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Got Milk?

The School Milk Scheme

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Director's Note

It's the year of the horse, according to the Chinese calendar, and I'm happy to report that as we gallop into the new year, *BiblioAsia* has plenty of new and interesting stories for you to graze on.

Our cover story looks at the milk drinking campaign that ran in the 1970s and 80s. Some readers might remember the daily ritual of drinking a small carton of milk in class (or forking out extra money for your children to buy the milk). The history of the programme, why it started and how it soured, is a microcosm of the Singapore story.

Speaking of the Singapore story, there is a new exhibition at Level 10 of the National Library Building that looks at one of the defining moments of Singapore's history – separation from Malaysia in 1965. For the longest time, conventional wisdom here held that Singapore had been kicked out. However, the exhibition (and accompanying book) makes clear that it was a mutual decision. In this issue, we reproduce an extract from *The Albatross File: Inside Separation* that explains why Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee felt that Singapore would be better off without Malaysia, together with a transcript of his handwritten notes from a key July 1965 meeting that worked out how the separation would be handled.

The separation in August 1965 was a watershed event that would change Singapore in ways both large and small. One of those small ways was turning 13 pens filled with chickens, turkeys and cattle (but no horses) into an agricultural show in the heart of the city. Largely forgotten today, the Singapore Agricultural Show in September that year was an attempt to put a brave foot (or hoof) forward, to show that life would go on and that Singapore would thrive.

Hold your horses though, we have much more for you: we examine a rare Japanese map of Singapore from the 1920s; we look at the 13-year history of the University of Malaya in Singapore; and we learn about how historians are finding new sources of Singapore's history, especially for the period before the 19th century.

Is history just about events, artefacts and institutions? Neigh, we say. History is about people as well. In this issue, you can read about Rodolfo Nolli, an Italian sculptor who left his mark everywhere around Singapore; the legendary singer-actor-director P. Ramlee's fruitful (screen)time in the city; civil servant Lee Ek Tieng who oversaw the clean-up of the Singapore River; and Yoshiya Mita, a Japanese military judge whose friendship with Lee Kip Lee and his family during the Japanese Occupation eventually resulted in singer-songwriter Dick Lee's play, *A Rising Son*.

Saddle up and enjoy the ride!

Alicia Yeo
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On the cover
Detail from a photograph of students at Tanglin Primary School drinking milk, 1986. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980001175 – 0089).*

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Image credits, clockwise from top left: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, National Archives of Singapore; Wong Han Min; Bibliotheca Thysiana, Leiden; Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, National Archives of Singapore; Jimmy Yap; National Library Singapore.

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Got Milk?

Students of Tanglin Primary School drinking milk, 1986. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980001175 – 0089).*

The School Milk Scheme in Singapore

In the 1970s and 1980s, primary school children were encouraged to drink milk in school. By the late 1980s, this initiative had curdled.

By Rebecca Tan

Rebecca Tan is an Archivist with the National Archives of Singapore, where she works on preservation planning and developing systems to ensure long-term access to government records.

In schools across Singapore during the 1970s and 1980s, scenes of school children chugging milk in class daily were a common sight. Singapore students did not suddenly develop a taste for the drink though. Instead, this came about thanks to the School Milk Scheme, a government initiative that began in 1974.

Why Drink Milk?

In a letter to the *Straits Times* in 1982, the Ministry of Education explained that the main objective of the scheme was "to improve and upgrade the nutritional intake of primary school children by the consumption, regularly in school, of a substantial food item". Milk, the ministry noted, was rich in proteins, carbohydrates and calcium which were "essential for healthy physical growth in our school children".[1]

Former educator and historian Eugene Wijeysingha noted that Singapore was a poor country at the time. "Don't forget. This was the seventies. That was the time I think when people in the country hadn't become sufficiently affluent enough. There were still poverty gaps in different parts of the island," he said in an oral history interview in 1995.[2]

The milk scheme idea came from Minister for Education Lee Chiaw Meng (1972–75) who "felt that nutrition was a crucial element in the learning process of a child", said Wijeysingha. He surmised that Lee was most likely inspired by his visit to the United Kingdom where "every child must drink half a litre or so many pints of milk every day", which was "part of the whole national health scheme".[3]

In June 1973, the Education Ministry started selling powdered milk "at 10 cents a glass in 10 primary schools" located in housing estates, in preparation for rolling out the School Milk Scheme nationwide. "The scheme, open to all school children from Primary one to six, is a move to get the children accustomed to milk drinking as well as to provide a nourishing supplement to their diet," said the ministry.[4]

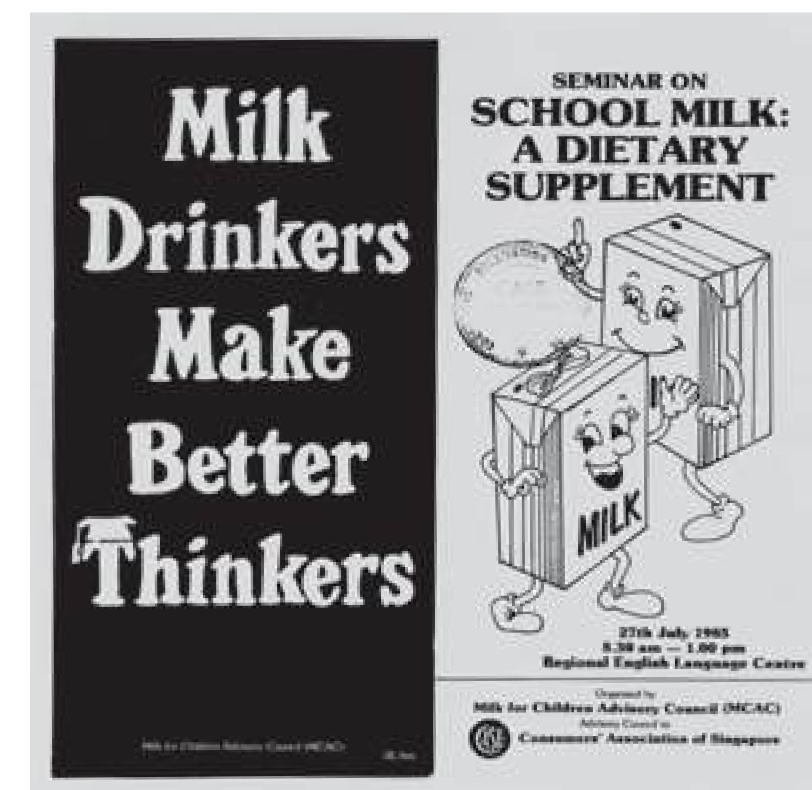
The milk was supplied at 10 cents a glass from Monday to Friday, but it was free for underprivileged children. According to the ministry, "[r]esponse from parents and children have [sic] been very encouraging", with many children looking forward to drinking the milk each day. "Parents too are very happy that their children are receiving this nourishing supplement at a minimum cost," the ministry noted.[5]

As Fresh as Milk

The scheme proper was launched in February 1974 at 33 primary schools and later expanded to more schools. By the end of 1975, "children in 150 schools were drinking the milk", with plans lined up to extend the scheme to another 140 primary schools by the end of 1976. Under the scheme, reconstituted pasteurised milk was sold at 10 cents a packet to students (this was increased to 12 cents from 1975), but children of parents receiving social welfare need not pay. The milk came in 150ml plastic packets and provided schoolchildren with a "wholesome, nutritious and low-cost snack" each day and aimed to "inculcate in them nutrition consciousness and good food habits", said the ministry.[6]

At the start of the scheme, the milk was prepared by Ben Sunshine Dairies. Later on, the milk was supplied by Malaysian Dairy Industries, Singapore Cold Storage or Premier Milk. It was "delivered daily to the schools twice a day in time for recess". Children could choose from five different flavours: vanilla, strawberry, pineapple, chocolate or for the not too choosy, plain milk.[7]

Although the scheme had initial teething problems such as "late and short deliveries", these were eventually resolved and it became popular with both teachers and students. "Response is overwhelming. The pupils enjoy the delicious milk and some of them even buy extra packets for their brothers and sisters at home," a teacher at River Valley English School told the *Straits Times*. Seah Peng Peng, a Primary 6 pupil, said: "I like the milk very much. I think if I drink a pack every day, I will have enough vitamins, proteins and brains to help me pass my examinations." The ministry also



The "Milk Drinkers Make Better Thinkers" brochure by the Milk for Children Advisory Council. *Consumers' Association of Singapore, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Microfilm no. NA 1911).*

Students of River Valley English School drinking milk, 1974. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

approved two secondary schools to participate in the scheme.[8]

School tuckshop vendors were also said to be supportive of the scheme even though business at the drinks stall dropped. They "appreciated the importance of the scheme and have given the schools their full co-operation," the *Straits Times* reported.[9]

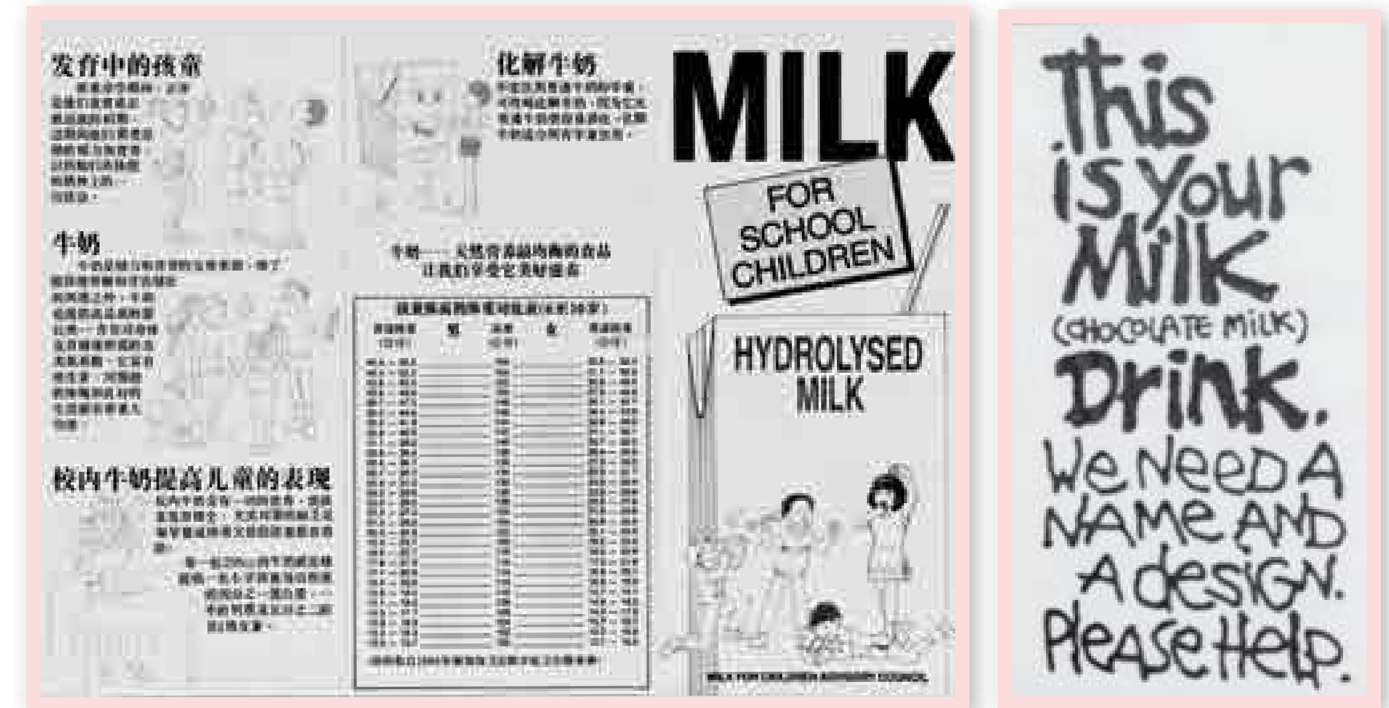
A teacher distributing milk to students of River Valley English School, 1974. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

Milk Scheme Goes Off

Over time however, interest in the scheme began to wane. In 1974, when the scheme was started, 63 percent of all primary school children drank milk daily but by 1980, this had fallen to 21 percent. The Education Ministry gave various reasons for the drop, such as children getting "fed up with drinking milk every day" and the "aggressive sales promotion" of soft drink companies having changed children's preferences.[10]

When interviewed by the *Straits Times* in 1981, some children, like Primary Three pupil Li Yi Liang of River Valley Government Primary School, simply said "I don't like milk" to explain why they did not participate in the scheme. He was on the scheme in Primary One but stopped after a year. "I don't like to drink it. I thought you must take it, so I did," he added. Later on, he switched to bringing his own flask of water from home. Betty Wong, 12, of the same school was more forthright. "Every time I drank it I felt like vomiting, so I stopped," she said.[11]

The Education Ministry adopted various measures to reverse the drop in milk consumption. In August 1981, it "urged principals to encourage pupils to sign up for the scheme by telling them and their parents the nutritional value of milk". It also changed the type of milk given to schools. Previously, schools were supplied with pasteurised milk twice a day at 20 cents a pack. However, the ministry announced in January 1982 that it would



(Above) The "Milk for School Children" brochure by the Milk for Children Advisory Council. It describes the benefits of milk and has a form for parents to fill in and sign their children up for the scheme. *Consumers' Association of Singapore, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Microfilm no. NA 1911).*

(Above right) To promote the nationwide "Name and Milk Package Design Contests" in January 1983, existing milk packets were replaced with new packaging bearing the message, "This is your milk" in a child's handwriting, with the added text "We need a name and design. Please help". *Source: The Straits Times, 28 December 1982, 10 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

supply "packet milk which has been ultra heat treated to last longer". Also known as UHT milk, it would contain 66 percent more milk and be supplied to schools in bigger packs at 20 cents each.[12]

Even with these measures, the milk distribution experience in some schools did not sit well with parents who complained that "pupils are forced to buy milk they don't want". Tan Tze Eng, an accountant, told the *Straits Times* in 1984 that at her daughter's school, pupils would receive a month's supply all at once. "The poor children have to lug 20 packets of milk home on the day the milk comes," she said. "And those who forget their plastic bags are scolded by their teacher and have to get their friends to help them carry the milk home."[13]

Teachers were also unhappy since distributing the milk and collecting the money ate into teaching time. Wijeyesingha acknowledged that it was more work for teachers. "They had to collect money, they had to distribute the milk, they had to keep records. I am sure there was not an entirely happy reception from teachers," he said in his oral history interview.[14]

One teacher noted that the milk scheme was not popular because students were "not allowed to choose the flavours they liked", and the choice of flavours delivered "was left entirely to the supplier". The same teacher found it "too troublesome" to allow the children to pick and choose the flavours they liked because time would be spent checking that the correct orders were delivered.[15]

Another teacher who could not get 20 pupils in her class to buy the milk resorted to buying the milk herself. "I know that some of my pupils hate the milk and I feel bad to force them to buy it, so I take the remainder home for my husband and sons," she said.[16]

Milk for Children Advisory Council Set Up

Possibly to further combat falling milk consumption in schools, the Consumers' Association of Singapore set up the Milk for Children Advisory Council (MCAC) in 1982.[17] The council complemented the Education Ministry's efforts to encourage milk drinking in primary schools, said Ivan Baptist, the executive secretary of the Consumers' Association.

Chaired by Nalla Tan, the council aimed to promote milk as a dietary supplement for children aged nine months and upwards, secure sponsors to supply free or subsidised milk to children too poor to afford it as part of a diet, and promote milk as a fun and nutritious drink. The council also aimed to publish literature on the promotion of milk for children, as well as give advice to parents, teachers and consumers.[18]

"The council wants to create a general acceptance of milk as a nutritional drink," said Baptist. "More importantly, we want children to enjoy the drink and not force it down their throats." To make milk more attractive to children, the council planned to ask milk manufacturers to "package their product more attractively".[19] It also got children involved in the design of milk packages.

In January 1983, the "Name and Milk Package Design Contests" were held. To promote the contests, existing milk packs were replaced with new packaging bearing the message, "This is your milk" in a child's handwriting, with the added text "We need a name and design. Please help". A $10,000 cash prize was promised to the school that provided the winning entry. The "name and age of the winner and his or her school's name" would also be printed on the new packs.[20]

Children were rewarded for drinking milk. Between June and November 1983, children who accumulated 30 milk pack flaps received a "magic" ruler and an eraser-pencil cap. The council ordered 200,000 rulers and eraser-pencil caps costing a total of $20,000 to run the promotion, which ended on 4 November that year.[21]

To make the milk more palatable, the council looked into introducing new flavours beyond the five initially offered. A *Straits Times* article on 10 November 1984 noted that the council "planned to introduce local fruit flavours but found [that] the flavours were not available in sufficient quantities". Furthermore, some flavours like blackcurrant and peach were not well received when tested on children.[22]

In November 1984, the council even came up with an event, appropriately named Milk Day. The inaugural event was held at the Mandai Zoological Gardens and attended by thousands of primary and pre-primary students. "The idea is to get children to participate in the activities and to make milk-drinking fun for them," said Nalla Tan, the council chairman. Each child received two packets of a new apricot-flavoured milk, which they drank with other food like sandwiches and cakes. The children were also entertained by an animal show, ventriloquist performances and a colouring competition.[23]

Milk Day in 1985 was held at the zoo over two days. The 5,500 children who visited the zoo on 19 November did not let the rain dampen their excitement. On Milk Day 1987 at Jurong Bird Park, each child received two packets of the newly launched sweet corn flavour.[24]

Nalla Tan, chairman of the Milk for Children Advisory Council, drinking milk with the top three winners of the "Name and Milk Package Design Contests", 1983. (From left) The winners are Leong Jenn Gan of Rosyth School, Winnie Kuek Suyin of River Valley Kindergarten and Tom A. Rozario of Anglo-Chinese Primary School. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980001422 - 0089).*

Children Sour on Milk Scheme

The council's initial efforts were successful. By February 1983, "about 27,000 of the 300,000 schoolchildren in Singapore were drinking milk compared to 24,300 a year ago". In 1983, "primary and pre-primary schools and the People's Association kindergartens bought about 10 million packs under the milk scheme". In 1984, "pre-schoolers and primary schoolchildren drank the same amount within 10 months", which meant that on average, a million packets of milk were drunk per month.[25]

While further numbers regarding milk consumption are not available, developments suggest that the programme was running into headwinds caused by Singapore's growing prosperity. Although the initial impetus of the milk scheme was to improve children's nutrition, by the late 1980s, the concern became less of nutrition and more about childhood obesity. In fact, in 1988, the School Milk Scheme was temporarily stopped because health experts feared it could be a cause of obesity, according to Baptist.[26]

In August that year, the seminar "Milk for Better Living" was held and some 350 principals, teachers, nutritionists, doctors and Health Ministry officers convened at the Pan Pacific Hotel to discuss who should be included in the School Milk Scheme. The seminar also reviewed the MCAC's role in light of "the prevailing food habits, the nutritional status, and the health of schoolchildren".[27]

At the seminar, council chairman Chua Sin Bin noted that "there is no direct link between obesity and the drinking of milk in schools", contrary to the earlier concerns of health experts. He said that since January 1988, full-cream milk had been replaced with low-fat milk even though full-cream milk did not lead to obesity in children. The reason, he said, was "psychological", and the replacement was to "stress the need to reduce the consumption of fats".[28]

Uma Rajan, the medical director of the School Health Services, noted that there were "changes in the dietary profiles of Primary One pupils" due to "increased spending power and the greater freedom children had in the choice and quantity of food." Hence, "the child of the '80s is taller and heavier than the child of the '60s".[29] The observation by Rajan suggested that childhood malnutrition was much less of a problem in the 1980s than it had been in previous decades. Indeed, it seemed that by the late 1980s, obesity among children, rather than malnutrition, was a bigger concern. The milk scheme, it would appear, had outlived its usefulness. In Wijeysingha's analysis, "gradually, as people became more affluent, there was no need to sustain this scheme" and it "died a natural death".[30] ♦

Milk packs for students of Tanglin Primary School, 1986. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980001175 - 0090).*

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THE ARCHITECT OF SEPARATION

Rather than being unilaterally kicked out in 1965, the decision that Singapore should separate from Malaysia was a mutual one, driven in large part by the efforts of Singapore's Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee.

Malaysia's Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman (Tunku) was in London in June 1965 when he was laid low by an attack of shingles. Lying in hospital gave him time to think and on 1 July, he wrote a letter to Acting Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak about the possibility of cutting Singapore out from Malaysia.

In the two years that Singapore had been part of the Federation, tensions between the two had ratcheted up considerably. Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) blamed extremists in Malaysia for fomenting two race riots in Singapore in 1964. To gain leverage, the PAP formed a coalition of opposition parties in the Federation that the Tunku saw as a threat to Malaysia's ruling National Front coalition that he led. (Albert Lau's essay "Separation" in *The Albatross File: Inside Separation* explores the deep fissures in the relationship between the two countries while Tan Tai Yong's "Merger" in the same volume provides the historical context for understanding why Singapore joined Malaysia in the first place.[1])

While the Tunku was mulling the possibility of separating Singapore from the Federation, similar thoughts were swirling through the mind of Singapore's Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee. During a meeting with Razak and others in mid-July 1965, Goh told Razak that "the best thing would be to call it quits, and that we should go our separate ways".[2]

In his oral history interview in 1982, Goh explained: "I'd had enough of Malaysia. I just wanted to get out. I could see no future in it, that the political cost was dreadful and the economic benefits, well, didn't exist. So it was an exercise in futility. So [as] far as I was concerned, you know, it was a project that should be abandoned once you say that it was worthless."[3]

Less than a month after that first fateful meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Singapore was out.

The following extract from *The Albatross File: Inside Separation* describes the two meetings that Goh had with Razak in Kuala Lumpur in July 1965. It also presents a transcript of Goh's handwritten notes from the second meeting which outlined the mechanics of how the separation would be carried out.

The Straits Times

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(Facing page) Dr Goh Keng Swee, 1967. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980005312 - 0020).*

(Right) Singapore separated from Malaysia on 9 August 1965 following an amendment to the Constitution approved unanimously by both Houses of Parliament under a certificate of urgency. *Source: The Straits Times, 10 August 1965, 1 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew touring villages to address the people and to appeal for calm amidst communal tensions during the 1964 racial riots. The riots were a critical factor leading to Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19990002627 - 0095).*

Goh was in Germany for medical treatment for most of June 1965; his liver problems had started to flare up in late May 1965 and a medical specialist had recommended he receive treatment at the German spa town of Bad Kissingen.[4]

In his absence, Toh [Chin Chye, Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore] and Rajaratnam [S. Rajaratnam, Minister for Culture of Singapore] launched what by most accounts was a successful first meeting of the Malaysian Solidarity Convention (MSC) on 6 June that "rang alarm bells in KL", Goh noted in his oral history interview in 1982. Calls for Lee's [Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore] arrest were also beginning to alarm the British Government. When rumours of a possible coup against Lee surfaced, British Prime Minister Harold Wilson felt compelled, as he wrote in his 1970 memoirs, *The Labour Government 1964–1970: A Personal Record*, "to let the Tunku know that if he were to take actions of this kind, it would be unwise for him to show his face at the Commonwealth [Prime Ministers'] Conference [in London from 17–25 June], since a large number of his colleagues including myself – would feel that such action was totally opposed to all that we believed in as a Commonwealth".

