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**THE NAME'S ZAIN.
JEFRI ZAIN.**

**SINGAPORE'S
JAMES BOND**

— p. 04 —





Director’s Note

In 1962, Ian Fleming’s superspy came to life on the silver screen in *Dr No*, with Sean Connery as James Bond. There was something about Bond that ignited the imagination, and movie studios around the world rushed to exploit the public’s hunger for glamorous spies. And this is how we got Jins Shamsuddin as Jefri Zain, “Singapore’s own James Bond”.

Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat (*Jefri Zain in Operation Lightning*) debuted in 1966 and did so well that it resulted in two sequels and a spinoff. *Gerak Kilat* is also notable for capturing scenes of Singapore that have since disappeared, as it was filmed entirely here. You can read all about *Gerak Kilat* and Jefri Zain in our cover story.

Unlike James Bond, Jefri Zain’s signature drink was not a martini, whether shaken or stirred. Perhaps it could have been a Sinalco instead. This was a highly popular drink back in the day, thanks to its unique taste and clever marketing. At one point, the National Aerated Water Company’s factory on Serangoon Road produced 40,000 bottles of the drink a day. Today, sadly, only the distinctive building is left. We hope the article on the company will be a refreshing read.

Aerated water was always a minor luxury in Singapore. It was certainly not something that was available on Rempang in the aftermath of the Second World War. Rempang, an island in the Riau Archipelago, was where thousands of former Japanese soldiers were interned after Japan’s surrender while awaiting repatriation. Conditions were harsh, but some of the internees were able to view their experiences in a positive light on hindsight, as you’ll discover in the article about their time on Rempang.

Other highlights in this issue include: how the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish world were perceived in Malaya during the late 19th and early 20th centuries; Singapore’s experience of the Great Depression; how the Singapore River has been captured by artists over time; and how the Singapore Police Force Band has been entertaining folks for a century.

As you can see, regardless of how you like your martini, there’s always something for you to savour in *BiblioAsia*.

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On the cover
An illustration of Jefri Zain, Singapore’s James Bond, by Oxygen Studio Designs.

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Image credits, clockwise from top left: National Library Singapore; Allen Goh Collection, National Archives of Singapore; Salleh Sariman; Jimmy Yap; Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board, © Estate of Georgette Chen; and Imperial War Museums.



28 The Ottoman empire was seen as exotic here.



20 Life was not easy for the Japanese awaiting repatriation after the war.



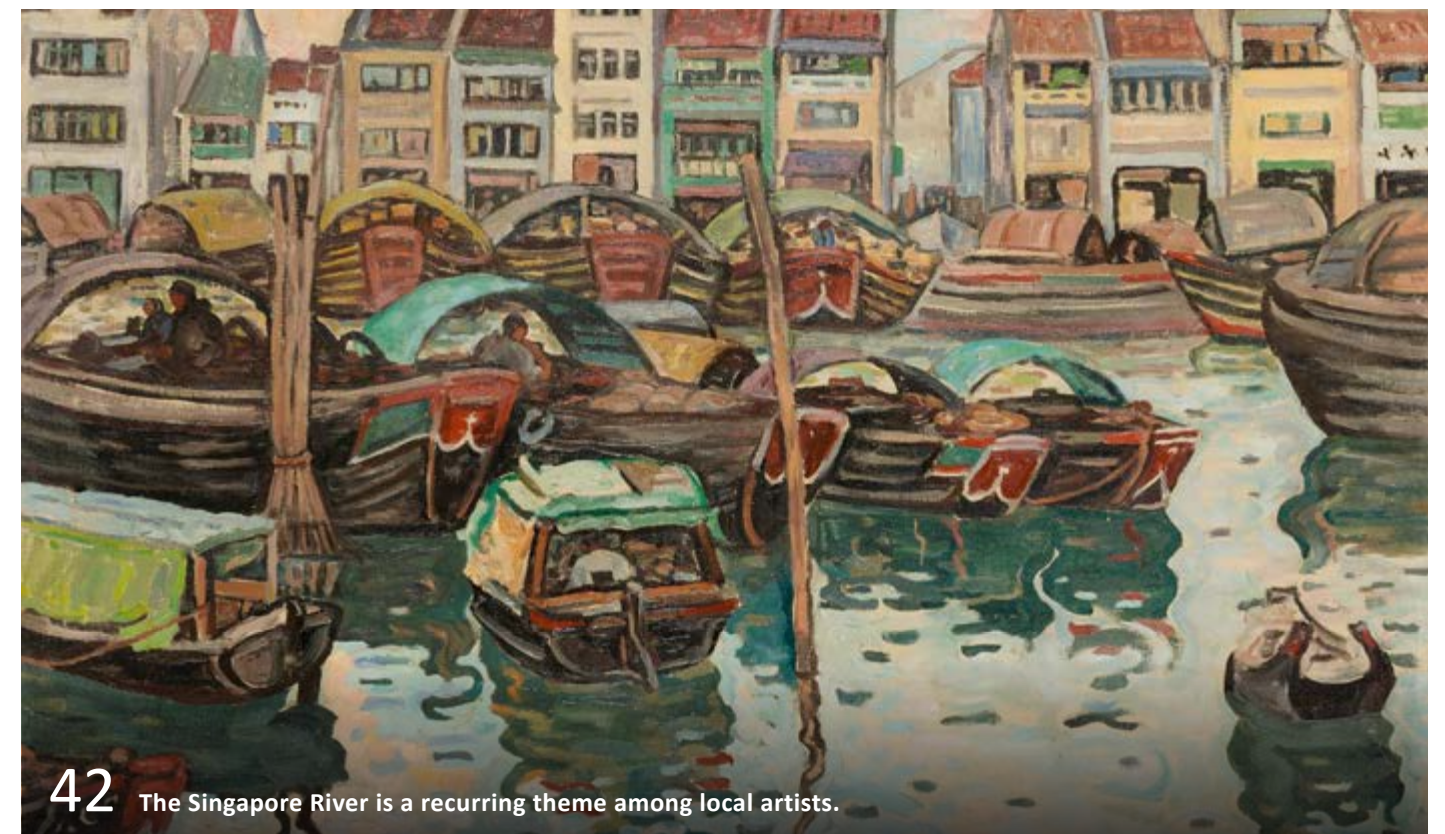
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12 The National Aerated Water Company was best known for making Sinalco.



