Introduction to William Ah Ket at the Victorian Bar and Scholarship

First, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Can I also acknowledge the following people:

- Bruce Atkinson, the President of the Legislative Council
- Hong Lim MP, the Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Asia Engagement sends his apologies as he has recently taken ill. Natali Klasevski, Adviser to Hong Lim, MP, is here to represent him.
- Members of the judiciary from the Supreme Court, County Court, Magistrates’ Court, and Federal Circuits’ Court of Australia.
- Members of the Ah Ket family

On behalf of Tuanh Nguyen, the President of the Asian Australian Lawyers Association and the National Executive Committee, I am delighted to welcome you to the launch of the William Ah Ket Scholarship, and shortly will introduce you to a member of the Ah Ket family to announce the winner of the Scholarship.

Back in the late 1800s and early 1900s, there were likely to have been only a handful of lawyers of Asian or Chinese descent in Victoria.

William Ah Ket was not the first person of Chinese descent to be admitted to legal practice in Victoria.

Bendigo born Edward James Vincent Ni Gan studied law at The University of Melbourne and appeared to have set himself up as a ‘Barrister and Solicitor’ in Bull Street, Bendigo in 1897.

He was the son of Guangdong immigrant Moy Ni Gan.

Less is known of another person called Ling Ah Mouy, who was educated at Scotch College.

He completed his articles at Cleverdon and Westley in 1886.
Ah Ket, however, was the first barrister of Chinese descent in Victoria and possibly Australia practising at the independent Bar.

He was born in Wangaratta on 20 June 1876 and died on 6 August 1936. At the time of his death, his estate was valued for probate at £4,342 (which is approximately AUD$510,000 today).

He was the only son and fifth child of Mah Ket and Hing Ung (who were married in 1864). They were storekeepers and growers, and buyers of tobacco. Ah Ket’s father had arrived in Melbourne in 1855.

Ah Ket was educated in Wangarratta High School and was home tutored in Chinese. He would have been one of the few people fluent both in English and Mandarin.

In his early teens, he acted as an interpreter (which undoubtedly had a great influence on Ah Ket choosing to study law). It was his father’s wish that he should qualify for law to serve his ‘countrymen’s interests’.

Ah Ket matriculated in 1893 and entered law at the University of Melbourne, completing a single subject before proceeding to his articled clerk’s course in 1898 at Maddock & Jamieson.

He was admitted to practice in May 1903.

He married Gertrude Victoria Bullock in 1912 and had two sons (William and Stanley) and two daughters (Melaan and Toylaan).

One of his daughters, Melaan Ah Ket, married Len Williams, the founder of the London Guitar School, and the parents of the famous classical guitarist John Christopher Williams (who is 76 years old).

Tonight, we are privileged to have Paul Ah Ket and his niece Blossom Ah Ket here with us.

Paul’s father is Dr Bill Ah Ket, the eldest son of William Ah Ket.

I also acknowledge Sharyn Prentice, Paul’s partner, and Jennifer Wood, another Ah Ket descendant. Jennifer’s line is from Rose Ah Ket, one of Mah Ket’s daughters.

At the Victorian Bar, Ah Ket read with Sir Stewart McArthur (who was later appointed a Supreme Court judge from 1920 to 1934).

Ah Ket signed the Victorian Bar roll in June 1904 with roll number 88. According to Chinese numerology, he would be doubly lucky!
Despite being born and brought up in Australia, William Ah Ket faced many challenges as he practised at a time when the Restrictive Immigration Act 1901 (Cth) was in force, facing discrimination and prejudice, in a highly conservative profession.

For example, William Ah Ket reputedly won the Supreme Court Judges’ Prize but was not recognised formally on the official board.

His award was later established through Supreme Court Library records, which showed that Ah Ket received prize money for an award, which even so was less than the official Supreme Court Prize amount (£40 instead of £125).

So, not only was he denied official recognition, his achievement was valued as lesser.

But others respected and regarded him very highly.

