seng's First Entry Form, dated 29 October 1923 (on file with the author). He was born on 2 February 1905 in Penang. Educated at Penang Free School and passed his Cambridge Senior Local Examination in December 1921.

¹¹ Social and Personal. *THE STRAITS TIMES*, 20 Sept. 1923, at 8.

¹² *Supra* note 6.

¹³ Inner Temple Archives, Copy of Testimonial from P. J. Sproule dated 18 September 1923 (on file with the author).

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Inner Temple Archives, Lim Beng Hong Admission File (on file with the author).

¹⁶ *Id.*

13 June 1909 in Penang. After completing her high school and passing the Cambridge Senior Local Examination in December 1926 at the same institution from which her elder sister had graduated, she made up her mind to follow in the footsteps of her elder sister and brother to pursue undergraduate legal studies at University College London, so she took the London Matriculation Examination in Penang and passed it in June 1928.¹⁷ By the time she decided to sail off to London, she already “had a distinguished career at St George's Girls' School, Penang, and had already passed her [London] Matriculation Examination.”¹⁸ It was reported in May 1930 that she “will shortly be leaving for England to study for the Bar.”¹⁹

Two Trailblazing Singaporean Duo

Teo Soon Kim and Lucy See, the two Singapore-born Chinese ladies at the forefront of the pursuit of legal education upon the removal of the gender disqualification, were also born with silver spoons in their mouths. Teo Soon Kim, born on 23 July 1904, was the eldest daughter of Teo Eng Hock, a rubber baron in the region. Teo was initially educated at the Methodist Girls School in Singapore and passed her Cambridge Junior Local Examination in 1919.²⁰ Afterwards, she studied at Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, and passed her Cambridge Senior Local Examination with a distinction in religious knowledge in December 1920.²¹ She came to England in or around October 1923 and briefly attended West Cornwall College in Penzance, Cornwall – a Methodist School for girls. Though Teo was only there for a very short time, she was fondly remembered as having “endeared herself to all”.²² On 24 January 1924, Teo went to the University College London for registration, but as she had yet to pass the required examinations for enrolment into the law program, she first enrolled with the Faculty of Arts to study in the matriculation course from January 1924 to June 1924.²³ Teo later passed an entrance examination in May 1924, which allowed her to matriculate as a full-fledged law student at the University.²⁴

Among these women, Teo had the most impressive extracurricular activities. She also became a strong advocate for the Chinese to study in England. While she was in London, she wrote a letter to the editor of *The Straits Times* – her home newspaper – to outline her experience pursuing education in London as a Chinese woman, expressing her

¹⁷ University of London, University College, Lim Beng Tek's First Entry Form, dated 6 October 1930 (on file with the author).

¹⁸ THE SINGAPORE FREE PRESS AND MERCANTILE ADVERTISER, 19 May 1930, at 10.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Cambridge Local Examinations*, THE SINGAPORE FREE PRESS AND MERCANTILE ADVERTISER, 12 May 1919, at 4.

²¹ THE SINGAPORE FREE PRESS AND MERCANTILE ADVERTISER, 9 April 1921, at 6. While in Singapore, she had taught at the Methodist Girls School for two years and eight months. The principal of the school described her as “a capable, conscientious and faithful teacher”.

²² *West Cornwall College*, CORNISHMAN, 29 July 1925, at 5.

²³ University of London, University College, Teo Soon Kim's First Entry Form, dated 24 January 1924 (on file with the author). This course entailed the study of Latin, English, History, Mathematics, Geography.

²⁴ University of London, University College, Teo Soon Kim's Registry File (on file with the author).

desire to give “an account of my impression of British hospitality that I, a Chinese woman student from Singapore, have had the privilege of receiving during the whole year that I have been in England. The foreign student, I can state as a fact, will find that everybody will be ready to oblige if she or he will only just speak up.”²⁵ With an outgoing personality, she had great success in socializing with school mates:

As a student boarding with friends a young woman is made to feel at home and they see to the fact that she, besides being made to feel as one of the family, is allowed all facilities for quite [sic] and study. Friends that she has made in College, and some of them who live in the same neighbourhood, often invite her to their homes to tea or to some place of interest or amusement.²⁶

Teo was well-liked and held in high esteem by her teachers at the West Cornwall College. On 13 July 1928, at the annual speech day and prize distribution ceremony, the College invited her as a guest-of-honour to hand out prizes to students. The College was proud of her achieving the distinction of being a barrister-at-law, and was confident that she was about to receive her LLB.²⁷ Teo made a very touching speech at the event – “When I came to the College, a stranger far from my home, I was made to feel at home at once. When they realised that I had come to study law, people asked 'isn't that difficult?' But when I told Miss Hanna [headmistress], she simply said: 'Go right ahead, child; you will do it.'(Applause)”²⁸

Like Lim Beng Hong, when Teo applied for admission to the Inner Temple, she provided powerful letters of testimonial from influential public figures that revealed her family’s impressive connections to the ruling class in Singapore. Like Penang’s first woman law student Lim Beng Hong, Singapore’s first woman law student was also fortunate to have an insider to guide her in seeking admission to the Inn of Court in London and to receive tips as how to navigate the entire process. Teo’s father obtained the help of Wong Siew Qui, a Cambridge-educated²⁹ leading businessman and community leader. Wong was a barrister-at-law of the Middle Temple, called to the Bar in 1910.³⁰ In fact, Teo was armed to the teeth with letters of testimonial, she came to the Inner Temple with four letters from Major General Sir Neill Malcolm, barrister Wong Siew Qui, Principal Minnie L. Rank of Methodist Girls’ School, Singapore, and a Londoner, Emily Kenneth. These letters vouched for her unquestionable fitness to be admitted a law student, for instance:

I, Major General Sir Neill Malcolm General Officer Commanding His Majesty’s Troops in Malaya, certify that I know Miss Teo Son Kim daughter of Mr. Teo Eng

²⁵ *Chinese and England*, THE STRAITS TIMES, 27 January 1925, at 10.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *West Cornwall College, Annual Speech Day and Prize Distribution*, CORNISHMAN, 19 July 1928, at 2.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ Letter of Testimonial from Wong Siew Qui dated 14 February 1924 (on file with the author).

³⁰ *Supra* note 9 at 758.

Hock a Chinese merchant in Singapore and believe her to be a fit and proper person to be admitted as a Student of the Honourable Society of the Inner Temple with a view to being called to the Bar

Dated this 13th day of February 1924
Singapore³¹

Lucy See, also known as See Chye Hong, was the second Singaporean woman to seek legal education in Britain. Born on 20 November 1908 in Singapore,³² she was the youngest daughter of See Tiong Wah, a Compradore of Hong Kong & Shanghai Bank, Justice of the Peace, and Municipal Commissioner of Singapore.³³ Lucy See studied at the French Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in Singapore and passed her Cambridge Senior Local Examination in December 1923, with a distinction in religious knowledge.³⁴ She had also received professional training in music and passed Trinity College Music Exams in Pianoforte Playing, Intermediate Division in Singapore in 1922.³⁵ She went to London in 1925 and sat the London University matriculation exam in September 1925, though she flunked the exam on the first attempt. She tried it again in June 1926, and finally learned of her passing the exam in late July in 1926.³⁶

When Lucy See sought admission to the Inner Temple, she was armed with a most impressive letter of testimonial – the Chief Justice of the Straits Settlement provided her with the key to unlock the door to the Inner Temple:

Chief Justice's Chambers, Supreme Court, Singapore 4th August 1926

I have pleasure in testifying that I am personally acquainted with S. Tiong Wah & that although I do not know Miss Lucy See his daughter personally I have no doubt whatever from my knowledge of her family that she is in every respect a lady who is suitable for call at any Inn of Court.

