

## Mrs. Khoo Siew Mun: A Tribute

*Persatuan Ekonomi Malaysia*<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

This tribute shines a light on Mrs. Khoo Siew Mun's pivotal role in the development of this journal, the *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies* (MJES), the flagship journal of the Persatuan Ekonomi Malaysia (PEM, also Malaysian Economic Association), jointly published with the Faculty of Economics and Administration (FEA) that houses the PEM.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, it also acknowledges her contributions to the FEA, University of Malaya (UM), and the nation. Read together with Siew Mun's publications as an economist, editor, bibliographer and librarian (Sinnasamy & Koh, 2025), this article is a snapshot of the changing economic and development priorities of the nation for well over half a century. Writing about Siew Mun's work is, however, no simple task. She did what she loved – making available academic resources, especially those related to Malaysiana – but in her undertakings, she usually placed the achievements of others before her own, desiring no acknowledgment for her significant efforts. Siew Mun would likely have preferred continued obscurity but it is only fitting that the MJES records, to the extent that is allowed by limited historical documentation and recollections, the experiences that have shaped her legacy.



Mrs. Khoo Siew Mun nee  
Leong Siew Mun  
5 Feb. 1938 – 11 May 2024

### 2. Family, Education and Marriage

#### 2.1 Life at Home

Siew Mun was born in Selangor on 5 February 1938. Her father was the late jovial, cultured and self-taught Leong Jim Choon and her mother was the late Low Hon

<sup>1</sup> The Persatuan Ekonomi Malaysia (PEM) is grateful to the Committee for the Tribute to Mrs Khoo Siew Mun (Shyamala Nagaraj, Goh Kim Leng, Lee Kiong Hock, and R. Thillainathan) for compiling this testimonial with the editorial support of Ivan Foo. The PEM acknowledges the generous cooperation and contributions of the family of Mrs Khoo Siew Mun, Ronald Khoo, Khoo Su-Ming, Leong Yin Ching, and Leong Hon Yuen, and her friends and former colleagues including Janaki Sinnasamy, Koh Ai Peng, Tey Nai Peng, Susheila McCoy and Chung Chee Min. The PEM also acknowledges accessing recollections at <https://viweb.org/SiewMun.htm>, <https://beritappm.wordpress.com/2024/06/01/speech-by-ppm-2022-2024-president-at-ppm-68th-agm/> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSIBdcUxs1E>. The PEM is deeply grateful for the kind assistance given by the current and former staff of the Faculty of Business & Economics, Universiti Malaya Library and the PEM Secretariat. The PEM also thanks Janaki Sinnasamy and Koh Ai Peng for their comprehensive listing of Mrs. Khoo's writings and publications presented in a separate article in this issue.

<sup>2</sup> As of 2021, the FEA has been absorbed into the Faculty of Business and Economics.

<https://doi.org/10.22452/MJES.vol62no1.8>

Mun, a strong character and the pillar of the family. She had a younger brother, Siew Wie, and a younger sister, the late Siew Yue. Home was a bungalow in hilly and green Ceylon Lane, Kuala Lumpur, shared with an uncle. An aunt lived nearby in Petaling Jaya. The family was served by two ladies, Sister Ah Yoke and Sister Ah Ching, from a nearby temple and they would, during the day, prepare meals for the family. Every year the family would drive up to Ipoh to visit Siew Mun's grandmother for the reunion dinner organised on the eve of Chinese New Year. Siew Mun was just shy of four years old when the Japanese invaded Malaya in December 1941 and only seven when the Japanese occupation ended in September 1945. Those were difficult days when food was hard to come by. Siew Mun used to recall that the family survived mainly on tapioca and at the end of the occupation the egg that they got to eat with rice was the origin of her great love for eggs! Siew Mun had a deep connection to her mother, and this, together with the supportive environment of a close-knit family amid the shared experiences of war, all fostered her sense of self-worth and compassionate demeanour.

Siew Mun's parents were involved in the printing business, the Yau Seng Press at Cross Street in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. It was a letterpress where a raised inked surface is used to create an impression on paper and thus requires the setting of text by hand. Proofs were read mainly by Siew Mun's father, but she helped whenever she could. The press was involved in the publication of, among others, government reports and academic works in diverse areas such as trade classification, agriculture and even Malaysian magic. It was an ideal setting for Siew Mun to learn about the intricacies of publishing and the importance of the correctly printed word.

## 2.2 *Life at School and University*

School was where Siew Mun developed her love of language as a medium of expression. She received her primary and secondary education at the St. Mary's Girls School in Kuala Lumpur. As Susheila McCoy, five years senior to Siew Mun observed in her eulogy (McCoy, 2024), the teachers were mostly missionaries from England recruited to provide an English education to girls "in this outpost of the British Empire." She credits the school for "the foundation on which our personal and scholastic lives were anchored." Importantly, schooling at St. Mary's provided Siew Mun, a high achiever, a window to the delights of English grammar, literature and poetry.