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JEFRI ZAIN IS SINGAPORE'S JAMES BOND

A 1966 Malay spy thriller becomes a cinematic portrait of a newly independent nation.

By Raphaël Millet



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.

When Sean Connery first uttered the iconic line, “Bond. James Bond,” in *Dr. No* (1962), the first James Bond film, it marked the beginning of a film series based on the fictional spy created by the British novelist Ian Fleming in 1952.¹ The film, which starred the late Scottish actor as an agent of the British Secret Intelligence Service (commonly known as MI6) with the code 007 (pronounced “double-oh seven”), premiered in Singapore in 1963.²

By the mid-1960s, following the release of three more films³ and the popularisation of the secret agent's trademark martini order – “shaken, not stirred” – the James Bond phenomenon had become a global cultural force, inspiring a wave of European espionage thrillers that increasingly turned to Asia for exotic locations. Newly independent Singapore soon found itself as the setting for Ferdinando Baldi's *Operation Singapore* (originally titled *Goldsnake: Anonima Killers*, 1966) and Gianfranco Parolini's *So Darling, So Deadly* (*Kommissar X – In den Klauen des goldenen Drachen*, 1966), both filmed on the island in late 1965 and early 1966 respectively.⁴

Rather than leaving this emerging genre to foreign filmmakers, Shaw Brothers' Malay Film Productions (MFP) sought to produce its own locally made spy thriller. When *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* (*Jefri Zain in Operation Lightning*) was screened on 3 September 1966, it was touted as “Singapore's Own Bond” and marketed as a “Western-style Malay film modelled after James Bond” that would “put Singapore on the international entertainment map”.⁵ Conceived as a studio project to revitalise Malay cinema through narrative and stylistic innovations, producer Shaw Vee Meng entrusted the original story to publicity officer Jaafar Abdullah before it was developed into a screenplay by Jamil Sulong (1926–2014), one of MFP's most accomplished filmmakers.

Born in Parit Sulong, Johor, Jamil joined the studio in the late 1940s, rising from translator to assistant director before making his full directorial debut in 1959. Jamil was by then ideally placed to



Jins Shamsuddin as Jefri Zain in *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* (1966). Courtesy of Shaw Organisation Pte Ltd.

bring the studio's most ambitious spy film to the screen.⁶ He was not alone in this though as he was assisted by the Singapore-born Kemat Hassan (1929–2004), who had served as his assistant director on several productions since 1959 and had himself been one of the familiar faces of the Jalan Ampas studios.

Once the screenplay for the spy thriller was completed, MFP moved swiftly. Even before filming commenced, several key personnel were reassigned from Omar Rojik's *Dahaga* despite the fact that it was still in production. Abu Bakar Ali (later known as Pak Bakar) became the cinematographer for *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat*, with Chua Chang Kok replacing him on *Dahaga*. Similarly, A.V. Bapat was transferred to the new film as set designer, while Mustafa Yassin succeeded him on *Dahaga*. There was true urgency due to the increasing number of European spy films using Singapore as a backdrop as well as competition from longtime rival Cathay-Keris, which was preparing to announce production of its own espionage feature, *Mat Bond*.⁷

Jins Bond

With the director and crew in place, attention turned to finding an actor capable of portraying Singapore's answer to James Bond. The role fell naturally to Jins Shamsuddin, real name Mohamed Zain Shamsuddin (1935–2017), who was born in Taiping, Perak, but had moved to Singapore in the mid-1950s. Jamil had known him even before he became an actor, when the young Jins frequently visited MFP's Jalan Ampas studio to repair tape recorders and became fascinated by filmmaking.⁸

After making his screen debut in *Keluarga Tolol* (1956), Jins came under the mentorship of actor and filmmaker P. Ramlee, whose *Pancha Delima* (1957) established him as one of Malay cinema's rising stars.⁹ By the mid-1960s, Jins had appeared in 27 films and become one of MFP's leading actors. When *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* entered production in 1966, Jins was fresh from starring in Jamil's *Kacha Permata* (literally Glass Gems, or *Shattered Glass*, 1966), released only weeks earlier, in February of that year.

Jamil regarded Jins as the ideal choice for the titular role, not least because he was widely seen in the local film industry as the only Malay actor whose height and features resembled those of Sean Connery.¹⁰ When I interviewed Jamil in 2004, he remarked that “without Jins there could have been no ‘Singapore’s Own Bond’”.

The choice of Jins Shamsuddin also helped shape the character's very identity. Jaafar Abdullah coined the name “Jefri Zain” by combining Jefri, the name of Jins' young son, with Zain, the actor's own given name, Mohamed Zain, thereby blurring the boundary between actor and character. The connection became even more personal with the casting of Jins' former wife and mother of his son, Rahmah Rahmat, who appeared alongside him in the film, making the production even more of a family affair. Rahmah, described by the press

as the “naughty girl” of Malay films, was given the role of Ratna, the “seductive, pistol-packing gangster girl” in the film.¹¹

Newspapers quickly dubbed Jins Shamsuddin “Jins Bond”, while also describing him as “James Bond Melayu” (Malay James Bond) and “Singapore's Own Bond”.¹² Far from being contradictory, these epithets reflected the transnational character of the Malay-language film industry at the time. The former situated Jefri Zain within Malay cinema, while the latter asserted Singapore's place in a global spy phenomenon. That Jins himself was not born in Singapore mattered little in an industry that drew talent from across the region.

