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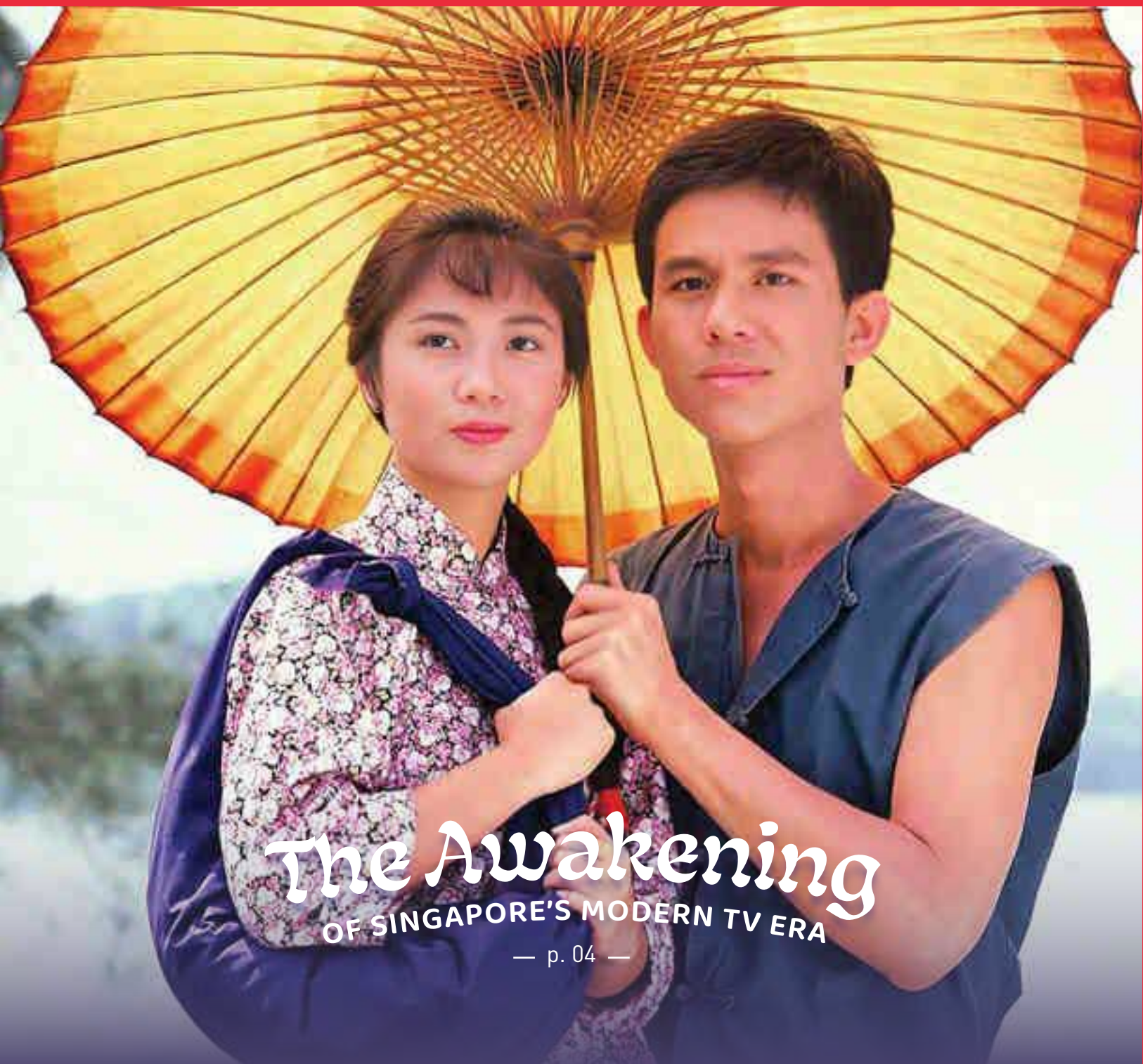

The Awakening OF SINGAPORE'S MODERN TV ERA

— p. 04 —

Director's Note

Shows such as *The Army Series*, *The Awakening* and *The Coffee Shop* were milestones for local Chinese-language TV that ushered in a new generation of entertainment royalty like Xiang Yun, Huang Wenyong, Edmund Chen and Li Nanxing. It's quite remarkable that these well-produced local productions arose just 10 years after Singapore began broadcasting in colour.

Indeed, the story of the switch to colour from monochrome is itself a fascinating one. People today spend thousands on flat-screen TVs that promise vivid, eye-popping colour. Yet when it was first introduced, no one seemed that interested in moving on from their black-and-white sets. Do tune in to Mohamad Karazie and Tan Jie Ling's account of Singapore's transition to colour.

Fast forward to the 1990s, Singapore was a nation of couch potatoes, thanks undoubtedly to such gripping programming as *Triple Nine* and *Under One Roof*. To get people moving, the National Healthy Lifestyle Committee introduced the Great Singapore Workout with then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong gamely leading the way. Over the next 30 years, the message to "get out of your seat, on to your feet, get your body moving like mine" eventually caught on, if the number of yoga and pilates studios and gyms that have mushroomed around Singapore since is any indication. Lim Tin Seng flexes his writing muscle to bring us this story looking back at the origins and history of this mass exercise movement.

While Singaporeans had to be persuaded to exercise, they didn't need any encouragement to visit the zoo. The Singapore Zoo, originally known as the Singapore Zoological Gardens, has always been a big hit with people who wanted to be able to (safely) encounter wild animals. Choo Ruizhi ferrets out the zoo's early history and uncovers some of the hairy situations the zoo faced.

These are just some of the must-reads in this issue. Others include a look at our first foreign minister, S. Rajaratnam; Singapore's pioneer cartoonists; the Hawkins Road Refugee Camp; the new Laws of Our Land exhibition; the Singaporeanisation of Thai Buddhist temple Wat Ananda; the fate of the Persian Armenian community in Singapore; and the search for a "lost" towkay.

We are always on the lookout to bring you great stories about our past, so stay tuned for more!

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On the cover
Xiang Yun as Ah Mei and the late Huang Wenyong as He Ah Shui in *The Awakening,* a local blockbuster drama series produced by the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation in 1984. *Courtesy of Mediacorp Pte Ltd.*

BiblioAsia is a free quarterly publication produced by the National Library Board. It features articles on the history, culture and heritage of Singapore within the larger Asian context, and has a strong focus on the collections and services of the National Library. *BiblioAsia* is distributed to local and international libraries, academic institutions, and government ministries and agencies. Members of the public can pick up the magazine at the National Library Building and public libraries. The online edition can be accessed with the QR code on the right.

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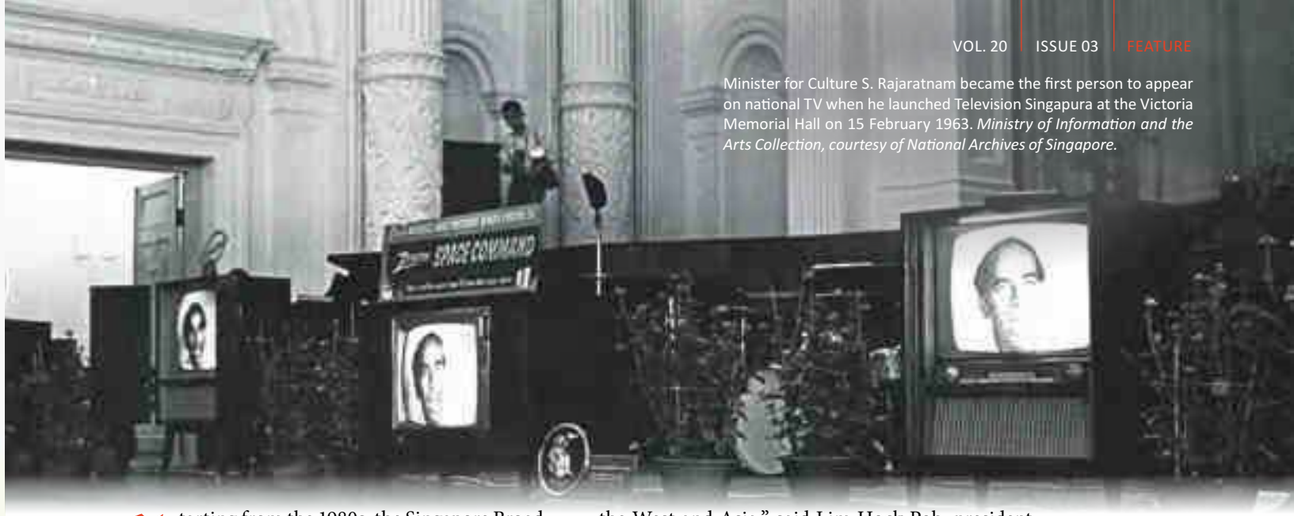
The Awakening

OF THE MODERN TELEVISION ERA
50 YEARS OF COLOUR TV IN SINGAPORE

People weren't particularly interested in upgrading their black-and-white TVs to colour TVs. Then came the World Cup.

By Mohamad Karazie and Tan Jie Ling

The Awakening (1984) was a hugely popular Mandarin drama series about the trials and tribulations of Singapore's early Chinese immigrants in the 19th century. *Courtesy of Mediacorp Pte Ltd.*



Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam became the first person to appear on national TV when he launched Television Singapura at the Victoria Memorial Hall on 15 February 1963. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Starting from the 1980s, the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) – the precursor to today's Mediacorp – began churning out highly popular local TV dramas in Mandarin. Shows like *The Flying Fish* (小飞鱼; 1983),[1] *The Army Series* (新兵小传; 1983)[2] and *The Awakening* (雾锁南洋; 1984)[3] became massive hits for the state broadcaster.

Apart from their high production values and compelling storylines, what made these SBC dramas so addictive were the actors themselves. Blessed with talent, youth and good looks, Channel 8 stars like Xiang Yun, Huang Wenyong, Edmund Chen and Li Nanxing, and later, Zoe Tay and Fann Wong, dominated the small screen. In the process, they became local royalty.

One factor that made watching these actors, and these shows, so enjoyable was something that we take completely for granted today: everything was in colour. *The Awakening* or *Samsui Women* (红头巾; 1986)[4] would have been much less compelling in black-and-white. It is quite remarkable that it took a mere decade after colour TV came to Singapore for SBC to produce television programmes that people would eagerly consume week after week.

Singapore first began broadcasting in colour in 1974, just 11 years after television itself made its debut here. Culture Minister S. Rajaratnam was the first person to appear on national TV when he launched Television Singapura at the Victoria Memorial Hall on 15 February 1963.

Between 1963 and 1974, all TV programmes in Singapore were broadcast in black and white. There was, however, a global move to shift away from monochrome to colour, and Singapore did not want to be left behind.

"The advent of colour television places Singapore amongst many of the highly developed countries in the West and Asia," said Lim Hock Poh, president of the Radio and Electrical Traders Association of Singapore (RETAS) at the Colourvision & Sound Exhibition held at the National Stadium in August 1974. "It not only reflects our capability in adapting to modern telecommunications but also signifies our advanced technological knowledge."[5]

The introduction of colour TV sets in May 1974 initially did not attract much enthusiasm in Singapore though. It was perceived as an unnecessary upgrade by many, reflecting a sentiment shared globally. However, the situation changed when it was announced that Singapore would broadcast the World Cup final live, in colour, on 7 July that year.[6]

The highly anticipated match sparked a buying frenzy in colour TV sets, with 2,000 units sold the day before the match. One of the first colour TVs available in Singapore was the Sierra 22 CTV 26 console encased within a hardwood frame. Imported from Holland, it cost around $2,400, a considerable amount of money given that the average monthly salary was between $300 and $500 in the 1970s.[7] The price did not seem to be a major hindrance though. "We don't seem to be able to supply sets fast enough to the dealers," said Song Choo Chai, managing director of Asia Radio, the sole agent for Sierra.[8]

Among those who enjoyed their new colour Sierra TV was mother of two Irene Chee, whose husband had bought a set in the mid-1970s. "I was initially watching a Hong Kong Cantonese period drama in black and white," she recalled. "After we bought the colour TV, the

Irene Chee's daughters, Veronica (right) and Su, posing in front of their Sierra colour television console, 1979. *Courtesy of Mrs Irene Chee.*

Mohamad Karazie has been immersed in history since joining the National Archives of Singapore as an Archivist in 2021. He has a deep passion for Singapore history and shares its stories across various platforms.

Tan Jie Ling is a Senior Manager with the Audio Visual Archives department at the National Archives of Singapore. A TV addict who loves the power of television, she is happy to be part of the department that collects, preserves and facilitates access to the nation's audio-visual memories.

Crowds gathering outside the Victoria Memorial Hall for the inauguration of Television Singapura on 15 February 1963. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

show became so much more enjoyable. I was amazed to see that the emperor's robes were in a bright yellow, and the attire of the empress and concubines were in various shades of brilliant colours." The Sierra served her well for a good 20 years, and after that she used it as a display for photo frames and other ornaments.[9]

Besides the sale of colour TVs, there was also a sharp rise in the number of TV rentals. A Rediffusion spokesman told the *Straits Times* that those "who [could not] afford to pay $2,000 or so to buy a set, agreed to rent sets, although contracts [had] to be on a yearly basis".[10]

Preparing for Colour TV

The switch from black and white to colour was not a simple one. Radio and Television Singapore (RTS; formed from a merger of Television Singapura with Radio Singapura in 1965) spearheaded the overhaul of broadcasting infrastructure for colour broadcasts in Singapore. RTS engineer Ujagar Singh explained that "black and white facilities had to be converted into colour because colour requirements were different and more stringent. In the studio, we had to, of course, besides buying new equipment, cameras, we also had to change our lighting system. Because colour requires more intense lighting to reproduce the colours... all the equipment had to be replaced with new colour equipment," he said.[11] This led to the replacement of 90 percent of existing equipment to ensure compatibility with colour transmission standards.[12] An estimated $20 million was set aside for this endeavour.[13]

Personnel had to be trained as well. RTS engineers and technicians were sent to London and Germany for training. Among them was engineer Philip Tay Joo Thong, who attended the six-month Colour TV Engineering course at Thomson TV College in London and met many people especially from Africa. "So we start[ed] to learn about the basic[s]… why three tubes, the reproduction of colour, what makes yellow yellow, what makes green – the complementary colours and so forth," he recalled in an oral history interview.[14]

Staff who did not have the opportunity to attend overseas courses were trained by their colleagues when they were back in Singapore. The British Broadcasting Corporation sent an advisor, John Castle, to help RTS with the equipment installation and subsequent training of staff.[15]

Besides engineers and technicians, staff of the camera unit had to acquire additional expertise and technical knowledge to operate the new colour equipment. "For black and white you don't have to worry about colour temperature," said cameraman Mun Chor Seng in an oral history interview. "Whether you're filming indoor or outdoor, it come[s] out monochrome. Whereas if you use colour, you have to think of the artificial light and the normal sunlight, because both have different colour temperature[s]. So if you were [to] use the colour film, you have to do colour conversion in order to maintain the uniformity on your final finish[ed] product. That is the main thing that one has to remember."[16]

In August 1974, RETAS organised the 10-day Colourvision & Sound Exhibition at the National Stadium that showcased $2.5 million worth of colour and sound equipment from more than 30 booths and 20 exhibitors. "Demonstrators and trained technical personnel will show visitors what to look for when adjusting and aligning their TV sets," said Roland Yeo of RETAS. This was one of the highlights of the exhibition.[17]

Launch of Colour TV

No stone was left unturned ahead of the debut of colour TV at the 1974 World Cup final held in Munich.[18] Before the match, the main community centres in all 65 constituencies across Singapore had colour TV sets installed. "It will be an exciting experience to view the World Cup Soccer final in colour," said Culture Minister Jek Yeun Thong in an interview with the *New Nation*.[19]

Several hotels also jumped on the bandwagon by screening the match on their premises. The Shangri-La had about 30 colour TV sets in its Island Ballroom, which had a seating capacity of 600. Admission was free but people had to pay for refreshments. The Mandarin Hotel had nine TV sets and also two screens at the Kasbah, the Pine Court and the Clipper Bar, with the first round of drinks served at $5. Nanyang University set up three colour TVs at its Union House, canteen and library.[20]

Even coffeeshops joined in the soccer mania. "I don't understand much about football but every time there is a match over television I have more customers," said the owner of a roadside coffee stall in Chinatown who had a TV set.[21] The much-anticipated match saw host West Germany beating Holland by a narrow margin of 2–1.[22]

A screen grab from the 1974 National Day Parade, which was televised live in colour. *Mediacorp Pte Ltd, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

After the match, RTS reverted to monochrome programme with the promise that the upcoming National Day Parade would be broadcast in colour. The live telecast of the parade in colour sparked another mad dash to snap up colour TV sets. In fact, the demand was described by dealers as "better than the rush for colour sets just before last month's World Cup soccer final".

Most dealers and renters also reported that they had run out of stock of colour TVs, with one agent telling the *Straits Times* that he had a "waiting list of a few hundred customers". "Because the orders just poured in, we cannot handle them straight away," he said. Fortunately, those without colour TVs could watch the parade from any of the 26-inch colour TV at 63 community centres.[23]

Minister for Culture Jek Yeun Thong on a tour of Radio and Television Singapore's colour television studios, 1974. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

The Formative Years

While the West Germany–Holland match was the first colour broadcast, it was only a pilot. Officially, colour broadcasting in Singapore began on 1 August 1974, starting with the programme *Anatomy of a Parade* on Channel 5 at 7.40 pm.[24] This was a Malay documentary showing behind-the-scenes footage of people preparing for the upcoming National Day Parade.[25] The same programme was subsequently televised on different days in English, Chinese and Tamil.[26]

With the transition to colour came local programmes, also in colour, which were initially made on shoestring budgets with a lean production team. By the end of 1974, all newsreels were televised in colour. Local programmes in colour were broadcast four hours on weekdays and six hours on weekends. By 1977, these had increased to 78 hours per week, making up about 75 percent of weekly programming. At this point, all news bulletins, sports events, and musical and variety shows were in colour.[27]

As a government body, RTS produced mainly educational and informational programmes. News, documentaries and children's programmes made up most of the local productions. Light entertainment such as musical and variety shows rounded up the list.[28]

School debate finals were one of the programmes produced by RTS. The first debate televised in colour was between National Junior College and Hwa Chong Junior College in 1975, and the topic was "That parents who send their children overseas for a secondary education are doing irreparable harm to their children". National Junior College, who opposed the motion, won the debate.[29]

RTS also regularly produced documentaries about Singapore. One of these was *On the Spot*, a 1976 series that showcased different parts of Singapore. Episode 12 of the series featured Singapore's parks and also local singers from different ethnic backgrounds singing in the parks. Performers included singer and composer Michael Isaac, Malay singer and entertainer Kartina Dahari and popular Mandarin singer Wu Jing Xian (吴静娴).[30]

Singapore's homemade programmes kicked up a notch when the SBC was formed on 1 February 1980, following the corporatisation of RTS. Armed with a more commercial drive, and a bigger budget for drama production, the quality and quantity of local programmes improved significantly. Local dramas, especially Chinese dramas, flourished.

Seletar Robbery (实里达大劫案; 1982) is the first Mandarin drama to be produced by SBC and laid the foundation for future well-regarded productions like *The Awakening* and *The Coffee Shop* (咖啡乌; 1985–86).[31] *Seletar Robbery* was based on an actual case where about $300,000 had been stolen from a construction site at Seletar Reservoir.[32]

Subsequently, *The Coffee Shop*, which aired from 16 December 1985 to 4 February 1986, became the first Mandarin TV serial to pass the one million viewership mark with 1,123,000 adult viewers. The story revolves around the lives of ordinary Singaporeans living in housing estates, depicting their joys, sorrows and aspirations. Previously, the records had been held by Hong Kong Cantonese serials, *Man in the Net* (网中人; 1980) and *Chameleon* (变色龙; 1981).[33]

Of course, merely showing something in colour was not a guarantee of success, no matter how good-looking the cast. The public reception to early local TV drama productions in English is a case in point. Some, like *Masters of the Sea* (1994) and *VR Man* (1998) were embarrassing flops. Others like *Triple Nine* (1995–99),[34] *Under One Roof* (1995–2003)[35] and *Growing Up* (1996–2001)[36] were genuine hits.

Perhaps the most popular of them all was *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd* (1997–2007), a sitcom starring Gurmit Singh and Irene Ang.[37] Centred around a Singlish-speaking general contractor with permed hair, a prominent facial mole and trademark yellow boots, and who boasts that he is "the best in Singapore, JB, and some say Batam", the show lasted eight seasons – attesting to its popularity.

Running for six seasons from 1996 to 2001, *Growing Up* is a coming-of-age English drama series about the Tay family, set in Singapore in the 1960s until the 1980s. *Courtesy of Mediacorp Pte Ltd.*

(Above) A screen grab from *The Coffee Shop* (咖啡乌), which aired from 16 December 1985 to 4 February 1986, and became the first Mandarin TV serial to pass the one million viewership mark. The story revolves around the lives of ordinary Singaporeans living in housing estates. *Courtesy of Mediacorp Pte Ltd.*

In many ways, the television industry is very different today from the early days of the 1970s and 1980s. The state broadcaster Mediacorp continues to produce local programmes, but it now has to compete for time and attention with computer games, social media and YouTube. People are still watching television but there is a universe of choice now, thanks to streaming giants like Netflix, Disney+ and Amazon Prime. TV sets themselves have changed. No longer boxy appliances housed in wooden cabinetry, these days, large, flat and slick screen TVs are mounted on walls.

Manufacturers are still trying to get consumers to upgrade their TVs though. Consumers are constantly being seduced by ever larger screens that display impossibly sharp images. At the same time, these companies are also investing in technology that produces colours brighter and more vivid than ever before. Demo sets in electronics stores show luscious images in hyper-realistic colours running on a loop. The promise of a world of better colour continues to beckon. ♦

Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd – about an uncouth contractor and his family – was Singapore's longest-running English-language sitcom, airing from 1997 to 2007. *Courtesy of Mediacorp Pte Ltd.*

Scan the QR code for a list of programmes in colour produced by Radio and Television Singapore and the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation that are available on Archives Online.

NOTES

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30 Years of the GREAT SINGAPORE WORKOUT

Launched in 1993, the Great Singapore Workout helped spread the message that being physically active was important.

By Lim Tin Seng

Get out of your seat
On to your feet
Get your body moving like mine
It's Singapore, Singapore
Workout Time

And with those words, the Great Singapore Workout was officially launched on 3 October 1993. On that day, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, dressed in a pink T-shirt and crisp white shorts – together with some 26,000 similarly clad individuals – took to the Padang to do a dance workout in a bid to get Singaporeans to exercise and keep fit. Goh told reporters that he had enjoyed the session. "It is a good exercise," he said. "I recommend this to everybody." Goh had undergone two training sessions and then practised on his own a few times before his public debut.[1]

Why a National Workout?

The workout was first unveiled on 1 September 1993 as the highlight of the second National Healthy Lifestyle Campaign.[2] The Healthy Lifestyle Committee headed by Kwa Soon Bee, the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Health, was the brainchild behind the workout. The committee hoped to "popularise the Great Singapore Workout as a Singapore exercise which everyone can do in the schools, homes and workplaces even after the campaign".[3] "It is a simple exercise routine which Singaporeans of all ages could learn and enjoy," said Kwa.

The 1992 National Health Survey had revealed that only 13.6 percent of Singaporeans aged 18 to 69 were actively engaging in regular exercise of light or moderate intensity.[4] This was a worrying statistic for the Health Ministry. "This is a matter for concern as physical inactivity is an important risk factor that predisposes an individual to lifestyle-related diseases such as high-blood pressure, heart disease and strokes," said Kwa.[5]

Creating a "Fun" Workout

Designed by the Singapore Fitness Instructors' Association and the Singapore Sports Council, the Great Singapore Workout was a carefully choreographed low-impact aerobic routine that was aimed at anyone between the ages of seven and 70.

Lim Tin Seng is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. He is the co-editor of Roots: *Tracing Family Histories – A Resource Guide* (2013), *Harmony and Development: ASEAN-China Relations* (2009) and *China's New Social Policy: Initiatives for a Harmonious Society* (2010). He writes regularly for *BiblioAsia*.

