

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

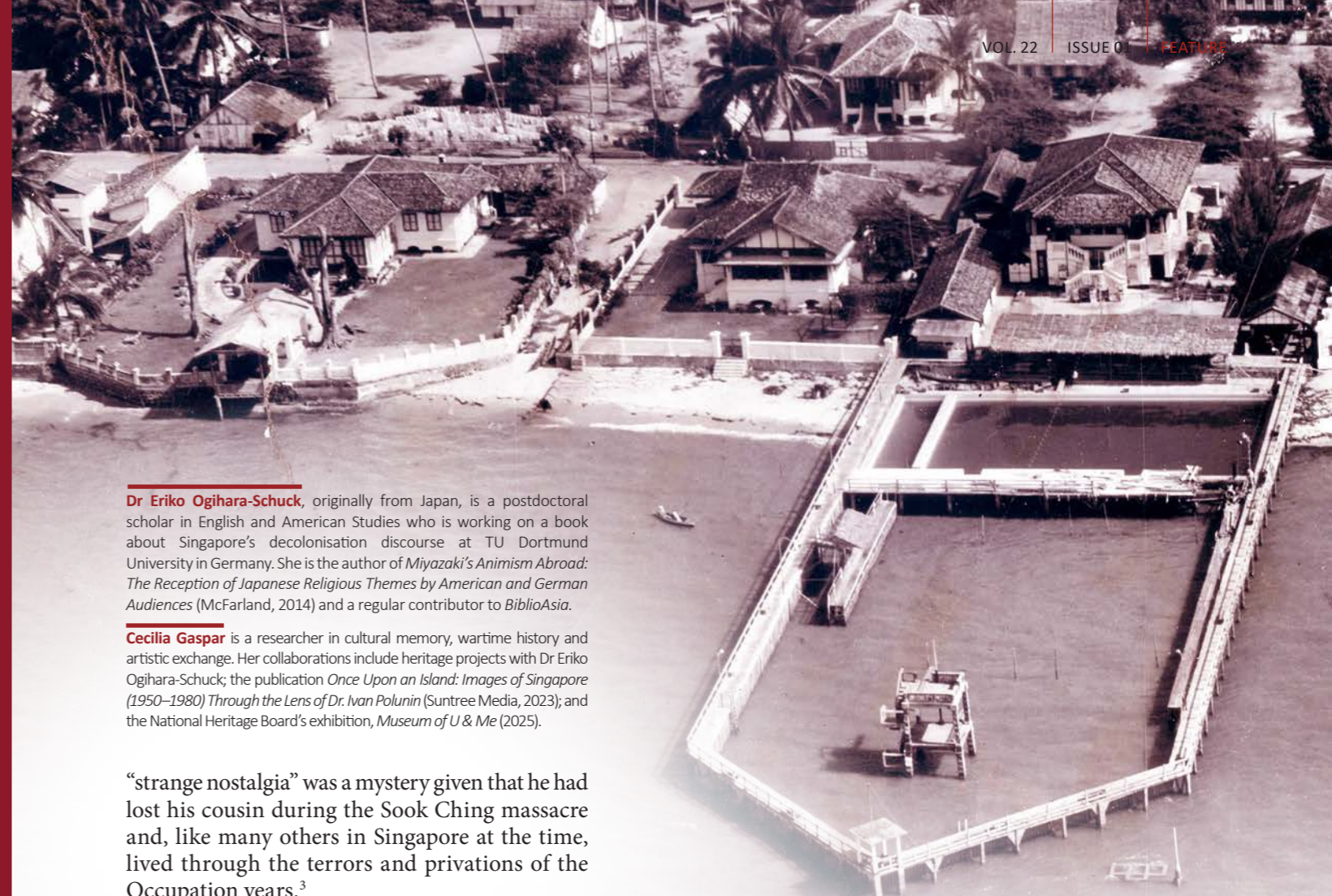
Sunny and Ruby live in a house on Amber Road. A few months after Singapore falls to the invading Japanese army, Hiroyuki moves into the house next door. The play revolves around the relationship between the three protagonists. Hiroyuki, a university graduate, lives alone in a large house and wants to 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



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"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