J.W. Murison³⁷
Chief Justice of the Straits Settlements
Barrister of the Middle Temple

As Lucy See's father was a Municipal Commissioner, he managed to have the Roland John Farrer, President of the Municipal Commissioners, put in a good word for her too: "I have known Miss Lucy See for a number of years, and that I have formed a high opinion of her character. I am convinced that, should she obtain her call to the Bar, she

³¹ Letter of Testimonial from Sir Neill Malcolm dated 13 February 1924 (on file with the author).

³² University of London, University College, Lucy See 's First Entry Form, dated 21 April 1925 (on file with the author).

³³ *Death of Weil-Known Chinese*, MALAYA TRIBUNE, 3 May 1940, at 2.

³⁴ THE STRAITS TIMES, 24 March 1924, at 8.

³⁵ *Trinity College Music Exam*, THE STRAITS TIMES, 15 June 1922, at 10,

³⁶ *Social and Personal*, THE STRAITS TIMES, 4 August 1926, at 8.

³⁷ Letter of Testimonial from J.W. Murison dated 4 August 1926 (on file with the author).

will maintain the best traditions of her profession.”³⁸

Ipoh-born Wong Beng Sim

Wong Beng Sim of Ipoh, Perak, Federated Malay States, went to Lincoln’s Inn to seek admission as law student in April 1929, when she was just 17 years of age.³⁹ Wong was educated at Redland Collegiate School, Bristol, and had just passed her Cambridge School Certificate examination in December 1928.⁴⁰ Wong’s father was a “mine and plantation owner” in Perak.⁴¹

Wong filled out the required form for admission to Lincoln’s Inn on 3 April 1929. She was able to navigate the admission labyrinth probably because she had access to information about the Lincoln’s Inn and the admission process from her father’s schoolmate, Khong Kit Seng,⁴² who was a barrister-at-law of the Inn and a prominent Chinese barrister in Perak. This family friend thus furnished Wong with a letter to help smooth over admission requirement: “. . . is known to me for the past 15 years. She is the only daughter of Mr Wong Siong Kwong, who was a schoolmate of mine, over 30 years ago.”⁴³

Wong’s family was also well-connected. Her second letter of testimonial was furnished by the Magistrate of Ipoh to certify that: “Miss Wong Beng Sim who is at present in England studying Law is the daughter of Mr. Wong Siong Kwong, a prominent resident of Ipoh, Perak, F.M.S. I further certify that Mr. Wong Siong Kwong and family are personally known to me.”⁴⁴

Despite her apparent strong family background, Wong’s career as a law student was short-lived. When she joined Lincoln’s Inn, she was only 17 years old, fresh out of high school in England. It appears she did not enroll in the law program at the University of London in preparation for her Bar Examination like her predecessors from Penang. She struggled to study and complete the required exams. After experiencing failures in her exams, she gave up her studies and sailed home on 11 July 1930.⁴⁵

Tackling the Bar Examination

At the Council of Legal Education, there were four examinations every year, which

³⁸ Letter of Testimonial from R.J. Farrer dated 4 August 1926 (on file with the author).

³⁹ Lincoln’s Inn Archives, Wong Beng Sim’s Admission File (on file with the author).

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² Lincoln’s Inn Archives, Khong Kit Seng’s Admission File (on file with the author). Khong was admitted on 14 April 1920 and called to the Bar on 28 June 1922.

⁴³ Letter of Testimonial from Khong Kit Seng, dated 8 February, 1929 (on file with the author).

⁴⁴ Letter of Testimonial from Magistrate of Ipoh, dated 8 February, 1929 (on file with the author).

⁴⁵ Board of Trade: Commercial and Statistical Department and successors: Outwards Passenger Lists. BT27. The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, England.

were held in Hilary, Easter, Trinity, Michaelmas terms.⁴⁶ The Bar examination comprised two parts – students had to pass both to receive their certificate of fitness for call to the Bar.⁴⁷ In the 1920s, Part I of the exam consisted of 4 subjects, namely: Roman Law, Constitutional Law (English and Colonial) and Legal History, Criminal Law and Procedure, and Real Property and Conveyancing (or alternatively, Hindu and Mahomedan Law or Roman-Dutch Law). Part II consisted of the final examination, where students had to successfully pass four papers: (a) Common Law; (b) Equity; (c) Law of Evidence and Civil Procedure; and (d) A General Paper on the three aforesaid subjects.⁴⁸ Students had to present themselves for these four papers at the same examination sitting.⁴⁹ However, students had the option of presenting themselves for examination of the four Part I subjects “at any time after admission.”⁵⁰

Successful students in examinations would be classified according to merit in Class I and Class II.⁵¹ In brief, in the late 1920s, the maximum marks obtainable on each paper was 150. For the Part I examinations, the minimum required marks for a Class I, Class II and Class III (Pass) were 110, 90 and 60 respectively. For the Final Examination, the calculation of marks was broken into three segments, with (i) the Common Law, Equity and Evidence and Civil Procedure Papers having each a maximum of 150 marks (total 450); and (ii) the General Paper consisting of three individual parts with a maximum score of 60 each (total 180); and (iii) the overall computation of the scores for parts (i) and (ii), totalling at a maximum score of 650. Students were graded separately on each of these three segments and classified accordingly. Though, in a nutshell, they would attain a Class I, Class II and a Class III (Pass) if they hit 480, 360 and 240 marks on their overall score (i.e. segment (iii)).⁵²

Except Wong Beng Sim who was not studying law at a University, the remaining four ladies were able to obtain an exemption from Roman Law exam by presenting a certificate to show that they had passed an exam in the said subject during their university studies.⁵³ Out of these five Chinese women, Lim Beng Hong and Lucy See were the only two that did not confront any failures in completing the battery of Bar Examinations.⁵⁴ Lucy See achieved the best overall performance in the Bar Examination, for she was among a small number of examinees in the term to achieve second-class honours in the final examination.⁵⁵ In contrast, Teo Soon Kim had to wage painful battles with the Constitutional Law and Legal History paper – she failed it thrice,

⁴⁶ Council of Legal Education, Consolidated Regulations of the Several Societies of Lincoln’s Inn, The Middle Temple, The Inner Temple, and Gray’s Inn as to the Admission of Students, the Education and Examination of Students... Revised 17th, 1924. Rule 19.

⁴⁷ *Id.* Rule 21

⁴⁸ *Id.* This General Paper consisted of three individual parts.

⁴⁹ *Id.* Rule 25

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ *Id.* Rule 28.

⁵² See Appendix I.

⁵³ *Supra* note 47, Rule 23.

⁵⁴ See Appendix I.

⁵⁵ Council of Legal Education Archives, Examination Performance Records, A.CLE 11/15 H1929-M1930 No 15.

and only managed to pass it on her fourth attempt.⁵⁶ Lim Beng Tek failed the Criminal Law and Procedure paper once, while Wong Beng Sim failed that same paper twice and eventually gave up on the Bar Examination altogether.⁵⁷ A comparative table of the grades of the four lady barristers who passed the Bar Examination is annexed at Appendix I.