(Facing Page) Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong doing the Great Singapore Workout with participants at the Padang during the launch of the 1995 National Healthy Lifestyle Campaign. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

The workout had five main stages – a warm-up session, upper body movements, lower body movements, total body exercises and cooling down. The 15-minute low-impact workout comprises the basic march; the side-step with scissor and arm bends; the toe tap and stretch; the arm and heel press; and the punch and kick movement.[6]

Created with safety in mind, the workout forgoes the high-impact leaps and bounds of aerobics, ensuring that one foot remains firmly on the ground at all times. A health advisory was also issued to people over 35; those who did not exercise regularly; had medical problems such as heart disease, asthma or fits; or were severely overweight to consult their doctors before proceeding with the workout.[7]

"The exercises have to be safe, effective and suitable for all age groups from children to grandmothers," said Bronwyn Dearnley, one of the three fitness instructors who choreographed the routine. "They can't be too strenuous and have to be fun to encourage people to start exercising."[8]

Although the workout could reportedly burn up to between 80 and 100 calories, it was meant to be seen as more than just a calorie-burning routine. "The Workout aims to get Singaporeans to exercise and have fun together. It encourages Singaporeans to make exercise a habit, like brushing teeth, and part of their everyday recreational activity, like watching TV," said Goh.[9]

To inject vigour into the workout and widen its reach, the Health Ministry engaged Adcom, an advertising agency, to create the workout video and song that embodied a distinct "Singapore flavour". Adcom creative director David Miller composed a melody that melded a catchy workout tune with local ethnic beats, including the lively Malay *joget*, before weaving in the lyrics.[10] Miller tested the tune on his three-year-old daughter. "When she started jumping around, I thought it would be a success," he recalled with a laugh.[11]

Miller worked with cameraman Geoff Oliver and the production crew from Panorama Films to create the exercise video. Filmed over four days in July 1993 at various locations across Singapore, the video featured fitness instructors doing the workout who were also joined by Singaporeans of different ages, professions and ethnicities.[12] The video ended with a mass workout involving some 200 people, including cameos by sports personalities Joscelin Yeo and Ang Peng Siong, comedians Moe Alkaff and Wang Sa, and television stars Zaleha Hamid and Chen Liping.[13]

It's Workout Time

In the lead-up to the official launch of the workout, a marketing blitz was carried out to promote it and encourage the public to learn the steps. The workout video and audio tapes were distributed free-of-charge to schools and organisations and sold in retail outlets, while instructional spreads showing the workout steps were published in local newspapers. Additionally, a series of "warm-up" events were organised throughout September to introduce the workout to the public.[14]

On 30 September and 1 October 1993, during ACES (All Children Exercising Simultaneously) Day, approximately half a million students across primary and secondary schools, junior colleges and kindergartens did the workout (those from the primary and kindergarten levels were given a shorter 10-minute "shape-up kids" routine that combined simpler and lighter movements such as stretching and jogging on the spot).

An instructional page from *Lianhe Zaobao* showing the steps of the Great Singapore Workout, 3 October 1993. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong doing the Great Singapore Workout with participants at the Padang during the launch of the 1993 National Healthy Lifestyle Campaign. *Image from Ministry of Health Singapore, Annual Report 1993 (Singapore: Ministry of Health, 1994), 30. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCLOS 354.59570677 SMHAR-[AR]).*

Variations of the Workout

Between 1993 and 1998, the Great Singapore Workout was a mass event. However, from 1999, the workout was decentralised. It was also used by schools and the community as a warm-up programme before any sports events.[15]

Over the years, there have been variations to the original routine to suit different fitness levels and purposes. In 1994, for Prisons Healthy Lifestyle Day, Changi Prison inmates performed a *taiji* version of the workout in a slower beat followed by the actual workout. "By doing two versions of the workout, we are mixing Eastern and Western styles. The *taiji* style also helps us to warm up first before exerting ourselves for the actual workout," said an inmate.[16] (*Taiji* is an ancient Chinese martial art developed for combat and self-defence, but has since evolved into a sport and form of exercise.)

In 1996, schools adopted the Fun and Fitness Workout, a more energetic and upbeat version estimated to be three times more vigorous than the original workout. The 15-minute routine, choreographed by the Singapore Fitness Instructors' Association, consisted of three parts – warm-up, an aerobic segment and a cool-down.[17]

Private companies also introduced their own workout such as the Great Motorola Workout by Motorola Electronics, which became a seven-minute low-impact aerobic routine. The workout was also modified for the wheelchair-bound. It became a routine consisting largely of upper body movements.[18]

(Left) The poster for the launch of the Great Singapore Workout at the Padang on 3 October 1993. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) School children doing the Great Singapore Workout on ACES (All Children Exercising Simultaneously) Day in 1993. *Image from Ministry of Health Singapore, Annual Report 1993 (Singapore: Ministry of Health, 1994), 30. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCLOS 354.59570677 SMHAR-[AR]).*

A screengrab from the "Great Singapore Workout" video showing instructors performing the steps of the exercise routine. *Image from Ministry of Health, "Great Singapore Workout," 11 July 1994, video, 32:54. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. 1995000807).*

In 2001, the Health Promotion Board (HPB) introduced a new workout to complement the original version. Called "Work Fit", the 20-minute routine targeted the body's major muscle groups by combining movements from different sports and games, including bowling, boxing, tennis and even golf. Developed by fitness consultants from the private sector and the Singapore Sports Council, the workout could be done "by almost anyone, anywhere" or "as a quick exercise fix in the office".[19]

Eight years later, in 2009, the HPB created the New Great Singapore Workout which incorporated "strength training and aerobic movements which were better suited to Singapore's multiracial culture". These included resistance band exercises and moves inspired by hip-hop, Malay dance, Indian dance, and Chinese *taiji* and *qigong* (an ancient Chinese system of physical exercise and meditation that combines movement, breathing and mental concentration).[20]

Local bank POSB put its own spin on things. In 2015, it rolled out "The Neighbourhood Workout" consisting of six moves "synonymous with Singapore": "selfie snap", "prata flip", "kaya spread", "shopping bag drag", "MRT squeeze" and "bus balance". The video showed people performing the moves in different parts of Singapore such as at a lift landing, in a corridor and at a hawker centre. Within two weeks of the video being uploaded on POSB's Facebook page, it had received more than 100,000 views.[21]

To commemorate the 25th anniversary of the original workout in 2018, the HPB launched a new version, calling it "The Greater Singapore Workout". Comprising 11 exercises, the workout, like the original, is "made simple, fun and engaging" so that it could be followed by "anyone, young or old", and performed "in any setting".[22]

While familiar moves from the 1993 version were retained in the refreshed iteration, the new workout had a more upbeat tune and featured different sets of upper body, lower body and full body movements. It also included new moves "inspired by everyday actions to strike a chord with Singaporeans" such as "Mozzie Clap", "Puddle Hop", "Kiasu Chope" and "Teh Tarik".[23]

A screengrab from Health Promotion Board's "Greater Singapore Workout" video showing instructors performing "The Kiasu Chope" move, 2018. *Image from "National Steps Challenge™ Presents The Greater Singapore Workout!" hpbsg, 11 November 2018, YouTube video, 5:53.*

Soon You'll Be Feeling Just Fine

The official launch of the Great Singapore Workout in 1993 marked the inaugural Healthy Lifestyle Day, signalling the commencement of the month-long National Healthy Lifestyle Campaign. The push by the Health Ministry to get people to exercise has borne fruit. The 2021 National Population Health Survey revealed that 32.5 percent of Singapore residents aged 18 to 74 years engaged in regular exercise during their leisure time, a significant improvement from the 13.6 percent in 1992.[24]

The explosion in the number of gyms around Singapore is just one very visible example of how people in Singapore are taking exercise more seriously now compared to four decades ago. Perhaps enough Singaporeans gave the workout a try and discovered that the song's closing lyrics were true:

Just give it a go
And what do you know
Soon you'll be feeling just fine ♦

THE GREAT SINGAPORE WORKOUT SONG LYRICS

Get out of your seat
On to your feet
Get your body moving
like mine
It's Singapore, Singapore
Workout Time

So don't be shy
Give it a try
Stretch your arms
Your legs and your spine
It's Singapore, Singapore
Workout Time

Granny and Grandpa
Children too
We'll show you all what
you gotta do
Come on, Dad
Come on, Mum
Family fitness is so much fun

Just give it a go
And what do you know
Soon you'll be feeling just fine
It's Singapore, Singapore
Workout Time

Scan this QR code to watch the original video.

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Animals, Anxieties and Aspirations

THE EARLIER YEARS OF THE SINGAPORE ZOO

The zoo was able to overcome major setbacks in its formative years to become the well-loved tourist attraction it is today.

By Choo Ruizhi

A Javan langur cuddling her baby at the Primate Kingdom in the Singapore Zoo. *Courtesy of Mandai Wildlife Group.*

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It was a little after 5 pm on 27 June 1973 when Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee was invited to shake hands with an orangutan.[1] The primate was Susie, and the occasion was the official opening of the Singapore Zoological Gardens (known as the Singapore Zoo today). In his opening speech, Goh declared that the zoo was the latest "welcome addition to the amenities available to residents of Singapore", a new recreational space for stressed, urbanised Singaporeans to relax. Spread over 28 hectares of land, the zoo featured about 270 animals from around 72 different species, many displayed in naturalistic enclosures.[2]

The idea of a zoo was conceived as early as 1967, just two years after Singapore's independence. Amid significant sociopolitical and economic challenges, why did the leaders of this new nation dedicate significant financial, intellectual and material resources to the creation of a zoo when there were other more pressing matters of national development at hand? To better understand the origins of the Singapore Zoo, and why Goh found himself shaking hands with an orangutan on a Wednesday evening in 1973, we need to look back at Singapore's early fascination for collecting, exhibiting and visiting exotic animal displays.

Singapore's Early Zoos

The collection and display of exotic animals in Singapore may be traced to the 1850s, when prominent businessmen like Hoo Ah Kay (better known as Whampoa) maintained private menageries on their personal residences. Located off Serangoon Road, in present-day Bendemeer, Whampoa's collection featured tapirs, giraffes and rhinoceroses.[3]

The red panda at the Pavilion Capital Giant Panda Forest in River Wonders. Like the giant panda, the red panda has an extra digit on each paw that works as a "thumb" to grasp bamboo. *Courtesy of Mandai Wildlife Group.*

Public zoological gardens, however, would not be established in Singapore until 1875. Funded by the British colonial government, this zoo was located in the Botanic Gardens and exhibited animals that had been presented as gifts to state officials: from a leopard gifted by the Court of Siam to a female Sumatran rhinoceros from Andrew Clarke, Governor of the Straits Settlements. Unfortunately, the animals faced regular abuse and "malicious poisoning" by visitors.[4]

In 1881, citing financial constraints, the colonial government withdrew all financial support for the zoo, forcing it to rely on private contributions to fund the operating costs. Despite the best efforts of its staff, the zoo was finally closed in 1904.[5] It would take almost 70 years before another publicly funded zoo materialised in Singapore – but in the meantime, privately operated zoos continued to attract visitors.

In 1928, the animal trader William Lawrence Soma Basapa established Punggol Zoo at 10 Mile Punggol Road. His collections featured Malayan tigers, Australian cassowaries and African lions.

Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee interacting with Sumatran orangutan Susie at the Singapore Zoo's opening day on 27 June 1973. Today, interactions with animals at the zoo and its related institutions involve encouraging natural behaviour. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission.*

Public Utilities Board chairman Ong Swee Law (centre) visiting the Longleat Zoological Park in England, 1969. *Image reproduced from Ilsa Sharp, The First 21 Years: The Singapore Zoological Gardens Story (Singapore: Singapore Zoological Gardens, 1994), 7. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING q590.7445957 SHA-[LKY]).*


Armed police comb Seletar-Mandai under shoot-on-sight order

Panther hunt

...and an escaped bear is shot in jungle

Twiggy the panther slipped out of its cage on 6 March 1973 and sparked a massive hunt that lasted 11 months. *Source: The Straits Times, 8 March 1973 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

In early 1942, however, as the Japanese invasion of Singapore loomed, British authorities ordered the zoo's dangerous animals killed and the harmless ones released into the wild.[6]

In postwar Singapore, private ventures showcasing wild animals remained highly popular with residents. In 1954, L.F. de Jong opened a zoo in Tampines that showcased cassowaries, tapirs, leopards, gibbons, crocodiles and snakes.[7] Three years later, animal trader Tong Seng Mun set up the Singapore Miniature Zoo in Pasir Panjang.[8] Just a year after that, the Shaw Brothers applied to run a zoo at the Great World amusement park, but the City Council rejected the proposal due to safety concerns for park visitors.[9] In 1963, Chan Kim Suan, an exporter of rhesus monkeys, opened a private zoo near Punggol that featured tigers, kangaroos, tapirs and crocodiles.

Although many of these private zoos did not survive for long due to high financial expenses, their continued reappearance suggests that keeping, exhibiting and viewing exotic animals had become relatively commonplace activities in Singapore by this period, and that animal displays were spaces of persistent fascination for many residents.[10]

A Zoo in the City

In 1967, the Public Utilities Board (PUB) began to explore ways to better utilise the water bodies under its management for recreational purposes. Several thousand acres of land in the Seletar, Peirce and Mac-Ritchie catchments were still closed off to the public. "One of the things considered was a zoo," recalled PUB chairman Ong Swee Law.[11]


(Above) Bernard Ming-Deh Harrison, formerly the zoo's curator of zoology and assistant director, was appointed its executive director in 1981 at the age of 29. *Image reproduced from Ilsa Sharp, The First 21 Years: The Singapore Zoological Gardens Story (Singapore: Singapore Zoological Gardens, 1994), 85. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING q590.7445957 SHA-[LKY]).*

(Below) Animal trader William Lawrence Soma Basapa established Punggol Zoo at 10 Mile Punggol Road. He is seen here with his favourite pet Bengal tiger, Apay. *Courtesy of the Basapa Family.*

In late 1968, Ong assembled a steering committee of 12 PUB officials to drive the project. As the team comprised officials who were "without previous experience or knowledge of planning zoos", they drew instead on the opinions and advice of experts and zoo directors from Europe, North America and Australia.[12] In September 1969, the committee submitted a report to the government, recommending the establishment of a zoological gardens for the country. This was approved a month later, and Singapore Zoological Gardens, a $5 million public company, was formed to design, construct and manage the zoo, with Ong as chairman.[13]

After a visit to the Dehiwala Zoo in Ceylon (Sri Lanka today), Ong invited its director, Lyn de Alwis, to be the consultant-director of the Singapore Zoo on a one-year secondment. "They [Singapore authorities] knew what they wanted, having toured many zoos, particularly in the US and Europe. They saw what we had at Dehiwala and decided to give us the job," de Alwis recalled.[14]

The committee had envisioned that it would feature an "open concept" architecture with animals displayed in naturalistic, spacious enclosures. To allay Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's concerns about having animals (and their waste) near a freshwater

reservoir, stormwater drains would encircle the entire compound with a dedicated waste treatment plant to process zoological sewage.[15]

By 1971, development work on the 28-hectare zoo, including the construction of a metalled access road and sewage facilities, was underway.[16] Some 2,000 trees were specially selected to replace "less desired" vegetation and to provide better shade and attract birds.[17] Construction took 18 months and cost the government about $9 million. But despite efforts to create a modern, "wonder world of animals set amid the sparkling reservoir waters", gaps remained – in some cases literally.[18] Three months before the new zoo was slated to open, a series of dramatic animal escapes made headline news.

Animal Escapees

It started with the sun bears. On 5 March 1973, two "tame and less than half grown" bears squeezed their way out of a narrow gap in their cages. One was "re-captured immediately", while the other eluded capture until it was shot dead two days later in the surrounding forested area, about 45 m from its enclosure.[19]

The next day, a three-year-old panther, the "youngest and smallest" of the zoo's five panthers, slipped out of its cage, and escaped into the surrounding jungle. Zookeepers had named the panther "Twiggy" after the supermodel of the same name, as "it was slim and had thin legs". The young feline had been locked in one of the "standard cages" in a quarantine area. The restless, frightened animal managed to escape by squeezing through the bars, which were each "about five inches apart".[20]

Twiggy's escape triggered a massive search effort. In addition to policemen, zoo staff and experienced hunters, three Reserve Unit troops totalling about 150 men were sent into the rainforests of Mandai, Seletar and Sembawang with a "shoot-to-kill" order. These personnel continued the search even amid heavy rain and darkness.[21] Although armed patrols failed to locate the panther, a search party "spotted movement" in the thick vegetation surrounding the zoo shortly before noon on 7 March and shot dead the remaining fugitive sun bear.[22]

Some 2,000 trees were specially selected to replace "less desired" vegetation and to provide better shade and attract birds.

Reports of the runaway panther provoked widespread fear and excitement among Singaporeans. "We are worried about the children and are taking all precautions," said Tan Thow Lar, a farmer. Nightlife in the nearby Sembawang Hills Estate slowed to a standstill as shops and households locked themselves in. Police warned students to keep away from the Seletar and Peirce reservoirs, while nearby schools shortened their teaching hours.[23]

The hunt for Twiggy reached its finale nearly 11 months later, when a clerk with the Singapore Turf Club spotted a strange animal entering a monsoon drain in the area on 30 January 1974. Policemen, Reserve Unit troopers, firemen and zoo staff rushed to the scene, bringing with them "tranquiliser guns, traps and special cages". Petrol was poured into the drain and set ablaze with flare guns. Despite efforts to smoke out the panther, the animal did not budge.[24] Two days later, the authorities flooded the underground drain while policemen stood ready with submachine guns. Soon after, a feline carcass floated out of the drain.[25]

A sloth at the Fragile Forest in the Singapore Zoo. The biodome mimics a tropical rainforest habitat. *Courtesy of Mandai Wildlife Group.*

Many citizens responded with outrage and grief for the "panther that harmed no one".[26] Others expressed their disgust at the "callous" and "ghastly way" in which a "young, probably sickly panther" had to be killed and likely "suffered a very painful death".[27]

Despite additional security precautions, the zoo would suffer a few more animal escapes in 1974. In the early hours of 14 January that year, just weeks before Twiggy's untimely end, Congo the Nile hippopotamus broke out of his enclosure and plodded into the placid reaches of the Seletar Reservoir. The massive animal would remain in the water body for 47 days before zookeepers unexpectedly succeeded in coaxing him back into his enclosure in early March with a bunch of bananas.[28]

Other less dramatic escapees in this period included an eland (a type of antelope) and a tiger – both were lured back into their enclosures with relatively little fanfare.[29]

Tighter security measures such as higher fences, reinforced walls and deeper moats were implemented, and appeared to have largely worked.

A New Era

The zoo welcomed its first public visitors on 28 June 1973, a day after the official opening. Entrance fees were priced at $2 for adults and $1 for children. The newly minted attraction became highly popular with citizens and tourists, and by June that year, it had welcomed over 850,000 visitors, far exceeding initial expectations.[30] De Alwis was proud of how the zoo had turned out. "It's a damned fine zoo," he told the *Straits Times* in July 1973.[31]

In subsequent decades, the zoo (and Singaporeans themselves) would witness significant transformations. In the 1980s, the zoo began marketing itself to attract more international companies and visitors to Singapore. Bernard Ming-Deh Harrison, formerly the zoo's curator of zoology and assistant director, was appointed its executive director in 1981 at the age of 29. In 1982, the International Union of Directors of Zoological Gardens, "which only admits directors of zoos of international standards", welcomed Harrison as its youngest member. Participating in such international organisations gave the Singapore Zoo access to wider global networks of expertise and animals, ushering in a new period of international animal exchanges.[32]

Thanks to collaborations with zoos in China and North America, Singaporeans were exposed to a wider diversity of exotic animals – from white tigers to golden monkeys – expanding the ways they could imagine and experience wild animals.[33]

Under Harrison, the zoo pioneered "Breakfast with an Orangutan" in 1982, where paying visitors could dine with orangutans. The concept found great traction with tourists, facilitating the meteoric rise of Ah Meng, a female orangutan that many people would come to develop a deep affection for. The zoo had initially trained Susie (the orangutan Goh Keng Swee had shaken hands with) to be a zoo mascot, but she had died of pregnancy toxemia in 1974. (The zoo no longer has a programme forcing orangutans or other animals to dine with people.)

Ah Meng was chosen as a replacement because she was photogenic, "well-groomed" and comfortable with humans, having been raised as a household pet before being given to the zoo. Docile and personable, Ah Meng was photographed with many visiting celebrities and foreign dignitaries, and grew to become a household name among Singaporeans. According to Harrison, Singapore's third president Devan Nair supposedly once remarked that "After Lee Kuan Yew, [Ah Meng is] the most well-known Singaporean in the world".[34] In 1992, Ah Meng became the first only non-human recipient of the Special Tourism Ambassador award by the then Singapore Tourist Promotion Board.[35]

Inuka, born on 26 December 1990, and his mother Sheba when he was less than a year old. *Courtesy of Mandai Wildlife Group.*

(Left) Spotted hyenas, also known as laughing hyenas, at the Night Safari. They make a wide variety of sounds, including the "laughing" associated with their name. *Courtesy of Mandai Wildlife Group.*

(Below) The late Ah Meng the orangutan was the star of the show at every photography session. *Image reproduced from Ilsa Sharp, The First 21 Years: The Singapore Zoological Gardens Story (Singapore: Singapore Zoological Gardens, 1994), 70. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING q590.7445957 SHA-[LKY]).*

The internationalisation of the Singapore Zoo continued into the 1990s and 2000s. On 26 December 1990, the zoo welcomed the birth of Inuka, the world's first (and perhaps only) polar bear to be born in the tropics. Like Ah Meng, Inuka endeared himself to Singaporeans and international visitors alike, becoming a mascot for the zoo's marketing efforts. But as a creature poorly adapted to the tropics, the polar bear also provoked many difficult conversations about animal welfare and zoological exhibits in Singapore. Such debates were led by the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (ACRES), a local animal welfare group.[36] (The zoo later said in 2006 that it would not bring any more polar bears to Singapore.[37])

New Attractions

The 1990s also witnessed the launch of the world's first Night Safari, which officially opened on 26 May 1994. Described as the first of its kind in the world, it allowed (and continues to allow) visitors to observe animals in nocturnal naturalistic settings, with even some free-ranging herbivores in certain parts of the park. At 40 hectares, it was nearly twice as large as the Singapore Zoo when it opened, and featured a collection of 1,200 animals from 100 different species, and "animals never before seen in Singapore", such as a one-horned rhinoceros from India.

"Few people realise that 90 per cent of tropical animals are in fact nocturnal," Ong Swee Law, by then executive chairman of the Singapore Zoo, wrote in a statement. "Night Safari gives visitors the opportunity to study this twilight world in complete safety and comfort."[38] There have been no animal escapes since its opening, reflecting the growing confidence in designing and operating "open zoo" enclosures.

The sheer novelty of the night zoo made it wildly popular with both local and international visitors. Open from 7.30 pm to midnight, the park added another highlight to Singapore's burgeoning nightlife.[39] Just a month after its opening, "overwhelming response" forced the Night Safari to suspend advance ticket sales and appeal to visitors to avoid coming on Saturday nights.[40] An initial forecast of 180,000 visitors was exceeded fourfold, with 760,000 visitors flocking to its gates in the first year alone.[41]

In 2000, the Singapore Zoo – along with the Jurong Bird Park (renamed Bird Paradise when it moved to Mandai in 2023) and Night Safari – came under the management of Wildlife Reserves Singapore (renamed Mandai Wildlife Group in 2021), marking a gradual shift of priorities towards maximising the company's financial sustainability.[42]

The restructuring led to the departure of key staff like Bernard Harrison in 2002, who had been with the zoo since its inception. Physically, the zoo underwent significant renovations. In March 2006, for instance, the zoo opened a $3.6-million Wildlife Healthcare and Research Centre where visitors can view surgery being carried out on animals through a live feed. Two months later, a free-ranging orangutan facility – the first in the world – was created using tall trees, thick branches, foliage and vines to replicate the primates' natural environment.[43]

On 28 February 2014, the 12-hectare River Safari (now River Wonders) officially opened. It was Asia's first and only river-themed wildlife park. Built at a cost of $160 million, River Safari also housed the world's largest freshwater aquarium, and was home to 6,000 animals from 200 species. Inspired by the seasonally flooded forests of the Amazon River, the riverine park sought to showcase animals from many of the world's rivers, and to promote a greater appreciation for freshwater habitat conservation among visitors.[44]

The park featured animals from diverse riverine habitats like the Amazon, Yangtze, Ganges, Nile and Mekong rivers. In addition to charismatic mammals such as Brazilian tapirs, South American jaguars and manatees, its freshwater exhibits also showcased exotic fishes like the Mekong giant catfish, the electric eel and the giant freshwater stingray. Attesting to the consistent and growing popularity of these animals, the River Safari hosted over a million visitors in its opening year, exceeding the number of guests the zoo and Night Safari had welcomed in their inaugural years.[45]

Attracting the most attention and excitement from visitors, however, were the River Safari's giant pandas from China. On an initial 10-year loan from China, giant pandas Kai Kai and Jia Jia were specially flown in from Chengdu, China, and then transported by an air-conditioned truck to the Singapore Zoo when they first arrived in 2012.[46] Notoriously difficult to breed, the pair formed the focus of numerous unsuccessful breeding efforts in subsequent years. These endeavours finally paid off when Jia Jia conceived via artificial insemination and gave birth to a male baby panda named Le Le on 14 August 2021, who became an instant hit with visitors.[47]

In 2022, the 10-year loan for Jia Jia and Kai Kai was extended for another five years until 2027, under an agreement signed by the China Wildlife Conservation Association and Mandai Wildlife Group. After Le Le turned two in August 2023, he was returned to China's panda conservation programme in December that year.[48]

A giant freshwater stingray at the Mekong River section in River Wonders. Each ray has a sharp barb on the base of its tail that can easily penetrate human skin and bone. *Courtesy of Mandai Wildlife Group.*

Grief and Remembrance

The early 2000s would also be a time of loss for the zoo though. On 8 February 2008, Ah Meng the orangutan died at the age of 48. News of her death elicited widespread expressions of grief from many Singaporeans. Her memorial service at the zoo, the first time such an honour had been accorded to any animal in Singapore, was attended by over 4,000 well-wishers.[49]

A similar outpouring of public sorrow was again seen when 27-year-old Inuka was put down on 25 April 2018 due to his deteriorating health. Hundreds of visitors attended the bear's memorial service, and many Singaporeans shared their feelings online in the form of photographs, blogposts, Facebook posts and visual art.[50] His death attracted reactions even from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. "Born and raised here," Lee wrote on his Facebook, "he was as Singaporean as any of us."[51]

Just chillin' with mummy. Giant panda Jia Jia gave birth to Le Le on 14 August 2021. Le Le was around six months old in this photo taken on 22 February 2022. *Courtesy of Mandai Wildlife Group.*

A Space of Many Possibilities

While it is easy to tell the story of the Singapore Zoo as one of institutional success and visionary leadership, it is also interesting and important to consider the ways ordinary Singaporeans have responded to this national institution and its animals. Although there have been other local animal attractions in Singapore at the time, like the Jurong Bird Park and the Van Kleef Aquarium, the scale of emotional excitement, affection and pride residents have displayed for the zoo and its animals is remarkable in the history of the nation-state.