School was also a nurturing environment for quiet excellence in leadership, living up to its simple, yet profound motto "I Serve," imbibed every morning during Assembly under the unpretentious yet inspiring leadership of the principal, the late Miss Carpenter. In secondary school, Siew Mun was appointed vice-captain. Siew Mun's classmates and seniors included trailblazers such as Malaya's first women's 4x100 meter relay team at the Asian Games in 1954 (Annie Choong, Carmen Koelmeyer, Maureen Siebel, and Fay Siebel), Malaya's first woman athlete to compete at the Olympics in 1956 (Annie Choong), and the first woman officer in the Malayan Civil Service in 1957 (Susheila McCoy).

Following the completion of Form Five in 1955, Siew Mun received her Lower- and Upper-Form Six schooling at the Victoria Institution in Kuala Lumpur. Here, her language, editing and leadership skills were enhanced. She acted in plays like *Wicked*

*Merdeka Parody*, Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, and *Tobias and the Angel*, and was a member of the Editorial Board of VI's *Seladang* and *The Victorian*. She was appointed Head Girl and, in this position, attended the Annual Selangor Prefects Social at the Victoria Institution Hall in 1957. As Lewis (1991), then headmaster of Victoria Institution from 1955 to 1962, noted in his memoirs:

... last but not least the V.I. had as sixth form pupils about fifty or sixty girls. Far from causing problems, the girls made the school a more lively and cheerful place. They caused no dilemmas; they were hard-working and co-operative. They were almost too good to be true. Some of the outstanding ones that I can recall were Leong Siew Mun, now Chief Librarian at the University of Malaya, Loo Ngai Seong, Fuziah binti Datuk Ahmad and Aloyah binti Rahmen, all Head Girls with brains and attractive personalities. But there were many others who obviously had bright futures ahead of them. One of them was Rafidah Aziz, now Datuk Seri, and the Minister for Trade and Industry.

Siew Mun pursued her tertiary education at UM at a time when it was establishing an independent division in 1959, distinct from its autonomous division in Singapore founded in October 1949. Her first-year courses were held at the grounds of the Technical College in Kuala Lumpur. Siew Mun completed her subsequent courses at the UM campus in Singapore with a focus on economics and was awarded the Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in 1961. Her subsequent career paths led her to complete first the Master of Economics degree in 1967 from UM and then a Postgraduate Diploma of Librarianship and Information Studies from the University of London in 1972. She was also awarded a three-month (May to July 1975) scholarship by the French Government to undertake studies on Southeast Asian materials in French libraries in Paris. From 14 May to 27 July 1979, she undertook a study tour of major university libraries and Southeast Asian collections in the United States.

### *2.3 Life After Marriage*

A gregarious personality, Siew Mun made many friends in school, university, and at work. It was at the university in Singapore that she met her husband, the late Philip Khoo, who came from Kuantan. The Khoo family grew with the birth of Ronald and Su-Ming. Philip and Siew Mun were a loving couple who complemented each other in terms of objectives, values and interests at work and in life, providing support as their careers developed over time. Philip's career took him from the Malaysian Civil Service to business, while Siew Mun who began her career as a research secretary, became Chief Librarian at UM. Philip and Siew Mun organised numerous lunches and dinners for family and friends to celebrate birthdays and various Malaysian festivals like *Hari Raya*, Chinese New Year and Deepavali at their home in Section 14, Petaling Jaya. Their loyal house helper, Sister Ah Ying, was a fabulous cook known for her Cantonese fried kuey-teow, fish head curry, chicken curry and *Nyonya* dishes. These lively occasions were memorable opportunities for cementing enduring friendships.

The family was deeply saddened when Philip was diagnosed with liver cancer. Siew Mun devoted her time and effort caring for Philip before and after his liver transplant

in Singapore. Philip passed away in September 1998, surrounded by Siew Mun, Ronald and Su-Ming. The following quote from a condolence in *The New Straits Times* (1 October 1998) placed by twenty-four of Philip's friends succinctly reflects the character of the man that was Siew Mun's life partner:

A man of great resolute tempered with a tremendous sense of humour.  
Unpretentious, yet a man of principle and pride.  
A man who will not hesitate to put his beliefs into action.  
And till the end he has shown unbelievable courage to face his destiny with a smile.

### 3. Career

Upon graduation in 1962, after a short stint as a temporary teacher at the Methodist Boys' School in Kuala Lumpur, Siew Mun joined the Department of Economics (DE) within the Faculty of Arts at UM. She was hired as a research secretary by DE head, the late Royal Professor Ungku Abdul Aziz, who had been invited by the Minister of Transport to study the facilities and services at Port Swettenham (now Port Klang). Siew Mun's involvement with Ungku Aziz in this project marked the beginning of a decades-long professional friendship with him based on mutual respect and recognition of each other's strengths. In 1963, she was appointed a tutor in the DE and then in 1965 joined as an editor in the University of Malaya Press (UMP).