In particular, some of these women had impressive results that are worth singling out for mention. For instance, Lim Beng Tek nailed 110 marks on her first attempt of the Constitutional Law and History exam in Michaelmas 1931.⁵⁸ She was one of the only seven students who received a first-class result on this exam among the pool of 226 candidates, putting her fourth on the merit list.⁵⁹ She even beat three male Chinese students – of which two were Oxford-educated⁶⁰ – at that same sitting of the exam, all three of whom only received third-class results. However, she struggled a bit with her second paper – Criminal Law and Procedure. In Hilary term 1932, she failed it with 53 marks, 7 marks short of a pass.⁶¹ With much resolve, she made it up by scoring a second-class result of 105 in her second attempt – a very impressive score that was just five marks shy of a first-class grade.⁶² Another success story worth mentioning is Lucy See's final exam taken in Hilary 1930. Among 220 candidates and 136 eventual passes, only 1 student achieved a first-class result, while 24 made the second-class mark.⁶³ Lucy See was one of the only two women among these 24, and made a remarkable 13th out of the 24 in her class.⁶⁴

In contrast, Wong Beng Sim's experience with the Bar was less fortunate. In Michaelmas term of 1929, Wong Beng Sim signed up for the first examination in Criminal Law and Procedure, but she only garnered 45 marks.⁶⁵ She mustered the courage to try it again in Trinity 1930. This time, even though she progressed 9 marks, it was still insufficient to make a pass.⁶⁶ These two failures must have frustrated the young Wong greatly. She only took another exam – Roman Law – in May 1930. Even

⁵⁶ *Id.* A.CLE 11/14 H1927-M1928 No 14. Teo first took her Constitutional Law and Legal History paper in Michaelmas 1924, but she encountered a disastrous failure, earning only 34 marks, which was 16 marks short of a pass. On her second attempt a year later in Michaelmas 1925, she improved, but her total was still 4 marks shy from a pass. It will take another two more attempts for her, before she finally cleared this exam in Easter 1927, with a borderline pass of 64 marks.

⁵⁷ *Id.* A.CLE 11/15 H1929-M1930 No 15.

⁵⁸ *Id.* A.CLE 11/16 H1931-M1932 No 16.

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.* Foo Yin Chiew of Ipoh and Harold William Lee of Hong Kong. The third was Khoo Hock Soon of Penang.

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² *Id.* In that exam sitting, four students achieved first-class result in the said subject. Lim Beng Tek was ranked 17th out 33 students who achieved second-class results. In total, 231 students took the subject examination, but only 191 passed. In the said exam, two male Chinese students Goh Cheow Choon and Kok Ho Leng, both of Ipoh only scored third-class.

⁶³ *Supra* note 57.

⁶⁴ THE LAW TIMES, 18 January 1930, Volume 169-163. The other female student Miss Ruth Epstein scored two marks more than Lucy and ranked a spot above her, i.e. 12th on the merit list.

⁶⁵ *Supra* note 57.

⁶⁶ *Id.*

though she passed it with a creditable passing score of 71,⁶⁷ it did not seem good enough to spur her on in her pursuit of becoming a barrister; she discontinued her studies at Lincoln's Inn and sailed home in June 1930.⁶⁸

Seeking A Bachelor of Laws Degree

Those four Chinese women from Penang and Singapore were not contented with mere admission to the English Bar. They also held high ambitions of earning their LLB degrees from the University of London. To successfully complete and graduate with an LLB degree, students had to undergo two sets of courses and pass their respective examinations. The first set was styled as an “intermediate law course” which comprised three subjects – 1) History of Roman Law to the time of Justinian with Gaius and Justinian's Institutes; 2) English Constitutional Law and its History; 3) Jurisprudence, Analytical and Historical.⁶⁹ For the “intermediate law” examinations, students had to take two papers on “History of Roman Law to the time of Justinian with Gaius and Justinian's Institutes”; two papers on “English Constitutional Law and its History”; and one paper on “Jurisprudence, Analytical and Historical.” These exams were Pass Examinations, meaning that they were evaluated merely on a pass-fail basis without specific grades given, but students had to show “a complete knowledge in each of the three subjects...”⁷⁰ and if they only passed in two subjects out of three – the examiners “may allow them to offer the third subject alone at the next following Examination.” Usually, these exams would only be offered once a year, starting on the fourth Monday of September,⁷¹ but sometimes, there was also a special round of exams that would be held in July for internal students reading law at the three constituent colleges of the University of London, namely University College London, King's College London and London School of Economics.

The final examination could be taken at the end of third year study or later. In particular, the LLB final examination took place once each year.⁷² There was a long list of 15 subjects for examination, from which the students could choose from.⁷³ In the 1920s, for the final exam, students had the option to take Pass or Honours Examination, the

⁶⁷ *Id.*

⁶⁸ *Supra* note 39.

⁶⁹ UNIVERSITY OF LONDON, REGULATIONS AND COURSES FOR INTERNAL STUDENTS FOR THE SESSION 1921-22 (1921), at 224.

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ *Id.* at 223.

⁷² *Id.*

⁷³ *Id.* at 225 – 227: (1) English Law of Contract and Tort; (2) The Origin, History, and General Principles of English Equity Jurisprudence, Trusts (public and private), Bankruptcy (excluding Bankruptcy practice), Administration of Assets, Mortgages, and Charges on Property, Partnership, Companies (excluding Winding-up practice), Injunctions, and Specific Performance; (3) Principles of English Law of Evidence, Elements of English Criminal Law and of Civil and Criminal Procedure; (4) The Indian Evidence Act, the Indian Penal Code and the Indian Code of Criminal Procedure; (5) English Law of Real and Personal Property; (6) History of English Law; (7) The Constitutional Laws of the British Empire; (8) Comparative Jurisprudence; (9) A portion of the Digest to be prescribed from time to time; (10) Public International Law; (11) Private International Law; (12) Roman Dutch Law; (13) Mahomedan Law; (14) Hindu Law; (15) Code Napoleon.

latter was more rigorous and prestigious than the former.⁷⁴ Students who attempted the Honours Examination but failed to achieve the requisite standards but demonstrated a level of knowledge sufficient to satisfy the Pass Examination would be awarded a Pass in the Pass Examination.

The LLB program at London was known to be highly rigorous and challenging for Chinese students. Failures were commonplace,⁷⁵ and even Lim Beng Hong's brother-in-law Goh Guan Ho had failed the Constitutional Law and History paper in his intermediate exam in 1914 and had to retake it the following year.⁷⁶ Lim Beng's Hong's brother, Lim Khye Seng, had even mightier challenges than his brother-in-law – he had problems even entering the LLB degree program,⁷⁷ and thus enrolled as a non-degree student at the University College London on 26 October 1923 to read law courses from October 1923 to June 1925.⁷⁸ It appears that he later gave up the attempt to read for the LLB degree, and focused his time on his Bar Examination instead.

Lim Beng Hong, however, was a student of great grit and determination, traits which would later pave the way for her to become a forerunning female Chinese lawyer. Her grades were not stellar throughout, but she passed them all at the first attempt and progress was evident. With her hard work, she managed to complete the LLB program at minimum time, and even scored some impressive marks that would put many of her fellow Chinese male counterparts to shame. In the academic year 1923-24, she scored second-class in Roman Law, and third-class in Criminal Law & Procedure, English Constitutional Law, and Jurisprudence.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, she successfully passed the Intermediate Law exam in July 1924.⁸⁰ In academic year 1924-25, she distinguished among her classmates, by attaining a second-class in Contract & Tort and becoming the second top-ranked student in Equity.⁸¹ For her final exam, she chose the secure route of taking the Pass Examination and successfully received her LLB degree in July 1926,⁸² thereby becoming the first Chinese woman to receive a law degree in the United Kingdom.

Lim Beng Hong's sister also only took three years to complete the LLB program. In

⁷⁴ *Id.* at 227-228: The Pass Examination were based on five subjects, namely subjects 1 and 2, and one from either subject 3 or 4, and the last two from either of the following groups: "Group I: Subject (5), together with any one of the subjects numbered (6) to (16). Group II: Either subject (12) or subject (15) together with any one of the subjects numbered (6) to (11). The subjects of the Honours Examination consisted of four of the subjects numbered 1 to 15 at the option of the candidates, and "the [Honours] Examination shall consist of one advanced paper in each of the four subjects so selected."

⁷⁵ Kwan Cho Yiu failed his intermediate law exam in 1927; Cheah Inn Kheam and Hock Tan Cheng failed his intermediate law exam in 1929; Chia Boon Hoe failed his intermediate exam in 1930 and 1931.