Despite the fact that Ah Meng the orangutan and Inuka the polar bear were not native to Singapore, they had endeared themselves to many people in this young, unlikely nation of migrants. While the Singapore Zoo is often described as a popular tourist destination today, it is also worthwhile to remember the institution at its origins: as a space of many possibilities, where animals came to represent the aspirations and anxieties of a new nation. ♦

NOTES

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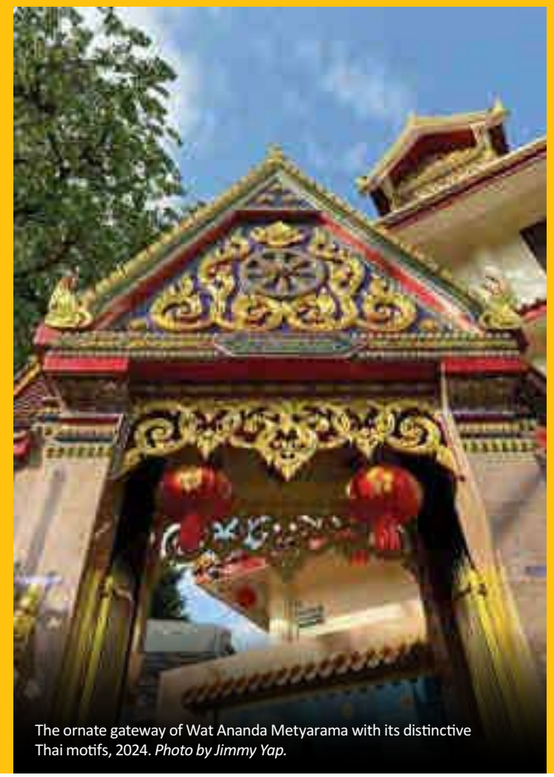
WAT ANANDA

THAI BUDDHISM WITH A SINGAPOREAN TWIST

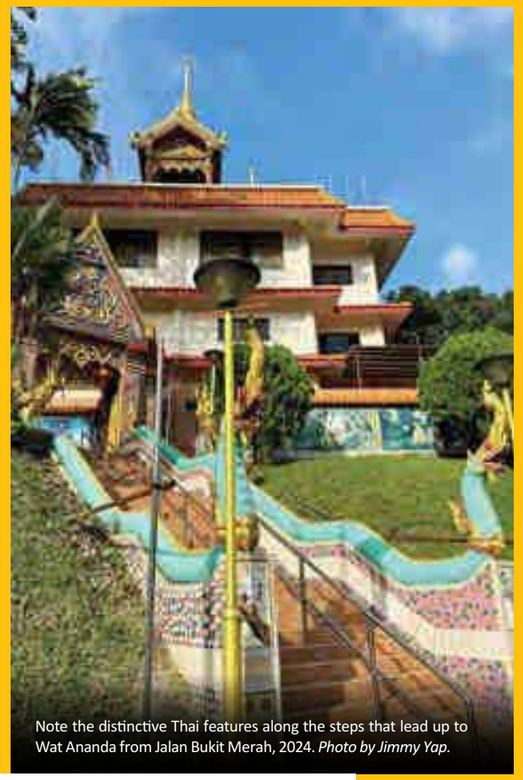
Despite the golden stupa and ornate roofs that indicate this is a Thai Buddhist temple, the Singaporean influences are not hard to spot at Wat Ananda Metyarama.

By Thammika Songkaeo

The temple as seen from the nearby flats in Bukit Merah, 2024. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*



The ornate gateway of Wat Ananda Metyarama with its distinctive Thai motifs, 2024. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*



Note the distinctive Thai features along the steps that lead up to Wat Ananda from Jalan Bukit Merah, 2024. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

On a little hill, sandwiched between Block 140 Jalan Bukit Merah to the east and the cars speeding over the Bukit Merah Flyover to the west, is a little piece of Thailand. On top of the knoll lies Wat Ananda Metyarama, Singapore's oldest Thai Buddhist temple. The temple's Thai characteristics are unmistakable. If you are approaching the temple from the entrance facing Jalan Bukit Merah, you will need to walk up the stairs whose sides are adorned with Thai motifs. At the top of the slope, you can spy a tall golden stupa perched on the roof of the building.

After you've made the 37 steps up the hill to reach the ornate gateway of Wat Ananda, a small Buddhist shrine lies on your left. Go up further and you'll arrive at the entrance of Julamee Prasat, which is described as a Theravada columbarium (Theravada Buddhism is one of three major schools of Buddhism, and the predominant school in Thailand[1]). This columbarium occupies the first floor of the building with the stupa on top. Go past the columbarium and you will be greeted by the main shrine: a large, single-storey building with gold trimmings on the roof in the distinctive Thai style.

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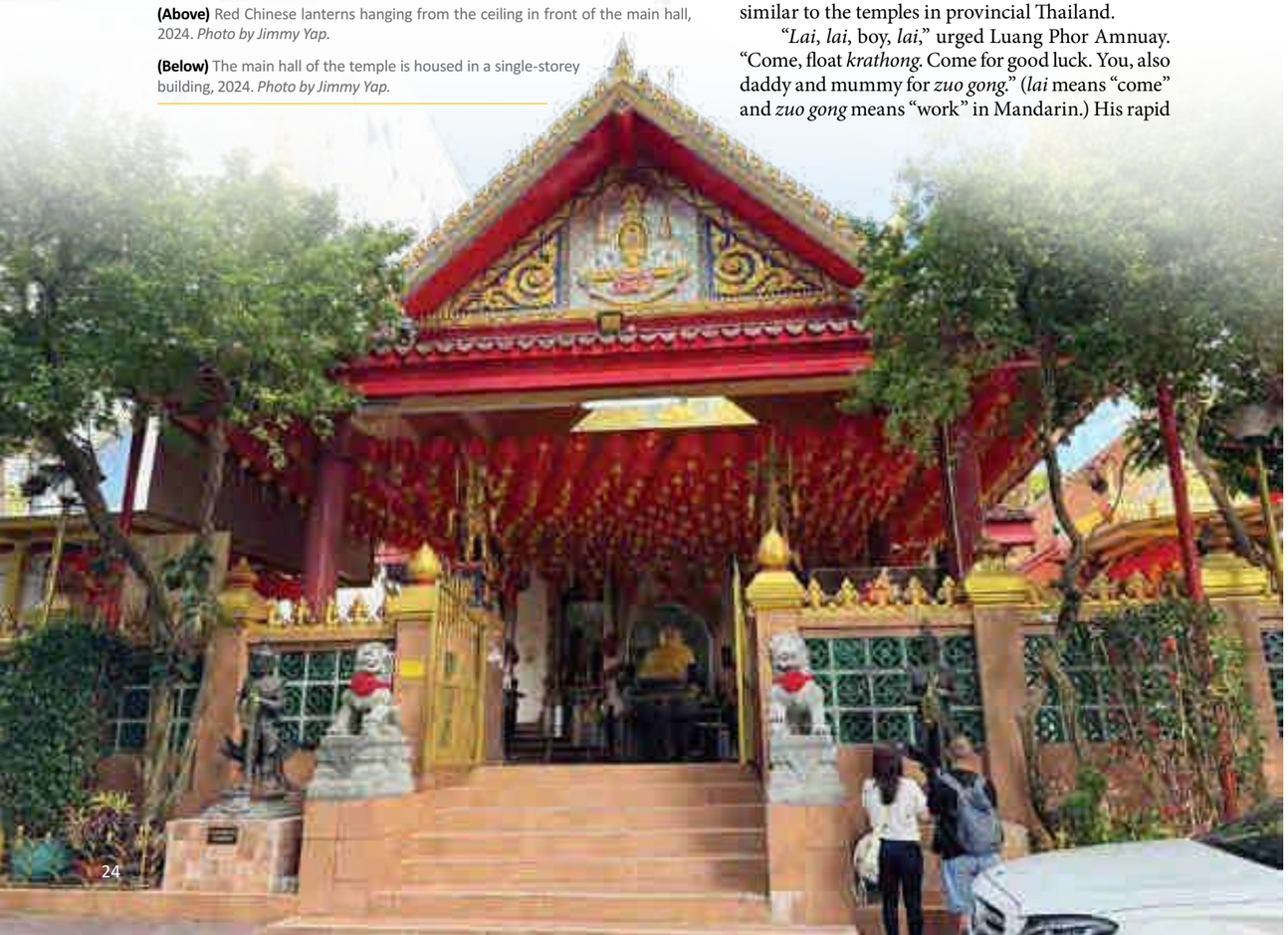
Wat Ananda has been in Singapore for more than 100 years and that time here has left its mark. All around the temple's compound are elements that would not normally be found in a Buddhist temple in Thailand. One obvious sign is the round, red Chinese lanterns that liberally adorn the ceilings in the compound.

Then there are the many statues of Guanyin, the Chinese Goddess of Mercy, that have been placed in positions of honour. A large white statue of Guanyin is the central figure in a low building to the right of the main shrine. Next to this building is a covered porch where a smaller, but still tall, golden figure of Guanyin resides, flanked by statues of two monks. Guanyin, however, is a more common feature of Mahayana Buddhism, the school of Buddhism commonly found in countries like China, Korea and Japan.

Wat Ananda may be known as a Thai temple but it definitely shows signs of being localised. Although older Thais still show up in traditional Thai costume on religious occasions, the temple has become a place for Singaporeans to get a dose of Theravada Buddhism and the Land of Smiles all at once. Even *what* the temple celebrates and *how* it celebrates those occasions have been adapted to local culture and customs, and Singaporeans' cravings for blessings.

(Above) Red Chinese lanterns hanging from the ceiling in front of the main hall, 2024. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

(Below) The main hall of the temple is housed in a single-storey building, 2024. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*



Loy Krathong

Take the festival of Loy Krathong, which is celebrated all over Thailand and usually falls in November. On the evening of the full moon in the 12th month of the Thai lunar calendar, a small *krathong* (meaning "basket" or "boat") – constructed from a slice of the trunk of the banana plant and bearing flowers, incense sticks and a lit candle – is floated on a river to honour and thank the Goddess of Water. This festival is celebrated at Wat Ananda as well, though not in a way typically done in Thailand.

At the 2023 celebration of the festival on 26 November, Luang Phor Amnuay – "Luang Phor" means "Venerable Father" and is a title for senior monks – invited visitors to buy and float *krathong* costing $20 each in a large, mustard-coloured inflatable pool. Swirling around in the pool under clear blue skies, the *krathong* felt no tug of a natural stream. This was in sharp contrast to the *krathong* in Thailand that were floated that evening under darker skies, riding on currents towards the mouth of the Chao Phraya River.

On that day, Thais visited Wat Ananda to socialise and make some merit, while Singaporeans, mostly of Chinese descent, seemed more focused on attaining better fortune by praying in front of the inflatable pool. A carnival-like atmosphere hung over Wat Ananda, similar to the temples in provincial Thailand.

"*Lai*, *lai*, boy, *lai*," urged Luang Phor Amnuay. "Come, float *krathong*. Come for good luck. You, also daddy and mummy for *zuo gong*." (*lai* means "come" and *zuo gong* means "work" in Mandarin.) His rapid

(Above) The mustard-coloured inflatable pool holding the *krathong*, 2023. *Photo by Thammika Songkaeo.*

(Right) This large white statue of Guanyin is housed in a separate building on the right of the main hall, 2024. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

mishmash of Mandarin and Singlish phrases were targeted at the Singaporeans present, and not at the Thais who were at the temple that day. Noticeably, too, he did not incorporate Thai into Sanskrit chants, knowing perhaps that Thais did not see Loy Krathong as an occasion to connect with Buddhism. On that day, the Thais in attendance could be seen dancing to traditional Thai music and cheering on heavily made-up beauty pageant contestants in the parking lot. The Thais were mainly families who wanted to show their Singapore-raised children how Loy Krathong is celebrated, as well as dating couples who floated the *krathong* for happiness and everlasting love.

The unique way that Loy Krathong is celebrated in Wat Ananda encapsulates how the temple merges both its Thai and Singaporean influences to create a final product that is neither entirely Thai nor Singaporean.

The Early Years

The temple's roots go back to the early decades of the 20th century. It was founded in 1918 by a monk, Venerable Luang Phor Hong Dhammaratano (Phra Dhammaratano Bandit).[2] Originally from Bangkok, Dhammaratano had lived in Pulau Tikus in Penang, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), India and Burma (now Myanmar), and was a polyglot proficient in Sinhalese and Mandarin.[3]

The Thai consulate offered Dhammaratano land beside the Thai Embassy, along today's Orchard Road, so that he could build a temple. But as Orchard Road was not easily accessible at the time, Dhammaratano declined as he felt that it was too far from the town centre. Instead, he decided to set it up on Silat Road in what is now the Bukit Merah area.[4] Wat Ananda Metyarama was completed in 1923, largely with the financial support of the Chinese in Singapore.

The pagoda was officially declared open by Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, the second daughter of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, on 27 June 1985. The temple continued with more additions and expansions over the years.

Even in the early years, while it clearly had Thai influences, the temple also served other Theravada Buddhists, notably Buddhists among the Ceylonese community in Singapore. According to Anne M. Blackburn, who has written about Ceylonese Buddhism in colonial Singapore, "[i]t is likely that some among Singapore['s] Ceylonese Buddhist population attended rituals at Wat Ananda during the 1920s". She noted that "Wat Ananda was located close to the Spottiswoode Park and Outram Park area of Singapore, core residential areas for the city's Ceylonese. Moreover, since Dhammaratano apparently knew Sinhala and was familiar with Ceylon's Buddhist environment

thanks to his travels, he would have been a reassuring figure to Singapore's Ceylonese Buddhists".[5]

However, due to the differences between Thai (then known as Siamese) and Sinhala Pali chanting styles, that would have "reduced somewhat the comfort offered by Dhammaratano's ritual work". As a result, the Ceylonese decided to worship at the Sakya Muni Buddha Gaya Temple instead, which had been established on Race Course Road in 1927. Chinese Buddhists, who were more likely to have been following the Mahayana style of Buddhism, began to worship at Wat Ananda,[6] importing the Mahayana culture and growing the temple's Sinification.

When Dhammaratano died in 1952, Venerable Phra Rajayankavee succeeded him as chief abbot and renovated the temple in 1953. After Venerable Chao Khun Phra Tepsiddhivides became chief abbot in 1974 (he is still the chief abbot today), he saw to the temple's expansion. In 1979, a pagoda and a three-storey residential block for monks were constructed. The pagoda was officially declared open by Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, the second daughter of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, on 27 June 1985.[7] The temple continued with more additions and expansions over the years. In 1995, the temple erected the golden statue of Guanyin in a covered porch next to the main hall. More facilities were completed in 1997, such as the three-storey building now housing the temple's office, library and columbarium.[8]

The most recent, and most noticeable, addition took place in 2014, when a five-storey extension – in the shape of a futuristic, cube-like structure – was completed for the temple's 90th anniversary. Instead of traditional Thai Buddhist style, "the temple wanted a different look to attract younger devotees," said its architect, Carl Lim of Czarl Architects. The new building houses monks' quarters, prayer halls, meditation centres, classrooms, a museum, and a dining hall.[9]

Even as the temple expanded physically, it continued to do outreach as well. In 1966, the temple established the Ananda Metyarama Buddhist Youth Circle as the first Buddhist youth circle in Singapore. In 2006, on its 40th anniversary, it was renamed Wat Ananda Youth. The majority of its activities are held in the temple. Since its inception, the youth group has organised events to help spread the tenets of Buddhism and to preserve the Thai Theravada tradition in Singapore.[10]

(Left) The statue of Venerable Luang Phor Hong Dhammaratano between the doorways leading to the main shrine, 2024. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

(Below) The futuristic cuboid five-storey extension was erected in 2014. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

Links to Thailand

Wat Ananda is not Singapore's only Thai temple, but it is possibly the most well-known one. It is the only temple outside of Thailand to be recognised by Thai royalty. In 2016, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's accession to the throne, celebrations were held at the temple on 9 June. Thongchai Chasawath, then Ambassador of Thailand to Singapore, accompanied by government officials, and family and staff of the Royal Thai Embassy, along with more than 100 Thais and foreigners in Singapore, meditated and prayed for the king at the temple.[11] When the king died later the same year on 13 October, both Thais and Singaporeans turned up at the temple on 15 October to pray for the late king. The mood was sombre as the crowd of almost 100, mostly dressed in black, clasped their hands together and chanted prayers in front of the late king's portrait.[12]

The golden statue of Buddha in the main hall is surrounded by hand-painted wall murals, 2024. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

The temple's monks themselves are also mostly from Thailand. Back in 1976, the former prime minister of Thailand, Thanom Kittikachorn, was even ordained as a Buddhist monk at the temple after being ousted from the country during the bloody student riots in 1973. He returned to the temple in February 1986 for the Nimitta Sima ceremony to lay nine 100-kilogram sacred stones to consecrate the part of the temple that can be used for the ordination of monks.[13]

Festivals and Celebrations

These Thai links do not erase the many Chinese influences one can see. The local Chinese community has been closely associated with the temple from the outset, evidenced by the large number of Chinese donor names on the walls. Due to the popularity of the temple with Chinese devotees, the temple celebrates non-Thai and also non-Buddhist festivals.

During the 2024 Lunar New Year period, for instance, monks conducted chanting sessions and after each session, wished temple-goers "新年快乐, 身体健康" (*xinnian kuaile*, *shenti jiankang*; "happy new year and good health" in Mandarin). The monks then invited those who wished to receive a *hong bao* ("red packet") to approach them. According to Chio Khee Teng, president of Wat Ananda Youth, monks at the temple give red packets to children. This is not practised in temples in Thailand though.

Then, there is the celebration of Ullambana on the 15th day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, known as the Hungry Ghost Festival in Singapore. It is called Zhong Yuan Jie (中元节) in Taoism and the Yu Lan Pen (盂兰盆) festival in Buddhism (Yu Lan Pen being a transliteration of the Sanskrit name Ullambana).[14]

Wat Ananda celebrates Buddhist festivals such as Vesak Day – which commemorates the birth, enlightenment and attainment of Nirvana of Buddha.

As the festival has its origins in the Mahayana scripture about filial piety known as the Yulanpen Sutra or Ullambana Sutra, Ullambana is not commonly observed in Thailand, where Theravada Buddhism is the official religion. At Wat Ananda, however, Ullambana is a big celebration during which devotees make donations for the monks to conduct special chanting sessions. Food items placed on altars are also offered to ancestors, and bulletin boards are covered in yellow.[15]

During Ullambana in September 2023, Luang Phor Amnuay invited devotees to write the names of their ancestors on a slip of paper and to drop this into a bowl. "But Chinese I cannot read," he nevertheless admitted, hinting perhaps that they should write the names in English so that he could include them in the chants.[16] After the chanting, the monks individually accepted red packets from worshippers.

Wat Ananda celebrates Buddhist festivals such as Vesak Day – which commemorates the birth, enlightenment and attainment of Nirvana of Buddha – and the annual Kathina Festival which celebrates the end of Vassa, an intensive three-month-long retreat for monks, in the same way as temples in Thailand do. On these occasions, the temple is packed to the brim, and those who make it to the main hall may chance upon more signs of the temple's "Singaporeanisation", if they know where to look.

Main Shrine and Temple Murals

Hand-painted murals by two Thai artists in 2015 adorn every single one of the main shrine's inner walls. At first glance, some of these seem nothing out of the ordinary as they depict Buddha's life and teachings, and his path to enlightenment. But on closer scrutiny, familiar landscapes of Singapore can be seen.

For instance, behind the huge golden statue of Buddha in the main shrine – which looms on a platform the height of a grown man – the artists have incorporated scenes of Singapore. In a mural titled "Planes of Rebirth" depicting the different possible planes of existence in which Buddhist rebirth may take place, artists have painted the famous row of Koon Seng Road shophouses in all its various hues. This scene represents human activities and human desires as depicted by the people exercising in fashionable athletic wear, and children in superhero costumes.

To the right of the houses is a large colonial-style bungalow, with luxury cars parked in front and a woman with her husband carrying a child. This reminds the viewer to reflect on materialism, which seems trivial compared to the larger meaning of life exemplified by the other characters within the scene: two little girls in hijab holding hands, a grey-haired woman in a wheelchair and an old man walking on his own with a walking stick. The life stages of birth, ageing, sickness and death, also known as the "four sufferings" in Buddhism, are conveyed in this scene against the backdrop of Singapore.

And to the right of this is the seemingly innocuous scene of people in a local *kopitiam* (coffeeshop) having a meal and drinking beer. This scene reminds us again of what Buddhism defines as a vice: alcohol. Vices, on this plane of birth, are everywhere.

Chinese-style Columbarium

In Thailand, columbaria are typically found outdoors, where the ashes are stored inside exterior temple walls encircling the main shrine. The Chinese-style columbarium in the basement of the temple's administrative office is another example of how Wat Ananda has become highly localised.

Just outside the space where rows of urns are kept is a space for ancestral tablets that are lined up in glass cases behind the statue of Ksitigarbha, the ruler of the underworld and a common deity placed among ancestral tablets in Chinese temples. In front of the statue are offerings of fruit such as persimmons and oranges, common in traditional Chinese ancestral worship. On any given day, a filial descendant may be spotted burning joss paper in a designated area near the columbarium.

(Clockwise from left) Murals depecting the row of colourful Koon Seng Road shophouses; the life stages of birth, ageing, sickness and death; and a local *kopitiam*. *Photos by Thammika Songkaeo.*

A Place for All

Wat Ananda commemorated its centenary in 2018, and its celebration lunch on 13 May was attended by then Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, along with a delegation of some 630 Buddhist monks from Asia, Europe and America who were in Singapore for a monks' conference.[17]

Today, both Thais and Singaporeans visit the temple to learn about Theravada Buddhism and participate in its activities. "I've been to Wat Ananda several times participating in religious activities, Thai cultural events and community events organised by the temple," said Panalee Choosri, a Thai resident of Singapore and Counsellor at the Royal Thai Embassy. "It made me feel that Thai temples are an integral part of the local community in Singapore, benefiting and playing a role in uplifting the spirits and developing the Singaporean society," she said.

She also noted how "Wat Ananda plays a crucial role in inviting the Thai and other ambassadors in Singapore, representing Buddhist countries such as Laos, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka, to visit the temple. This helps foster collaboration and unity among countries that follow the Buddhist faith".[18]

Choosri is not alone in seeing Wat Ananda as place for promoting religious harmony and helping the underprivileged in Singapore. In fact, the temple readily welcomes non-Buddhists to participate in its events. For instance, its regular durian parties are attended by people of various faiths, all bonded together by their love for the fruit.[19]

"The temple has a relationship with Singaporeans, encouraging cooperation and mutual understanding through activities such as banquets for the elderly. The Thais residing and working in Singapore would come to serve the food, sing and create an ambience that fosters camaraderie. Every three months, the temple organises special activities. Volunteers bring food and rice to distribute to the elderly. Volunteers write to them to ask what they need, and the temple provides the supplies according to their wishes," said Phramaha Rian Manone Yang, Assistant Chief Abbott and the temple's Honorary Secretary.[20]

Said Liow Kok Ann, a volunteer treasurer with the temple for nine years: "It is a safe spiritual space not only for the Thais but also for the local communities to come together and appreciate and explore the different aspects of Thai culture and Buddhism."[21]

The columbarium with the statute of Kṣitigarbha, the ruler of the underworld, and the ancestral tablets in glass cases, 2023. *Photo by Thammika Songkaeo.*

NOTES

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SINGAPORE'S PIONEER CARTOONISTS

(Clockwise from top left) Shamsuddin H. Akib, Liu Kang, Koeh Sia Yong, Tchang Ju Chi, Morgan Chua, Kwan Shan Mei, Dai Yin Lang and Lim Mu Hue, drawn by Koh Hong Teng. *Images reproduced from Lim Cheng Tju, Drawn to Satire: Sketches of Cartoonists in Singapore (Singapore: Pause Narratives, 2023). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 741.595957 LIM).*

Many of the early cartoonists were ideologically motivated and their drawings aimed to bring about social and political change.

By CT Lim

Most children grow up reading cartoons and comics. While many people move on to other interests, you could say that I never "grew up". The sense of wonder and excitement I felt whenever I flipped open a comic book bought with pocket money saved from skipping recess in school has never left me.

In the late 1980s, I started writing for *BigO* fanzine about music, comics and films. That led me to thinking seriously about popular culture, and how it reflected and shaped my worldview. When it came to selecting a topic for my history honours thesis at university, I wanted to do something about the political and visual culture in my own backyard – the history of political cartoons in Singapore. A few years later, I embarked on a part-time master's degree on the history of Chinese cartoons in Singapore, and I ended up writing 40,000 words on the topic while working fulltime. I would go on to curate small shows about comics and cartoons, and eventually started writing comic books (or graphic novels) myself.