The FEA was founded in 1966 to meet the nation's growing demand for a professional workforce, and Ungku Aziz was the first dean. In 1967, after completing her master's thesis in economics, Siew Mun joined the fledgling FEA as a Bibliography, Documentation and Publication Assistant (BDPA). She was responsible for designing the cover and layout of the first annual handbook of the FEA for the 1968/69 session, a format that remained unchanged even as recently as 2013! Siew Mun continued to build on her work to provide bibliographic resources on Malaysia for her colleagues at the FEA. She set up the FEA Library (FEAL) which became a welcoming, well-organised, resource-rich centre that provided access to published and unpublished documents supporting essential and quality research for economic policy and development. Siew Mun stayed at the helm until she became Deputy Librarian at the University of Malaya Library (UML) in 1975. Until a librarian was appointed for the FEAL, Siew Mun continued to support the documentation needs of the FEA. For example, when the Population Studies Unit (PSU) was established in 1979, within the FEA as a part of the Population and Family Health Project funded by the World Bank and the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, Siew Mun helped expand the library's holdings to include an extensive collection on women and development.

Siew Mun served as the Deputy Librarian of UML from 1975 until 1980 when she was appointed Acting Chief Librarian. In 1984, she became Chief Librarian, a position she held till her retirement in 1993. Armed with postgraduate qualifications in librarianship, she was able to pursue her passion to make available academic resources, only now her focus widened to well beyond that of economics and development. When students complained that it was too cold to work in the library, she famously replied,

“The air-conditioning is for the books!!” She had a critical role in converting the entire massive library card catalogue system to the Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC). She will be remembered for her passion and efforts to curate a diverse collection of books and materials that represent a wide range of cultures, peoples and fields of study, including collections of Peranakan, Za’ba, East Asian and Tamil literature. The UML remains the only academic Library in the country with such extensive collections.

Siew Mun returned to librarianship in 1999 as the Chief Librarian of Sunway College (now Sunway University) and Monash University Malaysia, serving until 2004. Within the Tun Hussein Onn Sunway Library (THOL), she launched the Library E-Bulletin named *@THOL* in October 2000. She was also responsible for initiating the online catalogue and library website. The library collection focused not only on books but also on other media such as audiovisuals, including 8,000 items, mostly in DVD format, as well as online access to dissertations and theses. In April 2003, the library was awarded an ISO 9001:2000 certificate and subsequent SIRIM recertification.

#### **4. Persatuan Ekonomi Malaysia (PEM)**

The PEM (Malaysian Economic Association) was founded in 1962 by Ungku Aziz, Tun Ismail Ali, Raja Tun Mohar, Tan Sri Jamil Rais and Dato’ Siew Nim Chee (Convenor), coinciding with the time that Siew Mun was hired at the DE. Siew Mun joined the Association, becoming a life member. Siew Mun was a backbone of the Association almost from its founding. But she always insisted on staying in the background (and shunned the limelight). There was an upsurge in the PEM’s activities when Dr. Stephen Chee became its Honorary Secretary in 1973 and again when Tan Sri Lin See Yan became its President in 1990. And yet, Siew Mun continued to put in the effort required for the success of the Association. Despite the changes in her career, Siew Mun remained steadfast in her contributions to the PEM’s mission and growth, often co-opted as an Executive Committee member of the Association. Her unwavering contributions and dedication made her an integral part of the Association’s identity and her influence is still felt in many aspects of the PEM’s work.

Siew Mun was committed to advancing scholarship in economics. She was an integral part of the organisation of many of the PEM’s Conventions that provided a forum for academics, policymakers, industry players and general practitioners to debate and deliberate on economic issues that are of special interest to Malaysia. Her former colleague, Dr. R. Thillainathan, who was the PEM President from 1996–2002, recalled that Siew Mun was “his confidant and right-hand person”. Without her unstinting support, he explained, “we could not have successfully organized the 1998 PEM Convention and the FAEA [Federation of ASEAN Economic Associations] Conference (held one after the other) which for the first time featured several international speakers, such as Professors Alan Walters and Robert Barro speaking on the key subjects of capital control and corporate governance”.

Siew Mun also helped organise professional training for economists, such as the Ph.D. Preparatory Programme conducted in collaboration with the Economics Institute (affiliated with the University of Colorado at Boulder) in 1994. The participants were young Malaysian scholars from the public universities and various

government agencies, likely recipients of scholarships to pursue their doctoral studies abroad. Instructors from the University of Colorado taught the core subjects of Macroeconomics, Microeconomics and Econometrics. Participants who successfully completed the programme were awarded the Diploma in Foundations of Economics from the Economics Institute.

### **5. *Kajian Ekonomi Malaysia / Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies (MJES)***

The *Kajian Ekonomi Malaysia*, the flagship academic periodical of the PEM was first published (in English) in June 1964. With Siew Mun's involvement with the PEM and her passion for disseminating bibliographic resources, it is only reasonable that she took on the editorial process of the journal. This was a time before digital typesetting and the process of publishing academic papers was laborious and time-consuming. Siew Mun was critical and meticulous in proofreading every handwritten or typed draft, followed by further proofreading and typesetting, so that the content was polished and precise before going to print. She ensured that the final product met the high standards expected in academic publishing. Each issue of the journal testified to her keen eyes for details and her exceptional diligence.

As the Sales Manager of the journal from June 1967 (Volume 4, Number 1) to June 1968 (Volume 5, Number 1), Siew Mun also was responsible for the journal's finances. The early issues were supported through advertisements. As the journal gained recognition, the PEM took on the responsibility of funding the journal through organised activities that brought in the requisite funds. In 1992, Yayasan PEM was established as a tax-exempt foundation to support the publication of the journal, in addition to other charitable causes.