⁷⁶ *Supra* note 8.

⁷⁷ His first attempt at the London Matriculation Examination was in January 1924, where he failed the subject in French language. He made a second attempt in September 1924 but failed again.

⁷⁸ *Supra* note 10. Re-Entry Form, dated 22 June 1924 (on file with the author).

⁷⁹ University of London, University College, Lim Beng Hong's Registry File (on file with the author).

⁸⁰ *Id.*

⁸¹ *Id.*

⁸² *Id.*

academic year 1930-31,⁸³ she received third-class in Roman Law and in Jurisprudence.⁸⁴ She passed her Special Intermediate Law exam in July 1931.⁸⁵ In academic year 1931-32,⁸⁶ she received third-class in Equity, but performed exceptionally well in Law of Contract exam and was placed second in that exam.⁸⁷ At the end of her third year at the University, she also chose the secure route of attempting the Pass Examination, passed it, and received her LLB degree in June 1933.⁸⁸

The first Singaporean student's ambition to get a coveted LLB degree from London University was thwarted by repeated failures in the final exams. At the outset, Teo achieved similar results like Lim Beng Hong. In academic year 1924-25, Teo achieved third-class in Jurisprudence, and second-class in Criminal Law & Procedure.⁸⁹ She passed the Special Intermediate Law exam on the first attempt in July 1925.⁹⁰ In academic year 1925-26, she achieved third-class in Contract & Tort, was placed 5th among the students who took the Law of Property exam. She only took the final exam in her fourth year, in July 1927, but despite the one-year delay, she still failed her Public International Law and Conflict of Laws papers – two subjects known to be of great interest to her.⁹¹ In the fifth year of her undergraduate studies, she mustered the courage to try the final examination again in July 1928, yet on this occasion, she failed even more papers, flunking General Principles of Common Law, English Law of Property, and Conflict of Laws.⁹² In the end, she gave up her ambition to obtain the much coveted LLB degree after almost five years' legal education at the University College London.

The second Singaporean woman student turned out to be most academically accomplished out of the four who had eyes on the LLB degree from the University of London. In academic year 1926-27, Lucy scored third-class in Roman Law, and second-class in Criminal Law and Procedure, and passed the Special Intermediate Law Exam July 1927 on her first attempt.⁹³ In academic year 1927-28, she achieved second-class in Contract & Tort.⁹⁴ She delayed taking the final examination in July 1928 possibly for the purpose of organizing the best preparation for taking the Honours Examination.⁹⁵ In July 1929, Lucy See became the first Chinese woman to pass the Honours' Examination and received her LLB degree with second-class honours⁹⁶ – which was a marvellous academic accomplishment – because first class honours was

⁸³ University of London, University College, Lim Beng Tek's Registry File (on file with the author). Lim Beng Tek matriculated at University College London to study law on 6 October 1930.

⁸⁴ *Id.*

⁸⁵ *Id.*

⁸⁶ *Id.*

⁸⁷ *Id.*

⁸⁸ *Id.*

⁸⁹ University of London, University College, Teo Soon Kim's Registry File (on file with the author).

⁹⁰ *Id.*

⁹¹ *Id.* She delayed taking the final examination which was ordinarily taken in the third year of legal studies, and only made her first attempt in her fourth year of studies.

⁹² *Id.*

⁹³ University of London, University College, Lucy See's Registry File (on file with the author).

⁹⁴ *Id.*

⁹⁵ *Id.*

⁹⁶ *Id.*

sparingly awarded.

Legal Eagles Take Flight

An “Epoch-Making” Moment for Women Lawyers

On 16 June 1926, Lim Beng Hong became one of 108 law students who were called to the Bar. She was one of only six newly minted women barristers at law called in that term.⁹⁷ After their coming onboard, “the number of women members of the English Bar will then be over sixty.”⁹⁸ As a matter of fact, Lim Beng Hong and her brother had set a record in the history – “for brother and sister of any race to be called simultaneously is unique – and unprecedented in the history of the legal profession.”⁹⁹ On garnering this feat, when asked if they intended to stay in England to practise law, Lim Beng Hong replied “Oh, no, the competition in London is too great. We expect to go back to Penang and practise either there or in China.”¹⁰⁰

Lim Beng Hong and her brother travelled homeward on steamer *Kashimire* and arrived in Penang in early December 1926, and when asked about their next moves, they told a reporter that their intention was to practise in Penang.¹⁰¹ Lim Beng Hong wasted no time in seeking admission to the Penang Bar, and filed her application for admission to the Bar in the Supreme Court Registry, Penang, on December 9, 1926.¹⁰² Despite the euphoria of Lim Beng Hong’s remarkable accomplishment of being called to the Bar in England, there was a legal uncertainty as to whether she could be admitted to practise law back home because the applicable local ordinance was not clear on this point.¹⁰³ At the time of enacting the ordinance, as it was not within the contemplation of the legislators that women would be allowed to practise law, the ordinance had variously used the male gender form when describing those eligible for admission. In particular, regarding the petition for admission, it was stated that “The applicant shall file the said petition in the Registrar's office, accompanied with a notice intimating that *he* has so applied....”¹⁰⁴ In this case, it appears a legislative amendment was required to allow Lim Beng Hong to be admitted to the legal profession in the Straits Settlements. In February 1927, it was reported that “A Bill was introduced which had as its object the removal of doubts as to whether a woman who was otherwise qualified to be admitted and enrolled as an advocate and solicitor of the Supreme Court of the Colony was

⁹⁷ *More Women Barristers*, THE DAILY TELEGRAPH, 11 June 1926, at 13.

⁹⁸ *Id.*

⁹⁹ *A Legal Record*, NOTTINGHAM EVENING POST, 18 June 1926, at 4.

¹⁰⁰ *Chinese Lawyers in London*, SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST, 27 July 1926, at 10.

¹⁰¹ THE SINGAPORE FREE PRESS AND MERCANTILE ADVERTISER, 9 December 1926, at 8.

¹⁰² *Local and General*, SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST, 28 December 1926, at 2. See also, *Lady Lawyer for Singapore, Preparing for Local Portia's Application*, THE STRAITS TIMES, 8 February 1927, at 8.

¹⁰³ The Laws of the Straits Settlements (Edition of 1926) Vol. II. Part II. Advocates and Solicitors and Conveyancers – Chapter VIII Admission to the Roll at 367-376.

¹⁰⁴ *Id.* at 368.

disqualified by reason of her sex from such admission and enrolment.”¹⁰⁵ Michael Henry Whitley, the then Attorney-General stated the legislative purpose as to meet a practical need “a petition by a lady who had been called to the Bar at the Inner Temple would come up for hearing in the Supreme Court at Singapore next June”. On 2 June 1927, William Peel, Governor of the Straits Settlements signed the legislative amendment, that “Section 70 of Ordinance No. 101 (Courts) is amended – (b) by adding ...the following new sub-section: (2) A person shall not be disqualified by sex from being admitted and enrolled as an advocate and solicitor of the Supreme Court.”¹⁰⁶

With the ambiguity on the local ordinance finally removed, the opportune time had come – once Lim Beng Hong had fulfilled the six months’ residence in the Colony requirement¹⁰⁷ – that she sets in motion the procedures requisite for admission to the local bar. She did so, together with her brother, and after filing their papers, it was announced that their petitions for admission to the local bar will be heard before Justice P. J. Sproule on Monday, 4 July 1927.¹⁰⁸ The news also reminded the readers about Lim Beng Hong’s extraordinary feat – “Miss Beng Hong will have the unique distinction of being the first lady lawyer to be admitted to practice in the history of the Malayan Peninsula.”¹⁰⁹ Justice Sproule was no stranger to Lim Beng Hong and her brother – he was a friend of the Lim family and was in fact their referee who had vouched for their admission to an Inn of Court in London. On the morning of 4 June 1917, on moving the admission of Lim Beng Hong to practice law at the Penang Bar, Justice Sproule described the moment as “an epoch-making event.”¹¹⁰ As a matter of fact, the brother and sister made history again by being the only sibling duo admitted to practice law in the Straits Settlements on the same day.

