

The Impact of the Catherine Lim Case

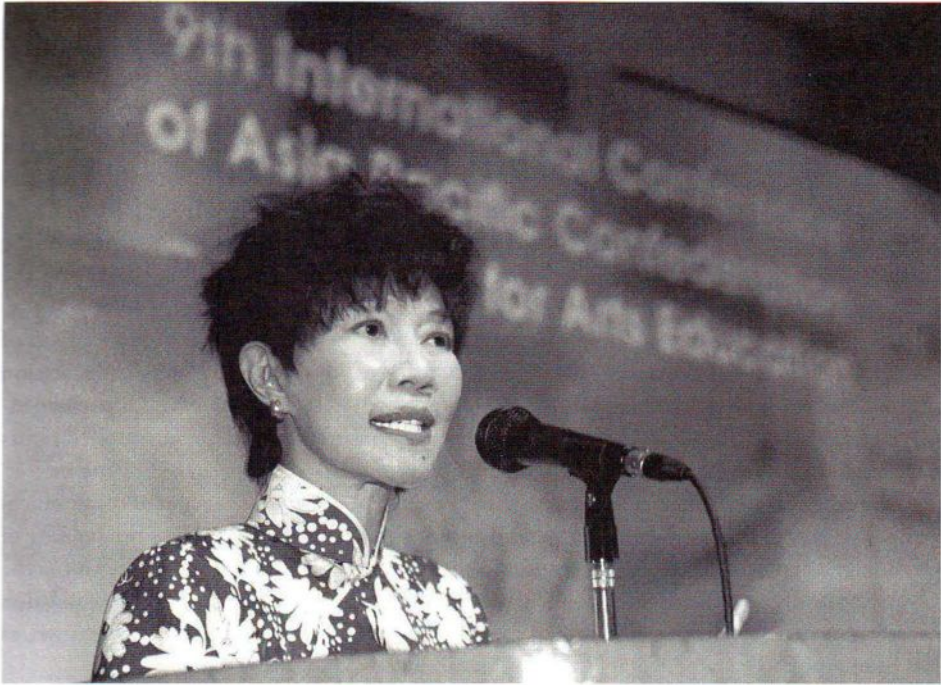
Catherine Lim is a Singapore citizen and a well-known writer. In 1994, she wrote two articles that touched directly on Singapore's politics. Her first article was "The PAP and the People: A Great Affective Divide"⁵, followed by "One Government, Two Styles".⁶

The prime minister's Press Secretary responded to Catherine Lim's second article to say that novelists, short-story writers and theatre groups would not be allowed to set the political agenda from outside the political arena. He invited Catherine Lim "to follow the illustrious example of Jeffery Archer, who became an MP and later Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party to espouse his political beliefs". The Press Secretary also identified the charges made in the articles and replied to them. The reply by the government caused a flurry of letters to appear in the Forum section of *The Straits Times*.⁷

Jimmy Tan wrote that whispering complaints to the Feedback Unit was not the way to build a Great Society.⁸ Russell Heng pointed out that two articles would not set a political agenda. The writer had merely taken up Goh's promise of a kinder and gentler Singapore. He noted that Goh was managing an important transition period and transition is never easy. He hoped history would honour Goh's contribution.⁹

Lim's position was that she had presented a problem to engage interested and concerned citizens in debate that was informed, principled and free from rancour and stridency.

Goh was of the view that there was a distinction between expressing views on political issues and destroying the respect accorded to the prime minister "by denigration and contempt". The debate then moved up to Parliament.



Outspoken Catherine Lim, 1999

In Parliament, Dr Kanwaljit Soin asked the prime minister how concerned citizens would know what the out-of-bound markers were, and their limits. She questioned whether the markers would make citizens reluctant to speak up. The prime minister replied: "It is not possible to demonstrate the boundary clearly. Use your common sense".¹⁰

A decade later, on 7 December 2006, Catherine Lim wrote: "A tight control both of the political opposition parties and of members of the public who choose to criticise the government in the media remains a cornerstone of PAP policy".¹¹ She noted that what was true of the past 40 years of PAP rule was true of the present. She bemoaned the fact that while the population enjoyed good governance and the good life, PAP rule had a dismal record for freedom of the press, political debate and room for dissent. She wondered if apolitical citizens trained to accept the good life would fight the good fight or bend their knees to the insolent might of a tyrant. Her fire was directed at the parameters of political debate, which stipulated what would and would not be tolerated, and the OB markers that existed for both the tone and content of political debate by excluding any criticism of government conduct implying lack of competence, transparency, probity and disrespect.

On 23 December 2006, two journalists, Peh Shing Huee and Ken Kwek, wrote:

"OB Markers" has since taken a life of its own, firmly entrenching itself into the local political lexicon ... The phrase refers to the topics which are "permissible" for discussion here ... No one knows if they have crossed the line—until they actually do ... writer Catherine Lim was judged to have done so in 1994 when she criticised the prime minister Goh Chok Tong's governance.¹²

Catherine Lim was not "judged" by a court of law to have offended against any provision of the law that she had improperly criticised the prime minister. No judge has said that

the power of the legislature can be exercised other than under the articles set out in the Constitution and through Bills passed by Parliament and assented to by the President.