

RELIVING MALAYSIA'S COLOURFUL HISTORY



Professor Dr. Shirley Lim Geok-Lin reading out her paper presentation...

13th August 2007 (Monday) - It is truly befitting that as we celebrate the country's momentous 50 years of independence, University College Sedaya International (UCSI) students were treated to a stimulating talk-cum-reading by prominent Malaysian author Professor Dr. Shirley Lim Geok-Lin.

A renowned scholar and prolific writer amongst the local fraternity, Shirley's talk entitled '*English Language Policy: Imagining A People's History*' recounting Malaysia's colourful history was indeed timely, particularly more so as it presented UCSI's international students a glimpse of both our history and our country's vivid beginnings.

The talk commenced with an interactive discussion and rhetorical recount of the socio-historical aspects of the English language. As it moved along, Shirley's poetic storytelling was a welcome break from the monotonous sessions commonly associated with presentations on the English language subject.

The audience was kept on the edge of their seats throughout the presentation as Shirley retold Malaysia's history weaving around the mystical, dreamlike-fairytale version of the legendary figure of Princess Hang Li Po, or *Puteri Hang Li Po* as the princess was known to the locals and of a little girl. The little girl had inherited a magical shawl from her great aunt whom she had never met before and the tale describes the extraordinary journeys she encounters along the way as she journeys to return the magical shawl to the princess.



Inevitably, when the topic of Malaysian history appears, the audience were treated to various facets of the country's early years, including multicultural, early settlers, and administrative developments pertaining to the country. As Malaysia was previously ruled by the Portuguese, Dutch, briefly by the Japanese, and lastly the British, the language of these administrations had left an impressionable mark on the people in terms of language, education and our daily lives. Shirley Lim recounts how the policies changed during those periods, illustrated a seemingly love-hate relationship with the particular language.

Although having migrated, Shirley continues to write about her country. Her latest writing entitled, *'The Princess Shawl'* depicts her love for her country and the tales and myths from

her early childhood in her hometown of Melaka.

Shirley has accumulated various international accolades to her name. From her first poetry book *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems* which won her the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1980 – becoming the first Asian women to have received the award – she went on to bag several prestigious titles including Asiaweek's Short Story Award for *'Mr. Tang's Uncles'* (1982), and the American Book Award for her writings in *'Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology'* alongside co-editors Mayumi Tsutakawa and Margarita Donnelly (1990).

Written and Illustrated by Fouzia Hassan Abdullah

Illustration: *'Princess Shawl'* – Princess Hang Li Poh