About a decade ago, I wrote two articles on comics and cartoons in Singapore for this publication. In 2012, I discussed the comics drawn by Eric Khoo (*Unfortunate Lives*) and Johnny Lau (*Mr Kiasu*), and how they reflected Singaporean society in the 1980s and 1990s.[1] The second article, published a year later, was based on the exhibitions I helped curate in 2013 at the various public libraries and the National Library: the 24-Hour Comics Day Showcase and the Chinese cartoon exhibition held in conjunction with the 90th anniversary of the *Lianhe Zaobao* newspaper.[2]

This current article, however, provides a snapshot of eight pioneer cartoonists in Singapore whom I showcased in a recent book. Published in 2023, *Drawn to Satire: Sketches of Cartoonists in Singapore* features illustrations by Koh Hong Teng.[3] The eight cartoonists highlighted in the book are Morgan Chua, Dai Yin Lang, Koeh Sia Yong, Kwan Shan Mei, Lim Mu Hue, Liu Kang, Shamsuddin H. Akib and Tchang Ju Chi.

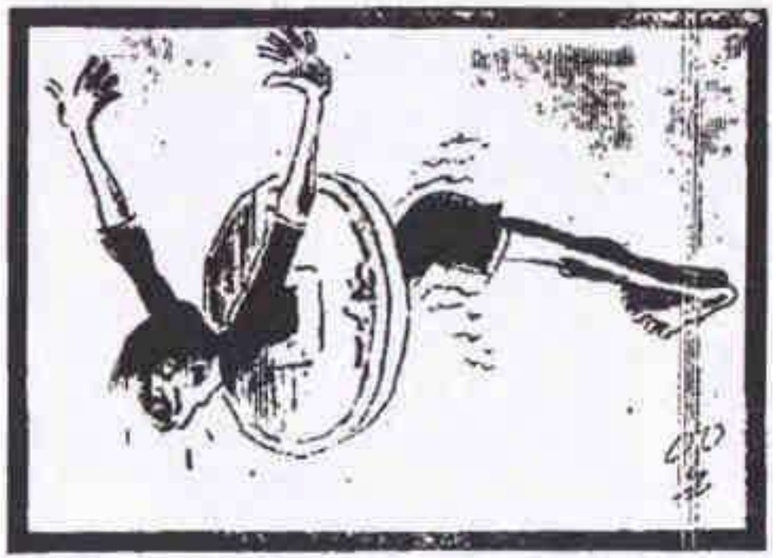
CT Lim writes about history and popular culture. His articles have appeared in the *Journal of Popular Culture* and the *International Journal of Comic Art*. He is the co-author of *The University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya: Tangled Strands of Modernity* (Amsterdam University Press/NUS Press, 2012).

I decided to write the book because unlike in other countries, the history of cartoonists and comic artists is not well documented in Singapore. For example, in conjunction with the 2024 Paris Olympics, the Centre Pompidou held a major comics exhibition titled "Comics, 1964–2024" from 29 May to 4 November this year. The closest we have had to something like this was an exhibition on the history of Singapore comics that I co-curated with Sonny Liew in 2016 at the Central Public Library. The exhibition was part of Speech Bubble, a month-long event comprising programmes such as talks and workshops to celebrate Singapore comics.

Drawn to Satire: Sketches of Cartoonists in Singapore by Lim Cheng Tju and published by Pause Narratives in 2023. *(From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 741.595957 LIM).*

While the exhibition had decent reviews and attendance, awareness of Singapore comics is still low among the public despite the popularity of foreign comics like Japanese manga. When Liew's graphic novel, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, was published in 2015 (and subsequently won three Eisner Awards in 2017), many people asked me to introduce them to Charlie Chan even though the book is a fictional biography showcasing the life and work of fictional pioneering comic artist, Charlie Chan.[4]

Other than some of my own articles, there is no book on the history of cartoonists in Singapore. When the opportunity came for me and artist Koh Hong Teng to collaborate on a book, we decided to do one on the cartooning history of



(Above) 金钱崖坠下的市民 (Ordinary Folk Suffering Under the Weight of Monetary Woes) by Tchang Ju Chi as published in *Yehui*, 20 December 1930. *Image reproduced from Yeo Mang Thong, Migration, Transmission, Localisation: Visual Art in Singapore (1886–1945) (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2019), 216. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 709. 5957 YAO).*

(Right) Liu Kang captured the brutalities committed by the Japanese against the people of Singapore during the Japanese Occupation. One of the torture methods was to tie the victim to a chair and then poke sharp pencils into the victim's ears, one pencil in each ear. *Image reproduced from Liu Kang, Chop Suey, vol. 1 (Singapore: Printed at Ngai Seong Press, 1946). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCLOS 959.5106 CHO-LK]).*

Singapore and its unknown links with the country's art history. Some people may know of artists like Liu Kang, Lim Mu Hue and Koeh Sia Yong, but not many know that they also drew cartoons.

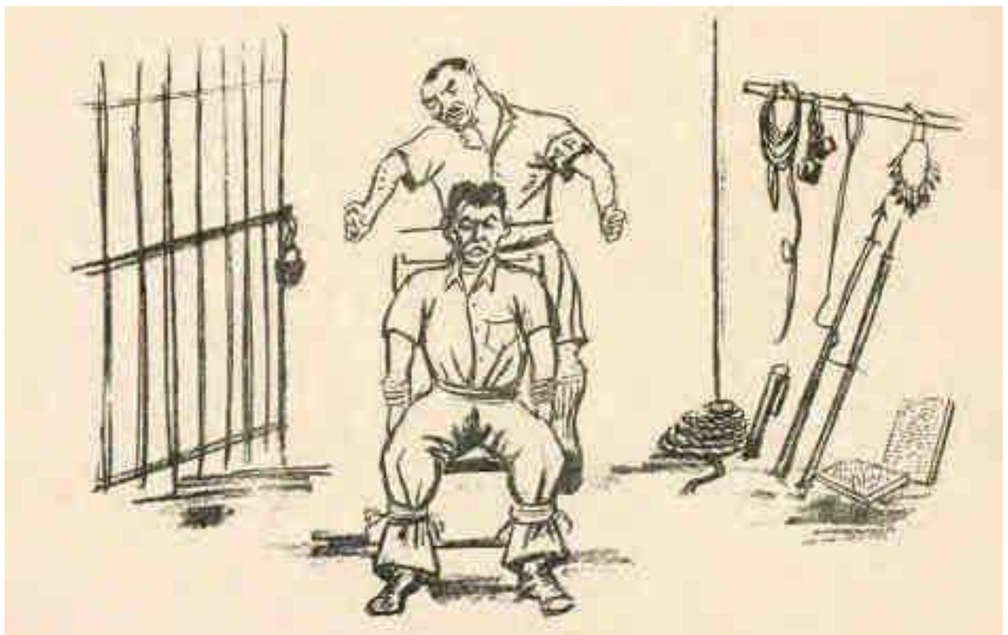
Of the eight cartoonists featured, I am personally familiar with four of them: Lim Mu Hue, Morgan Chua, Koeh Sia Yong and Sham. (I also met Liu Kang when I interviewed him.)

I first met Koeh when I interviewed him for my honours thesis in the mid-1990s, and I have enjoyed interacting with him over the years. In fact, I introduced him to Liew when the latter was researching his book, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*. Maybe Charlie Chan was modelled after Koeh.

As for Shamsuddin, I discovered his 1970s cartoons in my archival search of old microfilms of the *Straits Times* for my honours thesis. Later on, I got to know his daughter, Dahlia Shamsuddin, a librarian with the National Library Board and fellow member of the Singapore Heritage Society. She said her father was very proud that his cartoons were analysed so thoroughly in an academic article as he was just drawing the cartoons and did not think much about the meanings behind them.[5] I finally met Sham a few years ago, and he was a charmer.

I got to know Chua in 1999 when I did a small exhibition on political cartoons in Singapore featuring his works and those of Tan Huay Peng at the courtyard of the old National Library on Stamford Road. I gave a talk on that occasion and when Chua heard about it, he turned up. We went for coffee after that and became good friends, meeting many times over the years at the coffeeshop near the bus stop in front of the library. His standard order was chicken rice and *kopi-o kosong* (black coffee without sugar).

Another artist I had the honour to meet was Lim Mu Hue. From 2006, we would meet at the National Library at its new location on Victoria Street. We often dined at the cafe in the plaza outside the library as we were preparing for "Imprints of the Past: Remembering the 1966 Woodcut Show" held at the library.[6] Lim was quite a character and I enjoyed talking to him



带着光明来 (Arriving With Light) by Dai Yin Lang was published in *Nanyang Siang Pau* supplement, *Wenman Jie* (The World of Literature and Cartoons), 8 November 1936. *Image reproduced from Yeo Mang Thong, Migration, Transmission, Localisation: Visual Art in Singapore (1886–1945) (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2019), 177. From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 709. 5957 YAO).*

and visiting him at his home. When I showed the story about Lim to his daughter Sharon, she was tickled that we managed to capture his eccentric spirit.[7]

For the stories of both cartoonists (and others in the book), we adopted an approach of creative non-fiction. Most artists (and, indeed, most of us) lead similar lives – we are born, grow up, go to school, get married, have kids, grow old and die. My challenge was to find an entry point into their world, a particular incident that we can amplify to capture their spirit, their raison d'etre. We took some liberties; some things in the book might have happened, some might not have. But our aim was to tell a good story and hopefully get readers to circle back to the original cartoons and stories.

Cartooning in Singapore

Singapore's early newspapers were the first to include cartoons. The *Straits Times*, for example, featured entertainment news, local gossip and news from the metropolitan centre, as well as cartoons reprinted from London periodicals. In addition to newspapers, there were also interesting experiments like *Straits Produce*, a satirical magazine that was first published in 1868. Modelled after Britain's leading humour magazine *Punch, Straits Produce* carried cartoons, caricatures, short stories, poems and humorous essays.[8]

Vernacular newspapers began rolling off the presses in the second half of the 19th century in Singapore, but the first local Chinese and Malay cartoons only appeared in the early 20th century. (We could not find any cartoons in Tamil newspapers during this period.)

Back then, the Chinese newspapers were mainly concerned about events in China such as the anti-Qing movement, the activities of Sun Yat Sen, the 1911 Revolution, the 21 Demands on China, the May 4th Movement, the Shanghai White Terror Massacre and the Japanese incursions into China. The Chinese community in Singapore was more interested in what was happening in China than in Singapore. As such, the cartoons published in the Chinese press during this period tended to focus on events in China and were very political.

The cartoons that appeared in Malay newspapers were more social in nature and outlook. The Malay press saw its role as educating the masses, rallying the intelligentsia and being a catalyst for social change. Cartoons were part of the arsenal for raising the consciousness of the Malays, but one which was leavened with humour.

We are not saying that the eight people featured here are the very first cartoonists in Singapore or that they pioneered some kind of new cartooning technique. But they were among the early few to venture into this field or vocation, and they led interesting lives.

Cartoon Pioneers

In this day and age, we have to be careful with the words we use. Terms like "pioneer" are loaded and can be contentious, just like terms like "Nanyang artists" and "founding fathers" (some people might ask, You mean there are no founding mothers?). In this case, we are using the term "pioneer cartoonists" loosely to refer to someone who was drawing cartoons from the early 20th century up to the postwar and independence years.

We are not saying that the eight people featured here are the very first cartoonists in Singapore or that they pioneered some kind of new cartooning technique. But they were among the early few to venture into this field or vocation, and they led interesting lives. Like all lists, it is subjective and there are others we may have inadvertently left out (or some would say neglected). We welcome all feedback and we are open to being corrected.

Tchang Ju Chi (1904–42)

Tchang Ju Chi was a pioneer artist in prewar Singapore. He was born in Chao'an, Guangdong province, and settled in Singapore in 1927 where he taught art in Yeung Cheng and Tuan Mong schools. As an editor of *Xing Huang*, the weekly pictorial supplement of *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, he drew many cartoons for the newspaper. He also used cartoons in his advertising work.

Tchang drew many cartoons about local life in early 1930s Singapore. This was significant because other writers and artists who arrived in Singapore from China still focused on China in their literary and artistic works , whereas Tchang focused on the sights and flavours of the Nanyang. However, this changed when the 1937 Sino-Japanese War broke out, and the cartoons by Tchang and Dai Yin Lang became more about the war situation in China. Tchang was killed in 1942 during the Sook Ching operation in Singapore.

Dai Yin Lang (1907–85)

Born in Kuala Lumpur, Dai Yin Lang was educated in China and graduated from the Faculty of Western Art at the Shanghai Academy of Art. An activist and a communist, Dai was influential in the development of cartooning in Singapore, drawing not only cartoons but also writing many articles before World War II about the form and function of cartoons. He was deported to China by the British in 1939 for his anti-colonial views. Like many others, he suffered at the hands of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution.

Like Tchang, Dai drew about the lived experiences of the people in 1930s Singapore. Typical of the cartoons of the day, both men's cartoons had very few words as the literacy level was low in Singapore then. This is in contrast to the cartoons we see in the newspapers today which depend on captions, dialogue and wordplay. This meant the cartooning skills of Dai and Tchang had to be precise, without the use of words: 一针见血 ("to hit the nail on the head"). This is no easy task – then and even now.

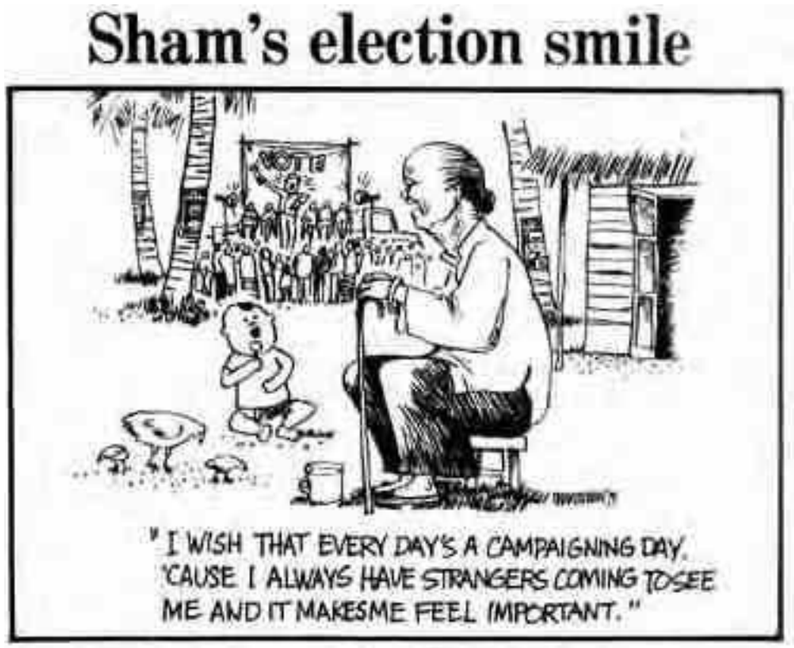
Liu Kang (1911–2004)

Liu Kang was one of the pioneers of art in Singapore. While well known as a painter, he also produced *Chop Suey* (1946), a series of comic books illustrating the atrocities committed by the Japanese against the people of Singapore during the Occupation years.[9] Although Liu never drew cartoons after that, *Chop Suey* remains an important work in the history of cartoons in Singapore.

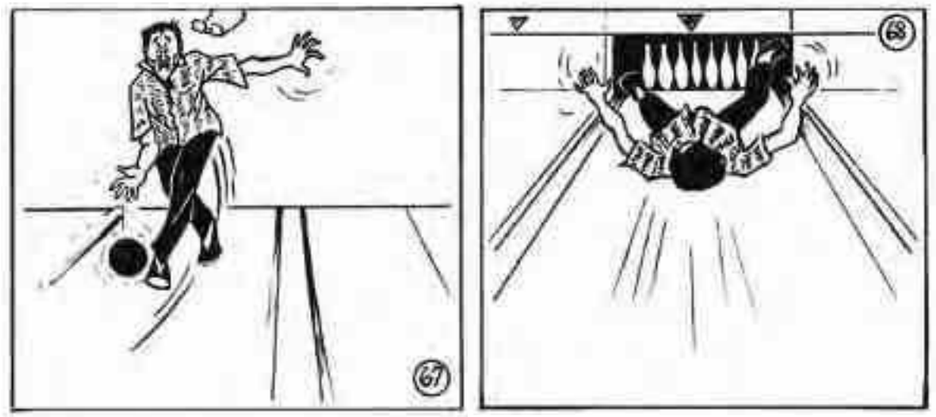
Kwan Shan Mei (1922–2012)

Born in Harbin, China, Kwan Shan Mei was one of the few female illustrators and cartoonists active in Singapore from the 1960s to 1980s. Her real name was Wong Fang Yan but she used Kwan Shan Mei as her pen name. She worked in Hong Kong in the 1950s before relocating to Singapore in the 1960s, drawing many of the textbooks of our childhood, such as the 24 readers published by the Ministry of Education as part of the Primary Pilot Project. Kwan taught at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in Singapore in the 1990s before moving to Vancouver, Canada, in 1999.

Like Sham, Kwan's style is gentler and "prettier" in terms of aesthetics, which was suited for the nation-building era of the late 1960s and 1970s when applied arts like graphic design and illustration were important in helping to develop the economy of Singapore. Her non-confrontational style ensured her a steady stream of jobs from the Educational Publications Bureau (established by the Ministry of Education in 1967 to produce affordable textbooks) in the 1970s and 1980s.



"Sham's Election Smile" by Shamsuddin H. Akib comprises cartoons reflecting the funny side of the 1979 by-election campaign. *Source: The Straits Times, 6 February 1979 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*



这下包中 (1958) by Lim Mu Hue. *Images reproduced from Lin Mu Hua, 林木化正华画集 (新加坡: 林木化, 1990). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RDTSH 759.95957 LMH).*

Shamsuddin H. Akib (1933–2024)

Shamsuddin H. Akib may not be part of the golden age of Malay comics in the 1950s, but his contributions in the fields of advertising, illustrations and cartooning are memorable. Like Tchang Ju Chi and Koeh Sia Yong, he straddled the worlds of graphic design, commercials and cartoons.

In 1962, while working as a commercial artist at Papineau Advertising, Sham submitted a mural titled "Cultural Dances of Malaysia" for a competition in which five winning designs would be selected for the new passenger terminal building at Paya Lebar Airport. Sham's mural was one of the chosen designs and it was installed on the ground floor of the airport above a row of phone booths. The mural is no longer intact today.[10]

Like Koeh, Sham drew cartoons for newspapers in the 1970s, focusing on local events (sports, elections). Instead of caricaturing politicians, Sham's cartoons took a light-hearted look at policies and everyday living.

Lim Mu Hue (1936–2008)

Lim Mu Hue has been described as the eccentric artist of the Singapore art scene in the 1970s. He once published a blank book titled 无字天书 ("Wordless Book"). But beneath the gruff exterior of a stubborn old man who loved his drinks and cigarettes lay a critical mind and generous spirit.

Lim can be considered a pioneer of conceptual art in Singapore. For one of his exhibitions in the 1970s, he took down all the works on the last day and visitors entered an empty gallery. But he was there to sign on the shirts of guests, and they became part of the artwork.

Lim's innovative approaches extended to the cartoons he drew in the 1970s: his protagonist (who is the artist himself) breaks the fourth wall constantly and makes fun of himself. He makes us laugh at his own expense, so we can learn, understand and empathise.

Koeh Sia Yong (b. 1938)

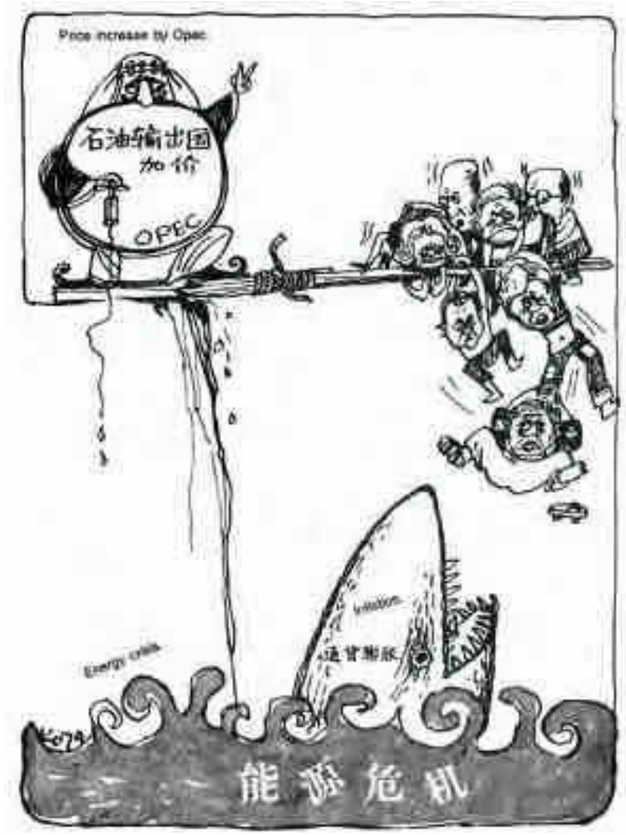
Koeh Sia Yong can be considered a second-generation artist in Singapore, but such labels are not useful as an individual is much more than the sum of the categories that museums, galleries, curators and critics choose to use on artists. Koeh is also a cartoonist, a woodcut artist and a believer of socialism in his younger days (and maybe now). He continues to draw cartoons today using his iPad.

Unlike his social realist works (woodcuts, paintings) in the 1950s and 1960s when he was a member and later the last president of the Equator Art Society, Koeh's cartoons for Chinese newspapers in the 1970s focused on foreign politics rather than local events. This illustrates the difficulty of drawing political cartoons in that decade when maintaining national consensus in the mass media was required of writers and artists.

Morgan Chua (1949–2018)

Morgan Chua was a Singaporean political cartoonist par excellence. A successor to the sharp penmanship of an earlier cartooning pioneer, Tan Huay Peng, Chua made his name at the *Singapore Herald* in the early 1970s before moving to Hong Kong to eventually take up the role of chief artist at the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. He returned to Singapore in the late 1990s and spent his last days here.

Chua was, and probably still is, the best political caricaturist we've had. His caricatures of world leaders graced many a cover of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, capturing the attention of readers in a busy newsstand and boosting sales. From Hong Kong, Chua drew cartoons about Singapore leaders from time to time. It is unfortunate that with his departure from Singapore in the 1970s, the tradition of political caricaturing was severed in Singapore, so much so that in the 1990s, the *Straits Times* had to employ cartoonists from the Philippines.[11] While we have political cartoons and comics today (especially on social media), we have never recovered the art of caricature drawing among our local cartoonists.



A cartoon about increasing oil prices by Koeh Sia Yong, 1979–80. *Image reproduced from Koh Sia Yong, A Mirror of Our Times 1979–1980: A Story in Cartoon (Singapore: K.S. Yong, 1995). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 741.595957 KOH).*

Common Threads

When we look at these artists, we can see that they share some commonalities. The cartoons of Tchang Ju Chi, Dai Yin Lang and Liu Kang focused on the Sino-Japanese War in China and the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. These pioneers drew their cartoons before or immediately after World War II.

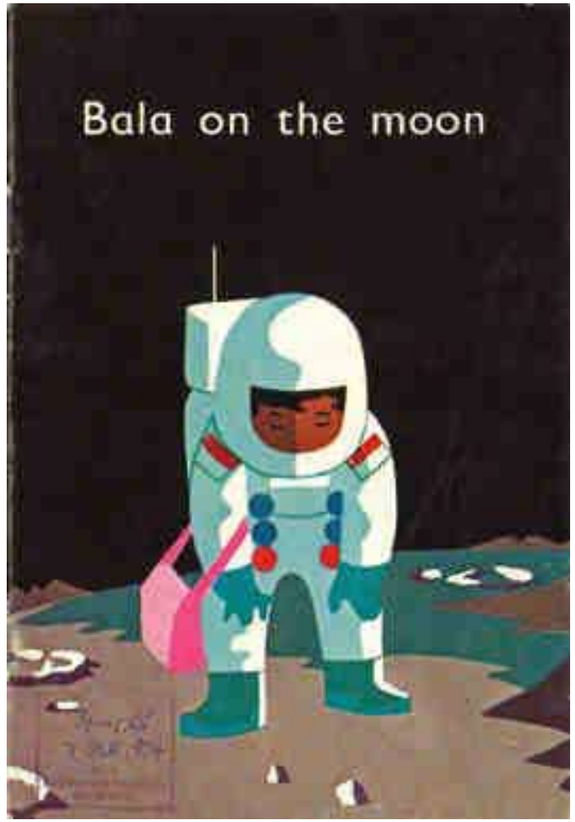
Lim Mu Hue, Koeh Sia Yong and Kwan Shan Mei were either students and/or teachers at NAFA. In the case of Kwan, she taught Koh Hong Teng, the artist of *Drawn to Satire*, in the early 1990s. Since its inception, NAFA has produced many cartoonists, including Koh and Sean Lam, a Singaporean artist known for his two-part graphic novel adaptation of *New York Times* bestselling author Larry Niven's sci-fi novel, *Ringworld*. Interestingly, the remaining two cartoonists, Shamsuddin H. Akib and Morgan Chua, had either studied at NAFA for a short while or had wanted to study there. Both Kwan and Chua worked in Hong Kong but at different times.

What other observations can we make from their life stories?

Cartooning was not a common profession back in the 1930s. That remains true today, although the situation is a little better now; currently art schools like NAFA even provide classes in cartooning. The eight cartoonists worked for newspapers, magazines and other periodicals.

