

World News

With a smile, a writer vexes the men who run Singapore

SINGAPORE

City-state's patriarchs seem unsure what to make of Catherine Lim

BY SETH MYDANS

It is the dress, she said, that catches the eye, the long silk sheath with the slits in the sides that offers what she calls "a startling panorama of the entire landscape of the female form."

The dress is called a choengsam, and the woman wearing it is Catherine Lim, 67, arguably the most vivid personality in strait-laced Singapore and, when she is not writing witty romantic novels or telling ghost stories, one of the government's most acute critics.

In a light, self-mocking, first-person novel called "Meet Me on the Queen Elizabeth 2!" she describes what she calls the strategic power of the dress, bright and playful to the eye but not as benign as it seems.

"No other costume has quite managed this unique come hither-get lost blend," she writes in the book, which recounts her flirtations on a cruise ship with men who, in their masculine determination, look faintly silly.

The story pokes fun at the government, too, she said.

Sometimes called a nanny state for its smothering top-down control, Singapore might also be called a macho state, in which government warriors of social engineering and economic development command the citizenry.

In Ms. Lim's political analysis, these efficient, no-nonsense leaders are respected but not loved by their people, whose allegiance is to the good life the leaders provide, rather than to the leaders themselves.

This "great affective divide," as she calls it, could deepen as a younger generation demands what some might term the more feminine qualities of the heart, soul and spirit.

That view, which she first put forward 15 years ago in a pair of newspaper columns, still rankles among Singapore's leaders, and its concept and vocabulary remain a framework for political discourse here today.

Ms. Lim has established herself as a



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Catherine Lim's criticisms of Singapore's leaders have prompted official ire and befuddled tolerance. "They leave me alone," she said.

leading voice for liberalism, and when newspapers shy away from printing her more pointed views in this heavily censored and self-censoring society, she posts them on her Web site, Catherinelim.sg.

She continues to say things few others dare to.

On her Web site a year ago, she belittled new, looser regulations over Internet speech as "a shrewd balancing

act, both to reassure the people and to warn off the critics."

"For the first time in its experience," she wrote of the governing People's Action Party, "it would seem that the powerful P.A.P. government stands nonplussed by an adversary."

At a forum this month with Singapore's most powerful man, the former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, she asked provocatively whether he would

She certainly doesn't behave like a threat.

She arrived for afternoon tea not long ago dressed not in a choengsam but in her workout clothes — elegant in black tights, a scoop-necked white T-shirt, a polka-dot scarf and a pert round cap.

"So, what a world, what a world," she said looking around her, as bright and wide-eyed as an Easter bunny. "But on balance, it's a wonderful world. I'm so pleased to be alive at this stage."

And then, in an animated monologue, the variegated ensemble that is Catherine Lim came tumbling out.

She talked of politics and science and mah-jongg and her adventures with men, of her atheism and her ruminations on death, which she said would bring perfect happiness though equilibrium and oblivion.

She talked of her childhood in Malaysia in a superstitious Hokkien Chinese family — the source of the ghost stories she has turned into literature — and her Anglicization by nuns in a Catholic school who taught her to love the English language as well as the strawberries and daffodils she had never seen.

She talked of her grown daughter and son — a doctor and a journalist — and of her divorce in 1984 from a man who found her insufficiently submissive. "It's the best thing that ever happened to me," she said.

She was reading up on science, she said — "I must be the only woman in Singapore who can discuss quantum physics a little bit convincingly" — when the idea for her next book came to her not long ago, a novel with existential undertones.

"This is just to give you an idea of how volatile writers like myself are and how our minds go tuk-tuk-tuk like fireworks all the time," she said.

It was just before her divorce that Ms. Lim began writing fiction, and when it was a hit, she quit her job as a university lecturer in linguistics. The 18 books she has produced have been published in a dozen countries, including the United States.

And then in 1994 — a year after writing about her adventures on the Queen Elizabeth 2 — she took Singapore by surprise with her hard-edged essays about the loveless relationship between the government and its people.

The fuss that followed became known

as the "Catherine Lim affair" and offered an object lesson in the brittleness and insecurity of the men — and just a few women — who hold power here.

In a study published last March titled "Who's Afraid of Catherine Lim?" Kenneth Paul Tan, a political scientist at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, cast Ms. Lim's duel with the government in Freudian terms.

An overbearing patriarchal leadership, he said, finds itself at odds with an outwardly gentle, deferential woman whose feminine demeanor befuddles and unmans them.

The government's aggressive response to her essays about the "affective divide" seemed to confirm Ms. Lim's assertion that it did not much care whether it was loved but was intent on being feared.

Goh Chok Tong, who was prime minister at the time, rose in Parliament to defend his government's honor, declaring: "If you land a blow on our jaw, you must expect a counterblow on your solar plexus."

In a speech a few months later, also quoted in the pro-government newspaper The Straits Times, he was even more expressive, saying: "If you hit us in the jaw, we hit you in the pelvis."

Really, Ms. Lim said in the interview, she likes men. But she seems to enjoy them in limited doses, as amusing playthings who must not be allowed to get out of line.

"I would never remarry," she said. "I will not even be in a commitment because I value my freedom so much."

The flirtations and intrigues she described on the Queen Elizabeth 2 were mostly true, she said, "with a little bit of disguising."

Since then she has become a professional lecturer on cruise ships, dressing up in her choengsam and telling her stories about men and women and ghosts.

"In one of my last cruises — this is so funny, and I love to regale my friends," she said — "I was wearing the choengsam and I saw a row of four old men sitting in front.

"And later one of them came up to me and said, 'You know, I wasn't even following your lecture. I was only looking at your choengsam legs.'"

The memory made her laugh. "Don't you think that was cute?" she said. "I thought that was cute."