A Cosmopolitan Cast

The film also featured established Malay stars such as Sarimah who played the female lead Tina, and Salleh Kamil, who was cast as the supervillain Commander Jeeman. They were joined by Chinese Singapore actresses Sylvia Koh, making her screen debut, and Rita Cheong, who had briefly appeared in Ferdinando Baldi's *Operation Singapore* only months earlier.¹³

Publicity materials enthusiastically promoted these actresses as Singapore's own Bond girls. “Our own Bond girls are very much like the curvy creatures the late Ian Fleming created. They are as desirable, as delectable and as deadly as Sean Connery's girl friends on the screen,” reported the *Straits Times*.¹⁴ The cast also included Margaret Clougher, who played Agent No. 4, and the British couple Tony Richardson, an army signalman, and his wife, Rene Richardson.¹⁵

This diversity was more than a marketing ploy. The screenplay required the presence of British military officers, their wives and airline personnel associated with RAF Changi, making the European cast essential rather than ornamental. Together with Malay and Chinese local actors, they reflected the ethnic diversity and international character of mid-1960s Singapore, reinforcing the city's cosmopolitan image.

The dialogue, likewise, contributed to the atmosphere. Although spoken predominantly in Malay, the film was peppered with English words and expressions – even by Jefri Zain himself – with lines such as “Please, don't come too close!”, “Get me something to cover the body” and “I'll send you home”. While English had long appeared occasionally in Malay-language films, *Jefri Zain dalam*

Gerak Kilat employed it more extensively than most of its contemporaries, giving its dialogue a distinctly modern, multilingual flavour in line with the ambitious production.

Borrowing from James Bond Films

Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat consciously adopted many of the characteristics audiences had come to associate with the British secret agent. By day, Jefri Zain worked as an insurance agent, but beneath the bathroom of his modest home lay a concealed operations centre from which he undertook covert missions. Investigating the murder of a fellow operative, Jefri found himself confronting the elusive Commander Jeeman, whose technologically sophisticated criminal organisation relied on hidden headquarters, advanced communications equipment, sophisticated electronic surveillance devices and concealed weaponry.

Jefri was assisted by Eddie, played by Salim Bachik, who designed and supplied him with specialised gadgets. Eddie fulfilled much the same role as Q, the head of the fictional Q Branch (later Q Division) of the British Secret Service. Q's ingenious inventions are a defining feature of James Bond films.

Among the film's highlights was Jefri's sleek Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing coupé, the equivalent to James Bond's Aston Martin DB5, which was first introduced in *Goldfinger* (1964). The Benz was valued at \$32,000 and was described by the press as the only example of its kind in Malaysia.¹⁶ It became an instant attraction, sporting Jefri's personalised “JZ1” licence plate and distinctive gullwing doors. Although it lacked the concealed gadgetry of Bond's Aston Martin, the car served the same symbolic purpose, projecting speed, sophistication and technological modernity while signalling that Singapore's own secret agent deserved a machine every bit as impressive as his British counterpart.

The Mercedes-Benz 300 SL was not the only authentic feature of the production. Many of the firearms seen on screen, including the Sterling sub-machine guns carried by Jefri and his adversaries, were genuine weapons that required not only the authorisation but also the assistance of the Singapore Police Force. Many of the film's fight sequences were personally supervised by Assistant Superintendent Shaari, then chief armourer of the police force.¹⁷ He was responsible for the management, maintenance and distribution of police firearms, making him the natural choice to oversee the production's use of weapons and ensure their safe handling on set.

Jins also underwent training with the police in the handling of firearms and explosives before



(Above) Rahmah Rahmat as gangster girl Ratna in *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat*. Source: *The Straits Times*, 15 April 1966, 18 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

(Right) An advertisement for *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat*. Image reproduced from *Berita Harian*, 29 August 1966, 8. (From NewspaperSG).

filming commenced. The involvement of the Singapore Police Force lent *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* a level of realism and technical credibility rarely seen in Malay cinema of the period.

Jins' commitment to the role went beyond mastering firearms. In the James Bond film *Thunderball* (1965), which premiered in Singapore on 16 March 1966 – only three days before the announcement of the new Malay spy thriller – Sean Connery had personally carried out many of the film's underwater stunts, thereby raising expectations for the genre.¹⁸

In response, Jins insisted on performing all of his own stunts. Without using a double, he leapt from a moving car and a motorboat, and most spectacularly across the rooftop of the Capitol Theatre, clearing an eight-foot (2.4 m) gap between two buildings before astonished crowds. During another chase,

(From left) Director Jamil Sulong, actor Jins Shamsuddin and assistant director Kemat Hassan, 1966. Courtesy of Raphaël Millet.





Jefri's Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing coupé as seen in *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* (1966). Courtesy of Shaw Organisation Pte Ltd.

Jins injured his leg after leaping from a bridge but completed the sequence regardless. His willingness to undertake such risks gave *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* an authenticity worthy of Singapore's own Bond.

The Kissing Scene

Yet more than its gadgets, luxury cars or spectacular stunts, the film generated a lot of buzz through a controversy largely fuelled by studio publicity officer Jaafar Abdullah, who encouraged speculation that the film would contain the first genuine kiss in a Malay-language production. Jamil Sulong, however, diplomatically refused to either confirm or deny this.¹⁹

The press eagerly picked up on the story and amplified the rumours, even claiming that Jins and Sarimah would perform the kisses. According to Jamil, Jins reportedly posed for publicity photographs embracing the film's actresses, including Margaret Clougher, although no such photographs appear to have surfaced.²⁰

With news reports escalating to claims of six kissing scenes, supposedly filmed in a specially constructed *bilik khayalan* ("fantasy room") reserved for unusually intimate sequences,²¹ the situation soon escaped MFP's control. Objections even came from the Malaysian Parliament, with one member of parliament declaring that he would get the film banned from being screened in Malaysia if it "contained kissing and other sizzling love scenes".