Singapore did not have a dedicated cartoon magazine or comic books until the late 1970s and 1980s, though there were a few standalone issues now and then. This had to do with the state of Singapore's economy in the postwar decades. When there was no spare pocket money for youths to spend, no publishers would publish comic books. As a result, cartoons only appeared in newspapers and magazines.

Morgan Chua's illustration of Operation Snip Snip, which was launched in January 1972 to ban long hair on men. *Image reproduced from Morgan Chua, Singapore: Sketches by Morgan Chua (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2008), 76. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 959.57 CHU).*



Bala on the Moon was part of a set of 24 readers published by the Ministry of Education for the Primary Pilot Project in the early 1970s. The illustrations were provided by Kwan Shan Mei. *Image reproduced from Bala on the Moon (Singapore: Educational Publications Bureau, 1974). (From PublicationSG).*

It was only when people became more affluent that comic books emerged, such as Roger Wong's *The Valiant Pluto-man of Singapore* in 1983.[12] None of the eight cartoonists worked under such favourable conditions though; they had to contend with the constraints and limitations of the newspaper and magazine format.[13]

We can also note that while contemporary cartoonists and comic artists aim to provide entertainment for young readers, the cartoonists of earlier generations could be classified as cultural workers. Cartoonists working for the press and magazines did not just draw cartoons; they were also journalists, artists and intellectuals.

Some of the pioneer cartoonists wanted to change the world, to bring about social and political change, and to make the world a better place. Some drew cartoons to fight against Japanese aggression in the 1930s, while others used their cartoons to promote anti-colonialism. Some like Tchang lost their lives because of their work. They were more idealistic than we are.

Given the Chinese majority in Singapore, it is not surprising that most of the early cartoonists were Chinese. As a result of prevailing social norms, few women became artists, much less be engaged in cartooning. Kwan was an exception, although she was an artist first in Hong Kong before moving to Singapore in the 1960s when she was already in her early 40s.

The 1950s can be termed as the golden age of Malay comics and cartoons, and there are many more Malay cartoonists that could have been featured.[14] We only included one Malay cartoonist, Sham, in *Drawn to Satire*. Other researchers can and should continue what we have started. Today there are more women artists drawing comics and cartoons because of the popularity of manga and anime and the advent of art schools.[15] We also have more Malay and Indian comic creators.

Finally, when all is said and done, being a cartoonist is still hard. It was true in the past and it is still true today. As I wrote in the final pages of *Drawn to Satire*: "Artists and their cartoons are products of their times. Seeing their works, we learn about their lives and struggles. Their many stories and experiences add graphic shades to the story of our past. Their collective stories embodied the history and heritage of cartooning in Singapore. It is not just one story but many different stories and experiences. Cartoonists are not winners. They are only human."[16]

Cartoonists are drawn to satire. Long may they run. ♦

NOTES

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4 Sonny Liew, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2020). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 741.595957 LIE); "Review: The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye," *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, 18 September 2015, https://kyotoreview.org/review-essays/art-of-charlie-chan-hock-chye/.
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REMEMBERING *The Hawkins Road* REFUGEE CAMP

A temporary home for Vietnamese refugees for nearly two decades, the Hawkins Road camp received thousands who experienced daily life within its boundaries and around Singapore prior to resettlement.

By Rebecca Tan

Mention Hawkins Road and most people will return a blank look, even if they live in Sembawang where the now-expunged Hawkins Road was once located. However, back in the late 1970s and up until the mid-1990s, the Hawkins Road Refugee Camp was home to Vietnamese refugees in Singapore.

The camp at 25 Hawkins Road was set up in 1978, occupying the former barracks of the British Army. The fall of Saigon in 1975 had triggered a massive exodus of Vietnamese who escaped from South Vietnam. Most fled by sea and sought refuge in neighbouring countries such as Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Singapore. Referred to as the Vietnamese boat people, they numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

The entrance to Hawkins Road Refugee Camp, 1986. *Registered Tourist Guides Association of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

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Arrival in Singapore

Singapore, being a small country, did not allow all Vietnamese refugees to come ashore. "The agreement worked out with the Singapore Government is that the camp may hold up to 1,000 people, who must be out within three months," the *Straits Times* reported in October 1981. Refugees were "allowed ashore only on the condition that they have been picked up by ships flying the flag of a nation which guarantees to take them if no other nation makes an offer".[1]

At the Raffles Girls' School speech day in August 1997, then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong explained: "We could not take them into Singapore. If we did, thousands more would come, and we would have been swamped." The navy was tasked to turn them away. "We had to refuel them, provide them food and water, patch up their boats and engines as best we could, and send them back out to sea and along their way to find some other country better able to take them in." Many of the soldiers and sailors who took part in what was named Operation Thunderstorm were shaken and chastened by the experience, he said.[2]

Once a refugee was deemed eligible for the camp, a host of procedures had to be followed. Staffers from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) would proceed to the harbour. The refugees would first undergo a health examination, receive vaccinations and be sent to the hospital if needed. It could take as long as "seven hours after coming in to port" before the refugees were welcomed into the camp. Upon entry, they would receive bowls of hot noodle soup as well as welcome packs containing blankets, sleeping mats and cooking pots.[3]

"For the first few days, [the refugees] would do little but rest, eat and attempt to take in their new situation," said the *Straits Times*. Once the refugees were more rested, they underwent interviews and had their case histories and x-rays taken. They could utilise amenities like a medical and dental clinic, as well as take up vocational training or language classes offered in the camp.[4]

Among those who spent time in Singapore was Chan Tho, now 70. He stayed in the camp for about three months in 1979 when he was 26. "We finally made it, we got rescued," he recalled. "You risk your life, you make it and you say ok, I don't have to be scared anymore." He was resettled in the United States and later worked as a civil engineer in Kansas City, Missouri.[5]

For unaccompanied children, arrangements were made for them to live in special houses with others like them. Thao Dinh stayed in the camp from August 1981 to March 1982 when he was 11 years old and remembers that the house was crowded when he first entered. His father and three younger sisters escaped Vietnam separately and were sent to a refugee camp in Malaysia instead. He was eventually reunited with his family and they resettled in Australia where he worked as a business franchisee. The 53-year-old currently lives in Brisbane.[6]

Life in Singapore

As the refugees were allowed outside the camp after 12 pm each day for shopping or other recreational activities, they would visit nearby towns like Chong Pang, which took on a "bustling rhythm" reported the *Straits Times* in 1980.[7]

The many zinc-roofed shops lining both sides of the main road sold items such as French-made crockery, household products, electrical goods, apparel and luggage. "Business is always better than usual whenever there are batches of refugees leaving to resettle elsewhere," said Ah Mei, a salesgirl. Some shop owners even picked up Vietnamese and became good friends with the refugees. "I make friends with these people. When they go away to Europe, they write letters and postcards to me," she added.[8]

One shop owner kept "pictures of dinner parties held in his shophouses and family snapshots sent from Australia and other countries". He also told the *Straits Times* that he and his family of helpers had "adopted" a couple of Vietnamese girls whom they occasionally picked up from the camp to spend the day with.[9]

Excursions were specially organised for the children. Dinh recalls visiting the nearby towns, as well as beaches and churches. "I can remember taking the double-decker bus to Marsiling, Sembawang and Ang Mo Kio," he said. The children were chaperoned each time they went out, and also got to celebrate occasions like Christmas and Lunar New Year together in the camp.[10]

A house for children at the Hawkins Road Refugee Camp, 1983. *Courtesy of Kaye McArthur.*

Days in the Camp

In November 1978, a Hawkins Road camp committee was formed by the refugees themselves following a UNHCR official's suggestion. The committee comprised positions such as an overall camp leader, an internal affairs head, a head of education, a head librarian, a deputy medical officer, a head of carpentry, a chief musician and an officer in charge of films and slides.[11]

The refugees also took English language classes in the camp. The teaching volunteers concentrated on topics like "how to find jobs, what kind of atmosphere to expect in different types of work, how to handle life in the country the refugees will be resettled in, and the changes in diet, climate and clothing they will face".[12]

Gabriel Tan, a Singaporean, volunteered at the camp from 1980 to 1991. Initially he only taught English, but he later got to know the refugees better and even took them on field trips during the weekends.[13] Expatriate volunteer Kaye McArthur recalls that classes

Singaporean volunteer Gabriel Tan with some of the children at the Hawkins Road Refugee Camp, 1982. *Courtesy of Gabriel Tan*.


Dục nhân
Nhan chung
Boat people's horror mag
Writers tell of the hell they went through

Refugees at the Hawkins Road Refugee Camp produced a magazine titled *Nhan Chung* to "describe the horrific tales of escape from their motherland". *Image reproduced from "Boat People's Horror Mag," New Nation, 6 December 1979, 4. (From NewspaperSG).*

were held in makeshift buildings with dirt floors. "As a teacher you soon forgot the dust, the dirt, the insects and the feeling your clothes were sticking to you from perspiration," she said. "Any physical discomfort was overtaken by the task in hand and the refugee's extraordinary enthusiasm and appreciation."[14]

To share stories of their lives, a magazine was produced by the refugees. Titled *Nhan Chung* (Witness), 10,000 copies of the first issue came out in December 1979. It was written in Vietnamese, with English translations done by the refugees themselves.[15]

"*Nhan Chung* (Witness) comes to life with two aims – to speak out the thoughts of refugees and sentiments to those left behind," explained camp leader Nguyen Duy Tien. Le Tuyet Ngoc, who translated the articles, said that the magazine was produced with the refugees' own money.[16]

The second issue was planned for publication in early 1980, after Singapore's Ministry of Culture had given approval.[17]

While the first issue focused on the refugees' tales of escape from Vietnam, Ha Van Ky, a former high school teacher who served as the magazine's editor, planned for the second issue to contain 21 articles about the refugees' search for new homes, life in Vietnam as well as the Christmas celebration held at the camp. "How we fled from Vietnam, our encounters with sea pirates, and the experiences of Vietnamese women sold to slavery will be some of the stories told in the magazine," said Ha.[18]

The second issue was never published though. "After discussions with the Culture Ministry, it was decided that the magazine should be discontinued because the refugees were too enthusiastic about it," said UNHCR official Luise Drüke. "There were too many contributions and the volume got too big to handle."[19]

Unfulfilled Promises

The camp received multiple lease extensions before eventually closing in 1996. The original lease was extended to December 1981, and a second extension to 30 June 1982 was also approved. Although the land occupied by the camp was slated for industrial development, a third lease extension was requested. "The arrival pattern of refugees is continuing," said UNHCR representative Sashi Tharoor. "For this reason, the UNHCR felt there is still a need for the camp."[20]

Among the resettled was Nguyen Van Loc, the former South Vietnamese prime minister. Originally in a category which "disqualified him from [resettlement in] the US", his association with the South Vietnamese government was evaluated and later "accepted as grounds for his resettlement in the US".[21]

Not all refugees were so fortunate though. Some countries did not fulfil their resettlement guarantees, leading about 60 camp inhabitants to go on a hunger strike in November 1992. The refugees protested the failure of seven Western countries – the United States, Britain, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Germany – to accept them. During the strike, two men "swallowed an overdose of anti-stress pills", another man "poured kerosene down his throat", while 16 others became unconscious and were taken to Tan Tock Seng Hospital.[22]

A few months prior to the strike, a 14-year-old girl of mixed Vietnamese and American parentage attempted suicide after she was told she would have to return to Vietnam. "I cannot go back. I was treated very badly because my father was an American soldier. I have no future in Vietnam," Ngoc Nguyen Hiau told the *Straits Times*.[23]

The refugees even took their protest to the UNHCR office at International Plaza. However, despite the refugees' six-month-long protest, all the seven countries remained unmoved. They had made their resettlement promises when their economies were expected to improve, but that did not happen. Hence, they later classified the Vietnamese as "economic, and not political, refugees, and so ineligible to be resettled in their lands".[24]

Moving Out and On

The last of the refugees only left Singapore on 27 June 1996 after the UNHCR decided to shut down all camps in the region. The 99 of them were met by the police, brought to an immigration depot where they were held for two weeks, and then finally boarded a Vietnam Airlines plane at Changi Airport bound for Ho Chi Minh City.[25]

Kaye McArthur, an expatriate volunteer, teaching children English at the Hawkins Road Refugee Camp, 1981. *Courtesy of Kaye McArthur.*

Lu Cheng Yang, the Controller of Immigration, said at a press conference on the day of their departure that the refugees "had been allowed to enter Singapore because of unconditional written guarantees by seven countries to resettle them within three months of their arrival". However, these countries did not honour their commitments and so the Vietnamese were "stranded in Singapore, many since the early 1990s". He added that Singapore had worked with the UNHCR and the Vietnamese government to arrange for their return.[26]

When these refugees left for Vietnam, they had saved an average of S$3,000 each and gained other skills like the ability to speak English; one person was reported as having saved as much as S$18,000. They had been allowed to find jobs as cooks, waiters and more. Danilo Bautista, head liaison officer at the UNHCR office in Singapore, noted that the Singapore government had given each refugee US$760 (S$1,070) as a gesture of goodwill, and that they would each be given US$240 more after arriving in Ho Chi Minh City. Ultimately, the departure went without incident.[27]

The former residents of Hawkins Road Refugee Camp have resettled all over the world and they have since set up a Facebook group to exchange photos and maintain contact with one another. Some have even come back to Singapore to visit the former campsite and recall memories of life here.[28]

Interestingly, some of the former refugees have also returned to Singapore to settle down. One of these is Yen Siow, who was resettled in Australia. She relocated to Singapore in 2015 with her Singaporean husband. In August 2016, she decided to track down her Norwegian saviours and managed to contact one of them, Bernhard Oyangen, through Facebook. Siow and Oyangen met in October that same year when the latter stopped in Singapore en route to New Zealand. Siow recounted that at the reunion, she had said to him: "'Mr Bernhard, these are my children, and without your team and your captain, they wouldn't be around today'."[29]

Another former refugee now living in Singapore is Vinny Nguyen. Nguyen stayed in Hawkins Road for a month in 1981 when he was six years old. He was resettled in the United States, and after graduating from university in California, joined a multinational IT company. He was then offered a job posting to Singapore, where he met his Singaporean wife. Their two children attend local schools, and he has been living in Singapore since 2003.

Nguyen said his memories of Hawkins Road were pleasant ones. "At six or seven years old, everything's a field trip and exciting," he recalled. "I remember playing a lot, playing more than anything." He also remembers being taken on outings to places like the Singapore Zoo. "Singapore always took care of everyone well," he said.[30]

Singapore's experience taking in the Vietnamese refugees came to shape its policy regarding refugees. Speaking in Parliament in 1998, Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng said that Singapore was a small country with limited resources and could not accept anyone who claimed to be a refugee. "We would otherwise be easily overwhelmed by sheer numbers. This would lead to a grave national, social and security problem." He noted that in the past, Singapore had accepted Vietnamese refugees on the ground that a third country guaranteed to take them. However, not all these countries honoured their promise and "we were saddled with the Vietnamese refugees for a long time. We have learnt our lesson and will no longer accept any refugees even if third countries promise to resettle them".[31] ♦

Vietnamese refugees boarding a special Vietnam Airlines flight bound for Ho Chi Minh City at Changi Airport after the closure of the Hawkins Road Refugee Camp in 1996. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

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SINGAPORE'S ARMENIAN CHURCH SURVIVED CLOSE TO 180 YEARS | SINGAPORE'S ORIGINAL ARMENIAN COMMUNITY DID NOT

Never large, Singapore's Persian Armenian community barely survived the war. Then came the demographic collapse.

By Alvin Tan

The Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator as seen from the south, 2024. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

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The *Straits Times*. The Raffles Hotel. The *Vanda* Miss Joaquim. These quintessentially Singaporean icons are associated with a community here that somewhat remarkably never exceeded 100 people – the Armenians.

To be clear though, while usually referred to as Armenians, the people who arrived in Singapore in the early decades of the 19th century did not come directly from Armenia, a landlocked country bordered by Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Iran. The early migrants were, instead, descendants of a population that had been resettled from the Armenian city of Julfa to Persia (present-day Iran) in the early 16th century. These Persian Armenians later settled in India, and then migrated to Java and the Malay Peninsula. Very soon after the British East India Company established a trading post in Singapore in 1819, the Armenians from nearby places like Penang and Melaka began arriving. By 1821, three Armenians – Aristarchus Sarkies, Arratoon Sarkies of Melaka, and another – had set up firms in Singapore.[1]

Once in Singapore, the Armenians quickly established various businesses and made important contributions to society. Catchick Moses bought printing equipment from a fellow Armenian merchant who had gone bankrupt, and launched the *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce* with Robert Carr Woods, an English journalist from Bombay, in July 1845.[2] In 1887, the four Sarkies brothers – Martin, Tigran, Aviet and Arshak – leased an existing building and turned it into the Raffles Hotel, after previously establishing the Eastern and Oriental Hotel in Penang in 1884.[3] Merchant and trader Parsick Joaquim came from Madras around 1840. His daughter Agnes Joaquim cultivated the hybrid orchid *Vanda* Miss Joaquim in 1893, which was chosen as Singapore's national flower.[4]

Founding of the Armenian Church

While the Armenians were certainly astute business people, they were also very religious. Christianity had been declared Armenia's state religion in 301 and being able to worship regularly was important to the Persian Armenians in Singapore.

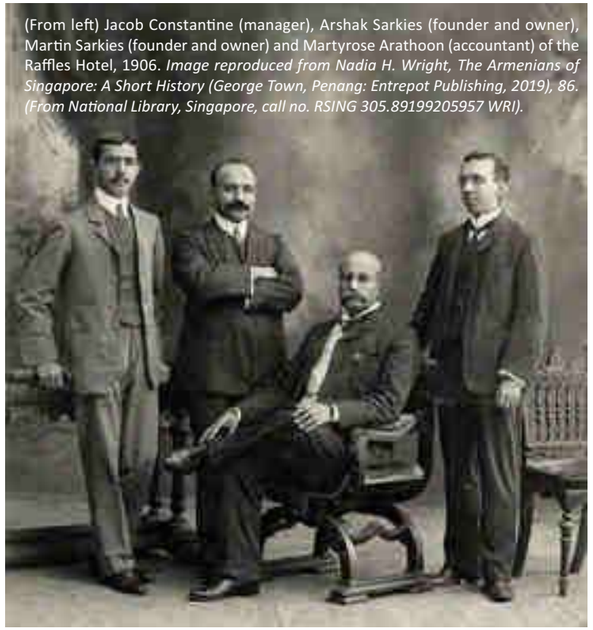
When they first came here, the small community was served by Reverend Eleazor Ingergolie, who was based in Penang but travelled down to Singapore to conduct services. However, the Armenians here eventually wanted their own resident priest and in 1825, they wrote to the Archbishop in Persia asking for a priest to be posted here.[5]

Two years later, the Reverend Gregory ter Johannes arrived and the first services were held in a backroom at John Little & Co. in Raffles Place. The services were subsequently held in a small rented room at Powell & Co. located at what was known as "the Merchant's Square". The cost of supporting the priest, renting the premises and staff wages amounted to $63 a month.[6]

A carte de visite albumen print of an Armenian by August Sachtler, 1860s. *Collection of the Family of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee.*

Eventually, though, the community wanted their own dedicated building. In 1833, they wrote to Samuel Bonham, the Resident Councillor in Singapore, for the piece of land "lying at the Botanical Gardens facing the public road called 'the Hill Street'". Approval was given in July 1834 and George D. Coleman was commissioned to design the building. The foundation stone was laid in January 1835 by the Very Reverend Thomas Gregorian, who had come from Persia for the event, and the local priest Reverend Johannes Catchick. The cost of the building came up to $5,058.30 (of which Coleman received $400 as architect and engineer.)[7]

Finally, on 26 March 1836, the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator was consecrated by Reverend Johannes.[8] In his sermon that followed the service, he told the congregation: "It now affords me uncommon pleasure to see you, brethren, assembled this morning under this roof, with joy in your hearts, because the house of God is much more fitting to worship in than our places of abode; there we enjoy bodily rest; here spiritual; as our Saviour observed – The soul is more worth than the body."[9]



(From left) Jacob Constantine (manager), Arshak Sarkies (founder and owner), Martin Sarkies (founder and owner) and Martyrose Arathoon (accountant) of the Raffles Hotel, 1906. *Image reproduced from Nadia H. Wright, The Armenians of Singapore: A Short History (George Town, Penang: Entrepot Publishing, 2019), 86. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 305.89199205957 WRI).*

Photo of Agnes Joaquim on a locket that once belonged to her, with an inscription of her name on the reverse side. She cultivated the hybrid orchid *Vanda* Miss Joaquim in 1893, which became Singapore's national flower. *Courtesy of Linda Locke.*

Galvanising the Community

The church was an important part of Armenian life in Singapore. It was where the Sunday service – known as the Divine Liturgy – was celebrated, where major feast days were observed, and where life events such as baptisms and weddings were held.

The church was also important for fostering a sense of community. Unlike the other immigrants such as the Chinese and the Indians, the Armenians tended to come to Singapore in family groups. Weekly church services would have allowed the men, their wives and their children to meet others of the same cultural and religious background on a regular basis. Friendships were formed, children grew up together and business opportunities were discussed. Run and maintained by the community and volunteers, the church was where community ties were strengthened.

Historian Nadia Wright noted that various members of the congregation raised money to pay for modifications to the roof and dome in the 1840s and 1850s: "Over the years, generous individuals further contributed to improvements and additions. For example, in 1861, Peter Seth donated the bell in the steeple, although this was not hung until the 1880s. In that same decade, Catchick Moses paid for the back porch and a new fence around the compound."[10]

However, the original dome and turret were deemed unsafe, and both were replaced by a square turret by 1847. The problem persisted, and around 1853, the turret was removed and the pitched roof replaced with a flat one.[11]

With the generous support of Seth Paul, the church and parsonage became the first church in Singapore to enjoy the comfort and convenience of electricity on 18 January 1909.[12]

Of course, the volunteers did more than build up the physical infrastructure. They were involved in other ways as well. Among her many talents, Agnes Joaquim was also skilled in needlework and she embroidered a beautiful altar cloth for the church.[13]

The tight-knit Armenian community also organised non-religious activities. The tragic events of the Armenian genocide in 1915 galvanised the community. Church trustees H.S. Arathoon and M.C. Johannes launched an appeal for funds on 16 October 1915 to relieve the plight of the Armenians. (They themselves donated $500 each.)[14]

By 1931, there were 81 Armenians in Singapore, the highest figure reported by the census. But some time after this, the numbers appeared to decline. One indication was the last full service by a resident priest in 1938, which suggests that the community was too small to support a full-time resident priest by then.

Dwindling Population

The onset of World War II and the Japanese Occupation accelerated the decline of the community. During the Occupation, 19 Armenians who were British subjects were incarcerated. Civilians were interned in Sime Road Camp, while those who served in the Singapore Volunteer Corps or Local Defence Volunteers were interned in Changi Prison.[15]

The church itself took enemy fire during the war as its grounds had been requisitioned by the British Army. When the Japanese started dropping bombs on Singapore, some fell near the church, which loosened masonry and timber while the roof of the parsonage caved in. Subsequently, the building was looted by the Japanese who removed the crystal chandeliers and carpets from the church, and furniture and paintings from the parsonage; these were never replaced.[16] During the Occupation years, the church was used by other Christian denominations – the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and Geylang Methodist Church – for their Sunday services.[17]

After the war, the population of Armenians in Singapore continued to fall as a result of emigration and as people died. In the 1947 census, which was the last to report the Armenians as a discrete category, there were just 62 of them.[18] In December 1949, Arshak C. Galstaun, a trustee for the church, told the *Straits Times* that there were only about 40 Armenians left in the community.[19]

Because of the small numbers, the community found it hard to maintain the church. Four years after the end of the war, the *Straits Times* described the church as being "in a worse way than any other house of God in Singapore. Plaster is crackling and peeling from the walls, roof timbers are falling, white ants have made such inroads on the gilded centrepiece of the ceiling that you can break off chunks, like stale bread".[20]

Official compensation for war damage was paltry and church funds had to be used for repairs. Eventually, the parsonage was repaired with personal contributions from Walter, Robert and Looleen Martin.[21]

The small numbers also made it harder to keep regular church services going. In 1953, the *Straits Budget* noted: "Walking into the Armenian Church of St Gregory, the Illuminator in Coleman Street you will find every Sunday that the altar candles are lighted and the liturgy stands open. But there is no service. At nine every morning, the Churchwarden, ex-Japanese P.O.W. Mr Joannes, reads players [sic] to the steadfast remanant [sic] of the faithful."[22]

The first Divine Liturgy to be served after the war was on 9 May 1954. It was an important moment for the Armenian community because the last time the Liturgy had been celebrated in Singapore was some 16 years earlier. "Armenians have bought a new altar cloth (the one old having rotted away). They have scrubbed the floor and whitewashed the walls," reported the *Straits Times*. "The church is fragrant with fresh flowers, candles are lighted and a choir of seven have been practising hymns unsung here since 1938."[23]

This was not the start of regular services though. In fact, the priest who came, the Surabaya-based Father Aristakes Mirzaian, was only able to be in Singapore after an Armenian woman in Surabaya established a fund to enable him to travel outside his parish to serve Armenians in the region.