In 1968, Siew Mun was appointed the Honorary Secretary of the Editorial Board. She continued to serve the journal in this role until December 1979. In many ways, her efforts in those formative years drew on her knowledge of economics, expertise in publishing and deep commitment to the effective dissemination of information. Her contributions not only helped establish the journal's reputation but also laid the groundwork for its long-term success.

The journal's name was changed to the *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies* from June 1988 (Volume 25 Number 1) to broaden its global authorship and audience. The coverage of the journal was expanded to include submissions of original research on other regions of the world in addition to studies of the Malaysian economy. After she retired from UM, Siew Mun returned to the Board as Publication Consultant from June 1997 (Volume 34 Number 1) until her untimely passing in 2024, a month before the production of Volume 61 (Number 1) of the journal. During the many years as Publication Consultant, Siew Mun provided expert advice on many technical aspects that shaped and maintained the overall quality of the journal as it moved into modern publishing. Her supportive role strengthened the journal's standing, thereby facilitating its inclusion in recognised indexing platforms, most notably Scopus (since 2007) and Emerging Sources Citation Index (since 2015).

A long-serving editor of the journal, Kim-Leng Goh, remembered Siew Mun for her exceptional editorial skills which left a lasting impression on him. He had the

privilege of working with her on a few projects in the early years of his academic career. Her keen attention to detail, her unwavering commitment to quality, her patience and perseverance, and her strive for excellence were invaluable lessons. She was consistently a strong supporter of the journal, offering generous words of encouragement that reflected her deep understanding of the challenges involved in producing a journal regularly and in a timely manner. Having previously been involved with publishing the journal, she appreciated the commitment and dedication required, as reflected in the following excerpts from the emails she sent to the Editorial Board:

At the best of times, producing a journal is a hassle and a challenge. You and your Team have managed to take the journal to a level of quality that all Members are so very proud of.

We appreciate the difficulty of balancing demanding work schedules, and so many personal research demands with having to attend to the needs of producing a journal issue to acceptable standards.

We are all aware that a journal of any quality is so difficult to sustain. But one where its quality improves and becomes recognised only becomes possible when the working team really puts in solid work on a continuing basis, year after grinding year.

Unlike many significant journals in the West, which are serviced by highly paid editorial staff, MJES is still the result of dedicated expertise and simple hard work by your team, working pro bono.

## 6. Writer, Editor, Bibliographer and Beyond

### 6.1 *The Writer and Editor*

Siew Mun had a deep appreciation for the power of language, learning French and even Latin. However, her true gift was her command of the English language. Whether she was the editor or the author, Siew Mun was an articulate writer who effectively communicated her aims and persuasions. It is gratifying to see her editorial prowess acknowledged formally. Williamson (1996) in his review of *Memorable Journey: Commemorating 25 Years of CONSAL (Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians) 1970–95*, noted that Siew Mun, who had taken on the editorial responsibility, did "...a fine job..." resulting in a "...wonderful book about a wonderful organization!" The listing of works in Sinnasamy and Koh (2025) reflects Siew Mun's passion and dedication in promoting quality academic resources through bibliographies and edited volumes. She was a prolific writer, and the list includes articles, paper presentations, reports and theses. In retirement, she authored several short stories for Malaysian children using local names, plants and animals. Many of these books, some of which were translated into *Bahasa Malaysia*, featured illustrations. They not only addressed a gap in local literature that her daughter had lamented about in childhood, but also talked of a harmonious life amid diversity, a testament to Siew Mun's extensive knowledge about, and passion for, the nation.

## 6.2 In the Realm of Economics

Siew Mun's core discipline in her undergraduate and postgraduate training was economics. In the almost six decades between 1960 and 2017, her meticulously researched written works and many carefully edited publications related to the Malaysian economy described the challenges, needs and evolving priorities of the nation. Siew Mun's editorial expertise was very much respected and in demand not just by the UM community but also by the nation's eminent institutions like Khazanah Nasional and Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.

Siew Mun's initial written contributions in economics were related to the valuation of economic resources. Her undergraduate thesis investigated costs and returns to rubber and coconut smallholdings (Leong, 1960). As research secretary to the Port Swettenham project, she was involved in obtaining "forecasts of the tonnages of import and export commodities likely to pass through the port of Port Swettenham," and based on that "to recommend the number of berths needed" and "the years by which they should be in operation" (Doraisamy & Durairaj, 2013, p. 236). The project had a major economic impact on the nation, as revealed in the following quote from the project report (Ungku Abdul Aziz, 1964) cited by Doraisamy and Durairaj (2013, p. 236):

Port Swettenham, whose hinterland is the 'heartland' of the Malay Peninsula, continuously reflects, in quite minute detail, changes in the pattern of the Malaysian economy ... to study the future of Port Swettenham is to study the future of the Federation of Malaya.