"I object to it not merely on religious grounds but also from the cultural point of view... kissing in public is not only against our national religion but also against Malaysian concepts of culture and tradition," said Ismail Idris, Alliance Member of Parliament for Penang South.²²

The press that had previously celebrated the production as "James Bond Melayu" or "Singapore's Own Bond" now dubbed it "Singapore's Kissing Bond".²³ The shift was telling: once the debate centred on morality rather than modernity, the film came to symbolise Singapore's increasingly cosmopolitan image rather than merely its cinematic ambitions, and Jefri Zain became less closely identified with the Malay community across the Malay Peninsula.

In the end, the controversy proved largely manufactured. Shortly before the film's release, the studio clarified that the kisses would involve neither Jins, Sarimah nor any other Malay actors, but only a British couple. Audiences ultimately saw just a single kiss between European honeymooners embracing on a beach at the beginning of the film.

As Jamil Sulong later explained, such behaviour seemed perfectly normal for Westerners holidaying or living in Singapore, and therefore suited the story's cosmopolitan setting. The episode, nevertheless, reflected broader social changes within Singapore and even more so in the Malay-language film industry. As filmmaker Amir Muhammad later observed, *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* was clearly meant to be "set in a socially liberal, cosmopolitan Singapore".²⁴

Documenting a Singapore That Once Was

Today, the greatest significance of *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* lies less in its espionage plot or much-publicised kissing scene than in the Singapore it inadvertently preserved. Unlike studio-bound melodramas, spy films thrive on movement, transforming streets, rooftops and public spaces into arenas of pursuit. The very conventions that once made the film appear strikingly modern have since turned it into an invaluable visual record of Singapore's early years of independence. This is apparent in the opening sequence which portrays Changi Beach as a vibrant seaside playground where Singaporeans and Westerners swim, sunbathe, water-ski and socialise along an open coastline that had not yet been transformed by reclamation and redevelopment works.

The action then moves across a succession of recognisable landmarks that embodied Singapore's emerging modernity. One scene takes place at the Adelphi Hotel on Coleman Street, which shows the characters attending a floor show titled *Mahaligai Lautan Selatan* (The Palace of the Southern Sea). It was most likely performed by the Lion City Revue whose repertoire of Malay songs and dances entertained audiences at the hotel throughout the late 1960s,²⁵ unless the performance was staged by MFP's own dance troupe. Within only a few years, however, the performances were no more: the Adelphi closed in 1973 and was subsequently demolished and replaced by the Adelphi Complex.

(Below) A scene filmed at Changi Beach in *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* (1966). Courtesy of Shaw Organisation Pte Ltd.

(Bottom) Changi Beach in a scene from *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* (1966). Courtesy of Shaw Organisation Pte Ltd.



Later in the film, a rooftop chase across the Capitol Theatre transforms one of the city's best-known Art Deco landmarks into a spectacular cinematic arena before spilling into the surrounding streets. The camera then casually lingers on places such as City Book Store, a familiar landmark at Winchester House in Collyer Quay since the end of the Second World War, as the pursuit across town continues.

Other scenes showcase neighbourhoods such as Serangoon Gardens, whose orderly residential landscape symbolised the aspirations of a rapidly modernising society. Even incidental details – the passing traffic, shopfronts, street furniture, fashions and patterns of everyday pedestrian life – have acquired documentary value, preserving aspects of Singapore that have long since disappeared.

The Only True "Singapore's Own Bond"

The film's documentary value becomes even clearer when viewed alongside the Zain series it launched, which occupies a notable place in Malay film history. Following the successful release of *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* in Malaysia and Singapore in late 1966, Shaw Brothers expanded the franchise with the female-led *Nora Zain: Ajen Wanita 001* (*Nora Zain: Female Agent 001*, 1967), followed by two Jefri Zain adventures filmed back-to-back and which also starred Jins Shamsuddin in the titular role: *Jefri Zain dalam Bayangan Ajal* (*Shadow of Death*, 1968) and *Jefri Zain dalam Jurang Bahaya* (*Danger Valley*, 1968). Shot in Hong Kong, all three films were directed by Lo Wei and produced at Shaw

The kiss scene between two European honeymooners on Changi Beach in *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* (1966). Courtesy of Shaw Organisation Pte Ltd.





(Above) A bookmark promoting *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* (1966). Courtesy of Wong Han Min.

(Below) Jefri Zain leaping from one building to another during a rooftop chase in *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* (1966). Courtesy of Shaw Organisation Pte Ltd.



Brothers’ Clearwater Studio in the territory.²⁶ (Lo Wei was a Hong Kong film director, screenwriter and producer who helped launch the international careers of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan.)

Yet in leaving Singapore behind for Hong Kong, the three subsequent films lost what makes the original unique today. They retained the Zain character (whether in its male or female form), the action and the espionage, but no longer captured the city of Singapore itself. Only *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* remains inseparable from Singapore, preserving its streets, beaches, hotels and public spaces at a pivotal moment before redevelopment transformed much of the urban landscape. In that sense, it remains the only true “Singapore’s Own Bond” film, not merely because it was made in Singapore, but because Singapore itself became one of its principal protagonists. In fact, the first film in the Jefri Zain trilogy was the only one to be marketed as “Singapore’s Own Bond”.

Jamil Sulong was not involved in the latter three Zain films. Instead, he went on to direct something very different: the epic *Raja Bersiong* (*King of the Fanged Wings*, 1968), based on a story by Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia’s prime minister from 1957 to 1970.²⁷ This was the last feature produced by MFP at Jalan Ampas before the studio’s closure. Yet when I interviewed Jamil in 2004, he described *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* as, in many respects, his last studio film truly about Singapore, a city where he had spent his formative years and established himself as a filmmaker. He also recalled it as perhaps the most

(Below) City Book Store at Winchester House, Collyer Quay, as seen in *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* (1966). Courtesy of Shaw Organisation Pte Ltd.