However, sex discrimination still presented a formidable obstacle in Lim Beng Hong’s initial attempt to get called to the Bar of Ipoh, F.M.S. In April 1927, Lim Beng Hong and her brother had trekked to Ipoh “for the purpose of filing papers in the Supreme Court to practice as solicitors in the F.M.S.”¹¹¹ The enactment governing the admission of advocate and solicitor was passed in 1918 before any woman could be eligible for entrance to the legal profession in England and British Malaya.¹¹² This probably posed an insurmountable obstacle in the absence of a legislative relief. Finally, 8 years later, on 18 March 1935, Lim Beng Hong mounted another attempt and succeeded in shattering the glass ceiling by gaining admission without any legislative change. At the

¹⁰⁵ *The Day's News*, THE SINGAPORE FREE PRESS AND MERCANTILE ADVERTISER, 8 February 1927, at 8.

¹⁰⁶ Straits Settlement No. 6 of 1927 – An Ordinance to Amend Ordinance No. 101 (Courts).

¹⁰⁷ *Supra* note 92. “(3) The applicant shall reside in the Colony or the Federated Malay States for six months before any order shall be made by the Court on his petition.”

¹⁰⁸ THE SINGAPORE FREE PRESS AND MERCANTILE ADVERTISER, 4 July 1927, at 8.

¹⁰⁹ *Id.*

¹¹⁰ *Epoch-Making Event, First Chinese Woman Barrister at Penang*, THE STRAITS TIMES, 5 July 1927, at 10.

¹¹¹ THE SINGAPORE FREE PRESS AND MERCANTILE ADVERTISER, 16 April 1927, at 6.

¹¹² *First Woman Lawyer*, THE SINGAPORE FREE PRESS AND MERCANTILE ADVERTISER, 20 March 1935, at 6.

beginning, there was still some lingering doubts about whether the 1918 enactment would allow admission of woman. Nevertheless, Edgar Atheling Stockwell Wagner moved her admission and urged the court to consider that the legislative provision at issue did not place any explicit restriction on gender – “they could not raise any issue against the admission of a woman barrister-at-law to the local bar unless it was expressly laid down in the enactment.” The Bar Committee was represented by the doyen of Chinese barristers – the Cambridge educated Yong Shook Lin, who was also of the Inner Temple. Chief Justice Sir Samuel Thomas “was inclined to agree with what was said [by Mr Wagner], and when Mr Shook Lin said that he had no objection, formally admitted” her to the local bar.¹¹³

Lim Beng Hong had her first taste of court litigation on 6 July 1927 when she represented a defendant sued by a coconut tree climber for disputed wages. She strove to help her client with a statute of limitation defence, arguing that most claims were time-barred. However, she lost the argument and the court gave plaintiff judgement for the requested amount.¹¹⁴ Her initial success at the court would come shortly. In her first appeal in the Supreme Court at Penang in August 1927, she represented two Tamils who had been convicted and sentenced to “a fine of \$25 each, or one month’s rigorous imprisonment for voluntarily causing hurt to a compatriot.” Lim Beng Hong succeeded in defending these Tamils – the court quashed the sentence of one of her clients and reduced the sentence for the other client.¹¹⁵

Only after having practised law for few months, Lim Beng Hong decided to go back to London to break a new record by starting graduate program in law at the University College London. She sailed on the *Rawalpindi* from Penang to London in late August. On this study trip, she aimed to complete the Master of Laws (LLM) studies and earn the degree in one year.¹¹⁶ She applied for admission to the LLM program on 12 October 1927, proposing to take the examinations required for the award of the LLM degree in September 1928.¹¹⁷ She enrolled in English Law and Evidence Procedure, Conflict of Laws.¹¹⁸

It appeared she was romantically involved with Indonesia-born Oon Wan Leong during her previous sojourn in London. On returning to London, it was shortly announced that Lim Beng Hong had tied knot with Oon Wan Leong in London on 23 September 1927.¹¹⁹ After two months’ study, she was prevented from continuing her studies “due to eye trouble”¹²⁰ and withdrew from the program in in December 1927.¹²¹ She only

¹¹³ *Id.*

¹¹⁴ *Lady Barrister Starts*, MALAYA TRIBUNE, 7 July 1927, at 10.

¹¹⁵ THE STRAITS TIMES, 5 August 1927, at 8.

¹¹⁶ THE SINGAPORE FREE PRESS AND MERCANTILE ADVERTISER, 30 August 1927, at 8.

¹¹⁷ University of London, University College, Lim Beng Hong's Re-Entry Form, dated 12 October 1927 (on file with the author).

¹¹⁸ *Id.*

¹¹⁹ *Social and Personal*, THE STRAITS TIMES, 30 September 1927, at 8.

¹²⁰ MALAYA TRIBUNE, 17 December 1929, at 8.

¹²¹ *Supra* note 79.

returned to Penang in December 1929 to resume her practice in the firm of Messrs. Lim and Lim.¹²²

When confronted with racial discrimination and sexism, Lim Beng Hong fearlessly went all out to vindicate her dignity and rights. In March 1930, while waiting for her brother to fetch their car on the jetty steps, “she felt an arm around her. She turned and found that the arm belonged to a European who was standing close behind her.”¹²³ That European was G. F. Lenders who was general representative for Carreras in the Far East. She confronted him and asked “What do you mean by putting your arm on me?” Lenders “instead of offering any explanation, said nothing except ‘Did I put my arm round you. Do you know who I am?’” He said this in an “insolent manner” and went to his friends to make mockery of Lim Beng Hong.¹²⁴ When her brother came back and intervened in the matter, Lenders insulted him, and things immediately escalated to a fist fight. Lim Beng Hong was outraged by the assault and insult, she pressed a charge of criminal assault against Lenders. This case became a sensational one in Penang, attracting an extraordinarily large crowd to the trials at the district court.¹²⁵ Lim Beng Hong succeed in her legal fight against a powerful European businessman, and in the end, Lenders was convicted and fined \$50.¹²⁶

Lim Beng Hong became a role model for young girls at schools in Penang – her attempt to break into male dominant legal profession inspired a Chinese pupil at her alma mater, the Government Girls School, to make reference to her feat in “...a speech by a Chinese pupil in which she said that one Chinese girl pupil had recently gone to England and might return to Penang as the first lady lawyer. Chinese Girls were grasping the advantages of the privileges of education.”¹²⁷

Later in her life, Lim Beng Hong struck out a glittering career that set numerous unsurpassable records. She was deeply involved in charity work in Province Wellesley, becoming the honorary treasurer of the Women's Service League and was a prominent defense lawyer during the Malaya Emergency.¹²⁸ On 1 February 1949, she was appointed Federal Legislative Councillor, representing professional, education and cultural interests. With this appointment, she became one of two women law-makers in the Federal Legislative Council.¹²⁹ She was also instrumental in establishing the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a uni-racial political party.¹³⁰ She co-founded and served as chairwoman of Province Wellesley Labour Party in 1950s.¹³¹ In 1964,

¹²² *Supra* note 120.

¹²³ *European Charged*, THE STRAITS TIMES, 28 March 1930, at 14.

¹²⁴ *Alleged Assault on Mrs. Oon*, THE STRAITS TIMES, 4 April 1930, at 13.

¹²⁵ *Id.*

¹²⁶ *Mr. G. F. Lenders Fined \$50*, THE STRAITS TIMES, 5 April 1930, at 11.