Sir Robert Menzies, in his book ‘The Measure of the Years’ said this of Ah Ket:

‘William Ah Ket did not ever sit on the Bench, though he would have been a very competent judge. He was a phenomenon at the Victorian Bar, a full-blooded Chinese born in the north-east of Victoria. He was a sound lawyer and a good advocate. His bland oriental features gave nothing away; his keen sense of fun was concealed behind an almost immovable mask. A certain prejudice among clients against having a Chinese barrister to an extent limited his practice, though instructing solicitors thought very well of him. He was considerably senior to me but we were great friends.’

From what I have read, Ah Ket built a successful practice at the Victorian Bar and was a very able advocate appearing on numerous occasions in the High Court of Australia.

He was regarded by members of the Victorian Bar with warmth and affection; popular and greatly respected for his integrity and abilities.

He was also highly regarded in the Chinese community, having co-founded the Australian Chinese Association and one of two delegates from the Chinese community in Australia to be part of the opening of the Chinese national parliament in 1912.

He also acted as Consul General for China in Melbourne.

Ah Ket demonstrated courage, determination, and grit in the face of challenges beyond his control.

He succeeded in an era where there were few like him. He was a master of his own destiny in a world that often determined to refuse him that privilege.
Tonight, however, we are here to celebrate William Ah Ket’s successes and to recognize his contribution to the legal profession as one who has led by example and given us an important legacy.

**The William Ah Ket Scholarship**

The William Ah Ket Scholarship is an annual scholarship of $5,000 to be awarded to a young lawyer, admitted to practice in Australia with up to five years post admission experience, who produces the most outstanding research paper in the field of equality, diversity and the law.

With the generous financial support from Maddocks, and the support of the Ah Ket family, the Asian Australia Lawyers Association is very honoured to have formulated and devised the William Ah Ket Scholarship in line with its mission to promote cultural diversity in the law.

We are also grateful to our panel of eminent judges who have assessed the submission.

I would like to formally acknowledge our thanks to:

- Michelle Dixon, CEO, Maddocks
- Dr Tim Soutphommassane, Race Discrimination Commissioner
- The Hon. Michael Kirby, AC, CMG, Former Justice of the High Court of Australia
- The Hon. Chief Justice Wayne Martin, AC, Supreme Court of Western Australia

For me personally, this initiative has taken 11 years to see it come to fruition from when my wife, Cheri Ong, and I first mooted the idea.

Back then, there were no associations at the independent Bar nor in the wider legal profession representing Asian Australian lawyers.

I also like to acknowledge the contribution of our Immediate Past President, Reynah Tang, for his collaboration in this initiative to bring it to fruition. Reynah was the first President of Asian descent at the Law Institute of Victoria.

It was when the Asian Australian Lawyers Association was formed in October 2013 that we re-mooted this initiative to create a scholarship in recognition of the historical contribution of William Ah Ket to the legal profession as the first Asian Australian barrister in Australia.

On behalf of my President and the National Executive Committee of the Asian Australian Lawyers Association, I am delighted to formally launch the
Tonight, we have invited 3 of applicants shortlisted for the competition.

- Shaheer Tari was formerly working at Sparke Helmore, Western Australia. He was admitted to practice on 4 October 2010. He is of Afghan background. The title of his paper is *Education, affirmative action and mandated quotas as a way to dismantle the ‘bamboo ceiling’ in the Australian legal profession*.
- Matilda Gillis is a lawyer at the Australian Government Solicitor, ACT. She is of Australian background, and admitted to practice on 18 August 2017. The tile of her paper is *The Injustice and Cruelty of No Recognition: An Argument for ‘Queering’ the Transitional Justice Space*.
- K Abraham Thomas is a lawyer working at the State Revenue Office of Victoria. He is of Singaporean Indian (Malayalee) background. He was admitted on 18 August 2015. The title of his paper is *Affirmative Action in Piercing the Bamboo Ceiling within the Australian Legal Profession – Utopian Ideal or Dystopian Nightmare?*.

Can I now invite Blossom Ah Ket to say a few words and to announce the winner of the inaugural 2017 William Ah Ket Scholarship.