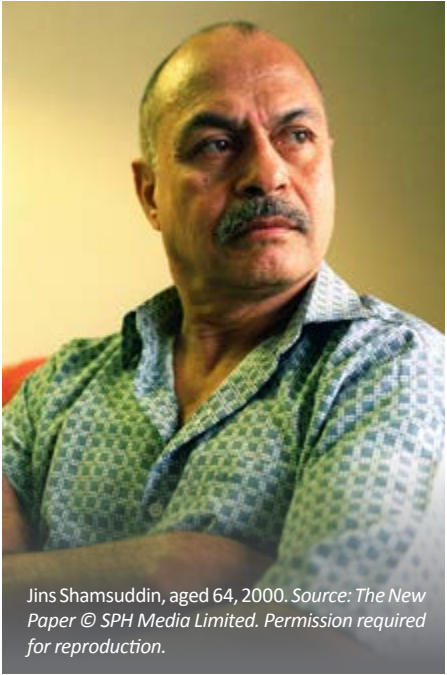
(Bottom) *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* (1966) showcases everyday landscapes of Singapore. Courtesy of Shaw Organisation Pte Ltd.



enjoyable film of his career, not only due to its action and gadgets but also the opportunity to film extensively on location across the island-city.

Jins, whom I interviewed separately in 2004, expressed similar affection for the production, asserting that Jefri Zain was inseparable from Singapore before his own career took him to Hong Kong and then elsewhere. “Those Jefri Zain movies captured the non-Malay audience,” Jins told the *New Paper* in 2000.²⁸

The recollections of the two main creators of “Singapore’s Own Bond” are revealing. Conceived as Singapore’s answer to James Bond, *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* ultimately became something far more enduring: an accidental visual archive of a newly independent nation and, perhaps, a true cinematic farewell to the city that had shaped the careers of several iconic and influential talents during what is usually described as the “Golden Age” of Malay cinema. ♦



Jins Shamsuddin, aged 64, 2000. Source: *The New Paper* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

This article draws upon multiple primary and secondary sources. Chief among them are separate interviews conducted by the author with director Jamil Sulong at his home in Pahang and with lead actor Jins Shamsuddin in Kuala Lumpur in 2004. These interviews are complemented by close analysis of *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat*, contemporary newspaper coverage, archival records and published biographies of both Jamil Sulong and Jins Shamsuddin. Wherever possible, information derived from oral testimonies has been corroborated against contemporary documentary sources. *Gerak Kilat* is currently available for viewing for subscribers of Malaysia’s pay TV provider Astro.

NOTES

- 1 “Dr. No,” IMDb, accessed 23 July 2026, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0055928/>; “Inspirations,” Ian Fleming, accessed 12 August 2026, <https://ianfleming.com/james-bond/universe/inspirations/>.
- 2 Joanne Soh, “Spy Classic Dr. No Returns to Shaw Lido, Kicking off the Cinema’s James Bond Marathon,” *Straits Times*, 5 March 2026, <https://www.straitstimes.com/life/entertainment/spy-classic-dr-no-returns-to-shaw-lido-kicking-off-the-cinemas-james-bond-marathon>.
- 3 The three films were *From Russia with Love* (1963), *Gold Finger* (1964) and *Thunderball* (1965), all starring Sean Connery.
- 4 Raphaël Millet, *Singapore: A Cinematic Portrait* (Singapore: Asian Film Archive, 2026), 210–11. (From PublicationSG)
- 5 “Kissing to Stay in S’pore’s First James Bond Film,” *Straits Times*, 27 April 1966, 20; “Halaman 8 Iklan Ruangan 1,” *Berita Harian*, 29 August 1966, 8. (From NewspaperSG)
- 6 Jamil Sulong, *Kaca Permata: Memoir Seorang Pengarah* [Gemstone: A director’s memoir] (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1990), 195. (From National Library Singapore, call no. Malay RSING 791.4309595 JAM)
- 7 “Pekerja2 ‘Dahaga’ Banyak Yg Letak Jawatan” [Many ‘thirsty’ employees resigned], *Berita Harian*, 19 March 1966, 7; “Enter Mat Bond the Magician,” *Straits Times*, 27 April 1966, 11. (From NewspaperSG)
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- 9 Raphaël Millet, “P. Ramlee: The Singapore Years,” *BiblioAsia* 22, no. 1 (April–June 2026): 52–57.
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- 12 “Halaman 8 Iklan Ruangan 1”; Judith Yong, “Four Deadly Lovelies All Set for Our Man Jins Bond to Out-do 007,” *Straits Times*, 17 April 1966, 7; “Kemalangan dalam Masa Penggambaran Akhir ‘James Bond’ Melayu,” *Berita Harian*, 24 July 1966, 5. (From NewspaperSG)
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From Pok Jui to Jui Residences

THE STORY OF THE NATIONAL AERATED WATER COMPANY



In the 1950s, the National Aerated Water Company produced over 40,000 bottles of Sinalco a day. All that remains today is the shell of the company's factory on Serangoon Road.

By Alvin Tan

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Jui Residences, an 18-storey glass-and-concrete condominium, is situated on Serangoon Road, near what was once the 3rd milestone. Standing on a 31,705-square-foot (2,946 sqm) site, it towers over a nearby two-storey Art Deco-style building that is part of the site. This comparatively ordinary-looking and diminutive building, however, is a remnant of Singapore's industrial history. For the entire site once housed the state-of-the-art factory of the National Aerated Water Company, which operated in Singapore for 70 years, from 1929 to 1999.

With its iconic signage tower and prominent Sinalco logo, the building was more than a production line; it was a tangible and visual promise of speed, technology and a nation's thirst for progress. Here, a soft drink craze was ignited – one that swept through the 1950s and 1960s by pairing a secret German formula with clever marketing, transforming the humble *pok jui* (Hokkien for “soft drinks”) into a sophisticated product and a household name.