Thillainathan believes that Siew Mun would have been a great academic economist if she had chosen to remain in the field. He noted that this was readily evident from a reading of her meticulous and thorough study on the *Licensing of Goods-Carrying Motor Vehicles in Malaya*, under the demanding supervision of the eminent economist S.J. Gilani for the degree of Master of Economics from the University of Malaya in 1967 (Khoo, 1967b). It was a pioneering piece of research into a very specialised industry that was growing rapidly and displacing the Malayan Railways network as the dominant mode of goods haulage in the country, and one on a key economic activity for which there was little or no data in the public domain. And long before the launch of the New Economic Policy (NEP), it was also the very first study on the role of government regulation in promoting Malay entry into business but at an industry level. Furthermore, in the hands of most writers, an account of the cost of the public inquiry system related to licensing of goods-carrying vehicles would have been mundane and boring. In the hands of Siew Mun, the account was, in the words of Oort (1970, footnote 2), "a very vivid description."

As the activities organised by the PEM grew, so did the papers that recorded these deliberations. Siew Mun conceived, spearheaded, and completed many important projects that showcased these resources. She initiated a documentation section in the *Kajian Ekonomi Malaysia*, published under the title "Documentation: Malaysian Economics" (Khoo, 1967a), providing an annotated bibliography of materials relevant for those conducting research on the Malaysian economy. The documentation was later expanded to a "Checklist of Socio-Economic Materials on Malaysia Produced



Between 1967-8" published in the December 1968 issue of the journal (Khoo, 1968). In 1993, she led a project that commemorated the Association's 30th anniversary. It was a bibliographic guide on the major publications in the PEM's collection between 1964 to 1992 including those published in its journal, Biennial Convention proceedings and Occasional Papers, arranged by subject groupings together with an author index (Khoo, 1993a).

Siew Mun (with colleagues) also edited works and prepared bibliographies addressing the nation's economic challenges and needs of the time. *Malaysia and the Multinational Corporations* (Chee & Khoo, 1974) dealt with the role of multinational corporations in the economy, a controversial strategy in the push for export-oriented industrialisation. *Malaysian Economic Development and Policies* (Chee & Khoo, 1975) dealt with distribution and growth, and appeared soon after the launch of the far-reaching NEP that aimed to restructure society. The opaqueness of the NEP's policymaking process notwithstanding, the volume documented the serious and thought-provoking discussions on economic concerns underlying the NEP's ethnic-based policy. These two publications, both well-edited compilations of conference papers, were published at a time when the nation was concerned about growth in the midst of a global economy confronted by escalating oil prices and a collapsing pegged exchange rate regime leading to the "great inflation" of the 1970s. *Malaysia: Some Contemporary Issues in Socioeconomic Development* (Cheong et al., 1979) was a collection of 22 papers from the 1976 Annual Convention of the PEM. The volume addressed concerns about the economy, providing input for the nation's *Review of the Third Malaysia Plan*. The papers covered a wide range of topics: the distribution of income and wealth, housing, land ownership, urban development, financing of the Plan, manufacturing, industrialisation, entrepreneurship, management of public enterprises, agricultural policy, rural development, population, unemployment and manpower planning. At the time, the world economy was characterised by "stagflation," with a significant slowdown in growth, high inflation rates across most countries, and a major disruption caused by rising oil prices.

Siew Mun's work in the field of economics and development broadened in 1990 to include the role of women when she was appointed Coordinator for a two-year project based at the FEA. The project, which aimed to produce a written analysis of the existing body of literature on women and development in Malaysia, would surely have appealed to Siew Mun. She was a member of the cohort of pioneering women who joined the Malaysian Civil Service in the 1960s that for about a decade was paid less than men for the same position. It clearly rankled her, as she pointed out to her former colleague, Shyamala Nagaraj, who had then just joined the FEA in the 1970s, "You are very lucky not to experience such discrimination."

The undertaking resulted in the volume titled *Status and Role of Malaysian Women in Development: A Bibliographical Essay*, published by the FEA and the National Population and Family Development Board (Khoo et al., 1992). The following highlights from the preface and acknowledgment of the volume showcase Siew Mun's editorial thought process and professionalism (Khoo et al., 1992: ix). The project team included compilers responsible for "initiating the searches, collecting all information for the project, vetting and editing the citations," a database analyst to manage the information,

and the requisite clerical and research assistance to support the work. The work required visits to specialised libraries and NGOs all over the country, accessing material from the national archives, theses and newspaper items, and collaboration with the ASEAN Clearinghouse on Women in Development. The most extensive part of the endeavour was the search for information that “adequately documents the legal field and women.” Above all, Siew Mun wanted the publication to be “a research undertaking” that would “allow for further administrative analysis and ... serve, albeit tentatively, as a basis for policy formulation.” She noted that “studies on women are among the most multi-disciplinary of subjects... The whole undertaking can only mark a beginning, rather than signify an end.”

After retirement from UM in 1993, Siew Mun continued to pursue her interests in women and development as project coordinator in the Women’s Affairs Division, Ministry of National Unity and Community Development, Malaysia (HAWA). Responding to local and global initiatives, the Malaysian government actively incorporated women-centric needs into its development policies. During her time at HAWA, the Malaysian Clearinghouse on Women in Development was established, and the bi-annual *Network Notes*, the Bulletin of the Clearinghouse, was issued. Though it lasted only from 1993 to 1994, the bulletin provided a rich source of information on women in development.