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

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

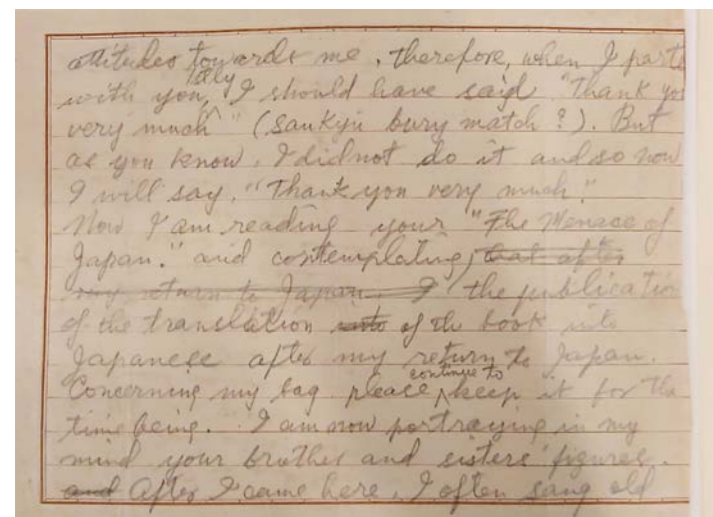
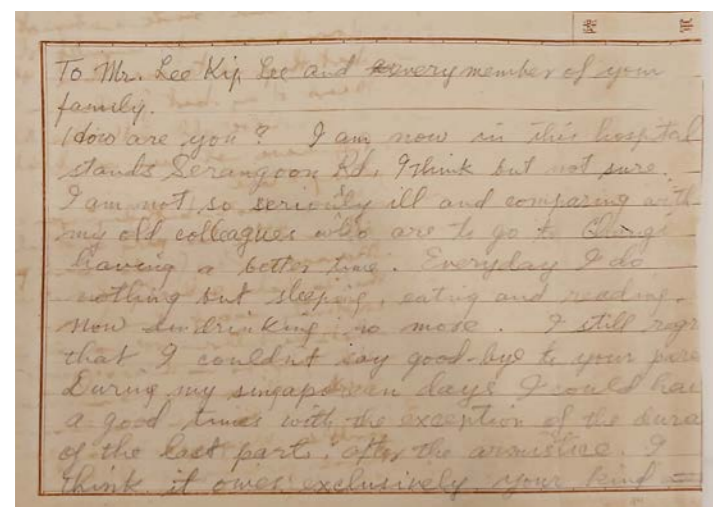
(Right) An aerial view of the Amber Road seafront, 1960s. The Lee family's residence was at No. 19 (on the left of the swimming club) while Yoshiya Mita's was at No. 17 (further left). Courtesy of Peter Lee.

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.



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]).

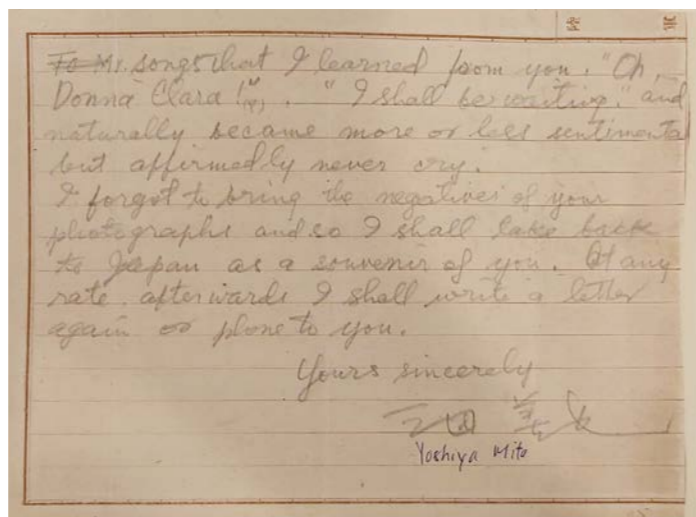
Remarkably, Mita admitted to Lee Kip Lin that he “did not quite agree with the policies of the Occupation authorities”. Lee Kip Lin believed that the friendship between the Lee family and Mita came about partly because Mita was unlike the other Japanese in Singapore. “He was different from most of the 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.



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.