Soft drinks, or carbonated drinks, first made their appearance in Singapore as early as 1832. A nondescript advertisement in the *Singapore Chronicle* announced the arrival of “a few dozens of fresh soda water” on the ship *Elizabeth*.¹ In 1883, John Fraser and David Chalmers Neave set up the Singapore and Straits Aerated Water Company – better known today as Fraser & Neave (F&N).² Other manufacturers included Framroz and Co. (1904), Phoenix Aerated Water Company (1925), Amoy Canning (1951) and Yeo Hiap Seng (1953).³ Most were local agents and bottlers for foreign soft drink brands, such as Green Spot. Framroz, however, became well known for its own concoction – Orange Smash.⁴

In an era where imported goods had an aura of luxury, sophistication and prestige, soft drinks were marketed as objects of conspicuous consumption and cleverly positioned as the perfect thirst-quencher for the enervating tropical climate.

Bottling Aspirations

In 1929, a three-man partnership comprising Yap Shing Nin, Cheng Sze Boo and Tan Kah Woo put up \$1 million in capital to set up the National Aerated Water Company on Hamilton Road, in

the Jalan Besar area. It employed about 20 workers at its factory, which produced 300 bottles of soft drinks every hour.⁵

During the Japanese Occupation, the company continued producing soft drinks using its stockpile of flavours and sugar rations. By 1950, the company – which changed its status to private limited in 1948 – was known as “the largest Chinese manufacturer

(Facing page) The factory of the National Aerated Water Company on Serangoon Road, c. 1950s. Parked in front of the building are Sinalco distribution trucks. *Courtesy of URA Collection.*

(Below) Jui Residences on Serangoon Road with the factory of the former National Aerated Water Company factory integrated into its development, 2026. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*





Distribution trucks loaded with crates of Sinalco at the factory of the National Aerated Water Company on Serangoon Road, c. 1950s. *Courtesy of URA Collection.*

(“without”) and *alco*, a truncation of “alcohol”.¹⁰ Its formula was a closely guarded secret, but its ingredients included a blend of orange, lemon, strawberry, blackberry, raspberry, pineapple and other fruit juices, giving it a unique citrusy flavour. And because of the added fruit acids and mineral salts, the drink was supposedly endowed with tonic qualities.¹¹

By September 1952, within a month of its public release, the company had sold 216,000 bottles of Sinalco. The company’s 75 employees were pulling 12-hour shifts to satisfy Singapore’s demand for the drink. One of its managing directors, Yap Shing Nin, announced that

a new factory would be built to meet the demand.¹²

In 1954, the National Aerated Water Company celebrated its 25th anniversary by inaugurating its new premises on Serangoon Road in October that year. Built at a cost of \$350,000, it was equipped with \$150,000 worth of the most modern machinery – washers, fillers, conveyors, syrupers and carbonators – from the United Kingdom. “Despite keen competition in the soft drink trade, we believe there is room for all as demand continues to increase rapidly,” Yap told the *Straits Times*.¹³

Within a year, the new factory – which had a rated production capacity of 48,000 bottles a day – was producing 43,200 bottles daily. It consumed 1.5 tons of sugar each day and produced one million bottles of soft drinks every month. Eighty percent of the company’s total output was sold in Singapore, with the rest going to the Federation and Indonesia.¹⁴

The factory even had its own fuel pump to service its “fleet of vans and lorries to carry its drinks to all parts of the Federation”. In 1958, the company announced a factory upgrade with a new \$100,000 machine capable of filling 6,000 bottles of soft drinks an hour. “Business in this line is growing in Singapore and our new equipment will enable us to cope with the increasing demand,” said Cheng Sze Boo, another managing director.¹⁵

of aerated water products in Singapore” with a product line comprising orange juice, pineapple juice and sarsaparilla.⁶

Although it made a few different types of drinks, the company’s best-known product was a beverage known as Sinalco. The company secured the licence to distribute the drink in 1952. Interestingly, the company was not the first to introduce Sinalco to Singapore. As early as November 1934, the *Malayan Tribune* carried a small, nondescript advertisement which went: “A new non-alcoholic beverage called Sinalco has been introduced into the local market by Mr. E.H. Schirmer of 2 Finlayson Green. The drink is excellently prepared and should find a ready sale in Malaya.”⁷

Other advertisements by Schirmer touted Sinalco as “Invigorating, Strengthening and Refreshing”, “the Queen of all Non-Alcoholic Beverages” and “When mixed with Beer, it’s second to none”.⁸ However, the National Aerated Water Company went beyond run-of-the-mill print ads. It promoted, marketed and sold Sinalco in a manner and with a scale that eluded Schirmer. The company launched Sinalco on 1 August 1952, which soon became wildly popular in Singapore.⁹

The drink actually dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. First concocted in Detmold, Germany, in 1902, the name Sinalco was a portmanteau formed from the Latin word *sine*

Building a Landmark

Like several other industrial buildings in Singapore from the 1940s onwards, the National Aerated Water Company building incorporated Art Deco-inspired stylistic elements. Notable examples would be the Ford Motor Factory on Upper Bukit Timah Road (1941) and Khong Guan Factory on MacTaggart Road (1952).¹⁶

With its L-shaped, two-storey red-and-cream building, the factory was designed to reflect technological progress and modernity. Deliberate efforts were made to balance the aesthetic form with its utilitarian manufacturing functions.

The building’s facade, dominated by long horizontal lines, has a vertical signage tower (reminiscent of an aeroplane’s tail fin) rising from it, breaking the visual monotony imposed by the linear design. Offset from the building centre, the tower’s curved elements soften the otherwise hard edges and geometric shapes that form the building’s leitmotif. Emblazoned with the Sinalco logo, the tower became a prominent visual marker for the area.