Three years later, in May 1957, the *Straits Times* reported that the first Divine Liturgy in 30 years to be celebrated by a bishop would take place. Monsignor Tereniz Poladian flew in from Beirut to do so. "On Sunday, the Colony's community of about 70 will attend a long-awaited pontifical service. The church which has been renovated at the cost of about $20,000, has just been completely refurnished. A choir of eight has been practising for the past two weeks for the big occasion."[24]

A painting of the Armenian Church by John Turnbull Thomson, Government Surveyor of the Straits Settlements, 1847. *Image reproduced from John Hall-Jones, The Thomson Paintings: Mid-nineteenth Century Paintings of the Straits Settlements and Malaya (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1983), 43. (From National Library, Singapore, call no.: RSING 759.2 THO).*

Preserving the Church

Although the Armenian community in Singapore was small and the church suffered because of the lack of funds to maintain it, the church, to the Armenians, was and still is a sacred space. But from the 1950s, there was a growing sense in Singapore that the church building was not just a sacred space, but an important part of Singapore's history.

In May 1954, a local group began to advocate publicly for its conservation. The *Straits Times* reported that the "Friends of Singapore, a cultural society, plans to rescue the old Armenian Church in Coleman Street because of its historical interest. It also plans to save the house of its architect Mr. Coleman… the society will make local Armenians an offer of help in the rehabilitation of the building".[25]

The church was indeed fixed up, though apparently without using funds from outside. This meant that it was done on a relatively small budget.

The Armenian community during Bishop Thorgom Gushakian's visit to Singapore in 1917. *Image reproduced from Nadia H. Wright, The Armenians of Singapore: A Short History (George Town, Penang: Entrepot Publishing, 2019), 4. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 305.89199205957 WRI).*

Tombstones of prominent Armenians in the Memorial Garden of the Armenian Church. The parsonage is located on the right. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

The traditional Armenian *khachkar* (cross-stone) erected in 2015 to mark the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide. It is located in the Memorial Garden of the Armenian Church. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

The results of the restoration did not please everyone. In a commentary in April 1956, *Straits Times* contributor Stanley Street criticised the community's restoration efforts that had left the church, in his opinion, unrecognisable.

Street wrote: "Had they possessed the means to carry out the long-delayed repairs while still preserving the charm and irreplaceable craftsmanship that has been lost, be sure they would have done so. But the community wished to restore their church from the slender funds at their disposal. Offer from other sources to help in this endeavour were declined, and for that we must respect the Singapore community of perhaps the oldest church in Christendom."[26]

In response, Arshak C. Galstaun, the church trustee and warden, wrote that his "first reactions to the article… were violent and I have, therefore, waited a few days to simmer down and to consult my church board". He noted that the parsonage had been completely repaired through the generosity of the Armenian Martin family and that the church spent several thousand dollars about five years ago to ensure it was structurally safe. He ended his response with a strongly worded reminder to the writer. "I would impress upon Stanley Street that the Armenian Church is private and sacred. We desire to be left alone to manage our own affairs as we think fit."[27]

Yet, this view that only Armenians had a say over the church was increasingly untenable as the 1960s unfolded. In addition to being an Armenian property and a consecrated space, the state was beginning to recognise it as a heritage building with great historical value, especially to a new nation.

In 1969, it was reported that the government was looking into setting up a national monument trust to preserve buildings of historical importance and the Armenian church was on that list.[28] In 1970, the Preservation of Monuments Act was passed, and in July 1973 the Preservation of Monuments Board gazetted the church as a national monument alongside seven others.[29]

The church trustees now had to balance this status with that of a consecrated space for the practice of Armenian Christianity. It was not easy, especially since the church in the 1970s and 1980s was thinly used as the population continued to dwindle. The *Straits Times* reported in December 1978 that "the Armenian community now barely raises the required quorum of 12 at the church's annual general meeting to keep the church going as a registered society".[30]

This tension came into sharp relief following a piece written by Australian architect Peter Keys in the *Straits Times*. After a visit to the church in September 1981, he had obviously been enamoured with the buildings and the grounds, and suggested ways in which they could be used.

The grounds, he wrote, "could be opened more to the public, mainly for passive recreational uses, although the odd fete-like occurrence would not be objectionable". He also suggested that the church itself could be used for a variety of purposes. It could be "one of the central spaces for people to congregate when exploring their city, with a large model and photographs" and for "small and intimate performances of music and drama". The building, he noted, is "too entrenched in our history for its preservation and conservation to depend on a few funds and the love and care of a few dedicated Armenians". "The buildings and their grounds are for us all to enjoy and take pleasure in. As such, their use should be carefully considered," he added.[31]

Church trustee Art Baghramian pushed back against these well-meaning suggestions. "First, I would like to point out that the Armenian Church is and has always been supported and maintained solely by private sources," he wrote. "Therefore, the use of the church and its grounds is not open to public debate. Second, and more important, is the fact that though religious services are not held at the church on a regular basis, it maintains a sacred and holy place. As such, it is not maintained for profane or secular use."[32]

In the quest to maintain the church as a sacred space and also allow it to be enjoyed as part of Singapore's heritage, the church accepted a proposal from the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (now Singapore Tourism Board) in 1985 to allow the premises to be used as a wedding venue for Japanese tourists.

"Wedding bells will ring again at the Armenian church next month when visiting Japanese couples walk down the aisle as part of a newly launched holiday package for Japanese honeymooners," the *Straits Times* reported. "The couples will go through a simple ceremony at Singapore's oldest Christian church, which is celebrating its 150th anniversary this year."[33] At that point, the church served about 20 Armenians still living in Singapore.

This proved to be a short-lived engagement though. Only one such wedding eventually took place before things went awry. "Church elders objected on grounds that marriage is a serious affair and should not be treated lightly."[34] Although the *Straits Times* did not elaborate, it did report that the plan had been to allow Japanese newly-weds to tie the knot again in "mock church weddings". It was a popular custom among Japanese honeymooners to go abroad to get "married" and have photos taken in a picturesque church, even though they had already undergone a traditional wedding back in Japan.

Archbishop Haigazoun Najarian, with the Ambassador of Armenia to Singapore Serob Bejanyan beside him, and congregants at the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator, 9 June 2024. *Courtesy of the Embassy of the Republic of Armenia.*

The Last of the Armenians

By the late 1980s, the Persian Armenian community had shrunk to about a dozen people. A 1988 report by the *Straits Times* said that there were just four "pure Armenians": Mackertich Zachariah Martin, Rita Poon, Mary Christopher and Helen Metes. (It is not entirely clear what the newspaper meant by the term "pure Armenians".) At 39, Mrs Rita Poon was the youngest of the four. She had been born in Iran but married a Chinese Singaporean. In addition to the four, the paper wrote that there were about a half-dozen half-Armenians and about 20 or 30 expatriates.[35]

Helen Catchatoor Metes, the last Persian Armenian in Singapore, died in 2007. After that, what was left comprised a handful of people who only had a distant Persian Armenian connection, perhaps a last name, but who were no longer Armenian Orthodox, and who no longer spoke the language.[36]

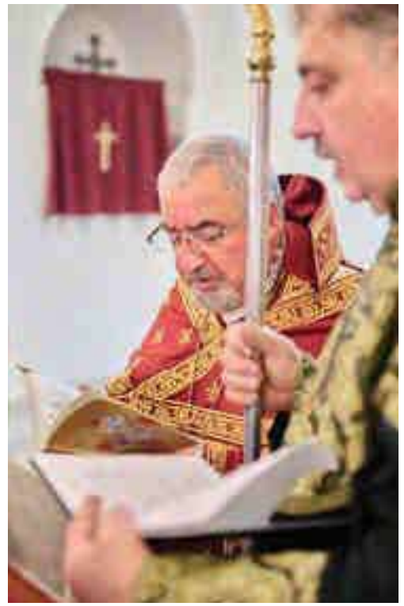
Among them was Loretta Sarkies, who was profiled in the *Straits Times* in September 2015. Then 74, she was the oldest daughter of James Arathoon Sarkies, who ran the Happy World Cabaret in the 1940s, and Mae Didier. Her granduncle was Tigran Sarkies, one of the four brothers who set up the Raffles Hotel. One of Loretta's daughters, Debra, eventually decided to change her last name from Aroozoo (Loretta had married Dutch-Eurasian civil servant Simon Aroozoo) to Sarkies at the suggestion of a visiting Armenian priest in an effort to keep the Sarkies name alive.[37]

Although the Persian Armenian community was shrinking, it was somehow able to find the funds to restore the church in the mid-1990s. The roof was waterproofed, the electrical system upgraded and the termite-infested windows replaced. The walls were also replastered and treated to prevent dampness. The building was restored in 1994, just in time for a service by visiting Armenian Orthodox Bishop, Oshagan Choloyan. According to the news report, the conservation project had been financed by the church.[38]

The restoration of the church came just in time because even though the number of Persian Armenians was getting smaller, the community of Armenian expatriates was growing. There were Americans and Australians of Armenian descent in Singapore. There were also Armenians from Armenia, especially after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. (Armenia had come under Soviet domination after World War II.)

While this influx boosted numbers, the newcomers were culturally different from long-time Singapore Armenians. For one, there was the issue of language. The newcomers, especially those from Armenia, could speak Armenian while the descendants of the Persian Armenians in Singapore could not. In an oral history interview, Jessie Sarkies, the sister of Loretta Sarkies, described how she felt left out at an event because everyone was speaking Armenian and she couldn't:

"I would say the Armenian people are nice, but they are very proud of whom they are. They are, on Saturday I found out, when I was told that I have to know to speak Armenian. Yah, and it's like there's distinction, and then I felt oh, I was so left



Archbishop Haigazoun Najarian (left) celebrating the Divine Liturgy at the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator on 9 June 2024. *Courtesy of the Armenian Church.*

A small memorial dedicated to Jessie Sarkies in the Memorial Garden of the Armenian Church. Her grandfather, Arathoon Martin Sarkies, was the cousin of the Sarkies brothers who founded Raffles Hotel. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

out after that. Because I couldn't mingle with everyone, because everyone down there all talks Armenian... So there's this distinction between me and them, because they all talk Armenian. I felt very down."[39]

The newcomers did rejuvenate the community though. In 2010, violinist Ani Umedyan and her musician husband Gevorg Sargsyan, vocalist Gayane Vardanyan and pianist Naira Mkhitaryan formed the Armenian Heritage Ensemble to bring the Armenian culture to the people in Singapore. The ensemble plays music by Armenian composers in the church four times a year.[40] In 2011, some 60 Armenians gathered to commemorate the Armenian genocide and also to celebrate Easter.[41]

At one point, according to a 2017 news report, a priest from Myanmar would come to Singapore five to six times a year to celebrate the Divine Liturgy here. In that report, Umedyan, who is also a regular church volunteer, said that when she first started worshipping at the church, there were only about 20 or so people. "Now that more expats have come, there are more people and we are happy to see the church crowded with about 40 to 50 people at each service."[42]

Another boost to the community and its profile came in May 2018 when the $1.2 million Armenian Heritage Gallery, housed in the historic parsonage building, opened.[43]

Today, there are about 100 people in the community, a quarter of whom are from Armenia while the rest are from the diaspora. While small, the community is determined to keep its culture and traditions alive.

On 27 March 2022, the Divine Liturgy resumed for the first time following Covid-19 restrictions on gatherings.[44] The Liturgy was celebrated most recently on 9 June 2024 by Archbishop Haigazoun Najarian. The Ambassador of Armenia to Singapore – Serob Bejanyan, who is based in Jakarta – attended the service.

According to church trustee Pierre Hennes, the church is now committed to the construction of a community reception hall next to the parsonage. "The hall will serve as a unique venue for community gatherings, wedding receptions, and other cultural outreach programmes hosted by the church and community," he said. Work has already begun on building this hall.

Hennes added that he saw the role of the church as being a "beacon for all Armenians and Singaporeans – whether visitors or residents – that serves as a platform to expose, maintain and advance the Armenian religion, culture and heritage". Not just a religious centre, the church was also a physical space for "connecting with each other and reinforcing the culture, highlighting our contributions to Singapore's past and present, and to be a part of the fabric of Singapore's future".[45] ♦

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Citizenship registration under the Singapore Citizenship Ordinance took place from 1957 to 1963 prior to the merger to form Malaysia. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

LAWS OF OUR LAND

Foundations of a New Nation

The Singapore Citizenship Ordinance (1957), the Women's Charter (1961) and the Employment Act (1968) are three important pieces of legislation that have shaped modern Singapore.

By Kevin Khoo, Mark Wong and Fiona Tan

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Not so long ago, the identity and legal status of Singapore citizens did not exist, wives in Singapore were not treated as equal partners in marriage, and Singapore's archaic employment laws were unsuited for a modern industrial economy. But these changed with the introduction of three laws which are featured in a refreshed exhibition by the National Library Board (NLB).

The Singapore Citizenship Ordinance (1957), the Women's Charter (1961) and the Employment Act (1968) are showcased in "Laws of Our Land: Foundations of a New Nation". The exhibition, which opened to the public on 5 July 2024, is hosted at the National Gallery Singapore, in the former Chief Justice's Chamber and Office at the Supreme Court Wing.

(Above) The Singapore Citizenship Ordinance (1957) was signed off by Governor Robert Brown Black and stamped with the seal of the coat of arms of the Colony of Singapore. *On loan from Supreme Court of Singapore.*

(Left) A poster from the 1959 Legislative Assembly General Election showing the 51 members of the first fully elected assembly. *Ministry of Culture Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Featuring 37 artefacts and reproductions, mainly from the collections of the National Archives of Singapore, National Library and Supreme Court Singapore, the exhibition examines the antecedents and significance of these three landmark legislations at the founding of independent Singapore. By examining the origins of these laws, the exhibition illuminates a pivotal period in Singapore's nation-building history, highlighting the country's transition from a British Crown colony to an independent and sovereign nation.

The Singapore Citizenship Ordinance (1957)

The Singapore Citizenship Ordinance of 1957 had its roots in the mid-19th century when the British first introduced nationality laws to Singapore that allowed migrants to be naturalised as British subjects, and for people born in British territories – such as Singapore – to automatically become British citizens regardless of ethnicity. This laid the ground for a multiethnic society to settle and develop in Singapore.

The ordinance introduced the legal status of Singapore citizens. Being a British colony, Singapore's settled population was split between the local born who were mostly Asian, British subjects and long-staying immigrants who were citizens of other countries.

While a Singaporean identity had developed over time, it was not conceived as a political identity requiring Singapore citizenship until the 1950s. Nonetheless, after the legislation was passed, a large majority of Singapore's population accepted citizenship, and through doing so, the people pledged allegiance to Singapore for the first time.[1]

The liberal terms of the ordinance permitted virtually all of Singapore's large settled, mostly Chinese, migrant population of over 220,000 (representing nearly half the adult working population) to become citizens, granting them legal and political rights – notably, voting rights in Singapore and the right to stay in Singapore – which were previously reserved for British subjects who were generally a more affluent group. The enfranchisement of the immigrants changed Singapore's politics dramatically by giving a much larger voice and voting influence to Singapore's workers.[2]

Additionally, the ordinance recognised that pluralism would be the cornerstone of the identity of Singapore's citizens. No provisions requiring British naturalisation or proficiency in English or Malay language were imposed on those registering to be Singapore citizens. Singapore's citizens would pledge a common loyalty, but communities could retain their distinctive cultural identity. Citizenship was also offered equally to both men and women, and there was no property ownership or wealth requirement to qualify for citizenship.[3]

The Singapore Citizenship Ordinance came into force in October 1957, and registration for Singapore citizenship started on 1 November. When the campaign ended on 31 January 1958, more than 320,000 people had registered to be Singapore citizens.[4] These new citizens were in addition to some 930,000 local-born persons who were automatically granted Singapore citizenship, out of a population of about 1,446,000.

The ordinance was officially repealed in 1963 and replaced by new citizenship laws under the 1963 State of Singapore Constitution.[5]

The Women's Charter (1961)

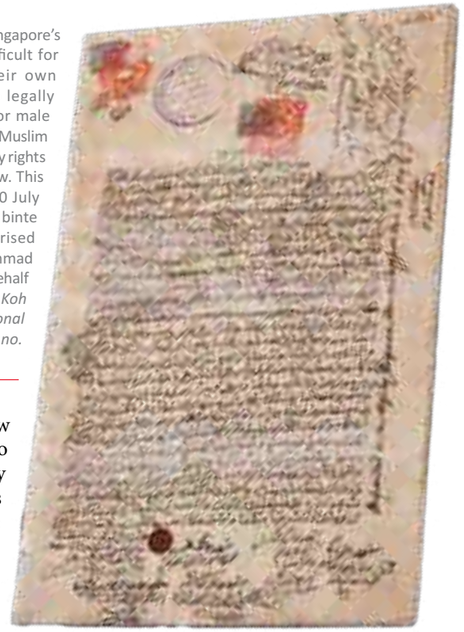
The Women's Charter, passed in 1961, was a pioneering legislation that introduced a unitary monogamous law governing civil marriages, and consolidated previous legislation pertaining to the protection of girls and women. It remains the core of non-Muslim family law in Singapore regarding civil marriages, divorces, and spousal and parental responsibilities.[6] (Muslim marriages are governed by the Administration of Muslim Law Act 1966.)

Prior to the introduction of the Women's Charter, there were diverse marriage practices governed by different laws. These included the Muslim Marriage Ordinance No. 25 of 1957, which had its roots in the Mahomedan Marriage Ordinance No. 5 of 1880; the Christian Marriage Ordinance No. 10 of 1940, which could be traced back to Ordinance No. 3 of 1880; and the Civil Marriage Ordinance No. 9 of 1940.[7]

However, all these preceding legislations addressed specific types of marriages where registration was not mandatory. This led to uncertainty in matters of inheritance and maintenance in cases of divorce, and colonial judges had to navigate between local customs and colonial law when such disputes were brought to the courts.

In the 1950s, there were increasing calls from the public for greater protection of women, the wider participation of women in public spheres, as well as the enactment of a monogamous marriage law. These efforts were largely led by the Singapore Council of Women, and in 1953, the council drafted the Prevention of Bigamous Marriages Bill, which was distributed to the Legislative Assembly.[8]

However, these efforts faced resistance from the Chinese, Malay and Indian communities who were concerned about the validity of existing polygamous marriages. They also saw the bill as a challenge to the practice adopted by the colonial authorities in avoiding interference with local customs and religious laws. It was only when the People's Action Party came into power in 1959 that a legislation for monogamous marriages became possible.[9]



The patriarchal structure of Singapore's colonial society made it difficult for women to administer their own property, and they had to legally depend on their husbands or male relatives. This applied even to Muslim women who retained property rights in marriage under Muslim law. This power of attorney, dated 20 July 1906, was created by Slamah binte Abdulla Albali and it authorised Omar bin Hadi bin Ali bin Ahmad Altui Baslamah to act on her behalf and administer her property. *Koh Seow Chuan Collection, National Library, Singapore (accession no. B26057119I).*

The introduction of the Women's Charter Bill in the Legislative Assembly in March 1960 had the support of both the ruling party and opposition members.[10] However, specific clauses in the bill were debated intensely in the Assembly and the bill passed through two Select Committees and some redrafting before the act came into force on 15 September 1961.[11]

While the clauses relating to marriages in the Women's Charter did not apply to Muslim marriages, which were governed by Muslim law, the increased public debates on protecting women's welfare in polygamous marriages also led to gradual reforms. These included the establishment of a Syariah Court in 1958, which was empowered to settle disputes relating to Muslim marriages, divorces, separation and payment of alimony. The Muslims (Amendment) Ordinance, 1960 (No. 40 of 1960) required a man who sought to marry another wife to seek the Chief Kathi's consent.[12]

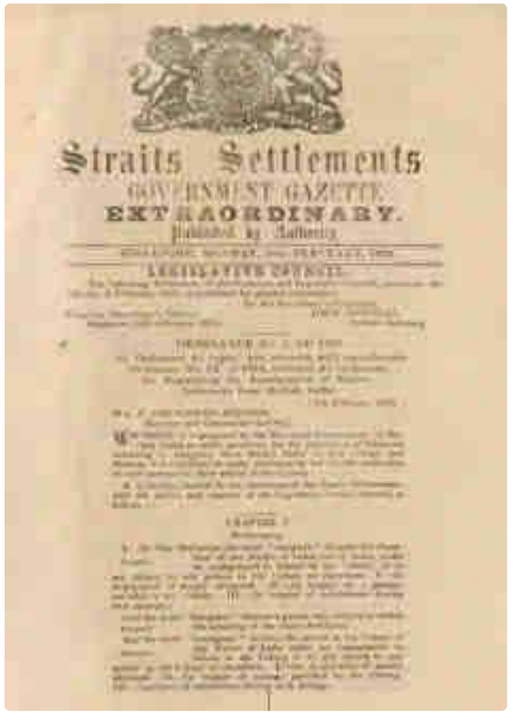
The traditional Chinese practice of buying and selling young girls as child brides is documented in this indenture dated 8 September 1939. It stipulates the parties to the betrothal and the matchmaker, and states that the female child was handed over to the contracting family for a dowry of $88. Such a customary contract was drawn up to bind both parties to the betrothal until the girl reached puberty. *Tan Boon Chong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Further protection for Muslim women came in the Administration of Muslim Law Act of 1966, which gave women the right to demand maintenance from their husbands even in irrevocable divorces.[13]

In addition to being a foundational law governing non-Muslim marriages, the Women's Charter also incorporated other pre-existing laws that covered the protection of women and girls. These had a long and varied legislative history, tracing back to the Women and Girls' Protection Ordinance of 1887, which had been introduced by the colonial authorities to regulate prostitution and trading of underaged girls.[14]

Some of the displays in the exhibition highlight such laws targeted at the protection of girls and women. These include the 1932 Mui Tsai Ordinance that prohibited the buying of young Chinese girls as domestic servants, known as *mui-tsai*, or "little sister" in Cantonese.[15]

As the only legislation in Singapore statutes that has the word "Charter" in its title, the Women's Charter symbolised the new nation's commitment to gender equality. It has undergone numerous amendments over the decades, with the latest amendment taking effect on 1 July 2024, allowing divorce by mutual agreement.



(Above) The Indian Immigrants' Protection Ordinance of 1876 saw the appointment of a Protector of Immigrants. It stipulated forms of labour contracts and regulated who could come to Singapore from India to work. *Collection of the National Library, Singapore (accession no. B02969451B).*

(Right) The Shop Assistants Employment Ordinance of 1957 established statutory rights for this large group of workers who had been excluded from the Labour Ordinance of 1955. This handbook was published to help employers and employees navigate the new laws, including requirements such as the closure of shops to give workers a weekly rest day and standardising the number of hours in a work week. *Francis Thomas Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

The Employment Act (1968)

The Employment Act, which came into force on 15 August 1968, modernised Singapore's labour laws to meet the needs of the new industrial economy and remains Singapore's main labour law regulating the basic terms and working conditions for employees today. It consolidated various labour laws and served as the basis of employer-employee relations in the newly independent nation. The act also standardised the terms of employment of workers in Singapore across different trades and industries.

After the British East India Company established a trading post in Singapore in 1819, many people from the region – initially, mainly young men – came to Singapore in search of work opportunities. They arrived as indentured labourers, or coolies, recruited through agents in their home countries. Because of the upfront costs to travel here – transport, agent fees, and consumables like food and lodging – they began their journey in debt.

Many labourers were deceived about their work terms and were mistreated. Work conditions were harsh, living conditions were deplorable, and they faced exploitation and even violence. This situation required state intervention, and labour laws were enacted to regulate and protect workers. Over time, many different labour laws were created.

The early laws were specific to different ethnic communities. The Indian Immigrants' Protection Ordinance of 1876 dealt only with Indian workers. This law allowed Indian migrants below 45 years old and in good health to come here for work. Similarly, the Chinese Immigrants Ordinance of 1877 sought to regulate and protect Chinese immigrants through the establishment of the Chinese Protectorate.[16] The legislation also required Chinese immigrants to land at designated ports and depots where they were screened to ensure their fare had been paid. Following this, an official would examine the terms of any labour agreements the immigrant had made before they were allowed to leave the depot.

The Trade Unions Ordinance of 1940 formalised the establishment of trade unions, with the aim to foster better relations between employers and employees.[17] The labour movement, intertwined with political shifts, gained momentum after the Japanese Occupation, with unions advocating for both workers' rights and political causes.

The Employment Act was introduced to respond to specific challenges faced by the new nation. The biggest factor was the economic fallout from the planned British military withdrawal in 1971, which would place at least 21,000 local jobs at stake and lead to an estimated $450 million (around 14 percent of gross domestic product) loss in annual spending by British military personnel.[18]

The Singapore Traction Company Employees' Union newsletter, *Suara* (Malay for "Voice"), featured content in English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. The STC operated the tram, trolleybus and motor bus services in Singapore from 1925 to 1971. In 1955, STC bus workers carried out what became the longest strike in postwar Singapore, lasting 142 days. This was the culmination of union demands since the late 1930s. *Collection of the National Library, Singapore (accession no. B29005361D).*

Another factor was the toll on the economy resulting from frequent strikes starting from the 1950s. In 1961 alone, there were 116 recorded strikes involving 43,584 workers and causing the loss of 410,889 workdays.[19]

With the Employment Act, the government aimed to balance employer and employee rights. Employees enjoyed standardised work conditions like fixed working hours, rest days and holidays, while employers were protected by the reduction of excessive overtime claims. Despite criticisms at the time, the act fostered industrial harmony and supported Singapore's economic growth. Between 1968 and 1972, Singapore's gross domestic product grew by an average of 13.4 percent.[20]

The Employment Act has since undergone a number of revisions and amendments, with the most recent 2020 Revised Edition taking effect on 31 December 2021. ♦

DISPLAYING SINGAPORE'S LEGAL HISTORIES THROUGH COLLECTIONS OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND NATIONAL LIBRARY

The collections of the National Archives of Singapore and National Library originate from government and authoritative sources. The curators – Kevin Khoo, Mark Wong and Fiona Tan – were mindful to present a balanced narrative, and to include personal documents like marriage certificates and identity cards, as well as oral history interviews and audiovisual recordings, so that people's voices and personal stories could be heard. In addition to physical displays, the exhibition features several multimedia interactives, including augmented reality experiences, where visitors can interact with composite characters inspired by historical sources.