Well into retirement, Siew Mun continued to share her editorial expertise in economics. At the request of the late Dato’ Dr. Mahani Zainal Abidin, Director-General of ISIS, Siew Mun agreed to be the principal resource person for its 25th anniversary project that resulted in the 2011 publication – *Malaysia: Policies and Issues in Economic Development*. As she wrote in an email exchange with Thillainathan, one of the advisors to the project, “I am very glad and privileged that Mahani invited me to be at the editing part of the ISIS book. It gave me an opportunity to work with very old and scholarly friends.” The project had two components, one a collection of papers by eminent authors and the other a database of interviews and thoughts of key personalities. Siew Mun led a team of technical editors to produce the 700-page, twenty-chapter volume. Mahani, in her preface, noted that the project began with traditional topics but grew to cover areas that examined the “progression of our economic thinking” (Khoo et al., 2011). A publication that is essentially a compelling history of economic thought and development in Malaysia over the previous fifty years, it covers macroeconomic management, economic growth and transformation, management of growth and equity, and enabling environments and institutions for development. Thillainathan credited Siew Mun’s strengths in both the field of economics and editing for the remarkable quality of the final product, one referred to as an “encyclopaedic, landmark study of the Malaysian economy, its institutions and its principal policy challenges” (Hill, 2011).

Throughout her career, Siew Mun kept up with the writings and projects of Ungku Aziz, her first employer. She soon realised that the impacts of his work were far-reaching, and that it was important to honour and recognise them. To acknowledge his work on the poor, she edited a collection of case studies on poverty that was presented to Ungku (Mokhzani & Khoo, 1977). In 1990, she coordinated a Festschrift volume that showcased Ungku Aziz’s influential ideas over the previous three decades. Aside from a listing of his publications, eminent economists contributed papers that discussed

cooperatives, savings, banking, finance, trade, transport, industrial relations, and the outlook for the Malaysian economy in the 1990s. These were published as Volume 27 (Numbers 1 and 2, June and December 1990) of the MJES. Siew Mun humbly placed herself last on the Editorial Committee list, though her contributions to this special volume were far from insignificant.

Arguably, Siew Mun's most important, and certainly her most extensive, bibliographic project was the collation and reprinting in 2017 of a five-volume collection of over seven decades of Ungku Aziz's works titled *Royal Professor Ungku A. Aziz: Writing for the Nation* (Ungku Abdul Aziz, 2017). Siew Mun coordinated the project for the PEM in collaboration with UML, UMP and UM, and the collation was the culmination of months of Siew Mun's tireless efforts. The project was the most meaningful gift Siew Mun could conceive for a scholar she deeply respected and admired, and the collation was presented to Ungku Aziz during an event celebrating his 95th birthday. Siew Mun's thoughtful appreciation of his strengths was recorded in the introduction on the title verso page of the publication: "This (project) is undertaken to honour Ungku as an educationist, economist, and agent of change par excellence with the objectives of preserving his works and to facilitate access to his writings and publications for purposes of research and education." The collation represented the zenith of Siew Mun's career as a writer, economist, editor and bibliographer, whose actions always prioritised broad access to academic resources.

Siew Mun also developed a close working relationship and a deep friendship with Mahani, who had served as the Honorary Secretary and Deputy President of the PEM. Upon Mahani's untimely passing in 2013, the MJES dedicated a special issue "Remembering Mahani Zainal Abidin" to commemorate Mahani's life and work. It comprised a paper titled "Dato' Dr. Mahani Zainal Abidin: A Tribute", a bibliography of Mahani's publications and seven other papers (Volume 51, March 2014). Siew Mun contributed significantly to the writing of the tribute (PEM, 2014). From her involvement in the 2011 ISIS publication, she understood the importance of Mahani's many contributions to economics, including macroeconomic management, international trade, and finance. She also took on the responsibility of contacting the family, friends, and colleagues of Mahani to gather and coordinate the necessary information. For the role she played, Siew Mun declined recognition. Without her knowledge, the journal editor added a footnote in the volume to acknowledge her significant contribution.

### 6.3 *The Consummate Librarian*

Early in her career, starting with the DE in UM's Kuala Lumpur campus, Siew Mun quickly recognised the nation's pressing academic needs, particularly of sourcing and accessing information. She promoted the idea of well-developed, detailed bibliographies, avenues for documenting research, and ways to disseminate research findings. She championed dissemination not only by editing publications that collated research but also by ensuring publications were available to the public.

Siew Mun worked closely with the management of the University of Malaya Co-operative Bookshop providing advice, guidance and assistance to the manager and staff.

The Bookshop was set up by UM to benefit both staff and students in 1967 when Ungku Aziz, a leader of the Malaysian cooperative movement, was Vice-Chancellor. Aside from the usual responsibility of selling textbooks, the bookshop featured publications by UM academic staff and documents from international organisations not usually found in the city's bookshops. In the pre-digital era, it served as a vital resource. Susan Go, the Southeast Asian Bibliographer at the University of Michigan, ascribed the rich collection of Malaysia in its library to her frequent visits of the Bookshop in her travels to procure books.