¹²⁷ *First Chinese Lady Lawyer*, MALAYA TRIBUNE, 6 December 1923, at 6. Speech was given at the prize giving ceremony in December 1923.

¹²⁸ *First Woman Lawyer*, SUNDAY MAIL, KUALA LUMPUR, 1 June 2003, at 55.

¹²⁹ *Id.*

¹³⁰ *Id.*

¹³¹ *New Labour Party in Province*, THE STRAITS TIMES, 22 September 1953, at 5.

she set up the Federation of Women Lawyers of North Malaya and became its inaugural president.¹³² In 1972, she became the first Malaysian to be voted in president of the International Federation of Women Lawyers.¹³³ In recognition of her numerous contributions, she was made a member of the Order of the British Empire by the British Queen in 1953.¹³⁴ In October 1974, she was honoured with Pingat Tun Fatimah from Malaysian Prime Minister.¹³⁵

As for Lim Beng Tek, after she passed her final Bar Examination in November and was called to the Bar at the Inner Temple on 17 November 1933,¹³⁶ she immediately took the next available opportunity to sail home on the steamer *Corfu* and arrived in Penang in December 1933.¹³⁷ Lim Beng Tek joined the family firm upon her return.¹³⁸

On 9 July 1934, the doyen of Chinese barristers in Penang, Cambridge-educated Lim Cheng Ean, moved the court to admit Lim Beng Tek as an advocate and solicitor of the Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements.¹³⁹ On admitting Lim Beng Tek to the Bar as the second women lawyer in Penang and the third in the Straits Settlements, Justice Whitley of the Supreme Court said: “Miss Beng Teik Lim, it gives me great pleasure to admit you... I am happy to think that the first lady barrister I have to admit here is a member of my own Inn. I hope your career will be a very happy and prosperous one.” In 1936, Lim Beng Tek gave up her legal practice and went to Shanghai. She married Frederick Everard Baguley, the only son of Rev. E Baguley. Frederick was a missionary with the London Missionary Society, and they soon went to Hankow, China to join the mission school Griffith John School there.¹⁴⁰

Fledging Lady Lawyers of Singapore

On 29 June 1927, Teo Soon Kim made history by becoming one of the six women “among the hundred law students to be called to the Bar at the Inns of Court.”¹⁴¹ Teo and Alice Josephine Mackie were the only two women called to the Bar at the Inner Temple in that term.¹⁴² After making this crowning achievement, Teo travelled widely before returning home in November 1928 as Singapore’s first lady lawyer.¹⁴³ In actuality, Teo became a small number of Chinese women who had the experience of observing in person how British politics was conducted in parliament – in one public

¹³² *Supra* note 128.

¹³³ *Id.*

¹³⁴ *From the Queen*, THE STRAITS TIMES, 26 February 1953, at 1.

¹³⁵ *Supra* note 117.

¹³⁶ *Lady Barrister, Miss A.T. Lim of Penang Passes Finals*, THE SINGAPORE FREE PRESS AND MERCANTILE ADVERTISER, 3 November 1933, at 9.

¹³⁷ THE SINGAPORE FREE PRESS AND MERCANTILE ADVERTISER, 6 November 1933, at 16.

¹³⁸ *Chinese Woman Barrister*, THE STRAITS TIMES, 11 December 1933, at 12.

¹³⁹ *New Woman Barrister Admitted to Practice in Penang*, THE SINGAPORE FREE PRESS AND MERCANTILE ADVERTISER, 12 July 1934, at 6.

¹⁴⁰ *Former Penang Woman Lawyer Weds*, THE STRAITS TIMES, 7 July 1936, at 16.

¹⁴¹ *Calls to the Bar*, THE DAILY TELEGRAPH, 25 June 1927, at 15.

¹⁴² *Id.*

¹⁴³ MALAYAN SATURDAY POST, 24 November 1928, at 21.

lecture she gave in Singapore, she “described a scene during a debate in the House of Commons and referred to the department of the different Parties when one of their members was speaking.” She had travelled widely and came to understand the issue of geopolitics – “she singled out Switzerland as the only country which enjoyed permanent neutrality guaranteed by the other European Powers.” During her sojourn in Europe, she had the privilege of attending a session of the League of Nations in Geneva – “when Sir Austen Chamberlain and Dr. Stresemann were present.” She was also an acute observer of the Fascist movement unfolding in Italy. In the same talk, she “also described Rome, and the great hold which the Fascist movement had on young Italians, Mussolini, who reigned supreme, was the hero of the moment.”

On 17 June 1929, Teo made history in Singapore when on the motion of the acting Attorney General Mr. R. Page, she took her oaths before Justice Deane,¹⁴⁴ and became the first woman advocate and solicitor to be admitted to practice in Singapore, after articling with Allen and Gledhill.¹⁴⁵ This was 35 years after the admission of Song Ong Siang – the first Chinese gentlemen admitted to practice law as advocate and solicitor in Singapore.¹⁴⁶ Justice Deane congratulated Teo and “expressed the wish that she would enjoy a long and honourable career in the Courts of the Colony.”¹⁴⁷ After her historic admission to the Bar in Singapore, Teo was sought out by a local reporter for an interview – when being asked why she took up law – she revealed that “she was ‘interested in law work’ when she was in Singapore after her school days, but that was all.” As early as 1923, she was attracted to the legal world, she “used to sit among the laymen and women in the Court...”¹⁴⁸ While in London as a law student, she told the reporter that for a while she was attached to the late Dr. Hugh H. H. Bellot, Honorary Secretary of International Law Association and the Grotius Society.¹⁴⁹ After two years of travelling in the US and China, she came back to Singapore in November 1928. Then she filed her papers to be admitted as a lawyer in Singapore.¹⁵⁰ Teo told the reporter that she “intends to practise in Shanghai.” Before long, Teo married Lo Lung Chi, an accomplished, promising young political scientist educated at Columbia University. In March 1929, they sailed off to China to start their married lives together.

Teo’s decision to head to China to practice law upon her marriage was quite unsurprising. Her father was a prominent financial backer of Dr. Sun Yat Sen. There were many precedents setters – those Malayan Chinese who after achieving distinction in Great Britain and Malaya decided to go to China to make contributions to the nation building. Teo was most likely inspired by those pioneers. On one occasion, Song Ong Siang, the first Singapore-born Chinese lawyer, had this to say about Teo – “they had

¹⁴⁴ *First Lady Barrister, Admitted to Practice To-day*, MALAYA TRIBUNE, 17 June 1929, at 8.

¹⁴⁵ *Nü Lü Shi Luo Zhang Shun Qin Nü Shi Dao Hu*, SHENBAO, 27 July 1929, at 15.

¹⁴⁶ Song Ong Siang was admitted to practice law on 27 March 1894.

¹⁴⁷ *First Lady Barrister Supra* note 133.

¹⁴⁸ *Our First Lady Barrister, Mrs. Lo Teo Soon Kim*, THE SINGAPORE FREE PRESS AND MERCANTILE ADVERTISER, 19 June 1929, at 11.