Goh returned to Singapore in early July. Soon after, he was asked to call on then Acting Malaysian Prime Minister Razak. Also present at the meeting, which he remembered as taking place in Razak's house in Kuala Lumpur, were [Malaysia's] Minister of Home Affairs Ismail Abdul Rahman and Umno [United Malays National Organisation] Secretary-General Jaffar Albar. "It started with the usual belly-aching session against Lee – his alleged misdemeanours, his character defects and so on and so forth – to which I listened with usual patience. And then Razak said: 'We can't go on like this.' And he asked whether I had any ideas to offer," Goh recounted in the 1982 interview. Taken aback and "totally unprepared", Goh replied: "We should go our separate ways. … we leave Malaysia, become an independent state, and you'll be relieved of all these troubles and we would have also been relieved of troubles from you. All these tensions that built up, communal tensions, will all be over. We're on our own, you're on your own." Razak had then asked Goh to talk to Lee and to let him know if Lee was "willing to go along with it".

Goh told his oral history interviewer that he did not make a record of this meeting with Razak on 15 July 1965[5] because "it was rather unexpected". He might have known that Razak had met Lee on 29 June, but would not have known that Razak had then reported to the Tunku, who was in London for the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference, that he "could not get through" to Lee and persuade him to stop politicking. This had confirmed the Tunku's determination to get Singapore out of Malaysia.[6]

In his 1977 memoirs, the Tunku revealed that he had written to Razak from London on 1 July 1965, saying that while it would be good to talk with Lee, "ultimately I fear we will have no choice but to cut out Singapore from Malaysia in order to save the rest of the body from gangrene".

Lee, however, was still keen to keep some form of union with Malaysia. In his memoirs, Lee recalled that after being briefed by Goh on his first meeting with Razak in July 1965, he had discussed with Goh "all the possible alternatives and decided that anything was worth trying if we could avoid a racial collision".[7]

Goh then saw Razak and Ismail again on 20 July. This time, Goh made a record of the discussion and kept his handwritten notes in the Albatross file. It was very likely not circulated to the rest of the Cabinet since, as Goh told the Malaysian leaders on 20 July, the "only ones privy to this" were Lee, Lim Kim San [Singapore's National Development Minister], E.W. Barker, Singapore's Law Minister] and himself. Toh and Rajaratnam, Goh told Razak, were "too deeply involved" in the MSC to consider any rearrangements.

Goh secured Razak and Ismail's agreement on three issues at this 20 July meeting:

- Singapore's separation from Malaysia "must be presented as a *fait accompli* to the British" so they could not prevent it.
- The constitutional amendments to make Singapore independent should be passed no later than 9 August, when the Federal Parliament next convened.
- Singapore's Minister for Law Barker would draft the legal documents and show them to the Malaysians within a week to 10 days.

Goh recorded that Razak was not only greatly relieved, but also grateful to Goh for "getting this solution on the move".

The next day (21 July), Goh learnt from Ghazali Shafie,[8] the Secretary-General of the Malaysian Ministry of External Affairs, that the Tunku had already given instructions to "return Singapore to Lee Kuan Yew" if no way to avoid communal trouble could be found. Ghazali, who had not been at previous negotiations, had been present at a lunch meeting between the Tunku and Lee on 14 April 1965, where the Malaysian leader had asked Lee to "list all complaints to Ghazali", as Lee revealed in his oral history interview in 1982.

The PAP led the formation of the Malaysian Solidarity Convention which was set up to pressure the Tunku's National Front. The first meeting of the convention was held at Singapore's National Theatre on 6 June 1965. From left: Chairman of Machinda Party of Sarawak Michael Buma; Chan Yoon Onn of Malaysia's People's Progressive Party; Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister and Chairman of Malaysian Solidarity Convention Toh Chin Chye; Chairman of Sarawak United People's Party Ong Kee Hui; and Secretary-General of United Democratic Party Lim Chong Eu. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980002890 - 0055).*

Goh Keng Swee's Notes on His Meeting with Acting Malaysian Prime Minister Abdul Razak and Minister of Home Affairs Ismail Abdul Rahman on 20 July 1965

Meeting: 20 July 1965, Tun Razak's office,
1105 to 1155 hours
Present: Myself, Razak, Ismail

I said that Lee, Lim [Kim San], Barker & myself are only ones privy to this. Toh and Rajaratnam too deeply involved in [Malaysian] Solidarity Convention. We should be able to carry the party if business properly handled. Any premature leak will jeopardise scheme. Our side are agreed to secession of Singapore as sovereign, independent state as this appears the only practical way of avoiding impending calamity. But speed is of the essence if scheme is to work.

Razak made two points: First to confirm that Lee is in favour. I said yes, provided it is done quickly, before his commitment and involvement in [Malaysian] Solidarity Convention makes it impossible for him to get out. Ismail accepted the point. Razak appeared both relieved and incredulous, the latter because he half expected Lee to reject the scheme. I explained Lee was realistic enough to see that a collision was imminent and that the consequences of such were incalculable.

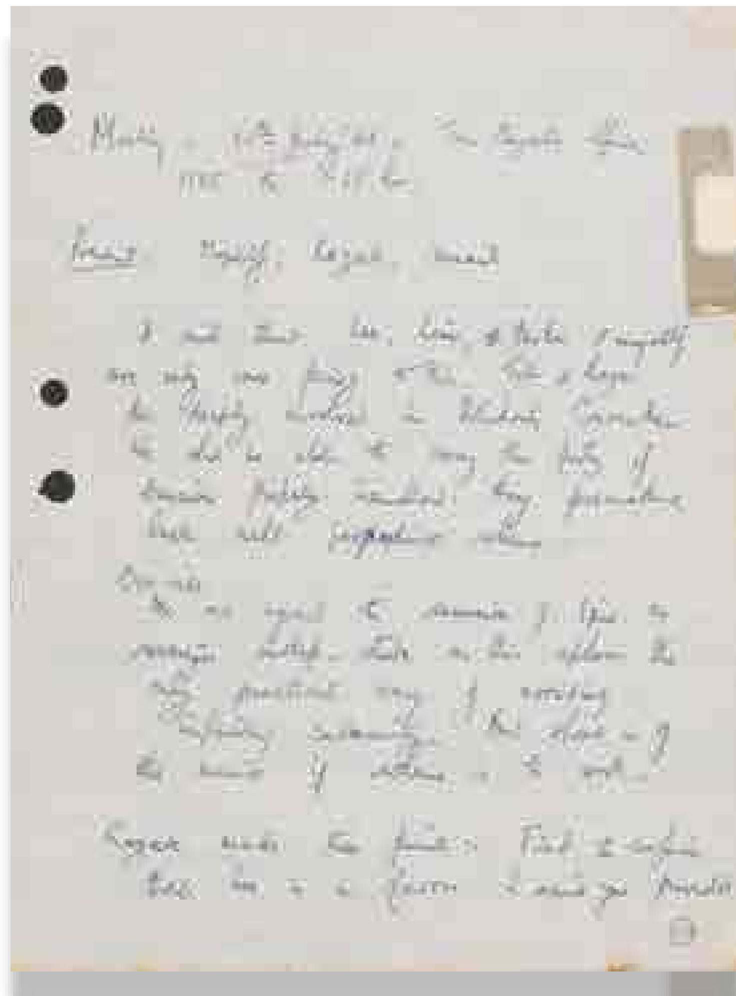
The second point Razak made was that the secession must be a joint move i.e. PAP [People's Action Party] must support it. I said this is possible only if immediate action is taken, if there is no leakage to blow up the works.

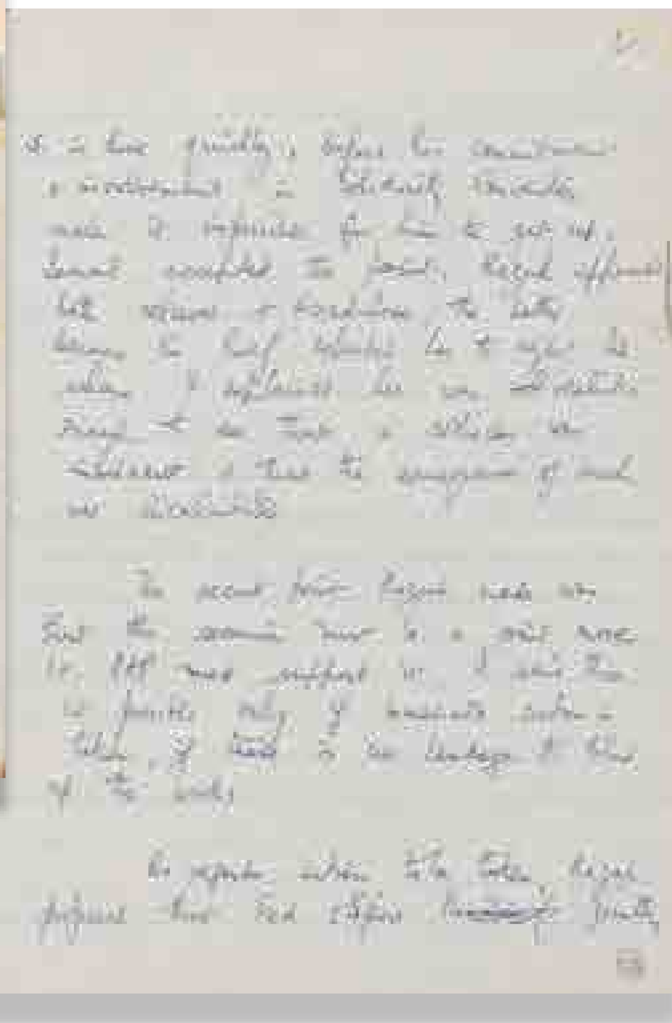
As regards action to be taken, Razak proposed that Federation and Singapore jointly tell the British of our intentions. He felt the British will agree if we all stood firm.

I pointed out that this course of action will fail.

In the course of desultory exchanges, Ismail asked Razak if he should not fly to see the Tunku. Razak said no, it was not necessary to involve the Tunku at this stage. Obviously this is a ploy. Ghazali told me on the golf course in the morning of 21 July that he had a message from Tunku: "If no way to avoid communal trouble can be found, return Singapore to Lee Kuan Yew." Ghazali added Tunku spoke while in hospital and when in a depressed state of mind. He hoped things will never come to this pass.

My interpretation of British policy is that they are backing PAP to the hilt as a co-partner in governing Malaysia. They believe that the MCA [Malaysian Chinese Association] will sooner or later lose the leadership of the Chinese to the PAP and a PAP–Umno coalition will result. The British believe this to be in their interest because they believe with PAP in the government, there is no risk of Malaysia joining Indonesia, closing their bases etc. Both Razak and Ismail confirmed that their interpretation of British intentions was exactly as I set out above. This established credibility in the soundness of my judgement that the British will never agree to the scheme.

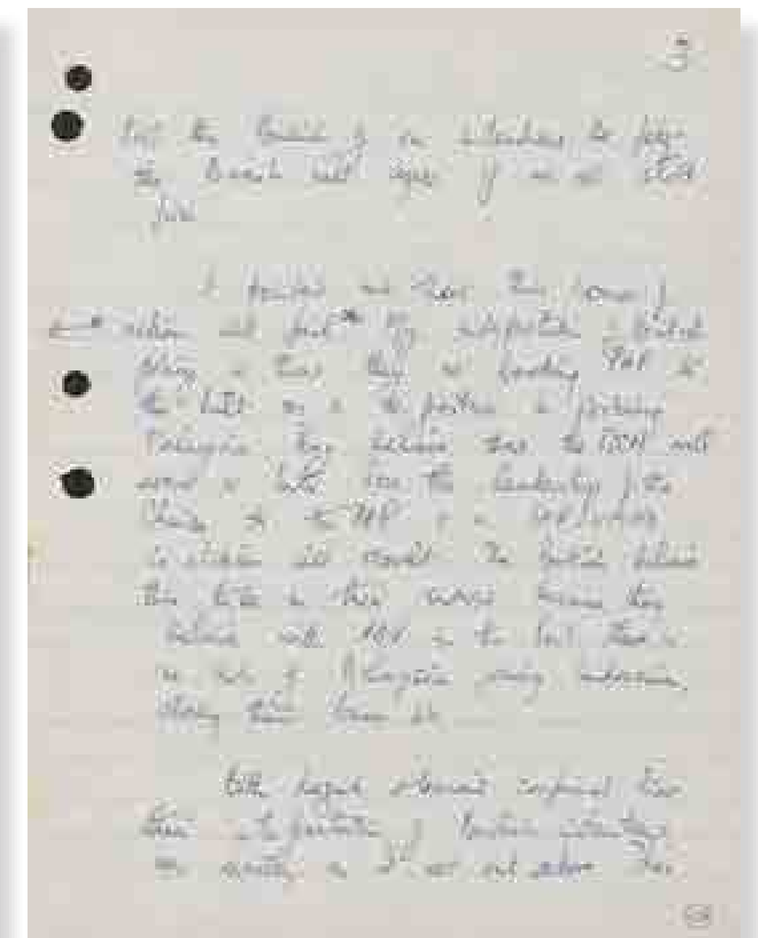




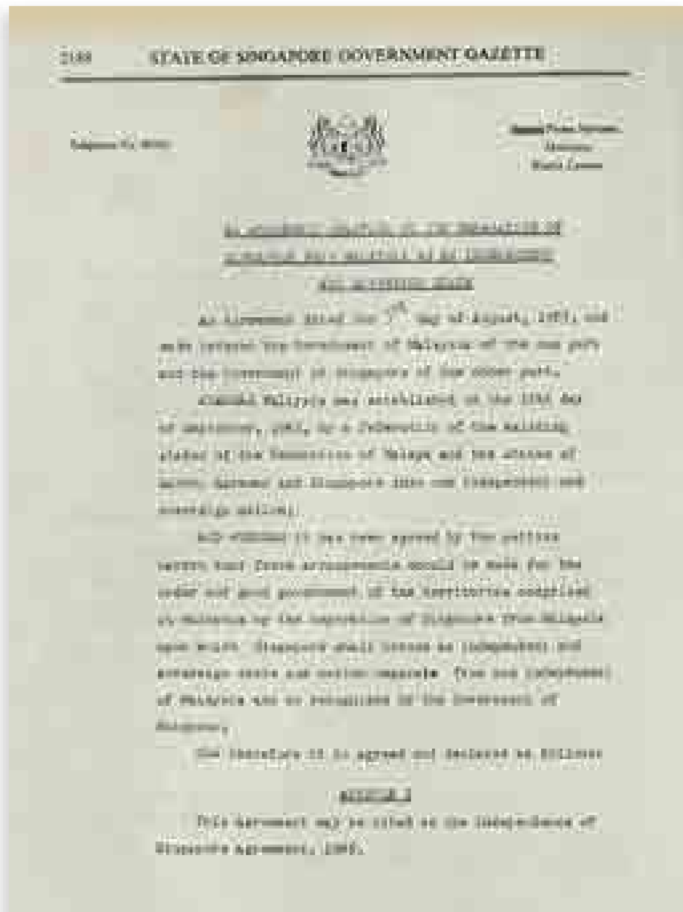
The first two pages of Goh Keng Swee's handwritten notes on his meeting with Acting Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein and Malaysian Minister of Home Affairs Ismail Abdul Rahman, 20 July 1965. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein (left) with Singapore's Minister for Finance Goh Keng Swee, 1973. The former and his delegation were on a three-day official visit to Singapore. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980002748 - 0002).*

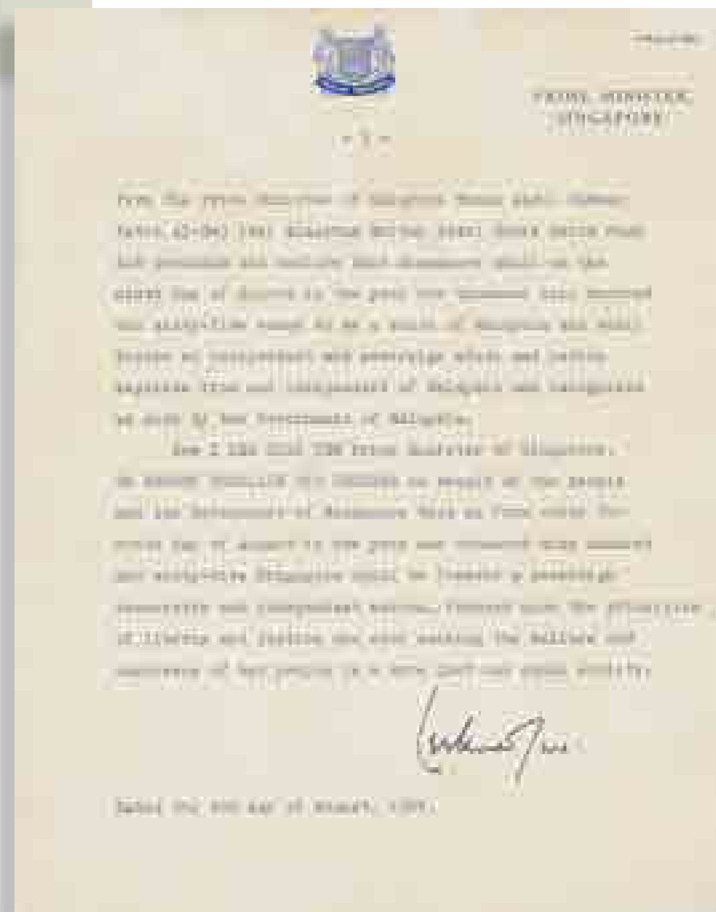
"I'd had enough of Malaysia. I just wanted to get out. I could see no future in it, that the political cost was dreadful and the economic benefits, well, didn't exist. So it was an exercise in futility." – Goh Keng Swee



These lines on the left were written on the reverse side of the preceding page (the second page of the note) and were intended to be read at the point where Goh Keng Swee drew an asterisk in the second paragraph of the third page. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*


STATE OF SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT GAZETTE

PRIME MINISTER
SINGAPORE


PRIME MINISTER
SINGAPORE

I then proposed that it must be presented as a *fait accompli* to the British. This should be done no later than 9 August, when Parliament re-assembles. The Constitutional amendments may be made granting Singapore independence – all three readings to take place on that date.

Ismail readily agreed to this proposal. Razak was greatly amused and said that perhaps PAP tactics were the best. I said I saw no objection if Lord Head [Antony Head; British High Commissioner] were informed as an act of courtesy of our intentions at 9.30 am on 9 August, half an hour before the Bill of Independence for Singapore is introduced. This was received with great merriment.

Ismail said two things were necessary – an amendment to the Constitution making secession of Singapore possible and an act giving effect to this article. He said that in the interests of security, civil servants should not be brought into this work and asked if we could do it. I said Eddie Barker will try a draft which we will show them in a week to 10 days' time. This was agreed to. It shows Ismail had done some homework.

Razak said a defence treaty between Singapore and Malaysian Government[s] should also be proceeded with. I did not follow him nor did I think [it] wise to enquire what sort of treaty he had in mind. The matter was not pursued then but it will be brought up again – I am certain of that – but our best line may be to say this can wait until after independence or if he disagrees to it, to ask him to prepare a draft defence treaty himself. However, we should get this matter off if we could.

I impressed upon both of them the imperative need for secrecy and I think they understand this. I mentioned pointedly to Ismail that his expat[riate] civil servants must not be told anything about this.

All this was completed by 1130 hours or so. I sensed that Razak felt greatly relieved and was grateful to me for my contribution to getting this solution on the move. He really believed that this will not only avoid the calamity now dangerously impending, but also put an end to the tension and misery that he had to put up with in recent months.

The rest of the time was spent on pleasantries as Razak insisted that I should not leave so early. He also arranged for a police car to take me to the airport transit lounge on my homeward journey so as to avoid journalists etc. ♦

(Left) The first page of the separation agreement relating to the separation of Singapore from Malaysia, dated 7 August 1965. It was signed by the leaders of Singapore and Malaysia. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) The Proclamation of Singapore as an "independent and sovereign state and nation" signed by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on 9 August 1965. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

NOTES

1 Albert Lau, "Separation," in *The Albatross File: Inside Separation*, ed. Susan Sim (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore and Straits Times Press, 2025), 44–97. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 959.5705 ALB); Tan Tai Yong, "Merger," *The Albatross File*, 18–43.

2 By the time Goh made the suggestion to Razak on 15 July 1965 that both countries should go their separate ways, the Tunku had already come to the same conclusion. And Razak was aware because the Tunku had written to him on 1 July that they might "have no choice but to cut out Singapore from Malaysia in order to save the rest of the body from gangrene" (Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj, *Looking Back: Monday Musings and Memories* [Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, 1977]. [From National Library Singapore, call no. RSEA 959.5 ABD]). The Tunku had also told Razak that "it would be a good time to talk with him [Lee Kuan Yew] now", which Razak might have interpreted as sounding out Lee on the idea of separation, a task he passed on to Goh at their 15 July meeting.

3 Sim, *The Albatross File*, 351.

4 Tan Siok Sun, *Goh Keng Swee: A Portrait* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2007). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 959.5704092 TAN)

5 Neither Goh nor Lee [Kuan Yew], in their oral history interviews, put a date to this first meeting between Goh and Razak in July 1965, except to note that it took place a few days after Goh's return to Singapore in early July. Singapore historian Albert Lau, in his 1998 account of the negotiations leading to Separation, used the 13 July 1965 date that Australian High Commissioner Tom Critchley first reported might have been the day Goh went to Kuala Lumpur to offer Razak a "new Singapore initiative" (Cablegram 1795, Critchley to Canberra, 16 August 1965). Critchley subsequently corrected the date to 15 July 1965 in a follow-up cable, writing that "Mr Tan Siew Sin has checked up for me and tells me that Dr Goh Keng Swee first raised the disengagement when he came to Kuala Lumpur on July 15 (not the 13th as stated in my telegram)" (Savingram 40, Critchley to Canberra, 24 August 1965). In his essay on Separation in *The Albatross File*, Lau now uses 15 July 1965 as the date of Goh's meeting with Razak when Goh first suggested Singapore should become an independent state.

6 Mubin Sheppard, *Tunku, His Life and Times: The Authorized Biography of Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1995). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 959.5051092 SHE)

7 Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Times Editions: Singapore Press Holdings, 1998). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 959.5705092 LEE)

8 Ghazali Shafie, who served from 1959 to 1970 as Secretary-General of the Malaysian Ministry of External Affairs (which became the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1966), was later appointed Minister of Home Affairs, and then Foreign Affairs.

ALBATROSS EXHIBITION AND BOOK

The Albatross File is a secret file kept by Minister for Finance Goh Keng Swee, documenting the secret talks that led to Singapore's separation from Malaysia. It contains Cabinet papers, memorandums as well as Goh's handwritten notes of his discussions with Malaysian leaders in the tense days, weeks and months leading to Singapore's independence on 9 August 1965. The original Albatross File has been in the custody of the National Archives of Singapore since 1996.

In conjunction with newly declassified documents and oral history accounts, a permanent exhibition, *The Albatross File: Singapore's Independence Declassified*, and a book, *The Albatross File: Inside Separation* (National Archives of Singapore and Straits Times Press, 2025), were launched in December 2025.