Innovative in the pursuit of dissemination, Siew Mun embraced the latest technologies, even in the digital age well past retirement, to develop exemplary library systems. She was an exceptional leader in this respect at both UM and Sunway University. She had, as Kouzes and Posner (2023, pp. 4–14) explained about leadership that made extraordinary things happen, the ability to “a) model the way, b) inspire a shared vision, c) challenge the process, d) enable others to act, and e) encourage the heart.” She championed the librarian's role in the institution. Long-time staff at the FEAL, Corrinne How and Lulu Loo, remembered her as not just hard-working and intelligent but also as providing positive guidance. She fostered a sense of *esprit de corps* among UM's librarians, making them feel valued for their efforts as librarians who made the library a pleasant place for its users.

Even before becoming Chief Librarian, she encouraged academic scholarship among librarians. She started an in-house quarterly bulletin of UML titled *Kekal Abadi* (Everlasting) that published articles in English and *Bahasa Malaysia*. The first issue was published in 1982, and her doctrine of meticulous and accurate publication details is still followed today by the staff who manage *Kekal Abadi*. She convinced the UM administration that librarians, like the teaching staff, should have access to postgraduate education. Siew Mun believed that professional training, particularly outside Malaysia, exposed librarians to the various facets of librarianship and ensured they were on par with librarians globally. Senior librarians were also given opportunities to participate in a six-month study attachment at a library in the Asian region.

Siew Mun's interests in librarianship extended to supporting professional organisations locally and globally. She was a life member of the Librarians Association of Malaysia (PPM) and was always present at their Annual General Meetings. She presented papers in conferences of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). Her dedication was evident in her involvement with the 2018 IFLA World Library and Information Congress (WLIC) held in Kuala Lumpur. She served as the Coordinator of the Newsletter Team, which published monthly newsletters from October 2017 to August 2018 in the lead-up to the Congress. These newsletters not only shared updates on the gathering but offered participants helpful tidbits about local libraries and even places of worship!<sup>3</sup>

Siew Mun not only promoted the documentation of available resources; she applied this maxim to her own work. Reflecting on the important role of a librarian, she

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<sup>3</sup> For information on publication dates of these newsletters, see <https://2018.ifla.org/>. Some newsletters may be found here: <https://us16.campaign-archive.com/home/?u=53a85c37f858d05c9b6cd429a&id=ce1127f98d>

wrote about being a BDPA and about the FEAL (Khoo, 1975; 1977). Concerned about the reach of libraries, she discussed their utilisation (Khoo, 1982) and the provision of information in the digital age (Khoo, 1985a; Khoo, 1992). Her experience at UML exposed her to the operational issues of a large university library that she shared in articles about reprography and costing (Khoo, 1985b; Khoo et al., 1987; Khoo, 1989) and the challenges of computerisation (Khoo, 1985a; Khoo, 1991b). Leadership at the FEAL and UML, and her involvement in international conferences and professional organisations, brought important perspectives on librarianship. She shared these in Khoo (1981) about libraries in Malaysia and in Khoo (1984; 1991a) about the regional sharing of bibliographic information. Her expertise was also sought to evaluate access to resources, such as seminar papers on Bumiputera participation in the Malaysian economy (Khoo, 1987), in proposed faculty and departmental library collections at UM (Khoo, 1991c), in libraries available to the Malaysian Indian community (Khoo, 1993b), and regional materials on women in development (Khoo, 1993c).

Siew Mun was deeply passionate about the importance of libraries, viewing them as an integral part of the wider community. In an interview with the *Oral History Series* (Khoo, 2019), she recalled her involvement with women in Kampung Kerinci who were left alone with nothing much to do when their husbands went to work, and the children were in school. Working with others, she arranged for the library to bring these women in to learn the skills of bookbinding. When they acquired the skill of binding books, she negotiated for book-binding contracts as an additional source of income for them. In the same interview, the interviewer asked if advancing technology would cause librarians to become extinct. Her answer was an emphatic 'No!'. For Siew Mun, librarianship is not just about maintaining and organising a collection; it is also the sharing of information through publication, research, writing and editing. She firmly believed that the librarian's role will always be essential for the institution, community and nation.

#### *6.4 Beyond the Written Word*

Siew Mun was knowledgeable about all aspects of publishing, including content, language, paper quality, paper size, typeface and cover design. She was also very interested in the arts. In some of her projects, she was able to connect these interests, especially in her efforts to honour individuals who made remarkable contributions to the country, society and the PEM itself. Her unwavering commitment to this cause reflected her deep belief in acknowledging and celebrating those whose efforts created a lasting positive impact. In so doing, she always ensured that the person being honoured was presented with a well-designed high-quality item.

One of these individuals was Ungku Aziz, first head of the DE, the first Dean of the FEA, and the first Malaysian Vice-Chancellor of UM, an office he held until his retirement in 1988. Ungku Aziz also had the distinction of being a founding member of the PEM and the longest-serving Chairman of the Editorial Board of *Kajian Ekonomi Malaysia*/MJES, from 1962 to 1989. Siew Mun meticulously oversaw every detail of the 1990 "Essays in Honour of Ungku A. Aziz: A Festschrift Volume" presented to Ungku Aziz. It was a blue fabric hard-bound copy with the beige MJES cover pasted on top, and

the contents were printed on distinctive, high-quality watermarked paper, evoking a sense of appreciation, personal connection and thoughtfulness.