¹⁴⁹ *Id.*

¹⁵⁰ *Id.*

no doubt that when the time came for her to leave them to proceed to China she would emulate those who had preceded her from his part of the world... who had rendered, and were rendering services to China. And he believed that Mrs. Lo might have a good opportunity of assisting in the codification of the laws of China.”¹⁵¹

Teo’s arrival in Shanghai was reported by the local newspaper as well, nothing that her purpose of coming to Shanghai was to “practice law, to make loyal contribution to the motherland, and to protect civil rights...”¹⁵² In July 1929, Teo Soon Kim became a professor teaching a course on English literature at Guanghai University in Shanghai.¹⁵³ She also taught at the Faculty of Arts at Jinan University.¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, with a view to practicing law, Teo applied to Shanghai Bar Association for full membership. It was later announced on 13 October 1930 that the Association had resolved to admit her.¹⁵⁵ The next day, a local newspaper reported that Teo had become the third women lawyer in Shanghai.¹⁵⁶ On 23 October 1930, she announced the opening of her law firm in Shanghai. In teaming up with lawyer Lo Jiaheng, she would accept assignments to appear before different courts including Shanghai Mixed Court in French Concession, Shanghai Provisional Court, Jiangsu High Court and the Courts in Hong Kong. She stated that “if retained, [she] will exert best efforts, and will particularly welcome cases in relation to women.”¹⁵⁷ Her interest in improving women rights was apparent, when in March 1931, she joined forces with several professional women in Shanghai to prepare the establishment of China Professional Women Fraternity.¹⁵⁸

Teo only returned to practice law in Singapore in 1931, after spending two years in China.¹⁵⁹ She gave an interview when she came back, and when asked why she chose the legal profession, she answered that she had already made up her mind a decade ago:

It was profession in which there was no woman in this country and so few in the East. So I thought it was the profession for me, The teaching profession is rather crowded. I had taken up normal work and had been in the teaching profession, but when I got the chance I changed to law. The medical profession takes too long. In the legal profession, of course, you are concerned all aspects of life. You get to know practically everything. I think there is a very good opening for women in this profession because it is not so strenuous as medicine.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵¹ *Chinese Lady Barrister*, MALAYA TRIBUNE, 11 March 1929, at 3.

¹⁵² *Supra* note 145.

¹⁵³ SHENBAO, 19 July 1929, at 24.

¹⁵⁴ *Ji Nan Da Xue Quan Bu Jiao Zhi Yuan*, SHENBAO, 22 November 1929, at 11.

¹⁵⁵ SHENBAO, 13 October 1930, at 14.

¹⁵⁶ *Nü Lü Shi You Tian Liang Wei*, SHENBAO, 14 October 14, at 21.

¹⁵⁷ *Luo Zhang Shun Qin Lü Shi Zhi Xing Zhi Wu Tong Gao*, SHENBAO, 23 October 1930, at 2.

¹⁵⁸ *Zhong Guo Zhi Ye Fu Nü Tong Zhi She Chou Bei Hui*, SHENBAO, 7 March 1931, at 16.

¹⁵⁹ MALAYA TRIBUNE, 26 June 1931, at 8.

¹⁶⁰ *Lady Barrister in Hongkong: Successful Practice in Singapore Admitted To Local Bar*, SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST, 10 August 1932, at 11.

Teo was quick to add that she did not mean the legal profession was an easy one, though that should not daunt the aspiring women:

But that does not mean that the anxiety is any less in the legal profession. I believe that a woman should be capable of doing as well in the legal profession as a man. That is what I have seen from the American legal side.¹⁶¹

In America women are regarded as almost the equal of men and it is so easy for them to get into the legal profession. I should think that in countries where women have yet to be regarded as equals of men it would be quite a struggle in the beginning. In Singapore I find it is not so difficult. I find that I get help and encouragement wherever I go from the members of the Bar.¹⁶²

She was acutely aware that clients might harbour reservations about retaining women as their lawyer, but her personal experience turned out to be contrary – “...but that I find is not true. People come to me of their own accord and, in the main, introduce their womanfolk, especially when the case concerns women. Once you get the confidence of your client everything should be well.”¹⁶³

Teo Soon Kim’s debut in the Singapore court attracted significant publicity since it was “the first time a lady lawyer has appeared at the Bar in the Courts of the Colony.” She was assigned a case by the Crown to defend a Chinese man accused of murder in January 1932. This young Chinese man was charged of murdering his cousin for a dispute “over trifling sum of money in a vegetable plantation.”¹⁶⁴ In a trial taking place before Justice Sproule and a special jury at the Assize Court in Singapore,¹⁶⁵ Teo Soon Kim “wore the usual black robes worn by Counsel over a white jacket buttoning up at the neck, and spoke in a soft but clear voice in cross-examining witnesses for the prosecution.”¹⁶⁶ The accused was said to have allegedly stabbed his cousin in the back and the attack was said to “have been witnessed by a fellow gardener”, Ong Chiang,¹⁶⁷ who “said he saw the accused and deceased walking in the plantation, talking to each other... While they were walking witness saw Loh Kiang [accused] stab Loh Suah [deceased]... Witness saw a knife used. After Loh Suah was stabbed, witness saw accused run off towards the house.”

There was a general expectation that this was a hopeless case for the accused, but “[Teo’s] clever conduct of what at first appeared to be a hopeless case resulted in the discharge of the prisoner...”¹⁶⁸ Teo showcased her legal knowledge and skills in the

¹⁶¹ *Id.*

¹⁶² *Id.*

¹⁶³ *Id.*

¹⁶⁴ *Lady Lawyer's Debut, Mrs. Lo Teo Soon Kim, Defending in Murder Trial*, MALAYA TRIBUNE, 8 January 1932, at 10.

¹⁶⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶⁶ *Id.*

¹⁶⁷ *Id.*

¹⁶⁸ *Id.*

conduct of the defence by highlighting the weaknesses of the prosecution's case. In a well-calculated strategy to exonerate her client, Teo Soon Kim (referred to as Mrs. Lo below) cross-examined Ong Chiang:¹⁶⁹

“Mrs. Lo: You have to pass the deceased's house to reach your own house? – Yes.

The house in [sic] on a hill? – Yes.

Your house is on the other side of the hill? – Yes.

There are rubber trees in your plantation? – Yes.

How far away from the house were you? – About 300 paces away.

What length of path could you see from where you were? – A long stretch.”

Teo “spoke deliberately, [and] made an impressive address to the jury... The evidence of the witness, Ong Chiang, said counsel, could not be relied upon. He wanted to get the prisoner out of the way for obvious reasons.”¹⁷⁰ The jury after a short retirement, “returned a verdict of not guilty by a majority of five to two and the prisoner was acquitted and discharged.”¹⁷¹ On achieving this victory, Teo became “the recipient of genuine congratulations from her fellow counsel at the conclusion of the case.”¹⁷²

A few months later, in May 1932, Teo Soon Kim represented another client “charged with causing the death of a woman by rash act while driving a motor lorry.”¹⁷³ While behind the wheel, her client knocked the victim down and caused the death. Teo Soon Kim asked for an acquittal in this case on the ground that the alleged act did not amount to a criminal offence. Justice Whitley concurred “that the highest degree of negligence of which accused could have been guilty would be such as would form the basis of a civil action, not a criminal charge.” The Deputy Public Prosecutor eventually “decided that the evidence does not show such negligence as would justify a jury in convicting,” and the charge eventually withdrawn. With that, Singapore's first lady lawyer prevailed in yet another case.

Teo also laid claim to the distinction of being the first woman admitted to practise law in Hong Kong. On 8 August 1932, the Attorney General of Hong Kong Mr. Chaloner Grenville Alabaster, moved the court for the admission of Teo, stating that “I have no doubt that her presence will be welcomed and there will be no moaning at the Bar.”¹⁷⁴ The Chief Justice Sir Joseph Kempt on admitting Teo to practice law in Hong Kong declared that “This opens a new chapter in the history of the Hongkong bar.”¹⁷⁵ Teo was greeted with “many congratulations in the Supreme Court.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁶⁹ *Id.*

¹⁷⁰ *Id.*

¹⁷¹ *Id.*

¹⁷² *Id.*

¹⁷³ *Negligence That Was Not Criminal, Motor Accident, Charge Withdrawn at the Assizes*, THE SINGAPORE FREE PRESS AND MERCANTILE ADVERTISER, 6 May 1932, at 8.