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

Digging in the Japanese Archives

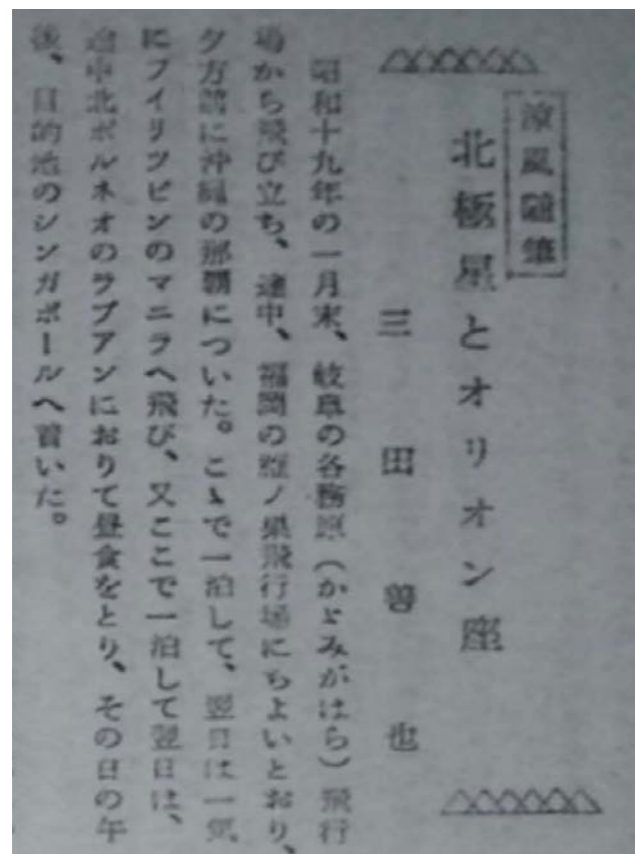
What had driven Mita to suicide? This was the question that intrigued Eriko Ogihara-Schuck when she learned of this story in July 2023 from Peter Lee, Lee Kip Lee’s son and Dick Lee’s younger brother. Ogihara-Schuck – formerly from Japan and presently a postdoctoral scholar in Germany’s TU Dortmund University – 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





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.

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.

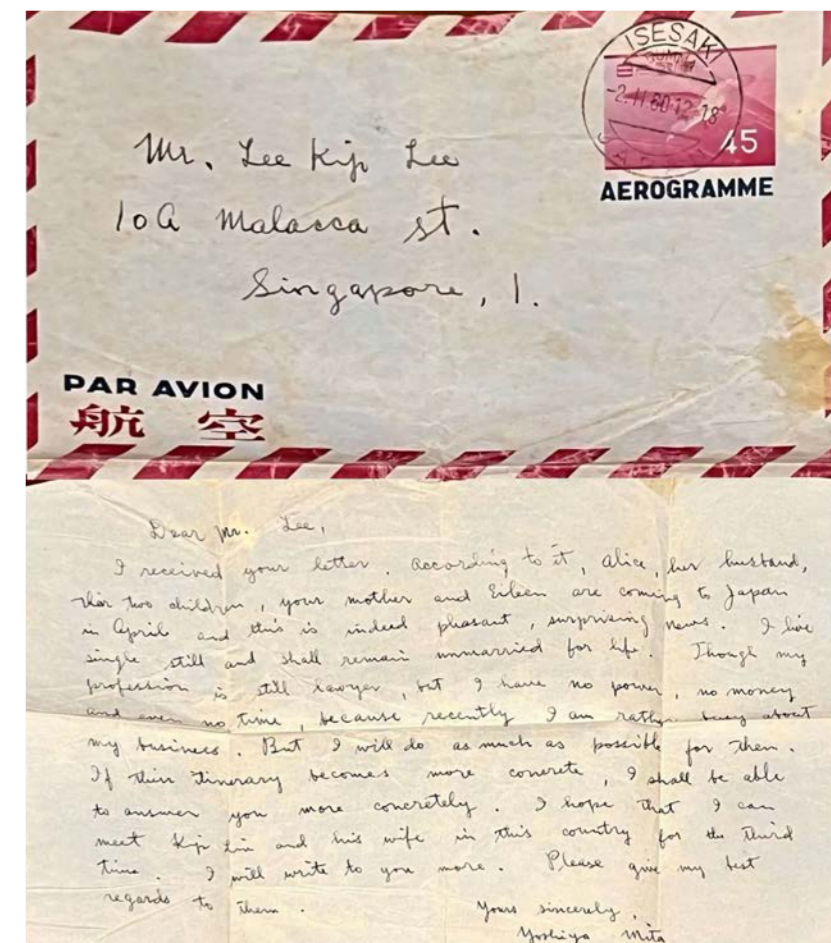
The sixth essay in this series, however, is different. After describing the plants he had seen on Mount Akagi such as Japanese atractylode, Japanese quince, ladybell and Fischer's ragwort, Mita wrote of continuing his walk on Mount Akagi on a cold, hazy day until the path before him disappeared. Beyond 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. ♦

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