To the tower’s left, a projecting concrete canopy marked the factory’s main entrance. And on its right, three large, rectangular collapsible grille gates facilitated loading and unloading.

Similarly, the fair-faced brick parapet of the balcony, timber doors and transoms (decorative or functional panels located above the door) provided visual relief from the extensive concrete finishing and metal grid windows. The side of the building facing the Kallang River features a small circular metal grid window that serves as an effective counterpoint to the square and rectangular shapes dominating the structure.¹⁷ Together, these visual elements alluded strongly to the hallmarks of mass production – speed, efficiency and technology.

Crates of Sinalco stored in the warehouse within the factory of the National Aerated Water Company on Serangoon Road, c. 1950s. *Courtesy of URA Collection.*



Workers bottling Sinalco at the factory of the National Aerated Water Company on Serangoon Road, c. 1950s. *Courtesy of URA Collection.*



Sinalco – The Trending Soft Drink of the 1950s

Sinalco was a big hit. Much of this success can be attributed to the company's marketing savvy that, in a pre-television era, relied heavily on physical outreach and engagement. It heightened brand visibility through trade fairs (or “expos”), which were an effective means of reaching a mass audience at a time when advertising was limited to either print or radio. The company invested time and money into the decoration of its stall at these trade fairs. Allowing potential customers to have a taste of Sinalco at these events also helped to introduce it to the general public.¹⁸

Press coverage helped to build visibility. In February 1953, the *Singapore Standard* newspaper recommended it as a last-minute festive purchase for Chinese New Year.¹⁹ Serving Sinalco, a soft drink with European origins, to your guests in those days was considered a status symbol.

Sinalco was also associated with fun. At the Great Eastern Trade Fair in January 1953, the

company promised prizes of up to “20 dozen bottles of Sinalco” if visitors could, for example, guess the number of bottle caps in a bottle or kick a ball into a hole from a distance of 12 feet. At the trade fair at Happy World in October 1955, Sinalco was sold at half price, or 10 cents a bottle. To reward customers – loyal or prospective ones – the company gave away pencils, pocket mirrors and balloons at its stall.²⁰

In August 1958, at the Great World Trade Fair, free bottles of Sinalco were given out nightly. At the time, these small tokens were little luxuries to most people, who were getting by with very little. “Every night it will be crowded with people, young and old, awaiting their turn for a bottle of Sinalco, politely served by smart sales girls,” the *Singapore Free Press* reported.²¹

Such activities attracted media attention, created brand awareness and generated buzz about Sinalco – it kept people wanting it and wanting more.

On 14 September 1958, the company put on what would be called a product placement drive today – Sinalco Night. Held at the Great World Trade Fair, the entertainment show featured more than 20 performers, including Chen Meiguang and Chen Meiyu, who were among that era's leading artistes. Audiences stood a chance to win lucky draw prizes.²² The first prize comprised 10 cases of Sinalco soft drinks, one handheld travel bag, three plates, three ashtrays, 12 mirrors and 36 pencils. It can be surmised that these items were emblazoned with the Sinalco logo. Winning numbers were published in the two main Chinese broadsheets the following day.²³

Later, in October 1958, the company tied up with Yong Chun Song and Dance Troupe for its 40th anniversary entertainment gala at New World. Branded as another “Sinalco Night”, the show featured the same lucky draw but guests received a special treat – a bottle of Sinalco which they deemed to be “a premium beverage”. In March 1959, the company amped up its brand campaign by holding a “Sinalco Lucky Numbers” lottery at the Constitution Exposition.²⁴

In response to the Bukit Ho Swee Fire in May 1961, the company donated three days' worth of sales proceeds from the Great World Trade Fair to aid the unfortunate fire victims.²⁵ Even a charitable act was an opportunity to sell itself to potential customers.

Press reports and advertisements were also used strategically to position the drink. Sinalco's German and European pedigree, together with its unique taste and aroma, formed a brand image and language that exuded sophistication and taste. Giving out freebies such as glasses inscribed with the Sinalco logo, or supplying free drinks for school events, left more than a palpable impression in the



Children enjoying Sinalco, c. 1950s.
Courtesy of URA Collection.

public consciousness.²⁶ In 1959 alone, more than 11.5 million bottles of Sinalco were sold across Singapore, Malaya and Borneo.²⁷

Growing Capability (1960s)

In 1961, the company announced plans to build a new factory in Petaling Jaya, outside Kuala Lumpur, to better serve the Malayan market. To fit out the new factory, Ching Kwong Yew, managing director, and Yap Neng Juan, a director, visited West Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States to acquire insights into the latest know-how and technology in soft drink production.²⁸

Built at a cost of \$350,000 and equipped with fully automated machinery procured from the United States amounting to more than \$200,000, the new factory's initial production level was rated at 400 dozen bottles per hour. Employing 40 workers initially, the plant was opened in July 1964 by Lim Swee Aun, Malaysian Minister for Commerce and Industry. This added production capacity was needed urgently. Malaysians reportedly consumed 1.3 million bottles of Sinalco in 1963 alone.²⁹

In 1972, the company began producing Royal Crown Cola under franchise from Royal Crown Cola Co. International, then the third largest American soft drink producer. With this, the company hoped to secure up to 10 percent of the

cola market in Singapore, which was estimated at nine million cases a year. In anticipation, the company sank \$2 million into new machinery that could bottle up to 500 bottles a minute, or 27,000 bottles an hour. It also revealed plans for further plant expansions: a new factory in Singapore and in Johor Bahru.³⁰

Fizzling Out (1970s–1990s)

For all its plans, the 1970s were challenging and troubled times for the company despite its market share and reach. The 1973 global oil crisis affected Singapore badly, leading to rising fuel costs and inflation, which peaked at 22.37 percent in 1977.³¹ Consequently, all soft drink makers in Singapore had to grapple with a wave of price increases between 1973 and 1977, which ate into their profitability.³²

1976 proved to be particularly difficult. In October, a fire broke out at its factory caused by an errantly discarded cigarette butt, resulting in \$10,000 worth of damages.³³ The company also saw its market share shrink considerably when it lost its Sinalco distribution rights – which it had held for 30 years – in Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei. To add to its woes, its Malaysian subsidiary, National Aerated Water Co. (Kuala Lumpur), was the subject of a winding up petition in the Malaysian High Court in 1977.³⁴

A wall poster advertising Sinalco, c. 1940s–1970s. Such posters were commonly found in coffee shops. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board. © Sinalco International Brands GmbH, Germany.