¹⁷⁴ *Lady Barrister: Mrs. S. K. T. Lo Makes History in Hongkong Admitted to Practice*, SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST, 9 August 1932, at 10.

¹⁷⁵ *Id.*

¹⁷⁶ *Lady Barrister in Hongkong, Success in Singapore Recalled*, MALAYA TRIBUNE, 19 August 1932,

Meanwhile, Teo's father moved to reside in China. There, he recommended his daughter to Wang Jingwei, President of Executive Yuan, for an appointment with the Chinese government. Sometime in September 1933, Wang appointed Teo as a counsellor to the Executive Yuan on the strength of her being a well-educated overseas Chinese lady lawyer, who would be able to serve as a role model for others.¹⁷⁷ Teo thus relocated to China. She would go on to teach at various universities including the celebrated Southwest Associated University. In April 1978, Teo died in Hefei, Anhui Province, China.

The second Singaporean woman lawyer Lucy See was called to the Bar in London on 27 January 1930, as one of the only four women among a pool of 96 students who were called to the Bar in that term,¹⁷⁸ a vivid illustration of the minority representation of women at the English Bar.¹⁷⁹ After getting called, Lucy See sailed home on the steamer *Rwalpindi*, arriving in Singapore in late February 1930 after five years' sojourn in London. One of the leading newspapers in Singapore reported her triumphant homecoming with some "embellished" information – "Miss See graduated from the University of London with first-class honours [sic] winning the LLB degree. She also enjoys the distinction of being the third Chinese lady from Malaya to qualify as a barrister-at-law, having passed her final Bar Examination at the Inner Temple, London, with second-class honours."¹⁸⁰ In truth, Lucy See only received her LLB with second-class honours, not a first – though passing the honour's examination with second-class performance was already a brilliant result. She indeed passed her bar final examination with second-class result – an unprecedented achievement by a Chinese woman. After her return, she became the second woman to have "a set in the office of Messrs. Allen and Gledhill,"¹⁸¹ an extraordinary feat for a woman in Singapore in those days. She was with the firm from February to August 1930.¹⁸²

In August 1930, Lucy See married Chen Hsu who was a fellow student in London. Chen Hsu was the son of General Chen Tiao Yuan, Governor of the Shandong Government and "is himself an officer of the Government under his father."¹⁸³ They sailed for China on 3 August 1930. Maybe for this reason, she did not apply for admission to the local bar in Singapore after her initial return in 1930. While in China, Lucy See joined

at 14.

¹⁷⁷ *Qian Xing Zhou Nü Lü Shi Zhang Shun Qin Nü Shi Rong Ying Xing Zheng Yuan Can Shi*, NAN YANG SHANG BAO, 11 September 1933, at 6.

¹⁷⁸ *Bar Candidates, Four Women Among New Barristers*, THE DAILY TELEGRAPH, 22 January 1930, at 15.

¹⁷⁹ Out of these four women, three were law students at the Inner Temple, a conspicuous trio among the 24 law students called to the Bar at Inner Temple.

¹⁸⁰ *Lady Barrister, Miss Lucy See Returning with Honours*, THE STRAITS TIMES, 15 February 1930, at 17.

¹⁸¹ THE STRAITS TIMES, 2 August 1930, at 10.

¹⁸² *Miss Lucy See: Admitted to Bar in Hongkong Born in Singapore*, SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST, 17 November 1951, at 6.

¹⁸³ *Well Known Chinese Married, Singapore Lady Barrister and General's Son*, MALAYA TRIBUNE, 4 August 1930, at 9.

Tsingtao Bar and later the Nanking Bar. She became a Legal advisor for the Chinese Air Force – the latter appointment was most likely made possible because of her husband’s father was a high-ranking Chinese government official.¹⁸⁴ She sought and obtained admission to the Hong Kong Bar on 16 November 1951, becoming the second woman to be admitted there.¹⁸⁵ Two years later, it appears that she returned to Singapore and was only then admitted to practice as advocate and solicitor in Singapore on 2 March 1953.¹⁸⁶

Conclusion

The Chinese saying goes that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. For these audacious pioneering lady barristers who time and again pushed the boundaries of what women can achieve, it probably all began when they set their minds to take the path untrodden, to bravely adjust their sails to the changing winds brought on by the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919. Their successes also in part lie in their families’ remarkable background and phenomenal financial wherewithal. With supportive families and abundant resources, they fearlessly set out to pursue their dreams with vision and vigour. Almost a century since then, tables have now turned such that in the law faculties of Chinese universities today, it is not only commonplace to find female students, but also that the number of female students far outweigh their male counterparts and, indeed, often outperform them in exams too. The tales of these early Chinese women barristers thus serve to remind us of how legal changes could propel wholesome social changes and how far our society has progressed in the fight for gender equality, and would continue to inspire generations of women to come.

¹⁸⁴ *Id.*

¹⁸⁵ *Miss Lucy See, Supra* note 182.

¹⁸⁶ Roll of Advocates and Solicitors Singapore 1852-1968 (on file with the author).

		Lim Beng Hong	Lim Beng Tek		Teo Soon Kim				Lucy See
		First Attempt	First Attempt	Second Attempt	First Attempt	Second Attempt	Third Attempt	Fourth Attempt	First Attempt
A	Roman Law	Exempted	Exempted		Exempted				Exempted
B	Constitutional Law & Legal History	Easter 1924, Class III	Michaelmas 1931, Class I		Michaelmas 1924, Failed	Michaelmas 1925, Failed	Easter 1925, Failed	Easter 1927, Class III	Easter 1927, Class III
	Part 1	41	60		21	25	26	27	31
	Part 2	39	50		13	31	20	37	42
	Total	80	110		34	56	46	64	73
C	Criminal Law & Procedure	Michaelmas 1924, Class II	Hilary 1932, Failed	Michaelmas 1932, Class II	Michaelmas 1925, Class III				Hilary 1927, Class III
	Part 1	53	38	50	37				42
	Part 2	39	15	55	36				31
	Total	92	53	105	73				73
D	Real Property and Conveyancing	Trinity 1925	Michaelmas 1933		Michaelmas 1926, Class III				Hilary 1928, Class III
	Part 1	40	56		35				48
	Part 2	48	51		25				36
	Total	88	107		60				84
E	Common Law	Trinity 1925	Michaelmas 1933		Trinity 1927				Hilary 1930
	Part 1	32	37		28				45
	Part 2	42	48		26				57
	Total	73	85		74				102
F	Equity	Trinity 1925	Michaelmas 1933		Trinity 1927				Hilary 1930
	Part 1	45	25		28				60
	Part 2	39	31		30				45

¹⁸⁷ Council of Legal Education Archives, Examination Performance Records, A.CLE 11/12 H1923-M1924 No 12, A.CLE 11/13 H1925-M1926 No 13, A.CLE 11/14 H1927-M1928 No 14, A.CLE 11/15 H1929-M1930 No 15, A.CLE 11/16 H1931-M1932 No 16, A.CLE 11/17 H1933-M1934 No 17.

	Total	84	56		61				105
--	-------	----	----	--	----	--	--	--	-----

G	Evidence & Civil Procedure	Trinity 1925	Michaelm as 1933		Trinity 1927				Hilary 1930
	Part 1	29	26		28				35
	Part 2	37	44		23				37
	Total	66	70		53				72
H	General Paper	Trinity 1925	Michaelm as 1933		Trinity 1927				Hilary 1930
	Part 1	26	36		20				46
	Part 2	30	40		21				42
	Part 3	33	32		31				26
	Total	89	108		72				114
	Regulation Applicable	Old	New		Old				Old
	Final Exam:	Items E to H	Items D to H		Items E to H				Items E to H
	Final Exam Grade:	312 (Class III)	426 (Class III)		260 (Class III)				393 (Class II)