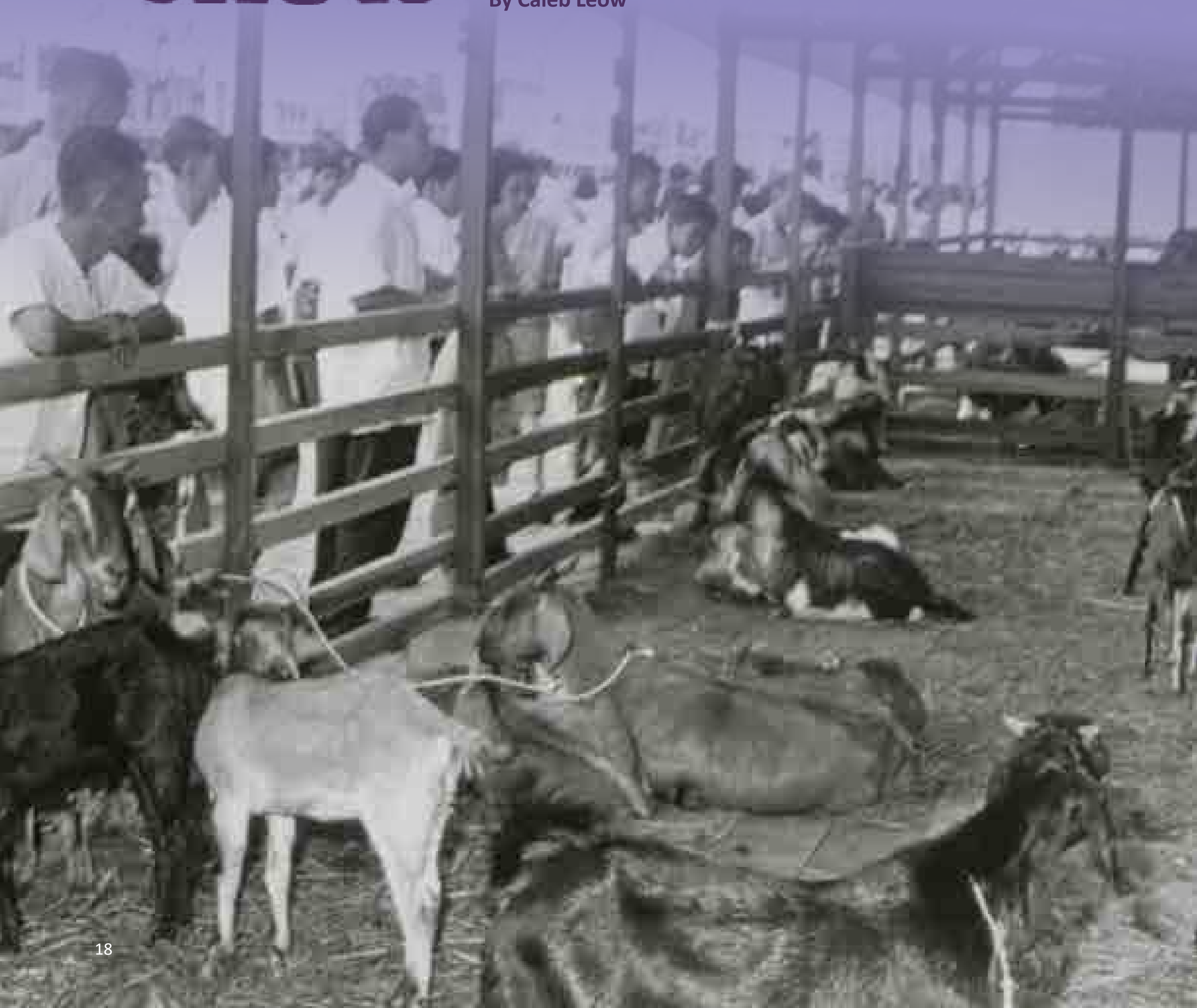
Jointly organised by the National Library Board and the Ministry of Digital Development and Information, the exhibition on Level 10 of the National Library Building aims to deepen visitors' understanding of Singapore's journey to independence through interactive storytelling, historical replays and first-person narratives of Singapore's founding fathers.

The book contains essays on merger and separation, documents from the Albatross File and other key documents relating to separation, as well as oral history interviews of key players involved. It is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library (call no. RSING 959.5705 ALB) and for loan at selected public libraries (call no. SING 959.5705 ALB). It is also available for sale at physical and online bookshops.

THE 1965 SINGAPORE AGRICULTURAL SHOW

Initially planned to encourage people to eat more eggs, the agricultural show eventually morphed into a mega event showcasing the achievements of farmers in Singapore.

By Caleb Leow



Caleb Leow is an Associate Librarian with the National Library Singapore, who works with the Singapore and Southeast Asia collections. His responsibilities include collection management, content development as well as providing reference and research services.

For just over a week in 1965, the heart of Singapore was filled with the sounds of grunting, mooing, bleating, gobbling, clucking and quacking. This is because some 13 stalls – filled with pigs, cows, goats, turkeys, chickens and ducks – had been set up in Kallang Park (where the Singapore Sports Hub now sits) for the Singapore Agricultural Show. Hundreds of thousands of curious city-dwellers made their way to the public park from 18 to 26 September to take in the sights and admire the vegetables, flowers and fruits – all locally produced – on display.[1]

In his speech at the opening of the event on 19 September, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew acknowledged that the idea of an agricultural show in Singapore had an air of improbability. "I would like to say that there is a little bit of the flair for greatness when we call this an agricultural show," he said. Yet what the show had achieved was something to be proud of, he noted. "You know, for an island of 214 square miles at low tide, and at high tide perhaps, two square miles less, to talk of agriculture is to take a deep breath and spread one's chest out, and I think that is what Singapore has been doing."[2]

The farm show shone a spotlight on Singapore's rural sector, which had taken on newfound importance in the immediate wake of independence just a month prior. The show's abundant display of livestock and fresh produce seemed to represent, at a vulnerable historical moment, a budding nation's potential to survive and thrive. Although its timing was fortuitous, the event had been months in the making and had been set in motion by something far more quotidian than a desire to demonstrate strength. It all started because Singapore had too many eggs.

(Facing page) Goats on display at the agricultural show, 1965. *Primary Production Department Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20060000819 - 0069).*

(Right) Entrance to the agricultural show, 1965. *Primary Production Department Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20060000820 - 0022).*

Hatching a Plan

On 21 March 1965, the *Straits Times* reported that an egg glut "had resulted in a drop of farm price from about 8½ cents to 6½ cents an egg". Coupled with the increased price of chicken feed, the decrease in profits placed a strain on the livelihood of some 150,000 farmers in the livestock industry.[3]

Ho Seng Choon, an egg farmer who became one of the organisers of the agricultural show, turned to the Primary Production Department (PPD) for help. The department had been formed in 1959 under the Ministry of National Development to work closely with farmers to promote the interests of rural industry. The PPD decided that the egg farmers needed assistance. "While we encourage exports of eggs, we will also launch a campaign to encourage local people to eat more eggs," said Cheng Tong Fatt, the director of the PPD. "This will be carried out through the Press, radio, television, schools and exhibitions."[4]

The 1965 egg glut led to the formation of a 20-man action committee comprising personnel from the PPD and two farmer organisations – the Singapore Stockfeed Manufacturers' Association and the Singapore Livestock Farmers' Association.[5] These two associations would work closely with the PPD to organise the campaign later in the year.

Although the egg glut crisis eventually improved, the organisers still went ahead with the plan to organise a campaign and Ho began to devise new ways to promote local agriculture. "[The egg crisis] had stabilised, but we couldn't stop there, we needed to find new ways to go further, to showcase the development of farming in Singapore," he said ("这个问题稳定下来，稳定下来我们不能够停在那边，我们要想办法推动，表现我们新加坡的农业发展").[6]

This led to the idea of a large-scale agricultural show mooted by Ho and another farmer, Ng Hung Theng. The duo said in jest that each of them would require $50,000, a sum Cheng was in fact open to providing. He even offered to deploy the full PPD team of 21 personnel to help when Ho claimed that an event of such a scale would be impossible to manage alone. It was thus only with the support of the PPD that the agricultural show managed to reach the impressive scale it did, costing almost $100,000 in the end, the precise amount promised by Cheng to the two farmers.[7]

As the project grew in scope, it attracted the attention of the prime minister. In his oral history interview, Ho recounted the anecdote of Lee turning down the invitation to open the show, assuming that it would be a small-scale event requiring, at most, the presence of a high-ranking minister ("他认为小规模的东西，最好你放一个高级政府官员就好"). However, unbeknownst to Ho and the other organisers, Lee eventually went to check out the progress of the event, and he was so impressed that he decided to open the show himself ("后来我们做好了，不懂他自己跑去看，看了以后，打电话到局长那边去，要放他的名，他要去剪彩，所以那天他去剪彩").[8]

A Feast for the Eyes

The highlight of the show was a display by 526 farmers over 13 stalls. There were six stalls for pigs, cattle and goats, three for poultry, ducks and eggs, while the remaining four displayed vegetables, flowers and fruits. These were not only exhibited for the public but were also part of a competition. The farmers who showcased the best "eggs, fowls, ducks, geese, pigs, goats, cattle, flowers, vegetables, fruits, singing birds and aquarium fish" stood to win a total of $20,000 in cash, as well as other prizes such as modern farming equipment, implements, animal feed, fertilisers, pesticides and veterinary drugs.[9]

The agricultural show was only one of the attractions of the event. Variety shows were staged at the far end of the park, near the seafront, while Chinese *wayang* (operas) were performed on a smaller stage nearby. Other forms of entertainment included band performances, a mini zoo, an amusement park for children, a Chinese riddle competition and even a Chinese chess competition. Visitors also participated in a lucky dip. There were vegetables, fruits, eggs and poultry sold at lower prices, and hawker stalls and restaurants offering special dishes and delicacies.[10]

(Above) Chinese riddle competition organised by Havelock Road Community Centre Riddle Club at the agricultural show, 1965. *Primary Production Department Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20060000820 - 0010).*

(Right) Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (third from left) accompanied by Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of National Development Howe Yoon Chong (second from left) and officials at the opening of the agricultural show, 1965. *Primary Production Department Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20060000819 - 0053).*

The agricultural show from 18 to 26 September 1965 drew an estimated 300,000 visitors. *Primary Production Department Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20060000819 - 0086).*

The agricultural show turned out to be a crowd pleaser. Over the course of nine days, it drew a total of some 300,000 visitors.[11] In the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* newspaper, a visitor by the name of Wu She wrote: "While exhibitions are a regular feature in Singapore, this agricultural show was in a whole different league."[12] Another visitor, Jia Ling, described how different generations of visitors clustered around different activities: "Elderly folk were so engrossed in the Chinese operas that they forgot about the many other stalls they had yet to visit, youngsters were enraptured by the frenetic music, while kids snuck off to squat under the silver screen."[13]

Beyond just entertaining the public, one of the objectives of the event was to draw attention to the close ties between the PPD and farmers. "My department is intensifying the drive to promote better and more modern agriculture with the help of the two associations to step up production," said Cheng. "Furthermore, many new industries have been established to produce animal feeds, fertilisers and veterinary drugs, and many more are expected to be formed to produce agricultural equipment and implements and allied products deriving their raw materials from agriculture."[14]

Across the stalls of livestock and fresh produce were sheds housing "tractors and other types of machinery, gardening tools, animal feeds, fertilisers, pesticides, veterinary drugs, seeds, hatcheries and other equipment", giving farmers the chance to be exposed to the latest technology and farming equipment. Exhibition booths were also set up by the PPD and the Urban and Rural Services Committee to showcase the work done by the government in improving the lives of the rural population, while nightly screenings at the entrance of the park highlighted the PPD's role in helping farmers produce better crops, livestock and poultry.[15]

Since the creation of the PPD in 1959, the department had been working closely with farmers to improve their livelihood via a range of free and subsidised services. A ploughing service introduced at the end of 1959 charged $20 per acre on a non-profit basis, while an experimental plant protection service was launched in October 1961 to combat pests and crop diseases. The PPD also provided demonstrations on the correct use of modern insecticides and fungicides as well as produced improved breeds of pigs and poultry which were then sold to farmers at low prices. As a result, pig production in 1964 increased by 14 percent, ducks by 50 percent, eggs by 20 percent and vegetables by 2.5 percent over the previous year.[16]

To commemorate the occasion, the organising committee produced a special publication for the show titled《新嘉坡农业展览会特刊》(Special Issue of the Singapore Agricultural Exhibition), which included messages from members of the organising committee, articles on recent innovations in farming, and advertisements by local feed companies, trading companies and international pharmaceutical companies.[17]

Cultivating Ties

In addition to showcasing Singapore's farming sector, the agricultural show also had another dimension: it was an effort to placate the rural population who had become unhappy following the government's resettlement of farmers and squatters in rural areas. The resettlement had begun in 1955 to make space for the development of Queenstown public housing estate, Singapore's first satellite town. These efforts intensified from the early 1960s onwards, after Singapore was granted full internal self-governance, with the establishment of the Housing & Development Board (HDB) in 1960.[18]

Just a year later, clearance and resettlement began for the development of Singapore's second satellite town, Toa Payoh, which was met with resistance from the ground.[19] In a 1997 oral history interview, Alan Choe, the first architect-planner of the HDB, noted the unpopularity of such measures due to the disruption it caused to farmers. "Resettlement was a big problem because we are moving… even in the case of Toa Payoh, we are moving into an area where Toa Payoh had farms. Can you imagine a family that is doing farming for many many years, living off the ground, suddenly you go in and you tell them, 'Look I want to take over your land, I want to do public housing and in return I am going to pay you compensation'."[20]

Such rural unrest was alluded to by Minister for National Development Lim Kim San during his speech at a news conference in November 1964 announcing the commencement of work for the Toa Payoh satellite town. Lim blamed the postponement of the project on "the organised resistance mounted by the anti-nationalist pro-Communist group, who instigated the peaceful squatters in Toa Payoh to resist clearance work in this area for almost two years".[21]

In a speech delivered at a prize-giving ceremony on 27 September 1965 for the winners of the show's competitions, the Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of National Development, Ho Cheng Choon, took the opportunity to highlight how the success of the show "demonstrated that the farmers and rural people were not forgotten by the Government". He added that it would "remove the grounds on which the pro-Communist anti-national elements have been accusing the Government of neglecting the rural people and the farmers." He also pointed out that if the government had not worked together with the rural population, there would not be so many exhibits on display at the show, and that surplus poultry, pigs and eggs would not be exported to Malaysia and neighbouring countries.[22]

In a message published by the *Straits Times* on 19 September 1965, Minister for Law and National Development E.W. Barker also praised the show's success which, in his words, served as an "eloquent refutation of the lies that have been spread by pro-Communist agitators who have been trying to deceive the rural residents into believing that they are being ill-treated by the Singapore government". The agricultural show highlighted the achievements and success brought about by the hard work of both the farming population and the government, he said. Efforts by the government included the "provision of extension services, assistance and advice, with a view to increasing the productivity of our farming community, bringing down the cost of production and generally improving the standard of living of the rural residents".[23]

A Fleeting Bloom

The success of the show led Ho to say that "exhibitions of this nature should be held periodically". However, newspaper records seem to indicate that this was the last show of its kind to be organised. A two-day agricultural show was held in Choa Chu Kang in August 1966, but it was on a much smaller scale and did not receive the same kind of national attention as the 1965 show.[24]

In the years that followed, agriculture increasingly faded from the national consciousness as a result of industrialisation and urbanisation. The land available for farms was reduced from 14,000 ha in the 1960s to about 8,400 ha in the 1970s.[25] Eventually, Singapore's rural population was resettled into new HDB housing estates.

A special publication produced by the organising committee of the 1965 agricultural show. It included messages from members of the organising committee and articles on recent innovations in farming. *Image reproduced from 新嘉坡农业展览会特刊 [Special Publication of the Singapore Agricultural Show] (Singapore: Primary Production Department, 1965). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 338.1095957 SIN).*

Turkeys on display at the agricultural show, 1965. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980000759 - 0080).*

The process of urbanisation would only intensify over the next half century. Given Singapore's small size, the ease of importing food, and the declining importance of agriculture to the economy compared to other sectors, it appeared that farming did not have a bright future. However, in 2019, the government announced a push to develop the country's agri-food sector. It set a "30 by 30" goal to domestically produce 30 percent of the country's nutritional needs by 2030. This move was a response to possible resource scarcity resulting from climate change.[26]

This goal has since been scaled down. In November 2025, a more modest target was revealed: to produce 20 percent of Singapore's fibre consumption needs and 30 percent of its protein consumption needs by 2035. (In 2024, about 8 percent of fibre and 26 percent of protein consumed in Singapore were produced domestically, reported the *Straits Times*.)[27]

These new targets were announced after a year-long review of the original "30 by 30" goal. "We acknowledged that this was a challenging aspiration given our small and under-developed agri-food sector, our limited land resources and high operating cost environment," said Minister for Sustainability and the Environment Grace Fu at the opening of the Asia-Pacific Agri-Food Innovation Summit on 4 November 2025.[28]

The reduced targets reflect both a recognition of the challenges facing the agri-food sector as well as Singapore's determination to work towards some measure of food self-sufficiency. As both the importance and difficulties of developing agriculture in Singapore are making the news again, it is perhaps high time to pay tribute to the contributions and achievements of Singapore's early farmers. ♦

NOTES

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SINGAPORE'S EARLY JAPANESE COMMUNITY ON A RARE MAP

A rare Japanese-English street map of Singapore tells the forgotten stories of the Japanese community who left their mark here in the early 20th century.

By Gracie Lee

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Within the National Library's Rare Materials Collection lies a cartographic treasure that opens a window into Singapore's multicultural past. The map titled *Map of Singapore* = 新嘉坡市街地圖 (*Shingapōru Shigai Chizu*) tells a story of the thriving Japanese diaspora that once called this bustling port city home.[1]

The undated work, measuring 54 cm by 79 cm, was likely published in 1920, making it one of the earliest Japanese street maps of Singapore. Drawn to a scale of 1:5 miles, the map presents a detailed layout of Singapore town, accompanied by an inset map of the island of Singapore. The map appears to be an adaptation of Fraser and Neave's 1913 *Map of Singapore Showing the Principal Residences and Places of Interest*,[2] with four significant additions: the inset map, Japanese place names as well as railway and tramway lines.

While many place names are simply transliterations of their English names, what makes this Japanese map fascinating are the place names and locations that the map creator had carefully marked out for their special importance to the early Japanese community.

Detail from the map titled *Map of Singapore* = 新嘉坡市街地圖 (*Shingapōru Shigai Chizu*), likely published in 1920. It is one of the earliest Japanese street maps of Singapore. (*From National Library Singapore, call no. RRARE 912.5957 MAP).*

Kobunkan bookstore (2nd shophouse from the right) and Iroha Motor Cars & Co. (extreme right) at 167 and 168 Middle Road respectively, c. 1910s. The handwritten caption behind the photograph reads 英領新架坡 好文館 いろは自動車 山﨑・竹井経営 [泰来當質店] (Eiryō Shingapōru Kōbunkan Iroha Jidōsha Yamasaki・Takei keiei [Tài Lái Dāng Zhìdiàn], which translates as "British-governed Singapore / Kobunkan and Iroha Motor Cars / Managed by Yamsaki & Takei / Chop Thai Loy Pawn Shop". *Courtesy of Tanabe Tsukasa.*

The map had originally been published in January 1919 to commemorate Singapore's centenary. This first edition featured a distinctive cartouche (a decorative emblem on a map that contains the title, author, general description, legend, scale bar, etc.) and advertisements from local Japanese businesses printed on the reverse.[3] The library's copy, however, appears to be from a later 1920 printing as it lacks these visual elements.[4]

Location of Kobunkan bookstore (circled in red) on Middle Road. *Image reproduced from* 戦前シンガポールの日本人社会: 写真と記録 = *Prewar Japanese Community in Singapore: Photographs and Records (Senzen Shingapōru no Nihonjin Shakai: Shashin to Kiroku).* シンガポール: シンガポール日本人会 *(Shingapōru: Shingapōru Nihonjinkai), 2004, 30–31. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 305.895605957 PRE). Courtesy of The Japanese Association Singapore.*

Kobunkan: Bookstore and Publisher

The publisher's name, Kobunkan, appears on the map in both Japanese and English as 好文館出版部 (Kōbunkan Shuppanbu; Kobunkan Publishing Department) and Kohbunkwan Singapore.[5] Kobunkan was one of Singapore's pioneering Japanese bookstores and publishers,[6] with a long-established presence at 167 Middle Road.[7]

The bookstore offered an extensive array of Japanese products ranging from newspapers, magazines, books and maps to stationery and picture postcards. Its customers included the employees of leading Japanese firms in the commercial district of Raffles Place and Collyer Quay as well as small Japanese businesses clustered around Middle Road and North Bridge Road. The latter comprised medical and dental clinics, retail shops, grocery stores, photo studios, barbershops, tailors, hotels, inns and restaurants.

Kobunkan's bestsellers revealed the community's continued links with Japan. Major newspapers such as *Asahi Shimbun* (朝日新聞), *Osaka Mainichi* (大阪毎日) and *Tokyo Nichi Nichi* (東京日日) provided vital news from home. Literary and general interest magazines such as *The Sun* (太陽; Taiyō), *The Central Review* (中央公論; Chūō Kōron), *Reform* (改造; Kaizō), and *Japan and the Japanese* (日本及日本人; Nihon oyobi Nihonjin) attracted a steady readership among white-collar workers like employees of trading companies and banks.

But perhaps more unusual was Kobunkan's largest customer base – the *karayuki-san*.[8] Sold into prostitution, these Japanese women lived and worked in Japanese brothels located in and around Malay Street, which was within walking distance to the bookstore. They typically favoured lifestyle and women's magazines such as *Kodan World* (講談世界; Kōdan Sekai), *Women's World* (婦人世界; Fujin Sekai) and *Friend of the Housewife* (主婦の友; Shufu no Tomo).[9]

Kobunkan's reach also extended beyond Singapore's borders, serving Japanese plantation workers in Johor and expatriate communities across British Malaya, the Dutch East Indies and British North Borneo.[10] The bookstore was also the local distributor for Sakura Beer and the Kangaroo brand of canned Japanese fishcakes – *chikuwa* and *kamaboko*.[11]

From Pearl Diver to Entrepreneur

This curious connection between Japanese fishcakes, kangaroos and Singapore becomes clear when we examine the life of Kobunkan's founder Yamasaki Eijirō (山崎 榮治郎),[12] whose remarkable journey took him from Japan to Singapore and Australia.[13]

Born in 1871 in Ehime Prefecture, Japan, Yamasaki first arrived in Singapore as a crew member aboard a British ship bound for India. Through a local broker in Singapore, Yamasaki secured work as a pearl diver in Broome, Western Australia, where the global demand for pearl buttons had created a booming industry that attracted many Japanese settlers.[14] Yamasaki's entrepreneurial drive soon led him to general trading, importing Japanese goods to Broome via shipping agents in Singapore and establishing the commercial network that would later pave his move to Singapore.

Also, while in Australia, Yamasaki made a foray into Malayan rubber. His 300-acre Ehime Rubber Estate (愛媛ゴム園; Ehime Gomu-en), established between 1909 and 1910, was one of the earliest rubber plantation developments along the Johor River.[15]

The Move to Singapore

When Yamasaki relocated to Singapore in 1912,[16] the knowledge and experience that he had gained from his Australian ventures stood him in good stead. He initially established his wholesale trading business from Nippon Hotel (日本ホテル; Nippon Hoteru) on Beach Road, selling Australian beef and Kangaroo brand canned food manufactured by his own Sanyu Trading Company Canning Factory (三友商會鑵詰製造所; Sanyū Shōkai Kanzume Seizōsho) back in Ehime Prefecture.[17]

(Left) Portrait of Yamasaki Eijirō from a postcard of his general store in Broome, Western Australia, c. 1909. *Photo by Aussie~mobs. From flickr.*

(Right) Two *karayuki-san* seated along a five-footway, c. 1870s–1910s. *Image reproduced from Sammlung von 19 originalphotographien aus Singapur (n.p.: n.p., 1880–1900). (From National Library Singapore, call no.RRARE 779.99595703 SAM).*

Recognising the growing demand for Japanese reading materials among Singapore's expanding Japanese community, he started Yamasaki Bookstore Section (山崎書林部; Yamasaki Shorinbu) in 1912.[18] Yamasaki's business quickly outgrew the hotel premises, which struggled to accommodate his three business arms: the book retail department, the merchandise department (山崎商品部; Yamasaki Shōhinbu) and the Sanyu Trading Company operations.