Siew Mun played an integral role in the preparation for the inaugural conferment of Fellowships of the PEM during the 30th Anniversary Dinner of the Association in 1993. Six distinguished individuals were conferred the Fellowship, and each of them was presented with a scroll of Fellowship in the form of a citation printed in gold and mounted on a Chinese silk scroll. Siew Mun actively composed the citation, and the design and layout for the special printing of the scrolls.

In 2002, Siew Mun guided a team to create a booklet on Ungku Aziz as Malaysia's "Renaissance Man" for a dinner organised by the PEM for his 80th birthday, where five guest speakers, including the President of the Republic of Singapore, spoke glowingly at the Grand Dinner on his extraordinary life. In a unique and thoughtfully crafted souvenir programme (Khoo & PEM, 2002), she described the design concept thus: "The size of the Souvenir Programme is an unusual size – this is a reflection of Ungku who is a most unusual person. The typeface is Futura Book, chosen because Ungku has always favoured a sans serif typeface. The colour of the Cover is an earthy brown, to reflect the "rural" base of Ungku's lifelong research interests. Wording and borders are printed in silver, lending a touch of aristocracy." It was a description that eloquently reflected her deep understanding of Ungku Aziz's achievements.

Upon the passing in 2003 of longest-serving president of the PEM, the late Dato' Dr. Mokhzani bin Abdul Rahim, Siew Mun worked together with colleagues from the FEA and the PEM to put forth a proposal for the establishment of the Mokhzani Memorial Medal to honour his memory. She saw to the design of the medal, contributed to the seed funding for the creation of the Medal, and ensured that there was documentation so that recipients understand his contribution. The medal, established by the PEM and funded by Yayasan MEA, was awarded to the best student who graduated from the Master of Economics programme at the FEA by coursework. The first medal was awarded in 2004.

Siew Mun also brought together her academic, publishing and artistic interests to celebrate women in Malaysia. The Fourth World Conference on Women was held in 1995 in Beijing, China, and it aimed, among others, to consolidate five decades of legal advances securing the equality of women with men. Together with the Publications Sub-Committee at HAWA, she coordinated the content, design and publication of a booklet to be distributed at the conference to a global audience. *Malaysian Women Today* (Nagaraj, 1995) covered all fields in which women participated and was written in language that was simple, non-academic and succinct. The cover was a powerful artistic expression of Siew Mun's grasp of women's issues in Malaysia. She selected beautiful fabric specimens from her friends' collections and had the cover designed and printed by a printer who worked with art. As she explained (page ii):

In Malaysia, as elsewhere, fabric design and production are closely identified with women's industry and creativity. Over the centuries, waves of immigration to Malaysia have brought in their wake various races and diverse cultures. The textile designs: *batik*, *brocade*, *peranakan embroidery*, *saree*, *songket*, and *asli* weave are symbolic of these different ethnic groups. Like the smooth fabric-flows on the back cover, these women have lived and worked in close harmony

with each other. Today, Malaysian women of all races are firmly bonded by commitment to developing Malaysia, in equal partnership with men. Net-working with one another, within organisations or as individuals, they are well-set to take wing: to achieve for the family, for the nation, and for themselves.

Again, she was able to articulate through design of a publication her deep understanding of its purpose.

## 7. Farewell Friend

Siew Mun's passing on 11 May 2024 was deeply mourned even as her extraordinary life was celebrated by those near and dear to her. Siew Mun accomplished so much, but she would be the first to acknowledge the contributions of her many colleagues in diverse contexts. Her dedication to excellence, integrity and sincerity in all her endeavours fostered collaborations that blossomed into deep, mutually respectful friendships. Those who had the pleasure of studying with her, those who had the privilege of working with her, those who were delighted to call her a friend, and those who had the joy of calling her family – all remember her as gracious, kind, warm and generous. Siew Mun valued the people she met, maintaining close friendships not just with classmates from school but also with her teachers. Siew Mun believed that it was important to stay in touch with her many and loyal friends whenever and wherever possible, even organising gatherings of former colleagues from the FEA, PEM and UML. One co-worker recalled that her office was always visited by friends and colleagues. She was close to her friends' children and even made new loyal friends after retirement. To her family, she was inspirational and motivational, but more than that, she was also proud of their achievements. She shared her extensive knowledge of locations across time when traveling with friends and family, frequently on a tight budget. Her enduring bonds with friends and family guaranteed gatherings long after retirement, sharing good food, books read, travels remembered, museums visited, operas attended and gatherings where (as she explained) she found joy in sharing small gifts. As the following extract from an appreciative text to her niece showed, it was companionship that she cherished, "... I enjoyed time spent with you, your company, and conversation." Her enduring spirit of appreciation and friendship was apparent to her visitors even during her last days. We will miss her humour, her warm smile and her fellowship.

Farewell, Siew Mun. May God grant you eternal peace and rest.

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