The Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry (SCCCI) along Hill Street, Singapore. Photo taken by me in August 2017.

Travel Grant Report
In Trinity Term I was awarded, along with a fellow historian, the Arthur Felix Broomfield Prize in History as well as the Picot Prize, to help subsidise my travel expenses for research. As part of the Final Honours School requirement, I had planned to write my undergraduate thesis about the Chinese community in Singapore, and hence was planning to fly back to Singapore to conduct research to get a better understanding on the topic.

To provide some context, Singapore was a British colony until 1959, and was governed as a ‘plural society’ under colonial rule. Its residents comprised largely of immigrants from China or India who sought to earn money in Singapore, and these immigrants interacted mostly with people from the same hometown, leaving society divided under colonial rule. After WW2 and during decolonization, the Chinese, having grown rich from the rubber industry and Singapore’s entrepot trade, quickly became a powerful and influential group in Singapore’s political scene, with its leaders being able to influence the votes of the Chinese masses in favour of or against local political parties. The leaders of the Chinese community were so influential that then-PM Lee Kuan Yew had to ask the Chinese Chamber of Commerce for its support before it could secure a win in the General Elections.

However, when Singapore became independent in 1965 and the PAP (People’s Action Party) came to power, the roles of the Chinese institutions were jeopardized. The PAP had chosen the policy of multiculturalism, and the Chinese institutions, premised on unity based on blood or lineage, were deemed a danger to PAP’s multicultural cause. The widened scope of social services that the PAP now provided and that the colonial government did not, also meant that Chinese welfare institutions were at the risk of being irrelevant. It is against this backdrop that my thesis is interested in – the interactions between the government and the Chinese organisations, and how they managed to negotiate a common ground and compromise.

With the funding from the Prizes, I was able to fly to Singapore over the Long Vacation. I spoke to several Chinese historians on this topic and conducted interviews with several distinguished members of the Chinese community. I was also able to get access to the National Archives of Singapore, where I tediously combed through many pages of Chinese writing, as well as to the National University of Singapore, for a greater collection of documents from these Chinese organisations. I also visited the National Library, where there was a greater collection of books on Singapore’s Chinese community, multiracial and multicultural policies, etc. Access to these information is critical, as they would be difficult to obtain in Oxford.

A significant amount of time was spent researching on the thesis in the Long Vacation, and I am currently working on an outline as well as preliminary writings on certain bits. I am very grateful to the Prize for subsidizing my research expenses.

Miao Ling Ong
History & Economics
Pembroke College Oxford