In May 1913, Yamasaki relocated his operations to the more spacious 167 Middle Road.[19] The bookstore was renamed Kobunkan (好文館) in 1914 and, by 1915, had undergone significant expansion with the establishment of a publishing division helmed by Kōno Kōhei (河野公平), a seasoned newspaper editor from Ehime.[20]

Yamasaki's entrepreneurial ambitions were not confined to general trade and books alone. In 1913, he established Iroha Motor Cars & Co. (いろは自動車商会; Iroha Jidōsha Shōkai),[21] which employed Malay drivers to provide transportation services tailored specifically to the Japanese community's needs. These included trips to and from the Japanese cemetery for funerals, visits to the entertainment and red-light districts,[22] recreational drives for *karayuki-san* and passenger transfers for European vessels docked at the Singapore harbour. The growth in the business led to its expansion and he leased the adjacent shophouse unit at 168 Middle Road.

The End of an Era

In 1920, Yamasaki and his wife left Singapore, presumably to return permanently to Japan. The local Japanese newspaper carried a farewell notice where he expressed his gratitude to the community for their send-off. His departure marked the beginning of a decline of his businesses. Entrusted to co-manager Takei Kurayoshi (竹井庫敬) and others, these businesses struggled against the economic headwinds of the early 1920s – a slump in rubber prices and the 1920 ban on Japanese prostitution – before finally closing in 1923.[23]

Mapping a Community: Main Map

The Japanese Association (日本人會; Nihonjin-kai) and the Japanese Elementary School (日本人小學校; Nihonjin Shōgakkō)
Location on map: Short Street

The Japanese Association, established in 1915, and the Japanese School, founded in 1912, were both situated on Short Street. The association operated from Short Street between 1918 and 1920, while the school remained there until 1921. The school was first located on Middle Road before moving to Bencoolen Street, Wilkie Road and then Short Street.[24]

A cornerstone of the Japanese community, the association managed the Japanese School, maintained the Japanese cemetery from 1917 onward and established the Japanese Club in 1922. The association played a pivotal role in fostering the social and cultural life of the Japanese community in Singapore. The association is located on Adam Road today, while the school has three campuses in Clementi, Changi and West Coast.

Japanese Commercial Museum (日本商品陳列館; Nihon Shōhin Chinretsu-kan)
Location on map: 77 Bras Basah Road

The Japanese Commercial Museum was established in 1918 by the South Seas Association (南洋協会; Nan'yō Kyōkai) to further Japan's commercial and trade expansion into the South Seas.[25] Despite its name, the institution was not a museum in the conventional sense, but rather a showcase for Japanese-made merchandise.[26]

Route to Japanese Cemetery (日本人墓地行; Nihonjin Bochi-yuki)
Location on map: Serangoon Road

Serangoon Road is marked on the map as 日本人墓地行 (Route to the Japanese Cemetery), highlighting its importance as the main thoroughfare connecting Middle Road to the cemetery. The road served as the principal route for cemetery visitors and funeral processions travelling from Middle Road – where most of the early Japanese community lived and worked – to the cemetery in Yio Chu Kang. Notably, the cemetery, where many of Singapore's long-term Japanese residents were buried, was featured as a destination in Japanese guidebooks of the early 20th century.[27] The cemetery stopped taking burials in 1973 and became the Japanese Cemetery Park in 1987.[28]

Japanese Consulate (領事館; Ryōjikan)
Location on map: Raffles Chambers, Raffles Place

The Japanese Consulate established its office in Raffles Chambers in 1917, one of several locations it would occupy since its founding in 1879. The consulate's first premises was on North Bridge Road where Hoo Ah Kay (popularly known as Whampoa) served as the first honorary Japanese Consul. Following Hoo's death in 1880, the position was left vacant until Nakagawa Tsunejirō (中川恒次郎) was appointed as the first acting consul in 1889, with his office situated on Sophia Road.[29]

Mitsubishi Branch Office (三菱出張所; Mitsubishi Shutchōjo)
Location on map: Raffles Chambers, Raffles Place

Trading company Mitsubishi established a representative office in Singapore in 1917 after identifying Singapore as its strategic base for expansion into British Malaya, the Dutch East Indies and India. This move was part of a broader trend of Japanese trading companies and merchants setting up operations in Raffles Place and High Street during the late 1910s to capitalise on the growing demand for Japanese goods during and after the First World War (1914–18). Reduced trade between Singapore and Europe during the war had created an opportunity for Japan to increase its commercial presence in Southeast Asia.[30]

Bank of Taiwan Branch (台銀支店; Taigin Shiten)
Location on map: 1 Battery Road

The Bank of Taiwan, operating under the Japanese colonial administration in Taiwan, became the first Japanese bank to establish operations in Singapore in 1912.[31] The bank first opened at 100 Robinson Road before moving to Battery Road in 1916 where it was co-located with Mitsui Bussan Kaisha (三井物産会社), the first Japanese trading company in Singapore.[32] The Bank of Taiwan was formed in 1899 to serve as the central bank and development bank of Taiwan. It aimed to expand internationally to support Japan's economic expansion into South China and the South Seas.[33] The Singapore branch primarily handled foreign exchange transactions and loans to Japanese rubber planters and businessmen.[34]

Bank of Taiwan Company House No. 1 (台銀第一社宅; Taigin Daiichi Shataku)
Location on map: Osborne House, 11 Upper Wilkie Road

Known today as Mount Emily Villa, Osborne House served as the residence of the manager of the Bank of Taiwan during the late 1910s and then as the home of Singapore-based Japanese dentist Ikeda Jūkichi (池田重吉) in 1935. It later housed the Japanese Consulate-General between 1939 and 1941. After the Japanese Occupation, the building was used by the Ministry of Social Affairs' Social Welfare Department. In 1969, Mount Emily Girls' Home occupied the space followed by Wilkie Road Children's Home in the 1980s.[35] Today, the premises are occupied by The Private Museum.

Japanese Ship Wharf (日本船ワーフ; Nihon Fune Wāfu)
Location on map: Tanjong Pagar Wharves

This appears to be the berthing area for arriving Japanese ships.

Kuhara Branch Office (久原出張所; Kuhara Shutchōjo)
Location on map: 6 Scotts Road

The Singapore branch of the Kuhara Mining Company (久原鑛業株式會社; Kuhara Kōgyō Kabushiki Kaisha) was established in 1916. The company was founded in Japan in 1905 by Kuhara Fusanosuke (久原房之助), a prominent businessman and founder of several prominent Japanese companies, including Hitachi. As part of its overseas expansion plans, the company began conducting various explorations for oil and other mineral resources in the Dutch East Indies and Malaya. By 1920, its Singapore operations had grown to include the Kuhara Trading Company (久原商事株式會社; Kuhara Shōji Kabushiki Kaisha).[36]

Japanese Elementary School, 1910s. *Image reproduced from 伊藤友治郎 (Itō Tomojirō), 南洋群嶋写真画帖: 附南洋事情 = Picture Book of the South Sea Islands (Nan'yō Guntō Shashin Gachō: Fu Nan'yō Jijō). 英領ペナン市: 南洋調査会 (Eiryō Penan-shi: Nan'yō Chōsakai), 1914, 6. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RRARE 959 ITO).*

Japanese Commercial Museum. *Image reproduced from 南洋之產業. 壹之巻 = Tropical Industry (Nan'yō no Sangyō. Ichi no Ken). 新嘉坡: 新嘉坡商品陳列館 (Shingapōru: Shingapōru Shōhin Chinretsukan), 1920, 7. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RRARE 338.0595 NAN).*

Serangoon Road, the route to the Japanese Cemetery, c. 1911. *Arshak C. Galstaun Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980005502 - 0033).*

The Bank of Taiwan on Battery Road, c. 1930. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980001448 - 0067).*

The Girls' Home at 11 Upper Wilkie Road managed by the Social Welfare Department of the Ministry of Social Affairs, 1959. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980001968 - 0017).*

A postcard showing the shipping routes of Osaka Shosen Kaisha. Singapore appears as point no. 18 on the map. *(From National Library Singapore, call no. RRARE 952.03 LSB-[LSB]. Donated by Lim Shao Bin).*

Osaka Shosen Branch (大阪商船支店; Ōsaka Shōsen Shiten)
Location on map: 2 De Souza Street

Osaka Shosen Kaisha was one of Japan's major shipping companies that operated alongside the Nippon Yusen Kaisha (日本郵船会社) in Singapore. In 1918, the company established its Singapore branch office at 2 De Souza Street,[37] increasing its commercial shipping presence in the region. Prior to this expansion, local agent Guthrie and Co. had managed the company's shipping routes.[38]

Mitsui Company House No. 1 (三井第一社宅; Mitsui Daiichi Shataku)
Location on map: Draycot, Stevens Road

Draycot was once the residence of the manager of Mitsui Bussan Kaisha (三井物産会社). The property was more than a residential space; it was also a venue for hosting distinguished guests and business networking. Notable visitors included Dr Lim Boon Keng, a leader of the Chinese community in Singapore, and Marquis Saionji, a prominent Japanese statesman who stayed at Draycot while travelling to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference after the First World War.[39]

As Singapore's first Japanese trading company, Mitsui Bussan Kaisha began with a modest representative office at 8 Battery Road in 1891, occupying the upper floors of the Dispensary Building. Its initial aim was to secure contracts with European steamship companies to supply coal from Japan's largest coal mine, the Miike Mine. As business grew, Mitsui diversified into shipping, accounting, communications, insurance brokerage, and the import-export of various goods, including rice, electrical supplies, metals and metallic ores, marine products and textiles. The company's growing influence in Singapore's colonial business society earned it a place in the Singapore Chamber of Commerce in 1911.[40]

Consular Residence (領事官舎; Ryōji-kansha)
Location on map: Kinloss, Lady Hill, Orange Grove

Kinloss was constructed in 1903 as the private residence of Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander Murray, the colonial engineer and surveyor-general of the Straits Settlements.[41] Following Murray's departure from Singapore in 1906, the house became the residence of the Japanese Consul from 1909 to the 1920s.[42] During this period, Kinloss hosted several significant diplomatic events, including local celebrations of the Japanese Emperor's birthday and the coronation of Emperor Taishō in 1915. The residence also welcomed prominent guests, notably Prince Asaka Yasuhiko (朝香宮鳩彦王; Asaka-no-miya Yasuhiko-ō) during his stopover in Singapore in 1922 while en route to France for military studies.[43] ♦

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Scan the QR code to find out details of the inset map. Discover more about the prewar Japanese community in and around Middle Road from Curiocity (https://curiocity.nlb.gov.sg/mapping-middle-road-prewar-japanese-community-in-singapore/), and explore Japanese street maps of Singapore in the collections of the National Library Singapore and National Archives of Singapore.

NOTES

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2 Fraser and Neave Limited, *Map of Singapore Showing the Principal Residences and Places of Interests*, 1913, map. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. SP006064)

3 The cartouche reads: 開港百周年記念出版 (Kaikō Hyakushūnen Kinen Shuppan) [Port Centenary Commemorative Publication], 1 January 1919, map. Printed on the back of the map are advertisements from local Japanese businesses such as Miyako Hotel (都ホテル; Miyako Hoteru) and Hakuai Pharmacy (博愛藥房; Hakuai Yakubō) under the header 新嘉坡開港百周年記念合廣告 (Shingapōru Kaikō Hyakushūnen Kinen Gōkōkoku) [Singapore Port Centenary Commemorative Joint Advertisement]. See 文生書院（Bunsei Shoin Booksellers, Co., Ltd.）文生書院目録 2018 年: 中国・満州・朝鮮・台湾・樺太・南洋（Bunsei Shoin Mokuroku 2018–nen: Chūgoku・Manshū・Chōsen・Taiwan・Karafuto・Nan'yō), 77, https://www.bunsei.co.jp/old-book/moku/moku201809/.

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5 The English name was spelt according to the Japanese romanisation conventions of that period.

6 河野公平.好文館出版部 (Kōno Kōhei and Kōbunkan Shuppanbu), 南洋總覽 (*Nan'yō Sōran*). シンガポ-ル: 好文館 (Shingapōru: Kōbunkan, 1920), 172–74, NUS Libraries, https://digitalgems.nus.edu.sg/view/347109. A 1916 survey of Japanese residents and their occupations recorded two bookstores operating in Singapore. In 1920, Kobunkan's own publication, 南洋總覽 *(Nan'yō Sōran)*, recorded just two book retailers although the printing industry had grown to 11 by that time.

7 This address corresponds to the site presently occupied by the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts Campus 1 and the headquarters of the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations.

8 *Karayuki-san* (唐行きさん), meaning "those who have gone to China", was a euphemism used to refer to Japanese sex workers.

9 松本博之. 鎌田真弓. 村上雄一 (Matsumoto Hiroyuki, Kamata Mayumi and Murakami Yūichi), eds., ブルームにおける日本人商店主のライフストーリー山本亀太郎・三瀬豊三郎を中心に (*Burūmu ni okeru Nihonjin Shōten-shu no Raifu-sutōrī Yamamoto Kametarō, Mise Toyosaburō o Chūshin ni*), 48–59, Nagoya University of Commerce & Business, https://www.nucba.ac.jp/archives/189/202504/NUCB-K-25101.pdf; 南洋新報 (*Nan'yō Shinpō*), 30 October 1912, 10, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, https://hojishinbun.hoover.org/en/newspapers/nao19121030-01.1.10; 南洋日日新聞 (*Nan'yō Nichinichi Shinbun*), 14 January 1922, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, https://hojishinbun.hoover.org/en/newspapers/nos19220114-01.1.2.

10 Matsumoto, Kamata and Murakami, *Burūmu ni okeru Nihonjin Shōten-shu no Raifu-sutōrī Yamamoto Kametarō, Mise Toyosaburō o Chūshin ni*, 48–59.

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RODOLFO NOLLI

The Quiet Sculptor Who Shaped a City

Between the 1920s and 1950s, this Italian craftsman created a number of significant sculptural works that are still seen in Singapore today.

By Nicola Kanmany John

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Although he was not an architect, the works of Rodolfo Nolli can be found in buildings all over Singapore. Details and ornamentation by this Italian sculptor and stonework contractor can be seen at the former Supreme Court building, the old King Edward VII College of Medicine, the Fullerton Hotel and other 20th-century landmarks.

Nolli's contributions to the old Supreme Court building (restored with the former City Hall building and now part of the National Gallery Singapore) are perhaps the easiest to observe. In addition to the Corinthian columns which make the facade so grand, Nolli worked on the relief (a wall-mounted sculpture raised from a flat base) in the tympanum, which is the triangular decorative section just above the columns. The sculpture shows Lady Justice holding weighing scales and a sword – symbolising law and judgment – alongside figures reacting to her judgment (see photograph on page 39).[1]

Nolli may not be familiar to many today but the Italian sculptor made a name for himself as an expatriate artist in Singapore between the 1920s and 1950s. His contributions to the city's built heritage remain important to this day. Besides gaining attention for his professional work, Nolli made his presence felt at high-society gatherings, where he participated in a wide range of social engagements as well as once-in-a-lifetime events, including hunting down a man-eating tiger and welcoming the daughter of Benito Mussolini, the prime minister and Fascist dictator of Italy, to Singapore in 1930.[2]

"Rodolfo Nolli, a young Italian sculptor with his head full of dreams and glory, left Milan 36 years ago to seek fame, fortune and adventure in the Far East," the *Singapore Free Press* wrote in July 1949.[3] In this, he certainly succeeded.

A Head Start in Sculptural Work

Nolli was born in Lombardy in northern Italy in 1888 to an extended family with an affinity for sculpture. His maternal uncle, Vittorio Novi, and granduncle did sculptural work in Milan, including for the Milan Cathedral (Duomo di Milano), and many of their contributions can still be seen in Lombardy today.[4] Nolli's move to Southeast Asia was also inspired by Novi.

(Facing page) The former Supreme Court building with the tympanum and Corinthian columns created by Rodolfo Nolli, 2026. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

(Right) Rodolfo Nolli with his workers in his studio, 1930. *Lina Brunner Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980001358 - 0091).*

(Above) A closeup of the decorative work on the Corinthian columns of the former Supreme Court building, 2026. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

(Below) Rodolfo Nolli's relief on the building of the King Edward VII College of Medicine, 1926. *Lina Brunner Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980001358 - 0031).*

In 1912, Novi found work in Bangkok, Siam (present-day Thailand), where work on the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall commissioned by King Rama V had been ongoing since 1908. Nolli left Italy in 1913 to join Novi in Bangkok, and both men worked on this project and subsequent commissions for the next few years. Employed at his uncle's studio, the young Nolli would have been able to perfect his craft while enjoying a steady income and future opportunities in the rapidly developing urban centres of Bangkok and, soon, Singapore.[5]

Although newspaper accounts show that Nolli had already moved to Singapore by 1921, the *Straits Budget* referred to him as "Mr. R. Nolli of Bangkok" in December 1922 while describing his ornamental work for Holt Enterprise's Ocean Building. Nolli's contributions included "decorative work in stone and plaster, both on the interior and exterior of the structure".[6] The reference to Nolli's time in Bangkok suggests either that Nolli had not entirely committed to Singapore as a long-term prospect at this point or that his name was already famous, at least in architectural circles, in connection with the Siamese commissions he had worked on in his uncle's studio.

It was only in May 1924, when Nolli created the "plaster ornamentation" for the new Sailors' Institute on Anson Road, that the *Straits Times* described him as "an Italian architect living in Singapore".[7] A year later, in December 1925, he requested that the newspaper clarify that "he ha[d] not pronounced definitely on the authenticity" of a "supposed Roman vase in the possession of Mr W.H. Dop".[8]

This was in response to an article from three days earlier in which the *Straits Times* reported that "a well-known Italian sculptor" had discovered "a Roman vase at least 1,900 years old and worth at least $1000" in Dop's collection.[9] Evidently, Nolli felt that he was famous enough by this time for readers to assume that this description applied to him. (The fact that the requested clarification was published suggests that the newspaper agreed with this assessment to at least a moderate extent.) But Nolli's name was not universally known by any means: earlier in October 1925, the *Straits Budget* had to issue a correction that "Signor Nolli executed the plaster design of the Union Building illustrated in our last issue, and not Signor Valli as we stated".[10]

Famous Works

In February 1926, when the King Edward VII College of Medicine opened, the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* described Nolli as "the Italian sculptor who was responsible for the sculpture" of the new building. Among the decorative details Nolli fashioned for the facade is an eagle encircled by a wreath, which bears a striking resemblance to 18th-century decorative details of the Royal Villa of Monza near Milan. Nolli also made a "presentation key" designed by Major P.H. Keys – a replica of an ancient Roman statue known as the Minerva Medica – for the official opening of the new building.[11]

Around this time, the King of Italy made Nolli a knight ("Cavaliere") of the Order of the Royal Crown of Italy in recognition of "his work in the Far East".[12] From this point onwards, newspapers often referred to him as Cavaliere or Cav. Nolli, although he was occasionally still called Signor Nolli.

In 1928, a supplement to the *Straits Budget* featured photographs of Nolli with some of his recent work, including the top of a column intended for the Municipal Offices, a coat of arms and decorative feature for the Post Office Building and a relief (described as a "mural plaque") for the College of Medicine. For much of the next decade, Nolli continued to work on similarly commissioned exterior and interior decoration.[13]

In the late 1930s, Nolli worked on what has become his most famous commission: the facade of the Supreme Court comprising the columns and tympanum. This took more than a year to complete. Looking back on this project, which he was most proud of, Nolli called it his baby, "from the first stone at the base to the lightning conductor on top of the dome". In 1952, the *Singapore Standard* wrote that the facade would be "remembered as one of [Nolli's] best efforts".[14]

The tympanum, in particular, was a complex composition which drew on Nolli's skills as a sculptor to a much greater degree than the more decorative work he was often commissioned to do. It is likely that this further endeared the project to him given that Nolli also complained that the lack of opportunity for more artistic work in Singapore during the 1920s and 1930s meant that he had spent most of his career as "just a contractor" rather than a sculptor.[15]

Rodolfo Nolli with the Gan Eng Seng School crest, 1950. *Lina Brunner Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980001358 - 0034).*

There is no specific record of Nolli's political views, let alone his feelings on the subject of Fascism. Nonetheless, his Italian citizenship was enough to make him an enemy of the state when Italy entered World War II in 1940. Because of this, he was detained along with other Italian residents in Singapore and Malaya.[16]

Nolli spent four years in an internment camp in Australia before returning to Singapore in 1946. He appeared to have found work in postwar Singapore relatively easily, quickly securing commissions such as the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank crest, the mausoleum of the Sultan of Selangor and decorative work for the ballroom of the Raffles Hotel.[17]

In 1951, Nolli designed and made the coat of arms for three High Court halls which had been "without a coat of arms since the re-occupation".[18] Nolli's later works demonstrate the importance of architectural commissions in the postwar restoration of large-scale institutional buildings. He also worked on decorative details for schools that were built during this period, crafting the crest for the new Gan Eng Seng School and working on a set of reliefs of angels for the school chapel of St Anthony's Convent in 1952.[19] Nolli also worked on the Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque in Brunei for some time, though the *Straits Times* 1964 report that he retired in 1956 suggests that he did not stay on to see the mosque being completed.[20]

Altogether, Rodolfo Nolli lived and worked in Singapore for more than 30 years. In February 1964, Nolli died in Italy at the age of 75. The *Straits Times* report of his passing noted that the sculptor spent "nearly half his lifetime in Singapore" and listed several of his more prominent works in Singapore, Kuching and Kuala Lumpur.[21]

Nolli the Celebrity

Outside of his prolific career, newspaper coverage of Nolli's life and work in Singapore reveals a wealth of detail about his day-to-day life, his social calendar and even the various celebrities who crossed his path over his several decades here. In the news, his fame was consistently linked to his achievements as an artist: Nolli was often referred to as "well known sculptor R. Nolli" (or Cav. Nolli or Signor Nolli) regardless of whether the incident being reported had anything to do with his profession. The amount of media attention he received was certainly beyond the norm for artists based in Singapore not only during the 1920s but at any point since then. The extensive coverage of Nolli's life and work testifies both to the strong media interest in architectural development in Singapore and his connections with interesting and influential people in the Italian and other expatriate communities in Singapore at the time.

As a well-known Italian based in Singapore, Nolli was actively involved in hosting prominent compatriots during their visits to the city. In June 1928, the *Straits Times* report on efforts to rescue the crew of the airship *Italia* noted that the Arctic expedition's chief technician, Natale Cecioni, had been "a guest of Cav. R. Nolli" while passing through Singapore en route to Japan in 1926.[22] Cecioni would be one of only eight survivors of the *Italia* expedition.