The exhibition will enable visitors to develop a new appreciation for Singapore's legal history, and take a deeper dive into the topic by perusing other related materials at the National Archives and National Library.

NOTES

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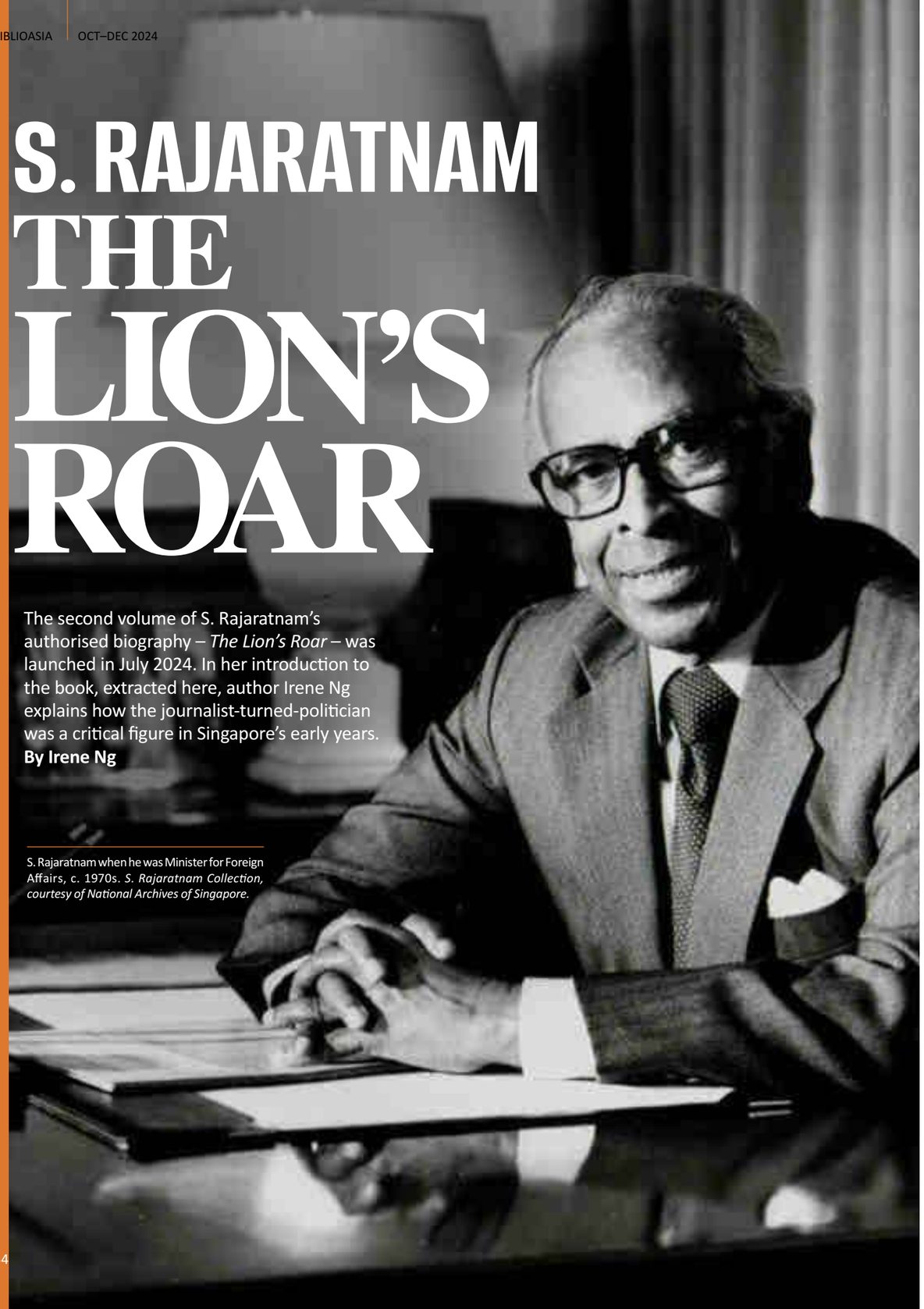
S. RAJARATNAM THE LION'S ROAR

The second volume of S. Rajaratnam's authorised biography – *The Lion's Roar* – was launched in July 2024. In her introduction to the book, extracted here, author Irene Ng explains how the journalist-turned-politician was a critical figure in Singapore's early years.

By Irene Ng



S. Rajaratnam when he was Minister for Foreign Affairs, c. 1970s. *S. Rajaratnam Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Irene Ng is the authorised biographer of S. Rajaratnam and Writer-in-Residence at the Institute of ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. She was formerly an award-winning senior political correspondent and a Member of Parliament in Singapore.

"You can make the tomorrow you want, provided you have the wisdom, the guts and the will to struggle for it." This sentence captures in a nutshell the guiding philosophy of S. Rajaratnam, who stands out among the founding leaders of Singapore as its chief national ideologue and foreign policy strategist.

This philosophy, with its emphasis on the future and the power of the human spirit, had been a basic premise of his political ideology long before he entered politics in 1959, and even longer before Singapore became independent in 1965. It was a dictum that was put to the test in his own eventful life. As a founding leader of the People's Action Party (PAP) who went on to hold multiple key ministerial portfolios, he lived out his faith in unfathomable circumstances. Heartbreak, anxiety and despair hovered constantly over his attempts to overcome them.

Yet, his guiding belief in the power of the human will did not come naturally to him; neither did it come easily. Born on 25 February 1915 in Jaffna, Ceylon, he was a child of the colonial era, when Ceylon, India, Malaya and large swathes of the world were part of the British Empire. He was also a child of several identities not of his own making. In his original birth certificate, his name was registered in Tamil script as Rajendram (which can mean "God among Kings" in Sanskrit), thanks to his maternal grandfather in Ceylon. That changed after he turned six months old – his mother, Annammah, brought him to Seremban, Malaya, to join his father, Sinnathamby, a supervisor in a rubber estate. There, his devout Hindu parents consulted the family priest and astrologer, and renamed him Rajaratnam ("Jewel among Kings").

In the rubber estate, Raja, as he was usually called, found himself the latest addition to the generations of Jaffna Tamil immigrants who had settled in the area. He grew up in an environment in which blood relations, tradition and tribe largely defined one's world. His religious elders believed that one's destiny was written in the stars, that one's fate was determined at birth, by one's horoscope, and could not be fully escaped. From young, he watched them consult the astrologer on anything and everything – be it choosing a marriage partner, starting a new job, or even determining an auspicious time to leave their house in the morning.

My first volume of Raja's biography, *The Singapore Lion*, describes how he struggled with this fundamental notion as a young man; how he had his political awakening in London as a law student in King's College from 1935, flirted with Marxist theory and found his gift as a writer as well as love with a Hungarian woman, Piroska Feher. It also relates how the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 changed everything for him. His real university was not King's College, from which he dropped out in 1940, but war-time Britain, where he learnt that politics was literally a matter of life and death.

A young S. Rajaratnam, c. 1930s. *S. Rajaratnam Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

S. Rajaratnam outside his flat in London. *Image reproduced from Irene Ng, The Singapore Lion: A Biography of S. Rajaratnam (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010). (From National Library of Singapore, call no. RSING 327.59570092 NG).*

(Above) S. Rajaratnam and wife Piroska in London, 1943–47. *S. Rajaratnam Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Top right) (From left) Dennis Bloodworth, Mrs Bloodworth née Liang Ching Ping, Mrs Piroska Rajaratnam and Mrs Wee Kim Wee relaxing after dinner at the home of Senior Minister S. Rajaratnam at Chancery Lane. *S. Rajaratnam Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

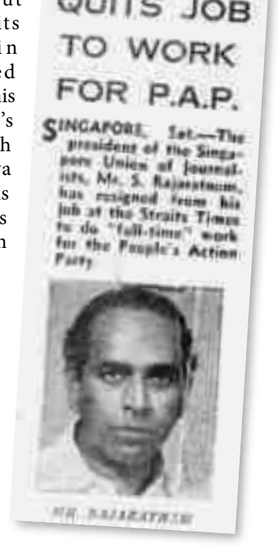
At the age of 32, Raja returned to Malaya in 1947 with his new wife, Piroska, and a resolve to shape his own fate as well as that of his country, Malaya, of which Singapore was an inextricable part. He had found his calling: to fight for independence for his own country, and to usher in the post-colonial society to come.

He became a journalist, using the power of words and ideas to stir people to action and to bring about change. His main vehicles were English-language newspapers the *Malaya Tribune* and the *Tiger Standard*, also known as the *Singapore Standard*.

His byline became a force in national politics as he crusaded against colonialism, communism and communalism. Besides writing for local radio and newspapers – which in those days were circulated in both Malaya and Singapore – he also worked as a stringer for foreign news agencies such as the London Observer News Service, the Pan-Asia Newspaper Alliance and *JANA: The News Magazine of Resurgent Asia and Africa*.

Raja fought for more than a decade for the independence of his people in Malaya. They had been dominated, divided and exploited by the British for more than a century, and he rebelled against this. In 1954, together with his anti-colonial allies, he formed the left-wing PAP, led by Lee Kuan Yew.

When the British gave Malaya – but not Singapore – its independence in 1957, he mounted another struggle – this time for Singapore's independence through merger with Malaya to form Malaysia. His entrance to politics was announced in a five-paragraph article in the *Sunday Times* on 29 March 1959. Headlined "Newsman Quits Job to Work for PAP", it told readers simply that Raja, 44, the president of the Singapore Union of Journalists, had resigned from his job at the *Straits Times* to do "full-time" work for the PAP.


NEWSMAN QUITS JOB TO WORK FOR P.A.P.

SINGAPORE, Sat.—The president of the Singapore Union of Journalists, Mr. S. Rajaratnam, has resigned from his job at the Straits Times to do "full-time" work for the People's Action Party.

MR. RAJARATNAM

(Above) S. Rajaratnam resigned from his job at the *Straits Times* to work full-time for the People's Action Party. *Source: The Straits Times, 29 March 1959 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

(Left) S. Rajaratnam speaking at an election mass rally in Chinatown on 26 April 1959. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

When the PAP swept to power in self-governing Singapore in 1959, Raja, who became the country's first culture minister, stood out even among the most ideological leaders driving the merger campaign. He had long imagined Singapore and Malaya as one entity, as one "nation in the making" – to use the title of his 1957 radio play – and had considered their eventual union as necessary, if not inevitable. He was elated when the union finally materialised in 1963.

For Raja, at least at that point, nothing was more important than building a united Malaysia, where people of all races would be equal. That was his big dream, his lodestar. His abhorrence of colonialism, of the exploitation of man by man, of racial discrimination and prejudice, had a moral rather than a political motivation.

The Singapore Lion ended with the merger in 1963, with a glimpse of the troubles to come. This second volume, *The Lion's Roar*, covers the period from Singapore's merger with Malaya to form Malaysia in 1963, to his death in 2006.

It traces Raja's crusade for a "Malaysian Malaysia" during the merger years, and its tragic end. It charts his subsequent odyssey to fight for Singapore's survival as an independent country and to create the national ideology of a country born in turbulent times. It reveals the mistakes made along the way – from inexperience, miscalculation and sheer desperation – and the efforts to overcome the dramatic reversals that threatened to destroy his dreams.

Raja came from a special generation of Singapore leaders – larger than life, tough, brilliant, complex people. Forged in life-and-death battles, they shared a fierce drive to succeed.

Besides Raja, the core leaders of the first-generation Cabinet were Lee, the country's prime minister; Goh Keng Swee, the finance minister; and Toh Chin Chye, the deputy prime minister. While there were other ministers pulling their weight, it was essentially these key leaders who made the critical decisions that decided Singapore's fate at its most vulnerable moments.

S. Rajaratnam, then Culture Minister, flanked by Yang di-Pertuan Negara Yusof Ishak (right) and Lee Khoon Choy, Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Culture, at the opening of the National Library on 12 November 1960. *Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

But Raja had some qualities that set him apart. The depth of his convictions, the breadth of his interests, and the length of his vision made him an exceptional figure, as did the power of his prose and polemics. But he had something more than that – an almost limitless imagination paired with fearless audacity. It was these qualities that helped to infuse his dispirited colleagues, including Lee, and a doubting nation with a sense of optimism and self-confidence in the most dire hours of independence, when they did not know whether Singapore was going to survive.

Of all the varied chapters in Raja's tumultuous life, the story of his struggle for a Malaysian Malaysia, and then a Singaporean Singapore, is one of the most insightful in terms of the clues it provides into his character and motivations.

Raja's abiding vision was to build a progressive society that was just and fair, and that provided equal opportunities and rights for all, regardless of their race, language or religion. "Regardless of race, language or religion" had long been his leitmotif. By this he meant creating a new social and political order in which these factors did not enter into the country's economic and political calculations.

It counts as one of his most powerful ideas. It became his signature, his lifelong obsession. It was encapsulated in the Singapore Pledge, which he drafted

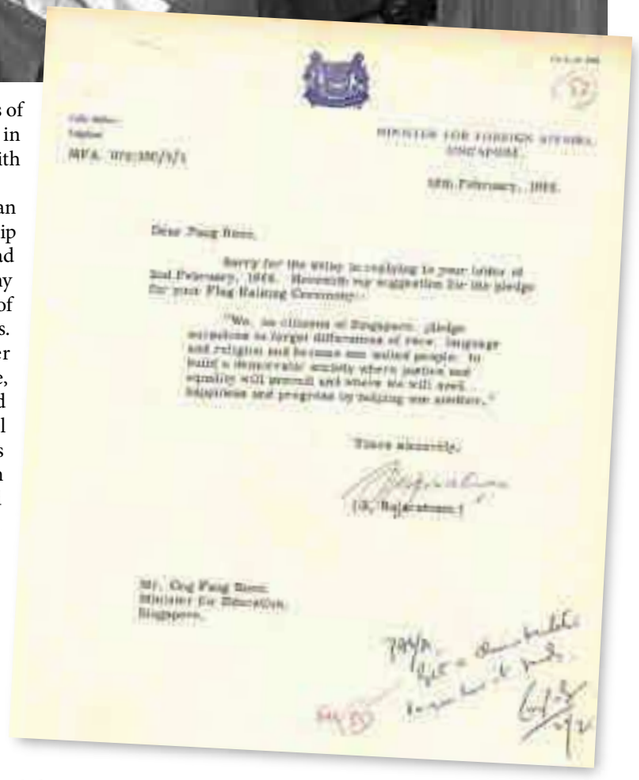
Then Foreign Affairs Minister S. Rajaratnam (extreme left) at a parliamentary session in 1967. To his left is Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

in 1966. Among the founding fathers of Singapore, he occupies a special place in its history for pursuing this vision with a high heart.

His politics, however, came with an equally high price of personal hardship and pain. Like most visionaries ahead of their time, he found himself in many instances having to face the agonies of shattered hopes and unfulfilled dreams.

But unlike some others, after every obstruction, every catastrophe, Raja somehow reinvented himself and revivified his dreams. With his genial smile and contagious optimism, he was buoyed by the unshakeable conviction that someday, all that he had struggled for would come to fruition, even if it might not be in his lifetime.

Certainly, he was not alone in his desire to build a non-communal and meritocratic Singapore that was open to the world – a Singaporean Singapore, as he called it. But, more than anyone else in the early decades of Singapore's evolution, he became its symbol and its spokesman. Yet he was not typical of the times, nor was he the archetype of Singapore's national character – for that, too, was still a work in progress. What Raja was, was the *essential* Singaporean.



MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS
SINGAPORE

18th February, 1966.

Dear Pang Boon,

Sorry for the delay in replying to your letter of 2nd February, 1966. Herewith my suggestion for the pledge for your Flag Raising Ceremonies:-

"We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves to forget differences of race, language and religion and become one united people: to build a democratic society where justice and equality will prevail and where we will seek happiness and progress by helping one another."

Yours sincerely,

(S. Rajaratnam)

Mr. Ong Pang Boon
Minister for Education
Singapore.

S. Rajaratnam's letter to Minister for Education Ong Pang Boon, dated 18 February 1966, suggesting the text for the pledge at school flag-raising ceremonies. *Ministry of Education Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

It might seem strange that such a person – a Jaffna Tamil born in Ceylon and raised in Seremban, a university dropout who spent 12 years in London mixing with progressive Afro-Asian writers and radical thinkers – should have come to embody this. I would argue the opposite: only by standing outside of the conventional concepts that made up Singapore then, could someone reimagine and remake Singapore, as Raja sought to do.

As this book shows, only a man with his set of experiences, interests and ideas could have envisioned Singapore transforming into a "global city" at a time when Lee was talking about building a "metropolis".

If anyone deserved the mantle of "Singapore's philosopher king", it was Raja. He was a man of ideas and action who combined moral philosophy with political power. A deeply philosophical thinker, he was equally at ease pontificating about the ills of a wealth-driven culture, ethnocentrism and xenophobia, as he was about the cures to the diseases that plague dysfunctional democracies and the international order.

As Singapore's first and longest-serving foreign minister, Raja also came to embody another aspect of Singapore – its distinctive views of the city-state's place in the world and of the role of small states in international relations.

His efforts to secure Singapore's sovereignty on the international stage set the direction for the vulnerable city-state's foreign policy and its approach to international relations for generations to come. He also played an important role in the defining events that shaped the region – the Indonesian Confrontation in the 1960s, the British military withdrawal in the early 1970s, and Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea (present-day Cambodia) in 1978. His work makes him a significant figure in the history of Southeast Asia.

At each step of his perilous journey, Raja found himself having to face unexpected dangers and to make critical decisions – some particularly contentious – that would decide the country's fate. My account of the early years of Singapore's independence reveals how powerfully "the past" sought to reassert itself, and how dreadful were the dilemmas which confronted the brave souls who took it upon themselves to represent the future. Far-sighted, patient and persistent, Raja forged alliances, sustained the spirits of those around him, and translated the meaning of their struggle into words of force on the international stage.

One would be hard put to invent a foreign minister who could have better guided Singapore's foreign policy through the dark days following its independence.

There was another vital role he played at a turning point in Singapore's history, a role which hitherto has been grossly underappreciated. It was his leadership as labour minister during another time of peril – the accelerated British withdrawal in the late 1960s to early 1970s. Raja oversaw the most far-reaching labour reform in the nation's history and, by doing so, ushered in a new era of industrial relations. He was the political linchpin of a new deal that laid the foundation for a unique tripartite alliance between unions, employers and the government – a system that would prove to be a key competitive advantage for Singapore.

Raja's story is thus one of trials and also of the triumph of the human spirit. Above all, it is a story of a faith in Singapore – or at least his idea of Singapore – a faith that he clung to until the end.

This is why the dictum in the epigraph to this introduction lurks behind almost every story in this book, even those stories that may not, at first glance, seem to have anything to do with it. Running through all of Raja's struggles was the common factor of faith: faith not in any god, but in man's ability to imagine, to create, and to overcome.

That said, Raja did not work alone. And his life, and indeed Singapore itself, would have turned out very differently had it not been for his key allies – most of all Lee, who got him into politics in the first place. As Raja himself said in 1990, he had been involved

S. Rajaratnam, then Culture Minister, smiles broadly as Home Affairs Minister Ong Pang Boon (second from left) shakes hands with Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1961. To the left of Ong is Education Minister Yong Nyuk Lin while Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew is on the far right. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

in many momentous events that he could not have conceived of without Lee in his life. Thus, while this is a book about Raja, it is also one about his closest colleagues, the decisions he made with them, and how he acted when things turned out wrong.

In this connection, one of the most common criticisms of Raja was that he was little more than Lee's mouthpiece and faithful follower. This book makes clear that Raja was very much his own man with his own views and his own voice. It was perhaps a major contradiction of Raja's career that he was at once Lee's loyal lieutenant and a politician beating his own path. It is a tension that is present throughout much of this book.

"A nation creates its own future – every time and all the time. Nothing is predestined."

This biography also brings out the tensions and contradictions that arose as he navigated the complexities of establishing non-communal politics in a multiracial society in an age of "tribal wars", developing a foreign policy that promoted national interest in a globalising world, and evolving a model of governance and democracy that worked for Singapore in a turbulent region. He was an ardent nationalist and yet a true internationalist who was ahead of his time.

Of course, Raja's legacy was not perfect. Both in foreign and domestic policy, many of his actions were controversial and remain so. While affable and gentlemanly in person, he could be merciless in combat. The force and clarity with which he expressed his views could crush more sensitive souls. But he always tried to do right by his people and his principles. And while his style of persuasion might not have suited every person or circumstance, it is worth comprehending.

In writing this book, there is one question that I was forced to consider time and again: would Singapore have succeeded without Raja's involvement in the struggle for its independence, survival and progress?

My answer can be found in the pages of this book.

Suffice to say here that it is extremely hard to see how Singapore would be what it is today without his profound and multifaceted contributions.

But the question has a wider importance, for it asks not only about Raja's place in Singapore's history, but also whether the ideas and principles that he championed still have a relevance now and in the future. The answer is not for me to give, but for the people of Singapore, particularly the younger and future generations, to decide.

In his many speeches to young Singaporeans, Raja often reminded them that a nation could determine its own fate, that its people could create the type of society they wanted to belong to and the kind of future they desired for themselves and the nation. "A nation creates its own future – every time and all the time. Nothing is predestined", he asserted in 1982. "Everything is determined by the will or lack of will on the part of peoples composing a nation. In other words, it is in our hands to choose the kind of future we want."

As Foreign Affairs Minister, S. Rajaratnam is introduced to Deng Xiaoping, then Senior Vice-Premier of the People's Republic of China by Tan Keng Jin, Chief of Protocol at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at a dinner hosted by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Mrs Lee at the Istana, 1978. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

It is a great pity that he did not write a book to draw the separate strands of his ideas on nations, nationalism and globalisation; on race, religion and language; and on governance, leadership and democracy to provide a coherent and accessible foundation of his thought, or what might be called "Raja-ism".

A book was, in fact, on his to-do list. One of his announced plans after his political retirement in 1988 was to write a book tentatively titled *From Wanderers to Star-makers*. Unfortunately, for reasons explained within these pages, the book never materialised.

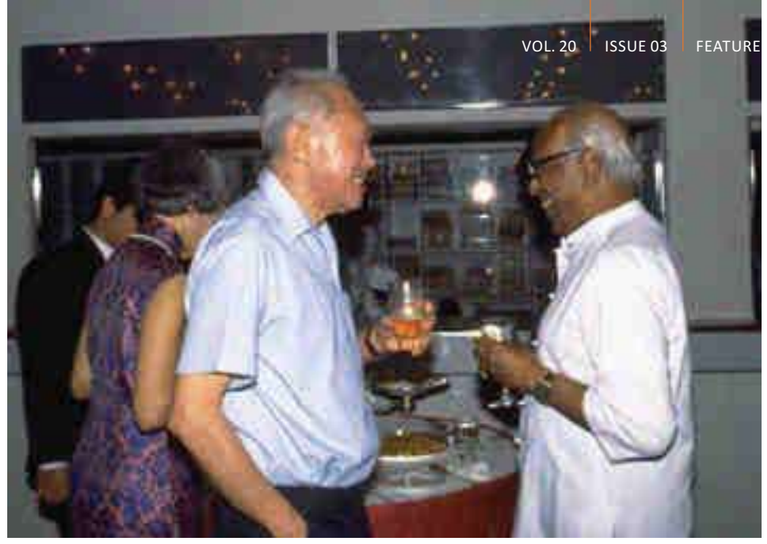
But, as its working title suggests, it would be about how transient migrants with their separate languages, religions, cultures and histories – the wanderers – struck roots in new lands and transformed into "star-makers", people who made their own destiny.

He might not have produced the last major work that many had hoped for, but he stands witness to the truth that, as American journalist Walter Lippmann once said, men are mortal, but ideas are immortal. The name S. Rajaratnam will forever be linked to the resonant words in the Singapore Pledge as well as to the transformative concepts of a "Singaporean Singapore" and "global city".

In the body of his speeches, he left the basic tenets of Singapore's foreign policy. After his death, his speeches continued to be read. A good selection can be found in the anthologies, *The Prophetic and the Political: Selected Speeches and Writings of S. Rajaratnam*, edited by Chan Heng Chee and Obaid ul Haq; and *S. Rajaratnam on Singapore: From Ideas to Reality*, edited by Kwa Chong Guan.

In honour of his contributions as Singapore's founding foreign minister, several institutions and initiatives were named after him. In 1998, a decade after his political retirement, the S. Rajaratnam Professorship in Strategic Studies was set up at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) at Nanyang Technological University. Then, in 2007, a year after Raja's death, the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies was established as an autonomous graduate school and think tank, incorporating the IDSS.