Nolli also formed part of the welcoming party that received Edda and Galeazzo Ciano, the daughter and son-in-law of Mussolini, during their visit to Singapore in October 1930. Although the *Straits Times* made no mention of Nolli in its coverage of the Cianos' visit, it reported that "all the members of the Italian community in Singapore" attended the dinner held in their honour at the Europe Hotel. The *Straits Budget*, on the other hand, ran a photo of the couple's arrival in which Nolli was both clearly visible and named as a member of the party. These incidents reveal Nolli's prominence within the Italian community in Singapore.[23]

Relief sculptures by Rodolfo Nolli, 1930s. These were meant for Meyer Chambers but were never used and were subsequently lost during the Japanese Occupation. *Lina Brunner Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980001358 - 0063).*

Nolli was also frequently mentioned in the press as an attendee at baptisms, weddings and funerals held in Singapore between the 1920s and 1930s, and even hosted one of the weddings. In February 1927, the *Straits Budget* reported that the wedding reception of Russian pianist Monia Litter and his bride, ballerina Mura Smirnova, was held "at the residence of Mr. R. Nolli in Gilstead Road". Although the paper described the event as "typically Russian and very joyous", it did not explain Nolli's connection to the couple or the extent of his involvement beyond providing the venue.[24]

In June 1931, Nolli was part of a hunting team that tracked down and shot "a fierce, man-eating tiger" believed to have killed three people in Kulai, Johor.[25] In April 1934, Nolli served as one of four judges at a beauty contest held at the old Racecourse.[26] The range of Nolli's social engagements during this period showed that he was friends with many prominent expatriates outside the Italian community in Singapore, including but by no means limited to other artists and performers.

In October 1934, multiple papers gave a great deal of attention to a serious car accident in which Nolli was badly injured, fracturing both his arms. The sculptor had been returning home from the Sea View Hotel when a car driven by D.C. Morgan of the Cold Storage Company collided with his on Meyer Road. The *Malaya Tribune* reported that "Mr R. Nolli, the Italian sculptor, who has lived in Singapore for a number of years, sustained serious injuries", and was found unconscious with both arms fractured. The *Sunday Tribune*, which wrote that the accident involved "Mr R. Nolli, the well-known Italian sculptor", even featured a photograph of the crash site illustrating the extensive damage done to both of the cars involved. Morgan was charged with "causing grievous hurt by a rash act" but released on bail. The *Malaya Tribune* ran a short update on 23 October, noting that Nolli was "making good progress" in his recovery.[27]

Nolli's fame as a sculptor appears to have contributed directly to media interest in the accident. Although Nolli sustained serious injuries in the crash, it had no lasting impact on his career; he not only returned to work but remained prolific for decades afterwards.

Even Nolli's more quotidian activities as an expatriate in colonial-era Singapore were recorded in the press. His performance as an amateur tennis player can be traced in regular updates published between 1927 and 1940. He played primarily in the "Handicap Men's Doubles" category, often but not exclusively with a Mr Osborne as his partner.[28]

Rodolfo Nolli's lions still adorn the entrance of the Bank of China on Battery Road today, 2026. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

Besides tennis, Nolli also took an interest in horse racing; his name was mentioned in the papers alongside horse owners, including at the Singapore Turf Club's Extra Meeting in 1938. His daughter was also photographed attending the races that year.[29]

Curiously, none of the many reports about Nolli's life and work in Singapore made even a passing mention of his wife. His daughter Lina Nolli, however, became a minor celebrity almost as soon as she arrived in Singapore. In May 1936, the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* reported that "Miss Nolli, daughter of Cav. Rodolfo Nolli" had arrived in Singapore upon completing

her studies in Rome and was planning to live with her father for the foreseeable future. She received many more mentions in the society pages of the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, including a photograph from her 21st birthday party. While no mention has been found of Nolli's wife, the death of his mother in Genoa merited an announcement in the *Straits Times* in April 1932.[30]

Nolli's Legacy Today

Many of Nolli's works can still be seen at or close to the sites for which he made them. Apart from the tympanum and Corinthian columns of the former Supreme Court, he also created the Corinthian columns of the former City Hall building. The General Post Office is now the Fullerton Hotel, while the former St Anthony's Convent is presently home to the National Design Centre. Similarly, the pair of lions that Nolli sculpted for the Bank of China can still be seen at the bank's main branch on Battery Road.

Of all Nolli's works in Singapore, the sculpture of Lady Justice in the tympanum of the former Supreme Court has attracted the most attention as it does not have a blindfold.[31] Lady Justice, the Euro-American allegorical figure representing justice as an ideal, has been depicted blindfolded since at least the 16th century, originally with satirical implications that were later reconstrued so the figure represents impartiality rather than indifference.[32]

Nolli's version of Lady Justice may be explained by the neoclassical aesthetic which informed much of Nolli's work in the 1920s and 1930s. Nolli seemed to have combined aspects of Lady Justice with those of the Roman goddess Minerva. Closely associated with wisdom and justice in Roman mythology, Minerva is consistently depicted with a shield and sword.[33] These attributes are clearly visible in Nolli's tympanum. On the other hand, Minerva rarely, if ever, appears with the weighing scales that are also clearly visible in Nolli's Lady Justice, suggesting that his creation is a combination of both Lady Justice and Minerva.

Works by Nolli are also preserved in the collections of the National Gallery Singapore and National Archives of Singapore. A relief titled "Commerce" from the series that Nolli made in 1937 for the Medeiros Building on Cecil Street is housed in the collection of the National Gallery Singapore.[34] In 1996, Nolli's daughter Lina donated a collection of 83 photographs of her father at work in Singapore and Bangkok to the National Archives of Singapore.[35]

Taken between 1913 and 1960, these images (which can be accessed at Archives Online; https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/) supplement the information on Nolli's life and works from newspaper reports, and offer further insight into his craft and process as a sculptor. In addition to documenting works in progress as well as projects not reported in the news, they show the sculptor at work in Bangkok, on-site at various commissions around Singapore and at his Scotts Road stoneyard, including works lost to modernisation and redevelopment over time.

In fact, Nolli was so closely associated with Singapore's built heritage between the 1920s and 1950s that he has often been mistaken as the creator of others' work. In particular, he is often mentioned in connection with the "Merdeka lions", a pair of stone lions originally flanking Merdeka Bridge when it opened in 1956 but were removed in 1966 when Nicoll Highway was widened.[36]

At the time of their installation, the *Straits Times* simply described the Merdeka lions as having been "ordered from Manila". Further details in the *Singapore Standard* revealed that the lions were designed by L.W. Carpenter of the Architects' Branch of Singapore's Public Works Department before being modelled by Italian sculptor Raoul Bigazzi, who was based in Hong Kong but travelled to Manila to have the final version of the statues cast.[37] That Nolli did sculpt a pair of lions may well have added to this confusion although these were made in a very different style for the Bank of China's main branch on Battery Road.

Considering how prominent Nolli's work was and still is in Singapore, relatively few scholars have offered much detailed research into his work. The first to do so was photographer Marjorie Doggett, who featured the Supreme Court in the opening pages of her book, *Characters of Light: Early Buildings of Singapore*, first published in 1957. She highlighted Nolli's work on various buildings, and included a description of his career in Bangkok and Singapore. [38]

Later commentary has tended to focus on Nolli's choice of materials for his works, analyse the small but influential Italian community in Singapore to which he belonged, or debate the significance of a fully seeing Lady Justice presiding over Singapore. Nonetheless, many of the buildings to which he made important contributions have not only survived but remain an important part of Singapore's history and built heritage, testifying to the tenacity and discipline Nolli brought to his work through several phases of the country's development. ♦

Lady Justice holding weighing scales and a sword – symbolising law and judgment – alongside figures reacting to her judgment in the tympanum of the former Supreme Court building, 2026. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

With thanks to the Ngee Ann Kongsi Library staff at Lasalle College of the Arts and Jerome Lim of the Long and Winding Road blog.

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NO MERE INTERLUDE THE UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA IN SINGAPORE

The University of Malaya in Singapore was a crucible for a new nation.

By Alvin Tan

The Li Ka Shing Building with the Tower Block at the National University of Singapore campus in Bukit Timah, 2026. The building was the old Block A of the University of Malaya. The Tower Block, formerly the Science Tower of the University of Singapore, was opened by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on 1 July 1966. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

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The National University of Singapore traces its history back to 1905 when the Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School was formed. In the ensuing 120 years or so, the university has gone through various incarnations.

Although it is easy to view the 13-year existence of the University of Malaya from 1949 to 1962 as merely a transitional phase, it was more than a mere interlude. Set up during decolonisation, the Cold War and the struggle for independence for both Malaya and Singapore, it was a fascinating experiment in tertiary education.

The Start of Tertiary Education

Tertiary education in Malaya began with the official opening of the Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School on 28 September 1905 to train qualified locals as assistant surgeons or general practitioners. In 1913, the school was renamed King Edward VII Medical School and again in 1921 to King Edward VII College of Medicine.[1] (The building is known as the College of Medicine Building today and located within the grounds of the Singapore General Hospital.)

To mark the centennial of Singapore's founding, the Centenary Committee proposed the establishment of Raffles College, which provided higher education in the arts and sciences. Its campus on Bukit Timah Road admitted its inaugural batch of students on 21 June 1928 and officially opened on 22 July 1929.[2]

More developments took place in the following decade. In August 1938, Malcolm MacDonald, Secretary of State for the Colonies, appointed a commission comprising William H. McLean from the Colonial Office, Harold J. Channon of the University of Liverpool and Kenneth W.M. Pickthorn of the University of Cambridge to "survey existing arrangements for higher education, general and professional, in Malaya".[3]

In their report published in December 1939, the McLean Commission concluded that Malaya was not ready for a full-fledged autonomous university. Instead, they proposed the formation of a university college by merging King Edward VII College of Medicine and Raffles College under a joint principal. At that point, only four universities existed in the British Empire – Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Jerusalem, Hong Kong and Malta. There was little interest or impetus to further develop and expand tertiary education in Malaya at the time.[4]

A New University

Attitudes changed greatly by the mid-1940s. In May 1945, the Asquith Commission – which had been appointed in England in 1943 – recommended that a "colonial university should be a small, completely residential university, with very high standards and an enrolment carefully adjusted to the employment capacity of its own territory". In 1946, Vice-Chancellor of Birmingham University Raymond Priestley, a member of the commission, proposed establishing a university college in Malaya.[5]

Within months, in March 1947, the Carr-Saunders Commission was appointed to further study the proposal. Chaired by Alexander Carr-Saunders, director of the London School of Economics, the commission toured Malaya to gather views, and released their findings and proposals on 30 April 1948. Its proposal was radical: Malaya was to bypass the preparatory stage of a university college. Instead, a new university – the University of Malaya with full degree-granting powers and with internal or external examiners to maintain academic standards – was to be created immediately through the merger of the two colleges proposed earlier by the McLean Commission in 1939.[6]

On 8 October 1949, the University of Malaya held its foundation day ceremony at the Oei Tiong Ham Hall of the former Raffles College. Speaking at the inauguration, MacDonald, by then Britain's commissioner-general for Southeast Asia and the first chancellor of the university, described it as "a cradle where a truly non-communal nation is nurtured" – a safe place where the idea of a university was cultivated and lived out.[7]

He noted that "the national population will contain a mixture of races. It will include, besides the Malays, Malayan Chinese, Malayan Indians and others whose homes and undivided loyalties lie here. It is essential that communal barriers between them shall

Hedwig Aroozoo (extreme left; later Mrs Hedwig Anuar and the first local director of the National Library) with the first women graduates of the University of Malaya, 1950. *Raffles College Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980005802 - 0090).*

be broken down, that they shall think progressively less of their distinctions of race and more of their common heritage and culture as people of Malaya".[8]

This lofty vision, driven by the conception of a multiracial Malaya, and which rejected communalism, would be the source of political tension for years to come.

The pomp and pageantry over, the university began its life in earnest. The campuses of the former King Edward VII College of Medicine and Raffles College took on new identities as the home of the University of Malaya. Undergraduates were housed in Raffles College's existing hostels.[9] This was intended to be a temporary arrangement until the university moved into its new $145-million campus in Johor, which was never built due to financial constraints.[10] It was decided eventually in 1953 that the university would be situated in two separate campuses on Bukit Timah Road in Singapore and a yet-to-be identified site in Kuala Lumpur.[11]

Opportunities for Higher Education

Access to tertiary education expanded when the university opened, and this was especially true for women and minorities. For young women, the new university provided them with opportunities to further their education.[12] Housed in Mount Rosie Hostel on Paterson Road, these young women were, for the most part, new to Singapore's cosmopolitan urban environment. And it was, for a number of them from Malaya, their first time seeing Singapore.[13]

"While they enter into the life of the university with all its opportunities for social and cultural activities, the girls I talked to all stressed that, for them, studies take first place," a *Straits Times* journalist wrote in October 1949. "Nevertheless, they do not look upon their stay at the University merely as a preparation for earning their living. They consider that educated Asian women must play an ever bigger part in the life of their country whether in a profession or in the home as wives and mothers."[14]

At the university's first convocation in July 1950, 15 women graduates received their degrees. Two were doctors, one a dentist and more than a handful hoped to further their studies in education. Among the graduates was Hedwig Aroozoo (later Mrs Hedwig Anuar), who went on to graduate with first-class honours in English in 1951 and become the first local director of the National Library in 1965 as well as a founding member of the Association of Women for Action and Research in 1985.[15]

However, this increase in opportunity and access was limited to the English-educated. As the university was an English-medium institution, the Chinese-educated – those from Chinese-medium schools – were excluded from admission, despite pleas from Chinese educators.[16]

In 1959, undergraduates from Chinese-medium schools were admitted to the Faculty of Science after a special committee was convened to interview Chinese middle school students. Described as a "marked departure from normal university practice", selection was based on their results from the Government Senior Middle (Chinese) School Examination and an interview. Eventually, 40 were selected out of 112: there were 28 from Singapore, 10 from the Federation and two from Sarawak.[17]

Malays, too, faced similar obstacles in gaining admission to the university. This was a consequence of limited access to secondary education, particularly in the rural areas, which in turn precluded access to higher education conducted in English as the medium of instruction.[18] Writing under the moniker C.H.E. Det in October 1949, one Mahathir Mohamad argued forcefully after outlining issues pertaining to Malay academic achievements and challenges that "The University at this stage is not fully beneficial to the Malays and it won't be unless there are special facilities to enable them to utilise the University to the fullest extent".[19]

Chancellor Malcolm MacDonald delivering his speech at the first convocation ceremony of the University of Malaya on 8 July 1950. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980000813 - 0024).*

(Top left) The plaque of the opening of the Science Tower of the University of Singapore by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on 1 July 1966. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

(Above) Chancellor Malcolm MacDonald conferring a degree at the first convocation ceremony of the University of Malaya on 8 July 1950. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980000813 - 0025).*

(Left) Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad graduated with a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery from the University of Malaya in 1953. He is seen here with his future wife, Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali, who also graduated with the same degree from the University of Malaya two years later. Mahathir later became prime minister of Malaysia. *Photo by Kini X, from flickr.*

Entanglement with Politics

Inevitably, given the zeitgeist of the era, university life was tinged with political overtones. In January 1951, as part of a larger police sweep, the entire apparatus of the left-leaning Anti-British League – a communist-linked organisation comprising students aiming to end British colonial rule – at the university was eliminated.[20] The University of Malaya Students' Union (UMSU) was, for the most part, moderate and conservative in its outlook and dominated the university's Student Council.[21]

But the left-wing University Socialist Club (USC), founded in 1953, was a different entity. It had "a broadly socialist identity" and its terms of reference were initially limited: it sought to "stimulate political discussion and activity and propagate Socialist thought within the University; support the University of Malaya Students' Union in demands for students' rights; and study the means for unity in Malaya".[22]

Student publications became platforms for activism and advocacy, addressing causes from positions that spanned the political spectrum. *Fajar*, published by the USC, acquired fame and prominence when its editorial board of eight was arrested in a dawn raid and charged with sedition in May 1954 for an article titled "Aggression in Asia", published in its seventh issue on 10 May that year.[23]

The case ended with the eight being acquitted after the case was dismissed by Justice F.A. Chua – who did not deem the article in question seditious – on 25 August 1954. As a result, the USC and *Fajar* gained a certain cachet. They had, after all, fought for and won a case about a fundamental freedom they cherished – the freedom of speech.[24]

The university's brush with politics continued into the next decade. On 18 November 1960,

(Above) The upper quadrangle at the National University of Singapore campus in Bukit Timah, 2026. The Federal Building is on the left and the Eu Tong Sen Building on the right. The latter houses the Faculty of Law today. Both buildings are gazetted national monuments. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

(Right) In the second volume of his memoirs published in 2020, Professor Wang Gungwu gives an account of his university education in Singapore and the United Kingdom. *Image reproduced from Wang Gungwu and Margaret Wang, Home Is Where We Are (Singapore: Ridge Books, 2020), 22. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 950.049510092 WAN).*

Singapore's Acting Minister for Labour and Law Ahmad Ibrahim handed a letter to Dennis J. Enright, Professor of English at the university, and warned him to "stay clear of local politics" or have his professional visit pass cancelled. He had on two earlier occasions commented on the government's cultural policy, including the ban on jukeboxes.

The letter reminded Enright that he had overstepped his boundaries. "Whether the Government is right or wrong in banning jukeboxes or whether it should or should not foster a Malayan culture is a matter for the citizens of this country to decide. We have no time for asinine sneers by passing aliens about the futility of 'sarong culture complete with pantun competitions,' particularly when it comes from beatnik professors."[25]

What was at stake here was not just the banning of jukeboxes in Singapore, but who could and should have free comment on the politics and policies of the newly self-governing state, in the name of academic freedom.[26]

Literary Arts

The university also proved to be a cauldron for the literary arts, as its eager students embraced poetry as a means of expression. One of Hedwig Aroozoo's early works, "A Rhyme in Time," was described by Malaysian poet Ee Tiang Hong as "a work that merits a place in any anthology of Malaysian poetry that has a historical import".[27]

Another budding poet was a young Wang Gungwu, who graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in history in 1953, and is a renowned scholar of the Chinese diaspora today. He was the vice-chancellor of the University of Hong Kong from 1986 to 1995.[28]

For the future historian, writing poetry as an undergraduate was a means to explore and grapple with what it meant to be Malayan. Wang recalled in his memoirs: "We wrote about what the future Malayan literature could be like and imagined the role it could play in educating future generations. Some had envisaged the possibility of Chinese, Malays and Indians communicating with one another in an evolving common language. We all knew that the nature of the country was still unclear. But the idea that we could contribute towards defining it by our efforts to promote its literary identity was tantalizing."[29]

A New Era

As the 1950s wore on, the University of Malaya found itself in a curious position. On 31 August 1957, the Federation of Malaya became independent. The university was at the crossroads of two political realities: its branch in Kuala Lumpur was in an independent Malaya, while Singapore still remained a colony.

In March 1958, both the Federation and Singapore governments decided to retain the university as a single institution but with two autonomous divisions – separate but equal – in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. This meant that each division would be controlled by its own divisional council and academic committee and recruit its own staff. There would, however, be a common university council, senate and vice-chancellor.

Slightly over a year later, the political realities changed once more as Singapore attained full internal self-government in 1959. Events unfolded quickly and by late May 1960, both governments had come to an agreement.[30] On 1 January 1962, the University of Singapore was born at a midnight ceremony at its Bukit Timah campus.[31] The University of Singapore Ordinance, passed on 16 December 1961, repealed the University of Malaya Ordinance (1959).

Tommy Koh when he was president of the University of Malaya Law Society, 1961. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

The philanthropist Lee Kong Chian was appointed chancellor and B.R. Sreenivasan, principal of the Singapore division of the University of Malaya, took on the role of vice-chancellor. It was no longer a colonial university, as Sreenivasan said in his speech, but a "university which exists to satisfy the educational aspirations of the people of this country".[32]

The university's early years have been described by historian Yeo Kim Wah as "a time of high idealism, romantic commitment and near euphoric sentiment".[33] To Wang Gungwu, the era was, in retrospect, a time when "the voices of hope, the idealism, the enthusiasm, the fierce emotions, the thousands of impractical ideas offered, and the immense confidence that only young people can project, coloured everything the students did for some two decades".[34]

Many of its graduates went on to hold important positions in independent Malaysia and Singapore. Mahathir Mohamad graduated with a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery degree in 1953, and was the prime minister of Malaysia not once but twice, serving from 1981 to 2003, and again from 2018 to 2020.[35] Edwin Thumboo, one of the "*Fajar* Eight", graduated in 1956 with a Bachelor of Arts with honours and obtained a doctorate from the University of Singapore in 1970, eventually becoming the longest-serving dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore.[36] S.R. Nathan, Singapore's sixth president, graduated in 1954 with a Diploma in Social Studies (Distinction), while Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh graduated in 1961 with a Bachelor of Laws with first-class honours.[37]

The University of Malaya in Singapore was a product of its times and its contradictions. Short as its 13-year existence was, it made a lasting contribution to nation-building. ♦

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A WARTIME FRIENDSHIP

During the Japanese Occupation, Lee Kip Lee and his family struck up an unusual friendship with a Japanese military judge who lived next door.

By Eriko Ogihara-Schuck and Cecilia Gaspar

In 2014, the Singapore Repertory Theatre staged *Rising Son*, a play by singer-songwriter Dick Lee. Set during the Japanese Occupation, the play features three characters: 18-year-old Sunny Lee, his sister Ruby, who is two years younger, and Hiroyuki Sato, a 28-year-old Japanese military judge.[1]

Sunny and Ruby live in a house on Amber Road. A few months after Singapore falls to the invading Japanese army, Hiroyuki moves into the house next door. The play revolves around the relationship between the three protagonists. Hiroyuki, a university graduate, lives alone in a large house and wants to do the decent thing by his new neighbours. He shares his food and gives Sunny books from his library.

Sunny is constantly aware of the brutality of the Japanese Occupation and his sister's vulnerability. For obvious reasons, he is forced to be polite to Hiroyuki but despite the enormous power differential, a sort of friendship is formed, albeit awkward and strained. The sheltered, headstrong and naive Ruby, however, eventually complicates matters by having a crush on the lonely Hiroyuki. In the epilogue, set after the war, Sunny and Hiroyuki meet up again in Japan. Hiroyuki eventually dies by suicide.

As unlikely as this story might sound, *Rising Son* was actually inspired by real events, specifically the experience of Dick's father, Lee Kip Lee. During the war, the elder Lee lived on Amber Road and had befriended his new Japanese neighbour, a military judge.

"My father always had a strange nostalgia for the Japanese Occupation, and I've always wondered why," said Dick in an interview with the *Business Times* newspaper in February 2014. "Unlike other people who want to forget that difficult period in their lives, my father collected a lot of war memorabilia and the house I grew up in was filled with them."[2] To Dick, his father's "strange nostalgia" was a mystery given that he had lost his cousin during the Sook Ching massacre and, like many others in Singapore at the time, lived through the terrors and privations of the Occupation years.[3]

Dick eventually found the answer in his father's diaries: during the war his father had befriended their Japanese neighbour. According to Lee's memoir, *Amber Sands: A Boyhood Memoir*, Lieutenant Yoshiya Mita was a military judge who lived next door to the Lee family on Amber Road during the second half of the Japanese Occupation.[4] Lee, like Sunny in the play, also visited the former military judge in Japan, some years after the end of the war.

Dick became "intrigued by this friendship especially because connections of that nature were viewed as deeply taboo during wartime". This inspired him to write *Rising Son*.[5]

(Facing page) Yoshiya Mita, 1957. *Photo by Lee Kip Lee. Collection of the Family of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee.*

(Right) An aerial view of the Amber Road seafront, 1960s. The Lee family's residence was at No. 19 (on the left of the swimming club) while Yoshiya Mita's was at No. 17 (further left). *Courtesy of Peter Lee.*

Dr Eriko Ogihara-Schuck, originally from Japan, is a postdoctoral scholar in English and American Studies who is working on a book about Singapore's decolonisation discourse at TU Dortmund University in Germany. She is the author of *Miyazaki's Animism Abroad: The Reception of Japanese Religious Themes by American and German Audiences* (McFarland, 2014) and a regular contributor to *BiblioAsia*.

Cecilia Gaspar is a researcher in cultural memory, wartime history and artistic exchange. Her collaborations include heritage projects with Dr Eriko Ogihara-Schuck; the publication *Once Upon an Island: Images of Singapore (1950–1980) Through the Lens of Dr. Ivan Polunin* (Suntree Media, 2023); and the National Heritage Board's exhibition, *Museum of U & Me* (2025).

An Enduring Friendship

The Lees lived at 19 Amber Road, next to the Chinese Swimming Club. According to the 2005 oral history interview with Eileen Lee, one of Lee Kip Lee's younger sisters, Mita had moved next door into 17 Amber Road during the Japanese Occupation, and Mita and Lee Kip Lee became good friends. Mita often visited Lee, and the two men enjoyed spending time playing chess and cards, and sharing meals. Mita also learnt how to cook from Peggy, another of Lee's sisters.[6]

In his memoir, Lee recalled that he and his family were "quite wary of" Mita when he first moved in and began approaching them "by various acts of kindness". However, they eventually became "convinced of his quiet sincerity and his likeable character" and came to "accept him as a genuine friend". Throughout the Occupation years, Mita would occasionally share with the Lee family the cooked dinner delivered to him by an army truck every evening as well as other supplies such as chocolates and cigarettes. He would also tell the family that he had been listening to radio broadcasts from San Francisco and would share his prediction that Japan would lose the war.[7]

Lee's younger brother, Lee Kip Lin, recalled in his oral history interview that there was one awkward evening when Mita suddenly asked why the local population disliked the Japanese. The family hesitated to answer as they were not sure if he was testing their loyalty but eventually they explained that it stemmed from the behaviour of the Japanese in Singapore, the concentration camps and the executions by the beach.[8]

Lee Kip Lee (in front) with his classmates, Cheong Kun Fatt and Au Keng Chu, in the garden of 19 Amber Road. In the background is the Chinese Swimming Club, early 1940s. *Courtesy of Peter Lee.*

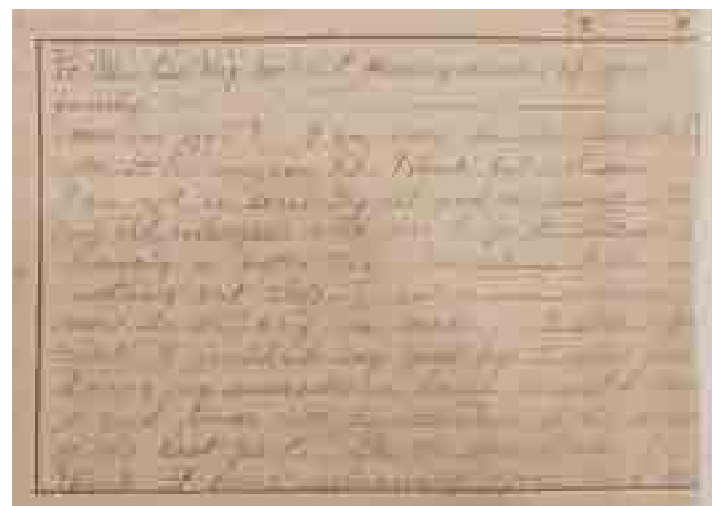
Remarkably, Mita admitted to Lee Kip Lin that he "did not quite agree with the policies of the Occupation authorities". Lee Kip Lin believed that the friendship between the Lee family and Mita came about partly because Mita was unlike the other Japanese in Singapore. "He was different from most of the Japs we knew. We thought he was much more civilised.., or rather educated… Most of the Japanese people we came across were very rough, they were really military types. So he was much more of a civilian than a military fellow, although he went through military training," said Lee Kip Lin.[9]

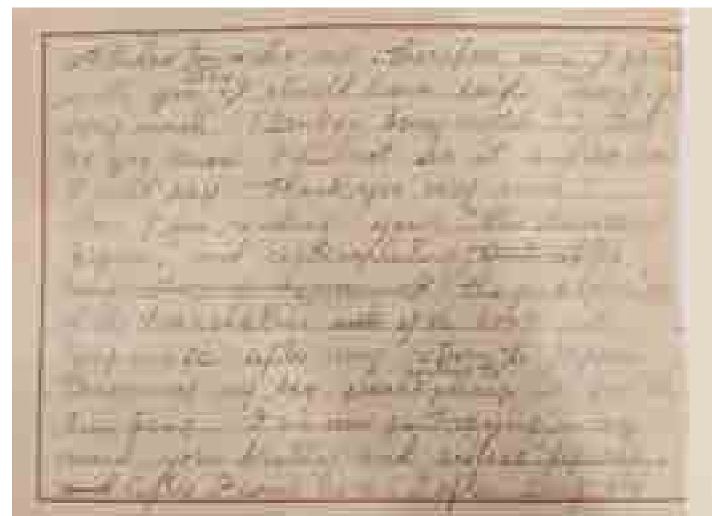
Was Lee Kip Lee conflicted about befriending the oppressor? Dick interviewed his father before the latter had a stroke to try to find out more. "He's not expressive, he just tells you as it is, not how he felt and I did try to get that out of him, which was not easy."[10]

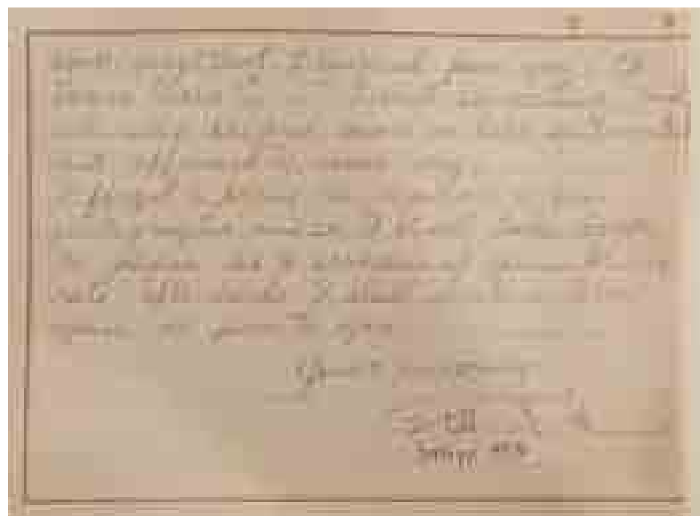
In the play, however, the tensions are clearer. During a climatic scene in *Rising Son*, Sunny Lee lashes out at Hiroyuki saying: "I hate the way I have to live in fear, and worry, and – anger. I hate that I have to be careful every minute of the day! […] Every time I see a Japanese soldier I'm reminded of the men they've shot – how many? Thousands! Fathers, sons, uncles – my own relatives! […] Yes, you have been kind to me – my family – I cannot deny that you have shown me a side of your people I didn't know existed – and I thank you, I thank you for your kindness […] but that doesn't change what you – your country, your people – represent to us."[11]

After Japan's surrender, Mita was initially moved out to Serangoon. He wrote the Lee family a letter expressing his gratitude for their "kind[ness]", that thanks "exclusively" to them, he was able to remember his "Singaporean days" until the armistice as "good times". He also promised to write again after returning to Japan.[12]

Mita, however, did not write again.







Yoshiya Mita's letter to Lee Kip Lee and his family expressing his gratitude for their kindness. This was written after Mita was relocated to Serangoon following Japan's surrender, 1945. Yoshiya Mita's name on the last page was inserted by Lee Kip Lee. *Image reproduced from Lee Kip Lee and Lee Kip Lin Family Archives: Lee Kip Lin: Correspondence, 1941–1952 (n.p.: n.p., 1941–45). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RRARE 338.092 LEE-[FAL]).*

Postwar Reunion

In an unpublished chapter of *Amber Sands*, Lee Kip Lee wrote that "after the liberation [Mita] sent me a brief note from his internment camp in Singapore, informing me that he was being repatriated home", but since then he "had lost touch with him". Lee eventually became haunted by the desire to find Mita. After hopelessly "racking [his] brain for some means of tracing his whereabouts", he suddenly "had a brainwave": it occurred to him to ask "Neil Thompson, former Chief Engineer of the Shell installation at Pulau Bukom, who had been transferred to Yokohama", to "insert an advertisement in the Japanese newspapers asking for the whereabouts of Mita".[13]

Against all odds, the advertisement worked. Lee learned that Mita was living in the city of Isesaki, about 95 km from central Tokyo, in Gunma Prefecture. Lee wrote to Mita to inform him that he was coming to visit. "He could hardly believe it when he read my letter saying that I was on my way to meet him," Lee wrote.[14] Mita was probably even more surprised to learn that Lee was coming to see him on his honeymoon with his wife, Elizabeth.

The reunion was in the spring of 1957. Mita took Lee and Elizabeth to Ueno Park in Tokyo to see the cherry blossoms and to the town of Yuzawa to see the snow. In the evening, the two men spent "the entire night drinking warm sake, regaling each other with reminiscences and singing the songs [Lee's] family had taught him". Their talk continued to a public bath: "We went on with our frolic, which continued to the hot spring bath in which we refreshed ourselves before calling it a night."[15]

At the time, Mita was a lawyer in Isesaki. His life was not a happy one though as he had a troubled marriage. That, however, did not stop the two men from enjoying a catch-up after just over a decade.[16]

In April 1960, four years after Lee's visit, his older sister Alice, together with her husband, mother, younger sister and children, met up with Mita during their visit to Tokyo.[17] Seven years later, it was Lee Kip Lin's turn. He and his wife visited Mita in Tokyo while on holiday. Mrs Lee recalled that Mita was tall and lean with a formal bearing, and appeared to be cultured.[18] Lee Kip Lin, however, was shocked by Mita's transformation. Mita had become "totally disillusioned" and was a "completely changed man by then". Lee Kip Lin also discovered that Mita had "lost his facility to speak English… couldn't speak a word of English".[19]

In October 1971, Mita took his own life. He was just 54. The news shocked Lee Kip Lee when he learned of it.

Digging in the Japanese Archives

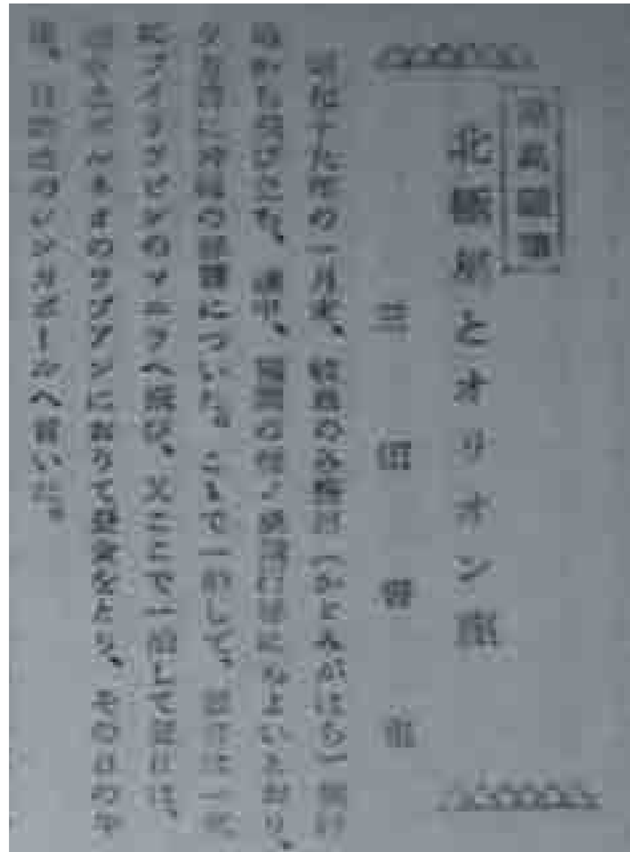
What had driven Mita to suicide? This was the question that intrigued Eriko Ogihara-Schuck when she learned of this story in July 2023 from Peter Lee, Lee Kip Lee's son and Dick Lee's younger brother. Ogihara-Schuck – formerly from Japan and presently a postdoctoral scholar in Germany's TU Dortmund University – was deeply unsettled by the fact that Lee Kip Lee never knew why Mita had taken his own life.[20] She decided to embark on research into Mita in the Japanese archives. In this endeavour, she was assisted by Cecilia Gaspar who reviewed materials in Singapore.

Armed with Lee Kip Lin's recollection that Mita was around 25 years old when he arrived in Singapore and was a law graduate of the University of Tokyo, Ogihara-Schuck was able to find Mita's full name in kanji, 三田善也, in the register of the University of Tokyo.[22]

This, in turn, led to the discovery of various archival materials about him. The sources found in the National Diet Library's digital collection, the Kanazawa University Museum (he lived in Kanazawa until graduation from high school) and the Isesaki Library (he lived in Isesaki after the war) include a group graduation photograph of his elementary school taken in 1929 as well as his death notice.[22]

Among these materials were two directly related to Singapore: Mita's essay titled "The Northern Star and Orion",[23] which recounts his wartime experiences, and a rare record of a wartime court document about a trial in which Mita was a judge (there were three judges). The case involved an Indonesian man who killed a Japanese soldier whom he suspected of raping his wife.[24]

Lee Kip Lee (left) and Yoshiya Mita in Yuzawa, 1957. The former was in Japan for his honeymoon. *Courtesy of Peter Lee.*



The title and opening paragraph of Yoshiya Mita's essay, "The Northern Star and Orion", published in 1959 in *Historical Tales of Isesaki*, the journal of the Isesaki City Library. *Courtesy of the National Diet Library, Japan.*

All these records helped to paint a more complete picture of the man. According to his family register, Mita lived in the town (in the present-day city of Nomi, Ishikawa Prefecture) where the former prime minister of Japan, Yoshirō Mori, was born.[25] Before entering the University of Tokyo to study law, Mita attended an elite high school (which later became the predecessor of Kanazawa University) where he received positive testimonials from his teachers over his three-year course of study.[26] He later became a judge advocate and was shipped to Singapore in early 1944, where he was stationed until Japan's surrender in September 1945.

After the war, Mita successfully established himself as a lawyer in Isesaki.[27] He played a leading role in founding the Human Rights Counselling Centre within the City Council.[28] Outside of work, Mita actively participated in community activities led by the Isesaki City Library and contributed essays to the library's monthly journal, *Historical Tales of Isesaki*, between 1958 and 1961.

In his 1959 essay, "The Northern Star and Orion", Mita acknowledged his good fortune that he had survived the war. He recalled that when he saw the Northern Star in Manila on his way to Singapore in January 1944, he had prepared himself for the possibility that he might never see it again.

Mita voiced no complaints about Singapore in this essay. In fact, he barely touched on his time in Singapore. After briefly writing that he departed for Singapore in January 1944 to serve at the Headquarters of the Third Air Force as a judge advocate, his attention shifted instead to the Northern Star which he did not manage to see during his time there.[29]

Interned in Rempang

At the Equator, however, Mita could see Orion instead. He was fascinated by the sight of its three central stars rising straight upward into the night sky and then descending vertically. The constellation, shining brilliantly amidst the tropical darkness, was so beautiful that it occasionally allowed him to forget the "totally inconsolable days" he endured on Rempang, an island 2.5 km southeast of Batam that was covered in dense forest – where he was held for six months before being repatriated to Japan.[30]

In Rempang, Mita was anxious about the situation in Japan and what might await him upon his return.[31] Along with 100,000 Japanese soldiers who were interned there, he suffered from the harsh conditions on the uninhabited island. The Japanese war veteran Masayuki Arase described life there as "hell" where the internees were like "dogs and cats chased into a prairie", enduring hunger and malnutrition that left them "literally… only bones and skin". They ate anything they could find, including mice and lizards, and many died from food poisoning.[32]

Given the conditions in Rempang, life for Mita would have been hard, especially as he had led a relatively privileged life as a former judge advocate in Singapore.

Mita probably did not share this experience with the Lee family after the war. When reminiscing decades later about the letter that Mita had sent him after being relocated to Serangoon, Lee Kip Lee recalled that Mita wrote it when "he was being repatriated home".[33] Lee did not seem to know that Mita had been sent to Rempang instead of back to Japan, and that a harsh life awaited Mita in Rempang after the letter was sent. Mita was probably not expecting that either when he wrote: "At any rate, afterwards I shall write a letter again or phone you."[34]

Remembering a Wartime Friendship

In a letter to Lee Kip Lee, postmarked 2 February 1960, Mita wrote that he "shall remain unmarried for life" and had "no power, no money" and "no time", a sign of his mental state at the time.[35] A former neighbour said that she remembered nothing

Yoshiya Mita's letter to Lee Kip Lee and his family, with the postmark dated 2 February 1960. Mita wrote that he "shall remain unmarried for life" and had "no power, no money" and "no time". *Courtesy of Peter Lee.*

Mr. Lee Kip Lee
10A Malacca St.
Singapore, 1.
AEROGRAMME
PAR AVION
航空

positive about Mita: he had no contact with his neighbours and was considered a troublemaker. He would get drunk and go around banging on the doors of his neighbours, threatening them.[36]

It was around this time that Mita began writing for the Isesaki City Library's monthly journal. Between 1958 and 1960, Mita contributed eight essays to the series "Flower Diary" in *Historical Tales of Isesaki*. The series recorded and described the flowers and plants that Mita had encountered during his mountain walks and which he later grew in his garden.

The sixth essay in this series, however, is different. After describing the plants he had seen on Mount Akagi such as Japanese atractylode, Japanese quince, ladybell and Fischer's ragwort, Mita wrote of continuing his walk on Mount Akagi on a cold, hazy day until the path before him disappeared. Beyond it, he found a small cabin with a straw roof. After lingering near the cabin and "exercising his imagination and illusion", he wrote: "I looked into the cabin and saw a man lying dead in the darkness beneath the fallen straw roof. I gazed at him closely and found that the man was myself."[37]

Towards the end of "Flower Diary 6," Mita imagined that years after he saw his own dead body lying in a cabin, it had disappeared and nobody would remember him.[38] In this regard at least, Mita was mistaken. Thanks to his friendship with the Lees, Mita's memory will live on. ♦

The writers thank Lim Kay Tong, Phan Ming Yen and Professor Kevin Y.L. Tan for supporting the research.

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P. Ramlee, c. 1962. *Courtesy of Wong Han Min.*

P. RAMLEE THE SINGAPORE YEARS

The formative years of the legendary singer, actor and filmmaker P. Ramlee unfolded in Singapore, a city he not only helped to enliven through his presence and artistry but also captured with enduring vividness in his songs and films.

By Raphaël Millet

Memorials to the legendary singer, actor, filmmaker and musician P. Ramlee can be found around Malaysia. Jalan Parry in Kuala Lumpur was renamed Jalan P. Ramlee in 1982, and Caunter Hall Road (the house that he was born in was located on this street) in Georgetown, Penang, became Jalan P. Ramlee in 1983. His birthplace has since been restored and turned into a museum called Rumah P. Ramlee, while the P. Ramlee Memorial Library opened in 1986 in his former home in Setapak, Kuala Lumpur.[1]

Ramlee's presence in Singapore, on the other hand, is much less visible. There are no roads named after him nor are there any museums dedicated to him. This is despite his years in Singapore, a little more than 15 in total, forming one of the most fertile chapters of his artistic life. Some of his more iconic films were actually made during his time in Singapore.

Raphaël Millet is a film director, producer and critic with a long-standing interest in Singapore's film history. His publications include *Le Cinéma de Singapour* (2004), *Singapore Cinema* (2006) and *Singapore: A Cinematic Portrait* (2026). He also directed the documentaries, *Gaston Méliès and His Wandering Star Film Company* (2015), *Chaplin in Bali* (2017) and *The Capitol of Singapore* (2020), all preserved by the Asian Film Archive.

Beginnings at Jalan Ampas Studio

Ramlee was born Teuku Zakaria Teuku Nyak Puteh in Penang on 22 March 1929 into a household shaped by the island's cosmopolitan rhythms and by his father's Acehnese seafaring roots. Music drew him early, more deeply than formal schooling ever did, and during the disruptions of the Japanese Occupation, Ramlee found refuge in village ensembles, learning harmony by ear and later mastering musical notation. By the late 1940s, he was winning radio competitions and refining his stage identity – the name P. Ramlee – with its simple initial acknowledging his father, Teuku Nyak Puteh, and offering a clear, memorable signature.[2]

Ramlee's path changed on 1 June 1948 when B.S. Rajhans, an Indian-born director working for Shaw Brothers, heard him singing *keroncong* (a traditional Indonesian musical style with Portuguese origins) in Penang.[3] Rajhans invited him to join Malay Film Productions, the Shaw Brothers's Malay-language studio on Jalan Ampas in Singapore, where he would record songs for soundtracks. He accepted, and a few weeks later, travelled south on 9 August carrying a violin.[4]

Ramlee's audition at Shaw studio included "Azizah", which he had composed after a youthful heartbreak. He was immediately taken on as a musician and playback singer in *Chinta* (Love, 1948) where he sang five songs composed by Zubir Said, who later wrote Singapore's national anthem, "Majulah Singapura". (A playback singer is a vocalist who records songs for films that actors then lip-sync on screen.) He also made his film debut in *Chinta* and was given a small part to play alongside actress Siput Sarawak, although the leading man was S. Roomai Noor for whom Ramlee provided the playback vocals.[5]

The Actor

After *Chinta*, other films – *Noor Asmara* (Light of Love), *Nasib* (Fate) and *Nilam* (Sapphire) (all three in 1949) – immediately beckoned in quick succession and each widened his range. In *Bakti* (Faithfulness, 1950), where he acted opposite Kasma Booty under L. Krishnan's direction, Ramlee emerged as a true leading man, singing in his own voice and showing that he could inhabit character and melody with equal force.[6] *Takdir Ilahi* (Will of God, 1950), also directed by Krishnan, cemented the impression.

In Krishnan's *Penghidupan* (Life, 1951), Ramlee played a morally ambiguous drifter who preyed on women. It was his only collaboration with the star Maria Menado, and it drew criticism from the Malay Welfare Association for its perceived affront to Malay values. Yet it showed Ramlee's readiness to inhabit darker, more complex roles. In *Patah Hati* (Broken Heart,1952) and *Miskin* (The Poor, 1952), both directed by K.M. Basker, Ramlee refined his dramatic sensibility by borrowing melodramatic elements from *bangsawan* (Malay opera) theatre and Indian cinema.[7]

B.N. Rao then cast him in some of his most compelling early performances, notably in *Hujan Panas* (Hot Rain, 1953) where he portrayed Amir, a musician lured by fame and undone by desire. This was followed by Malay Film Productions lavish Eastmancolor project, *Hang Tuah* (1956), where he took on the titular role as the 15th-century Melakan warrior.[8]

Ramlee's versatility was on display in the neo-realist (a style of filmmaking focusing on ordinary people and everyday life) drama *Anakku Sazali* (My Son Sazali, 1956) where he played both father and son. He also demonstrated his flair for comedy with the *Bujang Lapok* series of five films, beginning with *Bujang Lapok* (Old Bachelor, 1957) where, alongside Aziz Sattar and S. Shamsuddin, he was one of three bachelors whose missteps through modernity reveal humour and vulnerability.[9]

The Singer

Not long after Ramlee came to Singapore to work as a background vocalist, he earned the reputation of a "golden voice". By 1951, he was composing and performing the songs for the three films in which he appeared while also providing music for five others. Over the years, he wrote more than 500 songs and recorded about 350 of them himself.[10]

Ramlee's musical language grew from the cosmopolitan soundscape of early 20th-century Singapore.[11] The theatrical flair of *bangsawan* and the social rhythms of *ronggeng* (a traditional Javanese dance form) shaped his sensibility, while *keroncong* added its slow, swaying pulse. He wove these threads with Malay melodic lines, Anglo-American jazz harmonies, Latin inflections as well as influences from Javanese, Middle Eastern and Indian traditions. Its durability is clear in the

enduring lives of songs like "Azizah", "Getaran Jiwa", "Engkau Laksana Bulan", "Dendang Perantau", "Joget Pahang", "Tudung Periok", "Malam Bulan Di Pagar Bintang", "Dimanakan Ku Cari Ganti" and "Pukul Tiga Pagi".[12]

The Filmmaker

Ramlee's development as a filmmaker grew from years of close observation. He absorbed the working methods of the Indian directors who shaped early Malay cinema and learned precise camera craft from Chow Cheng Kok, the cinematographer for *Bakti*. In 1955, at just 26 years old (the same age Orson Welles was when he made *Citizen Kane* in 1941), Ramlee was given his first movie to direct. The decision marked an important shift in an industry long dependent on Indian filmmakers and signalled confidence in a Malay creative voice at the centre of a cosmopolitan studio system.