The following year, in 2008, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched the S. Rajaratnam Lecture series, an annual event that invites prominent people to speak to the foreign service on topics relating to diplomacy and international relations. In 2014, a S$100 million S. Rajaratnam Endowment was set up by Temasek Holdings to support programmes that foster stronger ties in the region and internationally. And in 2022 – 50 years after Raja's "global city" speech – the vision, as he articulated it, became the focus of the annual flagship Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

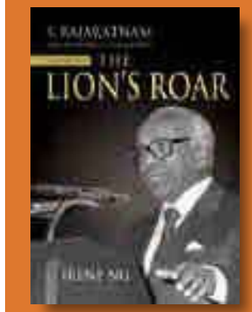


S. Rajaratnam, then Senior Minister, sharing a lighthearted moment with Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew at the National Day Rally reception at the Kallang Theatre in 1990. In the background, with her back to the camera, is Mrs Lee Kuan Yew. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

And yet, in all the official and intellectual commemorations of Raja's life, in all the events and speeches, it is easy to overlook the fire that burned in him throughout his life: the unrelenting conviction that the future is what human beings make of the possible – and the seemingly impossible. It demands from them a creative act. And, like all acts of creation, it will take imagination and ingenuity; patience and pain; and an infinite faith in the power of the human will.

And so we come back to the book that Raja never wrote, about wanderers who become star-makers. My two-volume biography is, in essence, the story of how one wanderer became a star-maker. It is the story of the transformation of a wandering wordsmith into a political giant whose voice reverberates through time.

He was the true Singapore lion who roared, and roared till the end. In a way, it is a perfect metaphor for the life of Raja and the Singapore to which he had devoted that life. ♦



S. Rajaratnam: The Authorised Biography, Volume Two: The Lion's Roar is written by Irene Ng and published by ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute (2024). The book is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (call nos. RSING 327.59570092 NG and SING 327.59570092 NG). Irene Ng asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

The National Library Board has launched a Generative AI-powered chatbook featuring S. Rajaratnam for users to learn about his life and contributions to Singapore. This service is available at the foyer of the National Library Building from 23 July to 21 October 2024.

(Right) A torn envelope postmarked 15 March 1928 with the name 潘锦三 on it. *Courtesy of the Family of Phan Kim Sam and Choo Yang Yung.*

(Below) A portrait of Phan Kim Sam used at the time of his death in 1939. *Courtesy of the Family of Phan Kim Sam and Choo Yang Yung.*

THE SEARCH FOR A "LOST" TOWKAY OF MALAYA

A man looks at his grandfather with new eyes after a mysterious envelope is found in an old workman's outfit that was about to be thrown away.

By Phan Ming Yen

Phan Ming Yen is an independent writer, researcher and producer. A former journalist and arts manager, his current areas of research are on the Malayan Campaign and Japanese Occupation in Singapore. He has written about 19th-century music in Singapore and also on the Syonan Symphony Orchestra during the Occupation.

It all started with a name on a torn envelope postmarked 15 March 1928: 潘锦三 (Phan Kim Sam).[1] My brother and I came across the envelope in the breast pocket of what appeared to be workman's clothes, which I was about to discard until my brother thought it wise to check the pockets first. Imprinted on the clothes, too, were the initials "P K S".

We had found these garments while packing the family house in early 2023, a pre-World War II shophouse in the former tin mining town of Kampar in Kinta Valley, Perak, Malaysia. We had started with the first cupboard that was accessible to us in the largest bedroom in the house. These clothes were among the first items we found. The shophouse had not been inhabited since our ageing aunt moved to Kuala Lumpur two years before the pandemic to be with our cousin. They are the two sole surviving members from our paternal side of the family.

The family name on the envelope was ours: 潘. But we did not recognise the given name 锦三. Also written on the envelope were the Chinese characters 泰盛, 金宝. The first two characters, 泰盛, was Thye Seng,[2] which was the name of the tin-ore dealing[3] business that our grandfather had founded in prewar Kampar (金宝).

He had died from an aneurysm two years before the outbreak of the war, so we had been told. He had plans to bring the family of nine children back to China, having built a huge house in his birthplace, Meixian (梅县) in Guangdong province, with the money he made in Malaya.

Our grandfather's name was 潘扬昌 (Fong Kam Sum). That was the name on the ancestral tablet at home and on his tombstone. It was the name our mother knew him by and it was also the name whom our cousin, who had lived in the shophouse in the late 1950s, was familiar with. None of them had ever heard of the name 潘锦三. Our aunt, now 94, is stricken with dementia.

The family business was subsequently passed on to our grandmother, Choo Yang Yung, and managed by our uncle and aunt. Our father, the youngest in the family, worked as a forensics document examiner with the Malaysian civil service in Petaling Jaya, Selangor. With the passing of our grandmother in 1995, the business was managed by our uncle. After he died in 2003 and given the falling tin prices in Malaysia since the 1980s, the business licence was given up.

As children, we – or at least I – seldom asked about our grandfather, preferring to just absorb whatever that was willingly shared with us. Perhaps it seemed to me then that everyone focused on working hard and living in the present for the future: the concern of our grandmother and aunt was always the education and careers of the grandchildren.

(Above) The interior of Thye Seng, the tin-ore dealing business that Phan Kim Sam founded in Kampar, Perak, before World War II. The shophouse has been restored as a heritage, event and creative residency space, 2024. *Courtesy of Phan Ming Ruey.*

(Below) The 1.6-metre-long panoramic print of Phan Kim Sam's funeral in 1939, with the Chinese text "中华民国28年2月8日金宝闻人潘锦三先生出殡时留影纪念 怡保埠 广州摄" ("Commemorative photograph from the funeral procession of renowned Kampar figure Mr Phan Kim Sam on 8 February 1939"). *Courtesy of the Family of Phan Kim Sam and Choo Yang Yung.*

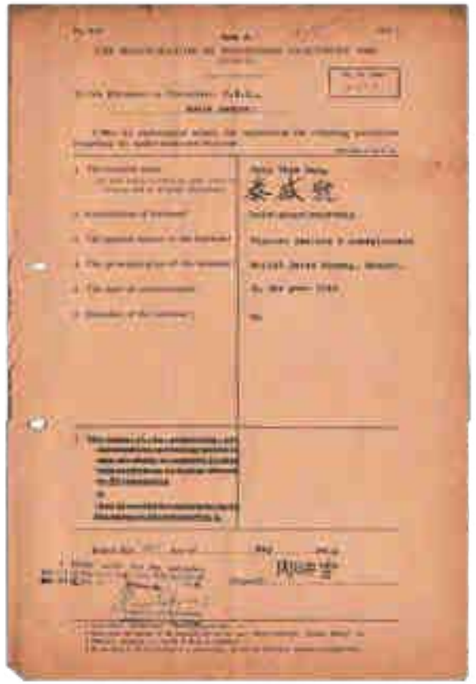
Up to the point when we found the envelope, this was what we knew about our grandfather and the family: he was Hakka; he had three wives – two from China, and the third, whom he married in Malaya, being our grandmother. Of his nine children, four were born from our grandmother. We were never told the names of the other five: three adopted elder sons and two elder daughters whose births we were uncertain of.

We knew a few other interesting facts about our grandfather. He liked art, and had sold *chwee kueh* (steamed rice cake served with preserved radish) when he first arrived in Malaya, probably around 1909.[4] He had loaned money to a tin miner who, in return, passed him tin concentrates. He removed the impurities from the concentrates and resold the tin to smelting agencies.[5] Before moving to Malaya, he had worked in Indonesia and returned to China. He was also very caring towards our grandmother. Our father seldom spoke about our grandfather and the business. After all, he was only a child of five when his father died.

The past, as novelist L.P. Hartley notes, is a foreign country.[6]

Finding that envelope addressed to 潘锦三 was a first step into that foreign country. There were three letters inside the envelope: two (from the same signatory) addressed to a 扬叔 ("Uncle Yang"), and another to 父親 ("father") from a different signatory. We did not recognise the names of both senders.

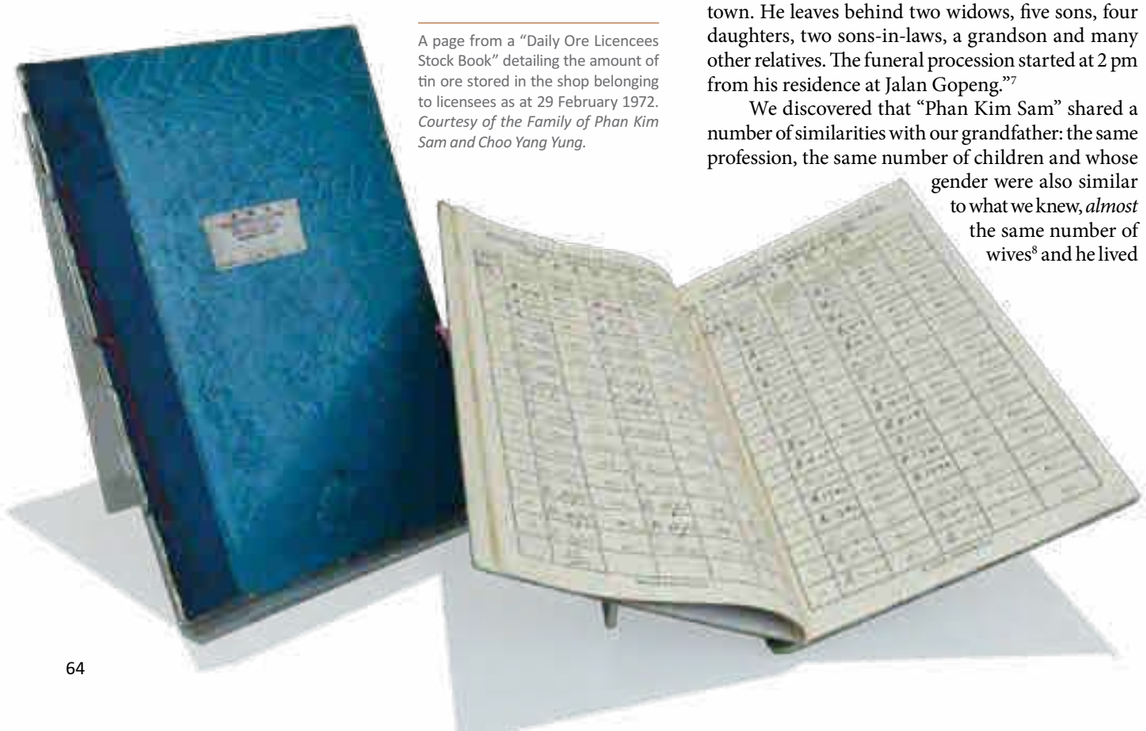
Attempting a search on variations of 潘锦三, in romanised form (and in original Chinese), in NewspaperSG, the National Library Board's online resource of over 200 Singapore and Malaya newspapers, turned up an article in the *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* dated 10 February 1939, with the headline "Funeral of Kampar Towkay".



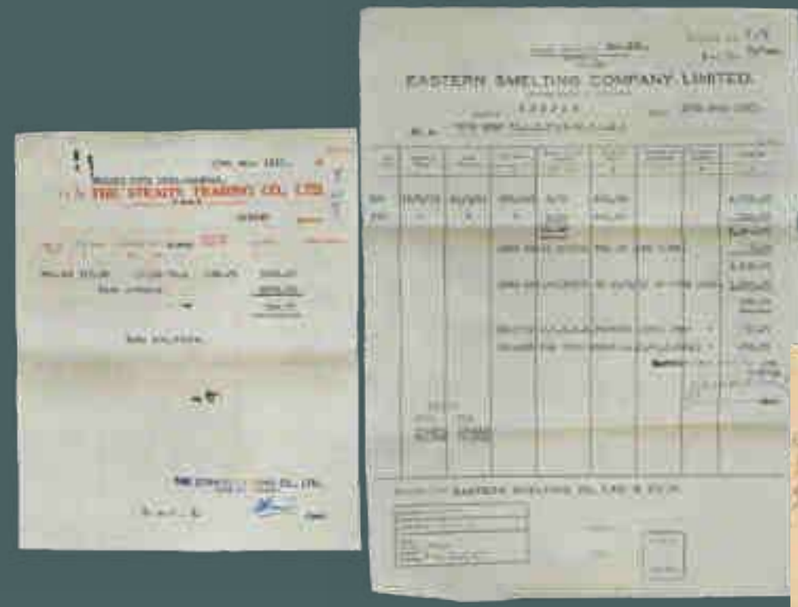
The business registration record of Thye Seng dated 28 May 1940. *Courtesy of the Family of Phan Kim Sam and Choo Yang Yung.*

The article stated that at the funeral of Phan Kim Sam, "well over 400 attended to pay their last respects": "Towkay Phan Kim Sam who was 68 was a miner by profession and was a well-known tin-ore dealer. He took interest in the social activities of the town. He leaves behind two widows, five sons, four daughters, two sons-in-laws, a grandson and many other relatives. The funeral procession started at 2 pm from his residence at Jalan Gopeng."[7]

We discovered that "Phan Kim Sam" shared a number of similarities with our grandfather: the same profession, the same number of children and whose gender were also similar to what we knew, *almost* the same number of wives[8] and he lived



A page from a "Daily Ore Licencees Stock Book" detailing the amount of tin ore stored in the shop belonging to licensees as at 29 February 1972. *Courtesy of the Family of Phan Kim Sam and Choo Yang Yung.*



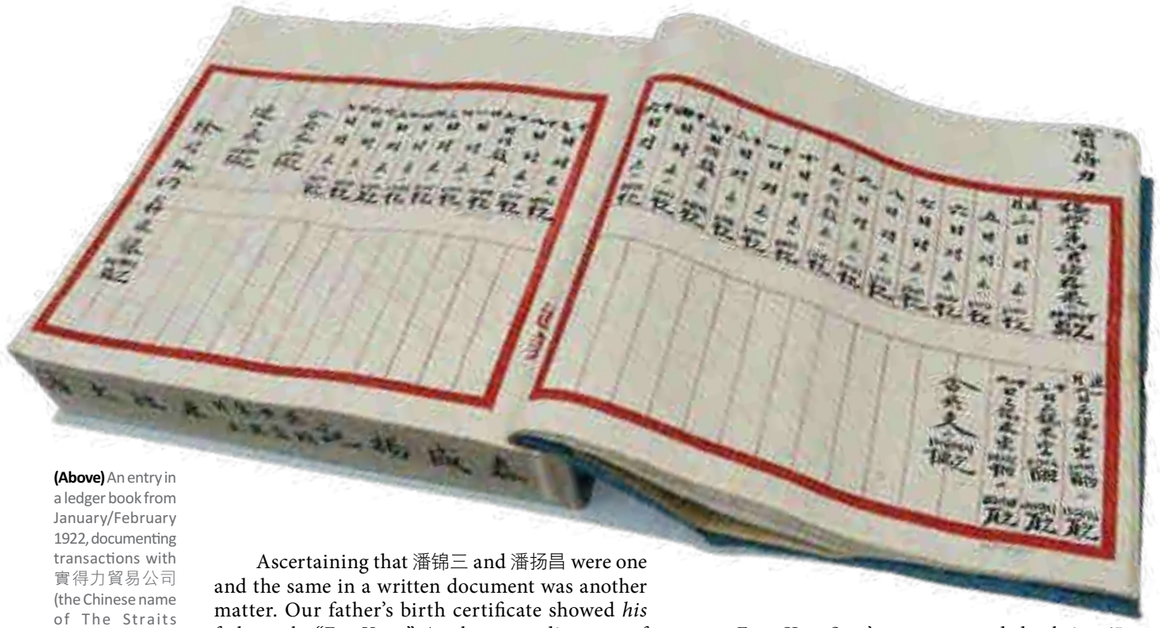
(Left) Receipts from Eastern Smelting Company Limited and The Straits Trading Co., Ltd. dated 17 January 1953 and 19 December 1953 respectively. *Courtesy of the Family of Phan Kim Sam and Choo Yang Yung.*

(Below) The acknowledgement for the delivery of a safe dated 24 September 1917. The safe remains in the shophouse today. *Courtesy of the Family of Phan Kim Sam and Choo Yang Yung.*

on the same road. We later found – tucked away on the topmost compartment of a wardrobe – a 1.6-metre-long panoramic print of the funeral with the Chinese text "中华民国28年2月8日金宝闻人潘锦三先生出殡时留影纪念 怡保埠 广州摄" ("Commemorative photograph from the funeral procession of renowned Kampar figure Mr Phan Kim Sam on 8 February 1939")[9] and a colourised photograph of a man with the name 潘锦三. The man in the photograph bore a strong resemblance to a portrait of our grandfather that hung in the office of the shophouse for as long as we could remember.

We spent the next few months searching for written evidence that 潘锦三 and 潘扬昌 were the same person. It was a search that also uncovered close to a century of business and other documents pertaining to my grandfather's company, Thye Seng: volumes of ledger books dating back to the 1920s that documented daily transactions and the names of those whom the family had business with, shares in tin mines prior to the war, receipts of sales and purchase, and invoices. The earliest record we found dates to 1917 for the purchase and delivery of a safe, which still remains in the shophouse today.

(Below) The work desk at the office space of Thye Seng, the tin-ore dealing business that Phan Kim Sam founded in Kampar, Perak, before World War II. The shophouse has been restored as a heritage, event and creative residency space, 2024. *Courtesy of the Family of Phan Kim Sam and Choo Yang Yung.*



(Above) An entry in a ledger book from January/February 1922, documenting transactions with 實得力貿易公司 (the Chinese name of The Straits Trading Co., Ltd). *Courtesy of the Family of Phan Kim Sam and Choo Yang Yung.*

Ascertaining that 潘锦三 and 潘扬昌 were one and the same in a written document was another matter. Our father's birth certificate showed *his* father to be "Fon Yong". A subsequent discovery of an envelope that contained a death certificate was marked with the name "潘扬昌" with the English words "Death Report – Fong Kam Sum decd", the name as recorded on the certificate itself.[10]

(Above) The envelope containing Phan Kim Sam's death certificate. *Courtesy of the Family of Phan Kim Sam and Choo Yang Yung.*

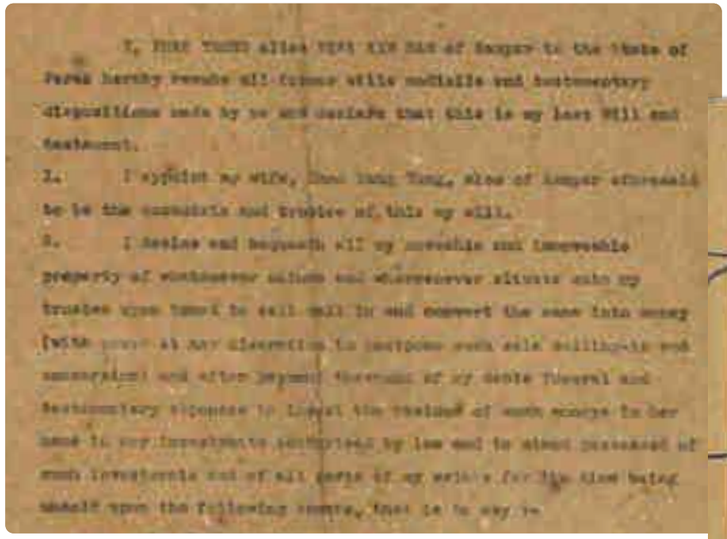
(Right) The death certificate of Phan Kim Sam who died on 2 February 1939. *Courtesy of the Family of Phan Kim Sam and Choo Yang Yung.*

Fong Kam Sum's age was recorded as being 65, and the cause of death written in two hands: the first, *demam panas*, which could be translated as "high fever", and the second is "myocarditis". Oddly enough, for his occupation, it was recorded as *jaga rumah* or "watchman". My grandfather was not a watchman but it is possible that the person who reported Phan's death assumed the official recording the matter was asking for his occupation rather than Phan's.

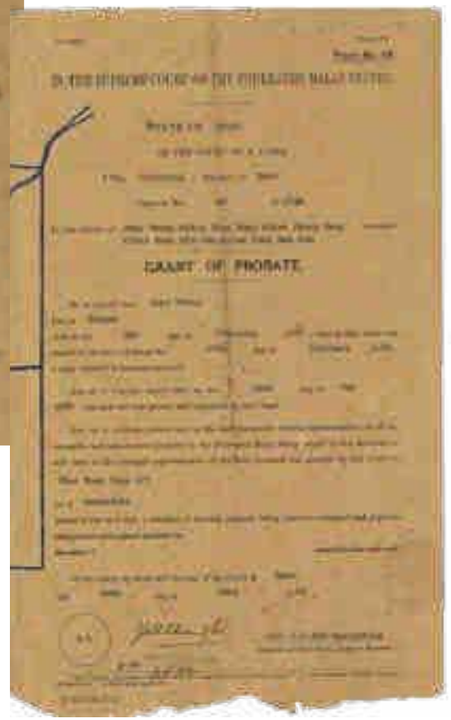
Relief came when a grant of probate was found in an old leather briefcase with the following name and aliases: "Phan Yeong alias Phan Yong alias Phan Kim Sam alias Fong Kam Sum". Phan's will begins with "I, Phan Yeong alias Phan Kim Sam of Kampar in the State of Perak hereby revoke all former wills codicils and testamentary dispositions made by me and declare that this is my last will and testament".[11]

The will also named our grandmother, Choo Yang Yung, as executor and trustee, and our father as his natural born son. 潘锦三 was, therefore, most likely the courtesy name – a name bestowed upon one at adulthood in addition to one's given name[12] – of 潘扬昌.

The search for more details on the life, activities and contributions of my grandfather and his subsequent impact on the community around him continues. There was a recent talk on small towns in 1930s Malaya co-organised by New Era University College (NEUC) and my family. It was held at our shophouse – which we have since restored as a heritage, event and creative residency space.[13] At the talk, we learned that research by a NEUC doctoral candidate on the prewar history of Kampar had unearthed more information in official documents of a tin miner called Phan Sam, likely to be an early diminutive of Phan Kim Sam.



(Left) Phan Kim Sam's will named his wife, Choo Yang Yung, as the executor and trustee of his estate. *Courtesy of the Family of Phan Kim Sam and Choo Yang Yung.*



(Right) Phan Kim Sam's grant of probate, dated 12 July 1939, legally recognised his wife Choo Yang Yung as the executor of his estate. *Courtesy of the Family of Phan Kim Sam and Choo Yang Yung.*

Apart from the use of courtesy names and diminutives, the situation is further complicated by the fact that in the past, most officials were likely to have recorded names in English as they heard spoken to them and that majority of the immigrant and indigenous population of Malaya were unfamiliar with the English language. As a result, variations in spellings of names and diminutives naturally arose. A cross-checking of documents – such as wills, and birth, death and citizenship certifications, and identity documents – to ascertain the identity of a single person could sometimes reveal a multitude of variations on the spelling of a single name.

Perhaps this venture into the foreign country of one's past is also a reminder of the second part of Hartley's quote: "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." And that difference is what makes the dialogue between a historian and his/her facts, a never-ending one, bringing forth new narratives and retellings of the past for the future. ♦

The author thanks Phan Ming Ruey, Mdm Lau Foong Kheng, Lee Ee Pieu, Dr Wong Yee Tuan, Jacky Chew, Chai Wei Sin, Chanel Pong, Ansell Tan and Sun Yu-li for insights into the history of Phan Kim Sam and Thye Seng. Thye Seng at 105 Jalan Gopeng, Kampar, Malaysia, is open to visitors by appointment. Contact the Phan family at rueyphan@yahoo.com for more information.

A collection of the business records of Phan Kim Sam and Thye Seng can be found in a donation from the Family of Phan Kim Sam and Choo Yang Yung at the National Library. Members of the public can make a request to view the materials via email at ref@nlb.gov.sg or at the reference counter on Level 11 of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, National Library Building.

NOTES

1 Letter addressed to Phan Kim Sam, 15 March 1928. ("Pan Jinsan" in *hanyu pinyin*.)

2 See "Registration of Business Enactment 1939" dated 28 May 1940. Thye Seng was founded in 1913.

3 Yip Yat Hoong, *The Development of the Tin Mining Industry of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1969), 29–32. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCLOS 338.27453 YIP). One of the main features of the tin-ore dealing business was that of tin-ore dealers giving loans to marginal miners. These miners in return would sell the concentrates from their mines to the dealer in settlement of outstanding debts. The tin-ore dealer then acted as an agent for these miners, selling the tin-ore to either The Straits Trading Co., Ltd. or the Eastern Smelting Company Limited for smelting and refining.

4 Phan Kim Sam's death certificate states that he had been residing in Malaya for 30 years at the time of his death. Research is still ongoing to ascertain his exact date of arrival in Malaya.

5 Yip, *The Development of the Tin Mining Industry of Malaya*, 29–32.

6 The quote "The past is a foreign country" is the opening line of novelist L.P. Hartley's (1895–1972) novel, *The Go-Between*, published in 1953. See L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: Penguin, 2020). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. HAR)

7 "Funeral of a Kampar Towkay," *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 10 February 1939, 2. (From NewspaperSG)

8 Little is known about Phan Kim Sam's first two wives other than their family name. It is the author's conjecture that the eldest of the three wives could have passed on by the time of his grandfather's death in 1939.

9 The print of the funeral is now with the National Library Board, Singapore.

10 Death Certificate of Fong Kam Sum, 2 February 1939.

11 Grant of Probate of Phan Yeong alias Phan Yong alias Phan Kim Sam alias Fong Kam Sum.

12 "Courtesy Name," My China Roots, last accessed 4 June 2024, https://www.mychinaroots.com/wiki/article/courtesy.

13 泰盛锡米店首办讲座反应热烈打造文艺写作驻地空间 [Thye Seng store's first lecture received an enthusiastic response and created a literary and artistic writing resident space], *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 7 May 2024, https://perak.sinchew.com.my/news/20240507/perak/5589314.

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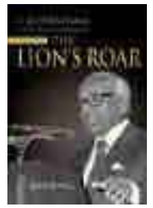

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