His debut effort, *Penarek Becha* (Trishaw Puller, 1955), set out his social and aesthetic compass.[13] The use of real streets, incidental sound and unposed movement created an immediacy that critics later linked to neo-realist cinema.[14] His shift from actor to director demonstrated that local Malay talent could helm major productions.

Across his early features, Ramlee sought breadth of form and theme. *Semerah Padi* (1956) drew on customs and moral choice.[15] *Antara Dua Darjat* (Between Two Classes, 1960) explored class conflict with clarity and bite.[16] *Ibu Mertuaku* (My Mother-in-Law, 1962) offered one of his finest performances as the blind musician Kassim Selamat moves through a vividly realised Singapore.[17]

His comedies, including *Labu dan Labi* (Labu and Labi, 1962), *Madu Tiga* (Three Wives, 1964) and *Tiga Abdul* (The Three Abduls, 1964), folded satire into everyday concerns of money, status and desire while retaining the allure of popular entertainment.[18]

In *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (The Nitwit Movie Stars, 1961), the fourth film in the *Bujang Lapok* series, Ramlee not only was the director but also played one of the protagonists who attempts to become an actor despite his inexperience and ignorance of the film industry. Its unmatched portrait of Singapore's Malay film industry remains both irresistibly funny and strikingly detached.[19] What began as a satirical take on studio life has acquired remarkable archival value, capturing with unusual vividness the world that shaped his craft.

Mapping Singapore on Screen

Among the most evocative aspects of Ramlee's career in Singapore is the way his films chart the growth and progress of the island city. Although not every production was shot entirely on location, many placed real streets, landmarks and coastlines at their heart, turning the city into both setting and silent actor.[20]

Across his films, Singapore appears at moments of arrival, ambition and sorrow. *Penarek Becha* moves from the clock tower of Victoria Memorial Hall and Anderson Bridge to Katong and Joo Chiat, then along Ceylon Road, East Coast Road, Balestier Road and Jalan Kemaman, finally reaching a shoreline thought to be Punggol. These routes mirror the story's contrasts of class and circumstance, tracing a movement from the colonial civic centre and established residential districts to more modest neighbourhoods and peripheral spaces, thereby spatialising the gulf between privilege and precarity that structures the narrative.

P. Ramlee shooting a movie at the Shaw studio, c. 1960. *Courtesy of Shaw Organisation Pte Ltd.*

As for the *Bujang Lapok* series, the bachelor protagonists traverse a wide range of Singapore locations: from Robinson Road and Shaw Chambers to the Nanyang Siang Pau building and MacRitchie Reservoir, even leaping playfully from Ngee Ann Building on Orchard Road back to Robinson Road. *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, in particular, sweeps across Empress Place and City Hall, then follows a lorry promoting a Malay Film Productions release past Capitol and Lido before entering a village.

Ibu Mertuaku traces a path through the Capitol Blue Room in Capitol Theatre, a clinic, a hotel on Geylang Road and a seaside villa. Other films showcase the Padang, Clifford Pier, Collyer Quay, Great World Amusement Park, Bukit Batok Hill, Tanjong Pagar and Bukit Timah. Even period costume films drew on local terrain, with *Hang Tuah* staging a coastal fight on Pulau Sekudu and *Madu Tiga* using Sembawang beach. Jalan Ampas itself, where the studio of Malay Film Productions was located – with its gates and side lanes – often slipped quietly into view.

Malay Life in a Changing City

Ramlee's films – in which class, modernity and moral choice were the focus – also traced the social currents underpinning Malay life in a city changing at great speed. In *Penarek Becha*, for example, a trishaw rider shows that dignity is not confined to wealth. *Antara Dua Darjat* turns on a love constrained by status, while *Ibu Mertuaku* reveals how talent can be broken by a society enthralled by appearances.

His comedies – including *Labu dan Labi*, *Madu Tiga* and *Seniman Bujang Lapok* – mock vanity and pretence with a light touch that never obscures the moral of the stories. In *Anakku Sazali*, the city offers promise to the father and ruin to the son, capturing the uneven pull of urban life.

His work echoes the debates that animated the Malay literary and publishing intelligentsia in the 1950s and '60s. Angkatan Sasterawa '50 or ASAS '50 (Malay Literary Movement of the '50s) called for "Seni untuk Masyarakat" (Art for Society); its motto urging clarity, purpose and attention to everyday experiences.[21] Ramlee knew figures from that movement, and *Bintang* (Star), the film magazine he published between 1953 and 1955, was edited by Fatimah Murad, wife of Asraf, one of the movement's leading thinkers.[22] The realist inclination of films such as *Penarek Becha* reflects the call by ASAS '50.

Directed by P. Ramlee, *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (The Nitwit Movie Stars, 1961) is the fourth instalment in the *Bujang Lapok* series of five films. Ramlee stars as Ramli, one of the three protagonists who attempts to become an actor and break into the film business. The film is a spoof of the Malay film industry from the 1950s to '60s. *Courtesy of Wong Han Min.*

Ramlee's engagement with tradition was deliberate rather than nostalgic. *Hang Tuah* ends with a reflection on justice, suggesting that inherited values must be tested against present demands. The past is honoured yet questioned. His female characters also embody the social changes of their time. The women in *Bujang Lapok*, *Seniman Bujang Lapok* and *Madu Tiga* challenge and negotiate, mirroring transformations in work, education and aspiration.

As for his comedies, these capture the average Malay working man in the city – short on money and rich in wit – using humour to bridge the divide between hope and means. The tone remains kind, for his sympathy lies with those trying to find their footing in a modern economy.

Film still from Malay Film Productions' *Hang Tuah* (1956), starring P. Ramlee as the 15th-century Melakan warrior and Saadiah as his love interest Melor. It is the first Malay film to be entirely shot in colour (Eastmancolor). Ramlee composed and performed songs for the film, including the famous traditional folk song "Joget Pahang". *Courtesy of Shaw Organisation Pte Ltd.*

Home and Family in Singapore

Ramlee's own life reflects the porous and creative world of mid-century Singapore. Born in Penang of Acehnese descent, he rose to fame in a cosmopolitan studio where Indian, Chinese, Malay and Indonesian talent worked side by side. He sang Malay songs infused with jazz, Latin and *keroncong* influences. He filmed folktales in a modern studio and contemporary anxieties on actual streets and wove Singapore's landmarks into his stories.

Ramlee's first marriage, to actress Junaidah Daeng Harris in 1950, was solemnised at her father's house on Boon Teck Road and it was she who accompanied his earliest steps in cinema. By 1955, the union had ended; that same year, he married Noorizan Mohd Noor, also an actress, at the kadi's (an official who solemnises Mulim marriages) office. Her care brought comfort and order. Each day, her driver delivered Ramlee's lunch in a tiffin carrier along with fresh clothes for the end of shooting, and she expected him home by eight in the evening. However, what began as love later felt restrictive, and the marriage ended in 1961.[23]

Later that year, he married singer-actress Saloma, born Salmah Ismail, in Pasir Panjang.[24] The couple moved to 28 Cedar Avenue, a four-room terraced house rented by Shaw Brothers and only half an hour from the studio on Jalan Ampas. Their work together on stage and screen made them one of the most admired pairs of the era. Between filming, composing and late-night rehearsals, Ramlee relaxed with poker and mahjong among friends, living a life modest in its pleasures yet rich in companionship. In these domestic rhythms, Singapore became more than a workplace. Yet he left.

Leaving Singapore

By the early 1960s, P. Ramlee seemed to feel that his long creative season at Malay Film Productions was nearing its end. In April 1964, the studio held a farewell ceremony to wish him well and encourage him as he prepared to take up new duties at Merdeka Film Productions in Kuala Lumpur. On 19 April, he drove north with his family in his American convertible to settle in the capital where he continued to act, direct and compose.

Ramlee lived the rest of his life in Malaysia but would return to Singapore regularly until the very end of his life. For instance, he attended the 19th Asian Film Festival at the Singapore Conference Hall from 18 to 23 May 1973.[25] There, he moved through receptions and screenings, presenting *Laksamana Do Re Mi* (The Admirals Do, Re, and Mi, 1972) – his final completed film – a playful work drawn from *One Thousand and One Nights*.[26] It would be his last public appearance abroad. A few days later, on 29 May 1973, he was gone, felled by a heart attack at his Malaysian home at the age of 44.[27] There is a quiet, sad and almost fated symmetry in the fact that Singapore – the city that shaped his youth and launched his career – was the last place he visited.

An Enduring Legacy

The roads and memorials named in his honour in Malaysia testify to P. Ramlee's substantial achievements there. In his nine years in Kuala Lumpur, he acted in 21 films and directed 18. In comparison, during his 16 years in Singapore, he performed in 42 films, made three cameo appearances, narrated one and directed 17, substantial in its own right.

Although no roads or landmarks bear Ramlee's name in Singapore, his presence can be seen in Singapore's cultural life. The Singapore International Film Festival helped renew interest in his work through screenings in 1989 and a major tribute in 1999.[28] The Asian Film Archive has continued this effort, presenting a curated selection of four of his classic films such as *Patah Hati* in May 2025 at the Oldham Theatre.[29] His music has also returned to the stage, most recently in Wild Rice's *Tunggu Sekejap: The P. Ramlee Suite* in May 2025 where Singaporean musician, composer and music director Julian Wong re-arranged some of Ramlee's most beloved songs. (*Tunggu Sekejap* will return to the stage again in August 2026).[30]

Contemporary artists from Singapore have been inspired by Ramlee's work. In 2005, Berlin-based Ming Wong re-enacted key scenes from four of Ramlee's best-known films in *Four Malay Stories*, playing a total of 16 different characters, both male and female. The video installation was screened at the Singapore Pavilion of the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009. More recently, in 2025, Wong presented *Four Malay Stories Redux* at the National Gallery Singapore, weaving Ramlee's movie clips with his earlier re-enactments.[31]

For artist Hilmi Johandi's series of work, *Dusk to Dawn* (2013–14), he referenced old films, such as those by Ramlee, and reworked film stills and posters in paintings that reflect on modernity.[32] These multiple artistic engagements show that Ramlee's mid-century Singapore remains a living archive to be constantly revisited rather than just a mere nostalgic walk down memory lane.

While Singapore has yet to create something as lasting as the memorials in Malaysia, one might hope that, in time, it will choose to honour not only the man but also its own film history through one of its most legendary figures. ♦

Hilmi Johandi, "Bangsawan", 2014, oil on linen, 120 x 150 cm. The painting was inspired by archival images of old Singapore, including scenes from P. Ramlee films, historical street scenes and amusement parks like Great World. *Courtesy of Hilmi Johandi and Ota Fine Arts.*

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REDISCOVERING SINGAPORE BEFORE 1800

HOW NEWLY RETRIEVED SOURCES ARE CHANGING THE STORY

Piecing together the Singapore narrative before Raffles is not easy but the sources are there, just waiting to be discovered.

By Peter Borschberg

Peter Borschberg is an Associate Professor in the Department of History, National University of Singapore. He is the author of several books and articles about the history of Singapore and the surrounding region, and pioneered the use of non-English European archives to fill the gaps in Singapore's history from the 15th to 18th centuries.

In the popular imagination, Singapore's history still begins in 1819 with the arrival of the British. But the island's story stretches back far earlier. Long before the arrival of Stamford Raffles, Singapore and its surrounding waters were already a vital node in Southeast Asia's maritime networks – a place where ships, goods, people and ideas converged. The traces of this earlier history lie scattered across the world, preserved in texts, maps and records that reveal Singapore not as a blank slate, but as a node in a dynamic regional web.

This article draws on my chapter found in the recently published collection of essays titled *Reimagining Singapore's History* edited by Matthew Oey (2025).[1] In my chapter, I focus on written texts and graphic sources but leave the topic of material culture to Kwa Chong Guan's separate essay on archaeology.[2] The essays in this edited volume were originally presented at the *Reimagining Southeast Asian History* conference held at the Asian Civilisations Museum in 2023, and show how much more there still is to uncover in Singapore's deeper and longer history.

Singapore's Fragmentary Past

It takes more than just curiosity to study Singapore's history before 1800. Researchers need the skills to interpret evidence, weigh reliability and tease meaning from sources that are often obscure or scattered. My chapter focuses only on European records, especially those written in languages other than English. While there is also a significant but less abundant corpus in Arabic, Chinese, Malay and other Asian languages, those fall outside my skill set but they most certainly deserve separate studies of their own.

Looking back, what is striking is how quickly the field has changed. In the early 1990s, when I had just begun teaching at the History Department of the National University of Singapore, a colleague cautioned me that searching for Singapore's early history would prove fruitless and that I would end up empty-handed. At the time, many scholars believed Singapore's history had already reached its apogee, with nothing left to discover. As Matthew Oey notes in his introduction to the volume, this sense of finality reflected a colonial-era mindset that treated Singapore as historically insignificant and irrelevant before the British arrived.

Today, the earlier view that Singapore's history began only in 1819 feels antiquated. Over the past two or three decades, new research has substantially transformed the field. Fresh sources, bold interpretations and cross-disciplinary collaborations have revealed that Singapore's pre-1819 past was better documented and more complex than once imagined. Rather than a historical blank slate, the island emerges as an active player in the wider currents of regional and global history.

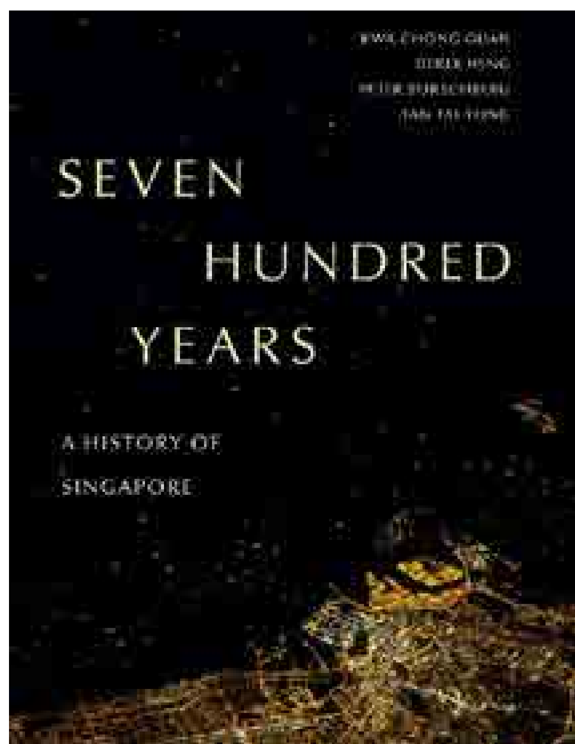
One of the clearest manifestations of this shift can be seen in *Singapore, a 700-Year History: From Early Emporium to World City*, first published in 2009. In this edition, the book offered only the sparsest coverage of the centuries between the fall of Temasek-Singapura in the late 14th century and the arrival of the British in 1819.[3] A decade later, the 2019 edition, *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore*, published by the National Library Board and Marshall Cavendish Editions expanded this section substantially, although important gaps still remained, especially in relation to the 15th and 18th centuries.[4] Now, with a third edition due in 2026, readers can expect to see Singapore's early history woven into a seamless seven-century narrative.

So what explains this transformation? What discoveries and breakthroughs have deepened our understanding of pre-1819 Singapore? And what challenges continue to confront researchers as they piece together Singapore's fragmentary past? The answers lie in the painstaking study of surviving texts, maps and records, as well as in the new questions scholars are asking about Singapore's role within the regional and global networks of c.1300–1824.

New Sources Behind the New Story

Reconstructing Singapore's history before 1819 is no simple task. The challenge has never been a lack of interest, but rather a shortage of skills and the weight of bias. For too long, research leaned heavily on English-language texts, leaving much of Europe's documentary record untouched. Unlocking these early traces requires specialised training: fluency in multiple European languages, mastery of their pre-modern forms and palaeography (the art of reading centuries-old handwriting). Before the internet streamlined and facilitated access, the work could be punishingly slow. Tracking down scattered manuscripts, cross-referencing obscure

(Facing Page) Raja Bongsu of Johor in his galley heading towards the Dutch flagship *Zierikzee* to meet with Vice-Admiral Jacob Pietersz van Enkhuysen after the battle against the Portuguese in the Johor River and Singapore Strait in 1603. The left of the etching shows a small part of a European-looking city that may have been intended to represent Singapore. *Courtesy of Bibliotheca Thysiana, Leiden.*



Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore offers new perspectives on the history of Singapore, one that stretches back to the 14th century, pre-dating the arrival of Stamford Raffles by some 500 years. *Image reproduced from Kwa Chong Guan, Derek Heng, Peter Borschberg and Tan Tai Yong, eds., Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore (Singapore: National Library Board; Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2019). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 959.57 KWA).*

passages and piecing together fragmentary reports often took decades of patience and persistence.

The surviving European materials that touch on Singapore and its surrounding waters fall broadly into four categories: conventional and unconventional sources, each in text or graphic form.

Conventional sources include the familiar: travelogues, letters, missionary accounts, treaties and official reports by colonial authorities or agents of the British East India Company. Some were written to dazzle readers back home in Europe with vivid – sometimes exaggerated – tales of the East. Others, composed for confidential circulation, offer more sober, carefully weighed assessments.

Yet not all evidence comes neatly packaged as reports or correspondence. Some of the most intriguing insights lie hidden in what might be called "unconventional sources": maps, charts, glossaries, dictionaries, encyclopedias and even works of fiction. These materials reveal how Europeans, often armed with only secondhand knowledge, tried to make sense of Singapore and its region.

Reference compendia, for instance, recycled outdated information long after it had ceased to be accurate. A mid-18th century dictionary might still describe a "great city" of Sincapura at the tip of the peninsula, centuries after such a large settlement had faded. Phantom cities continued to appear on maps and charts well into the 18th century; Sinosura, a city supposedly lying east of Singapore, was one such example. The error surrounding its existence has been traced to a misreading of Luís Vaz de Camões' Portuguese epic poem, *Os Lusíadas* (*The Lusiads*), first published in 1572.[5]

The expansive *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon aller Wissenschafften und Künste* (*Great Complete Universal Lexicon of All Sciences and Arts*), an 18th-century German reference work in 68 volumes by the bookseller and publisher Johann Heinrich Zedler, offers a telling example. It contains multiple entries on Singapore, under different spellings, reflecting how the name circulated across European scholarship. More than that, it shows the way knowledge was compiled: snippets borrowed from older works and stitched together by researchers who often had no personal, firsthand access to the places they described.[6]

Far from curiosities, these unconventional traces matter. They remind us that Singapore existed in the European imagination and circulation of knowledge long before Raffles – and that even secondhand echoes helped shape how the island was placed within the wider global networks of knowledge.

In 1720, Daniel Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, published *The Life, Adventures, and Piracies of the Famous Captain Singleton*, a novel that cast the Singapore Strait as one of the world's most dangerous waterways. Pirates, storms and treacherous waters turned every crossing into a deadly gamble. Though fictional, Defoe's tale reflected how Europeans of the time imagined the region: distant, perilous and impossible to ignore.[7]

Maps and charts carried the same mixture of knowledge and conjecture. For sailors, these were working tools, noting reefs, anchorages, freshwater springs and ports of call. Yet they also served as repositories of rumour, copying forward old reports long after their underlying realities had eclipsed. A single map might plot the contours of the strait while also speculating about trade routes or repeating references to a "great city" that had long ceased to exist. Read alongside written accounts, these charts reveal not only geography but also the evolving ways by which Europeans sought to comprehend Singapore and its surrounding waters.

Illustrations extended this visual record. Mariners and ship's officers sketched flora, fauna, settlements and people, often with as much invention as observation. While most surviving examples date from after 1750, a few earlier engravings stand out. Two from the workshop of the German publisher Theodor de Bry are especially striking. The first, *Contrafactur Des Scharmutz Els Der Hollender Wider Die Portigesen in Dem Flus Balusabar* (*Chart of a Skirmish Between the Dutch and the Portuguese in the Balusabar River*; 1606), schematically depicts the battles between Dutch and Portuguese naval forces near Singapore in 1603.[8]

The other, engraved in 1607, shows Raja Bongsu of Johor, dressed in elaborate Turkish-style robes, in his galley (*prahu*; a type of boat propelled solely by oars) heading towards the Dutch flagship *Zierikzee* to meet with Vice-Admiral Jacob Pietersz van Enkhuysen after the battle against the Portuguese in the Johor River and Singapore Strait in 1603. The left of the etching shows a small part of a European-looking city that may have been intended to represent Singapore.[9]

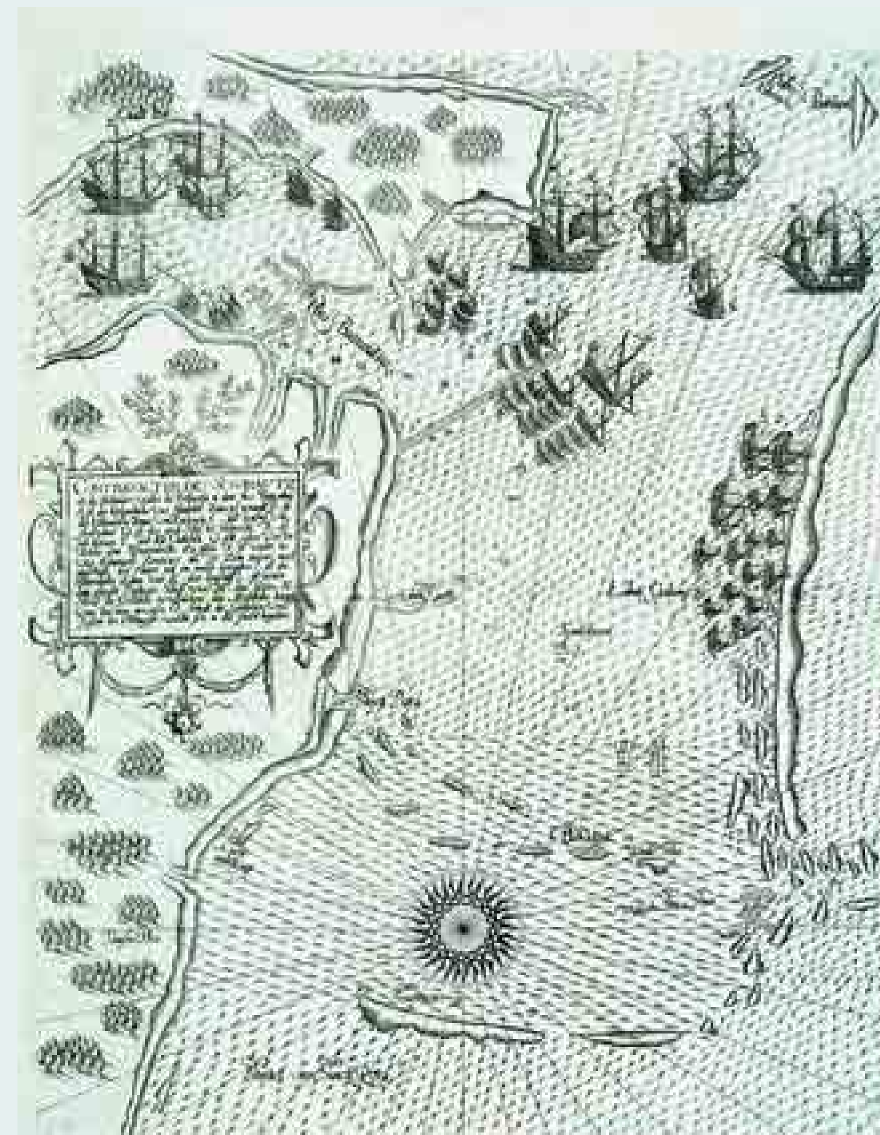
For all their embellishment, such works are among the earliest surviving European attempts to picture Singapore and its environs. While these blur the lines between record and imagination, they also demonstrate how much can be gleaned from unconventional sources. Taken together, they form part of the mosaic from which Singapore's pre-1819 history can be reconstructed. Each fragment – however flawed – adds insights, helping to restore the island's place on the larger regional and global stage.

Unexpected Finds in Unexpected Places

Do new sources still surface? Absolutely – but not in the archives and libraries one might expect. These institutions in London, Lisbon and The Hague have long been trawled for evidence. Real surprises now emerge from smaller or unexpected institutions, monastic libraries, private collections or overlooked manuscripts.

Consider Robert Dudley's maritime encyclopedia, *Dell'Arcano del Mare* (*On the Secret of the Sea*), published in 1645–46. A manuscript copy preserved in the Bavarian State Library in Munich contains a 1636 map, also by Dudley, where multiple features – a settlement, a river, a bay, a strait and a cape – are all marked with the name "Singapura" in various spellings. Such clustering of the name on a single map specimen is unusual and signals the island's weight in the European imagination.[10]

Or take the *Codex Castelo Melhor*, a privately held collection of Portuguese navigational instructions.[11] Recently transcribed, it offers something exceptionally rare: sailing directions for the "New Strait of Singapore", running from the northeastern tip of today's Sentosa down along the island's southwestern coast. Most early accounts focus on the Old Strait, the passage between today's Sentosa and the harbourfront area. This new detail adds a fresh layer of navigational knowledge to a familiar name.



This 1606 engraving by Theodor de Bry, *Contrafactur des Scharmutz els der Hollender wider die Portigesen in dem Flus Balusabar* (*Chart of a Skirmish Between the Dutch and the Portuguese in the Balusabar River*), depicts the battles between Dutch and Portuguese naval forces near Singapore in 1603. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

Even more surprising is the diary of Bremond, a French surgeon aboard the naval vessel *L'Oiseau* during a voyage to Siam (now Thailand) from 1687–88, which was sold at auction in 2023 and is now held in the National Library of Australia. While best known for recording an early European sighting of Australia, it also contains a brief but telling note of the warship passing through the Singapore Strait in December 1687. The entry records a lull – or absence – of wind that delayed the ship's westward progress to Pondicherry (or Puducherry) in India.[12] It was likely during this pause that the officers took measurements and gathered observations, which later informed French maps of the Singapore Strait and substantially shaped French cartographic representations well into the mid-18th century.

A manuscript copy of Robert Dudley's *Dell'Arcano del Mare* (*On the Secret of the Sea*, 1645–46), preserved in the Bavarian State Library in Munich, contains a 1636 map which shows several features – a settlement, a river, a bay, a strait and a cape – marked with the name "Singapura" in various spellings. *From Münchener Digitalisierungszentrum, Digitale Bibliothek.*

Each of these discoveries underscores a vital point: archival work is never really finished. New fragments and voices continue to emerge, uneven in detail but often rich in possibilities. The thrill of the hunt lies in knowing that the next overlooked manuscript – whether in a monastic library or a private sale – could still substantially impact the way we understand Singapore's pre-1800 story.

What Did "Singapura" Mean?

Unlike Temasek, which as a place name never entered European records, "Singapura" appears frequently but not with a single, fixed meaning. Over three decades of research have shown that at least 11 different geographical features around today's "Singapore" carried this name at one time or another: a settlement, a river, a sandbar, a bay, an island, a kingdom, two distinct maritime straits, a mountain ridge, a cape and even a larger hinterland.

This elasticity of the name "Singapura" makes interpretation a tricky business. A passing reference – "a ship arrived from Singapura" – might point to one of the two straits, the settlement or some entirely different feature. This problem is incidentally not unique to Singapore. Early modern sources use "Malacca" just as loosely: it might mean the city, the Melaka River, the adjacent strait or even the entire Malay Peninsula.

Complicating matters further, there was not just one city or settlement named "Singapura". Places with the same or substantially similar name appeared in Vietnam, Thailand and Java, while echoes of the name run deep through Indian epic traditions. For historians, the task is not simply to track mentions of the name "Singapura", but to parse carefully what each reference was actually pointing to.

Solving the Puzzles of Pre-1800 Singapore

How can one craft a historical narrative when a good part of the evidence rests on half-truths, hearsay and hand-me-downs? That is the puzzle of pre-1819 Singapore. Surviving references offer some tantalising glimpses, but they are also riddled with inaccuracies and distortions. Seen in this way, Europeans sometimes viewed Singapore through a type of funhouse mirror: stories recycled, refracted, distorted and stripped of context.

Anachronism is a common trap – treating yesterday's news as if it were today's. Batu Sawar, the Johor capital downriver from present-day Kota Tinggi, was destroyed several times in the 1600s and largely faded by the century's end. Yet 18th-century European compendia continued to describe it as a thriving city, recycling outdated reports long after reality had changed.

Decontextualisation poses another challenge. Information was often lifted from older accounts, stripped of its context and then presented as fresh fact. *Geographisch-Statistisches Handwörterbuch* (*Geographic-Statistical Pocket Dictionary*, 1817) by the German geographer and statistician Johann Georg Heinrich Hassel, for instance, describes Singapore as a city of Sumatran settlers ruled by its own king.[13] By then – 1817 – no such "city" existed. Hassel was not recording contemporary reality but reworking centuries-old accounts of Parameswara (a fugitive prince from Palembang who usurped power in Singapore), filtered through the published 16th-century Portuguese chronicles of João de Barros and Brás de Albuquerque. In Hassel's dictionary, legend had quietly morphed into "present-day fact".

These examples illustrate the delicate work and attention needed to reconstruct Singapore's pre-1819 past. Each source – accurate or flawed, detailed or fragmentary – must be read carefully, interpreted in context, and weighed against other evidence. Only then can we begin to place Singapore within the broader regional and global networks of the early modern period, restoring the island's long-forgotten layers of political, economic and cultural significance.

History from Fragments: Reimagining Early Singapore

Piecing together Singapore's story before Raffles is no simple or straightforward task. Sources are uneven and often contradictory, scattered across centuries and continents, waiting to be coaxed into conversation. Each account is a fascinating shard, yet all are potentially valuable and demand careful evaluation. For historians, assembling a coherent narrative from the late 1300s to the early 1800s is like constructing a mosaic from shards of glass: each piece must be studied, its edges understood and its colours weighed against the rest before a larger picture begins to emerge.

Gaps persist, of course. The 15th and 18th centuries, in particular, remain less studied, and even the best surviving materials resist tidy frameworks. Conventional analytical tools often falter. Forcing the sparse fragmentary sources into rigid analytical models can distort the story they tell. A more fruitful approach is to pay closer attention to language itself, that is, paying close attention to how words, phrases and concepts were constructed in their original context. Reading these fragments critically, with an ear attuned to the rhythm of early modern thought, allows historians to recover not just events, but the way people at the time saw and experienced them.

Singapore in the early modern period was never an isolated place. Studying it in isolation risks misreading its past or projecting modern assumptions back in time. The island existed at the crossroads of regional sultanates, bustling maritime trade routes and the ambitions of distant European powers. Its fortunes rose and fell alongside Majapahit, Siam, Melaka, Johor, Aceh and empires beyond Southeast Asia. To understand its story, one must think in terms of elastic networks rather than fixed borders: shifting currents of commerce, fluid alliances and strategic military moves that dictated the rhythms of daily life.

Over three decades of research have shown that at least 11 different geographical features around today's "Singapore" carried this name at one time or another: a settlement, a river, a sandbar, a bay, an island, a kingdom, two distinct maritime straits, a mountain ridge, a cape and even a larger hinterland.

Only by mapping these connections – and appreciating their complexity – does Singapore begin to take shape in the historical imagination. And even then, understanding is never fixed: each newly discovered letter, map or report reshapes the contours of what we thought we knew, revealing a past that proves to be dynamic, interconnected and fascinating.

Engaging with the Public: History as Conversation

History is not just a scholarly pursuit; it is an ongoing conversation with the public. Audiences are curious, sceptical and sometimes impatient. They stumble upon a fleeting mention of "Singapore" in a centuries-old text and wonder if they have uncovered a hidden treasure. They confront a landscape long assumed empty and may find it hard to imagine that historians can reconstruct a coherent narrative from mere bits and fragments.

Some accuse scholars of embellishing or inventing material; others are frustrated by inaccessible archives and libraries, or texts written in archaic languages. Making these sources accessible through annotated translations, transcriptions and affordable publications is essential. Without accessibility, scholarship risks remaining a private affair, while the public remains tethered to outdated ideas of Singapore's pre-modern "emptiness".

Why does this matter? Early modern Singapore was a crossroads, glimpsed only through scattered and often unreliable fragments, yet alive with movement, exchange and human drama. Carefully assembling these fragments does more than recover forgotten details: it reveals how stories were told, retold and repurposed across centuries. This is detective work, certainly, but also a vital act of translation, bringing a distant past into contemporary focus without erasing its texture.

Extending Singapore's history back to the late 13th century does more than fill gaps. It reframes the colonial narrative, showing Raffles's arrival not as the beginning of history but as a brief episode within a long evolving sequence. Each newly discovered source from the early modern era invites us to reassess the British role after 1819 and to appreciate the ingenuity and complexity of the societies that came before.

Historical research is like watching a sprawling theatre production. There are moments of sheer brilliance – the Flemish merchant Jacques de Coutre's vivid accounts, Robert Dudley's unexpectedly detailed maps – that make you lean forward in your seat. But there are also long stretches of painstaking work: squinting at barely legible manuscripts, untangling centuries of sloppy transcription, or cross-referencing fragmentary evidence. It is rarely dull enough to make you question your life choices, but it is not exactly a steady edge-of-your-seat excitement either.

This work demands patience, attention to detail, proficiency in languages old and older, and above all, a willingness to sit with uncertainty. Yet the rewards are real. Every fragment, map, letter or illustrative sketch breathes life into Singapore before 1819. What once seemed like an empty stage – a long pause between ancient Temasek and Raffles – now fills with movement, commerce, ambitions and the bustle of a space packed with human connections and stories.

The confusion over Singapore's identity in charts and maps is reflected in written texts. Over time, different names and locations were given for the island. It has been named for a settlement, a river, a sandbar, a bay, an island, a kingdom, two distinct maritime straits, a mountain ridge, a cape and even a larger hinterland. Graphic by Peter Borschberg. *Image reproduced from Kwa Chong Guan, Derek Heng, Peter Borschberg and Tan Tai Yong, eds., Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore (Singapore: National Library Board; Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2019), 163. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 959.57 KWA).*

Afterthoughts

In the end, the historian is part detective, part translator and part storyteller – filling gaps, reconciling contradictions and illuminating centuries that might otherwise have remained in the dark. Singapore before Raffles was never empty; it was certainly there, sometimes bustling and at times chaotic. Thanks to fresh research, we can finally get a better glimpse as what it truly was: a crossroads of empires, cultures and seas, whose story is far more complex and connected than previously thought.

Looking back to the advice I received in the 1990s, my quest turned out to be anything but futile. The sources were always there – waiting in unexpected archives, private collections and books written in languages long neglected. Earlier historians missed both the sources and the story because they cast their nets too narrowly, asked the wrong questions and expected tidy answers.

As each new discovery surfaces, the story only grows richer, proving that the past, much like the sea, is never still, and that Singapore's history is deeper, broader and more extraordinary than we ever ventured to think. ♦

NOTES

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3 Kwa Chong Guan, Derek Heng and Tan Tai Yong, *Singapore, a 700-Year History: From Early Emporium to World City* (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 2009). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 959.57 KWA)

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12 Rob Harris, "Newly Discovered Diary Records Landmark Sighting of Australia in 1687," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 2023, https://www.smh.com.au/world/europe/newly-discovered-diary-records-landmark-sighting-of-australia-in-1687-20230326-p5cvbe.html.

13 Johann Georg Heinrich Hassel, *Geographisch-Statistisches Handwörterbuch: Nach den neuesten Quellen und Hülfsmitteln*, vol. 2 (Weimar: Im Verlage des geographischen Instituts, 1817), 406, Münchener Digitalisierungszentrum, https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb10429388?page=1.

(Facing page) Loading and unloading of goods from sampans moored along the banks of the Singapore River at Boat Quay, c. 1930. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 9980006408 - 0059).*

(Above left and right) Roadside hawkers along the Singapore River, 1970. *A.J. Hawker Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image nos. 19980005683 - 0058 and 19980005683 - 0059).*

THE GREAT CLEAN-UP OF THE SINGAPORE RIVER

In a *BiblioAsia Podcast* episode, writer Samantha Boh tells us how civil servant Lee Ek Tieng and his team at the Ministry of Environment overcame the challenges of cleaning up the Singapore River.

Samantha Boh, lead author of *Lee Ek Tieng: The Green General of Lee Kuan Yew. Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

Lee Ek Tieng (1933–2025) was the first permanent secretary of the Ministry of Environment. In 1977, founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew challenged Lee and his team to clean up the Singapore River.

BiblioAsia Editor-in-Chief Jimmy Yap interviews Samantha Boh, who co-wrote *Lee Ek Tieng: The Green General of Lee Kuan Yew* with Pearl Lee and Matthew Gan.

Jimmy: The clean-up of the Singapore River took 10 years. Is it just picking up litter off the surface and dead things floating on the river? Is there more to it?

Samantha: I think the main issue they faced was that there were just so many people using the river. You had people who were living along the river, or those who were living on the river itself. Then you had the shipyards, the boatyards, street hawkers. So everything was going into the Singapore River so fast.

Jimmy: Very convenient.

Samantha: Yeah. It's so convenient. You throw [things] in, and it's like out of sight, out of mind, right? So, you can imagine the street hawkers slaughtering chickens, and the feathers and the blood just flowing into the Singapore River. We didn't have proper sanitation back then. No flushing toilets near the Singapore River.

And of course, the oil from the boats and all that. So, there was just a lot going on and it was extremely dirty. Early on, Lee Ek Tieng and his team realised that, okay, you need to do it systematically. Being the engineer that he was, the first thing they did was to figure out who were these people using the Singapore River? And, of course, they came up with a huge list. I think there were definitely tens of thousands of individuals using it.

Jimmy: That's a big number.

Samantha: Yes. There [were] also the pig farmers. Because the thing is, it's not just at the Singapore River, because the waterways flow there. So even upstream, there were people using it. So, after they figured out who these people [were], they then had to figure out, how do we move them? Because they realised that it was not possible to clean up the Singapore River if the inhabitants continued to use it.

Jimmy: That makes sense.

Samantha: It makes a lot of sense. You clean it up, but then the problem will resurface. I think as much as it was an engineering problem, it was a social issue because these were people's homes, people's livelihoods. And if you were going to move them away, you'd have to give them a better alternative.

That was a big challenge for [Lee Ek Tieng] because he had to figure out how [to] give them a better proposition. Street hawkers would say, "My business here is good. If you move me to the back, what if my business and livelihood are affected?" And so, they had to give [the hawkers] a better alternative. And that was the hawker centres, because at hawker centres, you've piped water. It's clean. You've proper garbage disposal. We'll make sure it's somewhere pleasant for people to visit. So, they had to entice them. I think they managed to do that, of course, with a lot of persuasion. And it was quite a long process because you had to license them as well.

When it came to the squatters who were living there, they looked to HDB [Housing and Development Board] for help. So, it was about giving them housing, buying flats for them to move into. And, of course, again you say, you'll have proper sanitation, you'll have proper toilets, you'll have water coming out of your pipes, proper garbage disposal. It was a lot of persuasion and showing people that there was a better life if you agree to move away from the Singapore River. ♦

Published by The NutGraf Books, 2025. *From the National Library Singapore (Call no. RSING 959.5705 BOH-[HIS]).*

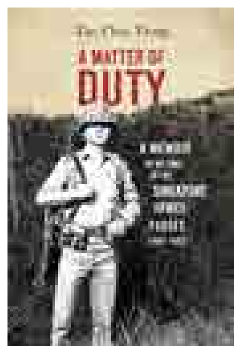
Scan the QR code to listen to the full episode on *BiblioAsia Podcast*, "The Civil Servant in Charge of Clean and Green Singapore, Lee Ek Tieng".

Check out the book, *Lee Ek Tieng: The Green General of Lee Kuan Yew*, available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library (call no. RSING 959.5705 BOH-[HIS]) and for loan at selected public libraries (call no. SING 959.5705 BOH-[HIS]).

NEW BOOKS ON SINGAPORE HISTORY

A Matter of Duty: A Memoir of My Time in the Singapore Armed Forces (1967–1982)

By Tan Chin Tiong

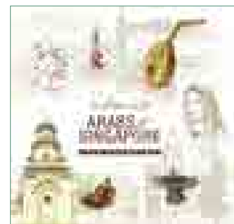


ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute (2025), 170 pages
Call no. RSING 959.57092 TAN

This memoir recounts how the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) was built from scratch under first Defence Minister Goh Keng Swee, including how challenges were met. Goh had talent-spotted the author Tan Chin Tiong and persuaded him to join the military instead of the Civil Service. Tan held pivotal roles in the SAF, rising through the ranks to become Deputy Chief of the General Staff.

Arabs of Singapore: 200 Years On

Edited by Syed Farid Alatas and Omar Alattas



Arab Network @ Singapore (2025), 282 pages
Call no. RSING 305.892705957 ARA

The Arabs in Singapore, primarily from the Hadramaut region in what is now part of modern-day Yemen, have played a pivotal role in the nation's history since their arrival in 1819. This coffee-table book offers a compelling account of two centuries of heritage, community life and contributions of the Arabs who have greatly enriched Singapore's diverse social fabric.

The Albatross File: Inside Separation

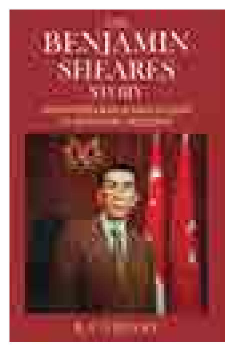
Edited by Susan Sim

National Archives of Singapore and Straits Times Press (2025), 487 pages
Call no. RSING 959.5705 ALB

In 1964, Minister for Finance Goh Keng Swee created the Albatross file documenting Singapore's deteriorating ties with Kuala Lumpur. In the file are Cabinet papers and Goh's notes from discussions with Malaysian officials before Singapore's separation. Most Albatross materials are published here for the first time, along with oral history accounts from Singapore's key leaders.

The Benjamin Sheares Story: From Pioneering Gynaecologist to Singapore President

By K.C. Vijayan

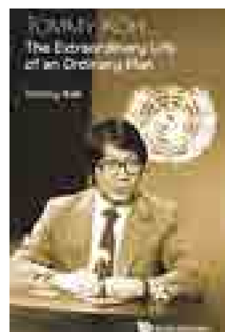


ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute (2025), 179 pages
Call no. RSING 959.5705092 VIJ-[HIS]

Dr Benjamin Henry Sheares was a distinguished obstetrician and gynaecologist before becoming Singapore's second president (1971–81). This biography examines his life and achievements through interviews, anecdotes and historical records. It traces his career from his work as a gynaecologist during Singapore's postwar baby boom to his tenure at the Istana.

Tommy Koh: The Extraordinary Life of An Ordinary Man

By Tommy Koh

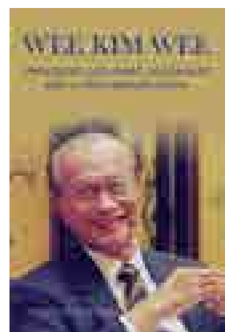


World Scientific Publishing (2026), 263 pages
Call no. RSING 327.59570092 KOH

Professor Tommy Koh recounts his undergraduate days at the University of Malaya (in Singapore) to his diplomatic career and currently as Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He was previously the Singapore Permanent Representative to the United Nations (1968–71, 1974–84), Singapore Ambassador to the United States (1984–90), and Agent of Singapore in two international cases: the 2003 land reclamation case heard at the International Tribunal on Laws of the Sea and Pedra Branca at the International Court of Justice.

Wee Kim Wee: President, Diplomat, Journalist and a True Singaporean

By Cheong Suk-Wai



ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute (2025), 213 pages
Call no. RSING 959.57 CHE-[HIS]

Dr Wee Kim Wee was a journalist and diplomat before becoming Singapore's fourth president (1985–93). Through interviews with over 30 individuals who knew him across different periods, this biography traces his journey from his time at the *Straits Times* newspaper to becoming High Commissioner of Malaysia and then concurrently Ambassador to Japan and South Korea, before assuming Singapore's highest office.

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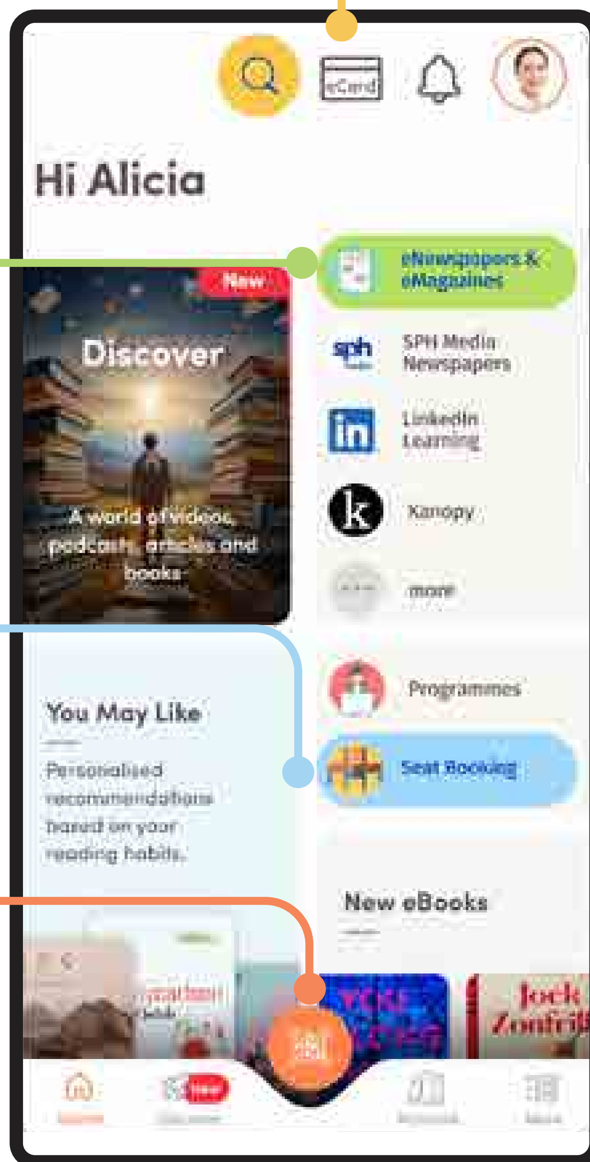

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