(Above) The former National Aerated Water Company factory on Serangoon Road, 2026. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

(Right) Fuel pump at the former National Aerated Water Company factory on Serangoon Road that once serviced the company’s fleet of distribution trucks, 2026. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

The company’s troubles extended into the legal sphere. In July 1976, the Industrial Arbitration Court ordered the company to provide its workers with uniforms and benefits. Subsequently, in 1979, the company was embroiled in an industrial dispute over the dismissal of six employees. The Industrial Arbitration Court eventually ruled that they had been unfairly dismissed due to their trade union ties. The company complied with the court ruling and reinstated the workers.³⁵

By the 1980s, its most popular product was no longer Sinalco but Kickapoo Joy Juice, a lemon-flavoured concoction. The 1985 recession in Singapore also caused it to scale back production, resulting in a further loss of market share to other soft drinks.³⁶ Its most prominent products – Sinalco, Kickapoo and RC Cola – were eclipsed by Coca Cola, Pepsi, Sprite and 7-Up, which were bottled by market leaders F&N and Yeo Hiap Seng.

In comparison, the National Aerated Water Company’s signature products were neither prominently marketed nor visible. Their marketing



playbook, written for the era before television and supermarkets, was out of step with the times. What were once considered cool products now looked like staid relics and holdovers from Singapore’s early industrial past.

In 1999, the Monarch Beverage Company, the American licensor of Kickapoo Joy Juice, initiated a decisive legal action against the National Aerated Water Company for breach of contract and trademark infringement. The conflict began after the company started manufacturing a beverage branded as Kick for a third party. This prompted Monarch to cancel their franchise agreement. Despite this, the company refused to stop producing Kick so in response, Monarch filed a suit that was ultimately upheld by both the High Court and the Court of Appeal. The fallout hit quickly. The company wound up its factory operations in the same year, and its iconic Sinalco and Kickapoo drinks were no more.³⁷ (Kickapoo subsequently returned to the Singapore market some years later, brought in by a different company.) Its once-modern factory building became neglected, marring the landscape along Upper Serangoon Road.

The Fizz Lives On

After being in a state of disrepair and disuse for several years, the building and freehold site were eventually sold for \$47 million to Malaysian-listed property developers Selangor Dredging Berhad in 2016.³⁸ The following year, the Urban Redevelopment Authority gazetted it for conservation – with full support from the developer – given its “heritage value, its role as a landmark in the area and the social memories it holds for the community”.³⁹

Today, the former factory building is integrated into Jui Residences condominium – its ground floor is approved for restaurant use and its second floor designated for office use. To those old enough to remember, it is a reminder that a *pok jui* was once so much more than just a fizzy thirst quencher. And for future generations, the building will remain a tangible reminder of a time when the fizz of a Sinalco soft drink was the flavour of economic and technological progress in Singapore’s industrial history. ♦

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Japanese soldiers on board an evacuation freighter to Rempang, 1945. *Imperial War Museums (A 30706)*.

THE LONG SURRENDER

THE EXPERIENCE OF JAPANESE SOLDIERS INTERNED IN REMPANG AFTER THE WAR

After Japan's surrender, many Japanese soldiers were shipped off to an island in Riau to await repatriation. There, they had to contend with harsh living conditions, malaria and food shortages.

By Eriko Ogihara-Schuck and Cecilia Gaspar

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While Japan's surrender in 1945 was obviously welcomed by the people in the countries occupied by Japan during the Second World War, it created a new challenge: in Southeast Asia there were hundreds of thousands of Japanese military personnel who had to be repatriated to Japan. This was a major logistical problem because these men had to be housed and fed until they could be sent back. These men were designated as Japanese Surrendered Personnel, and in the end, some remained in Southeast Asia for two and a half years before they could return to Japan.¹

In Malaya, a contingent was used as labour for postwar reconstruction. However, most were relocated to remote locations, including the islands of Rempang and, subsequently, neighbouring Galang in the Riau Archipelago, where they awaited repatriation. Rempang was particularly favoured because it had water and building materials, and relatively few inhabitants had to be evacuated to make way for the Japanese.²

The Japanese lived on Rempang between October 1945 and July 1946. At one point, there were about 68,000 Japanese interned on this Dutch-ruled island, which is about one-fifth the size of Singapore and located 2.5 km southeast of Batam.³

On Rempang, the Japanese had to start largely from scratch. They had to build roads and places to live, and rely on farming to supplement the meagre rations they were given. In addition to hunger and malnutrition, they also suffered from diseases such as malaria. For those who survived and returned to Japan, the hardships they endured in Rempang left an indelible mark. Some documented their experiences in memoirs, while others drew on the Rempang internment as inspiration for fictionalised accounts.

One prominent person who was interned in Rempang was the well-known Japanese singer Ichiro Fujiyama (1911–93) who was held first on Galang island and then on nearby Rempang. In his 1986 memoir, *Let the Singing Voice Echo Across the Southern Skies*, Fujiyama recalled the challenging conditions he experienced and observed: "We supplemented our meagre food supplies by painstakingly cultivating small plots of land and somehow managed to avoid starvation."⁴



Map showing Singapore, Batam, Rempang and Galang.

A former civilian appointee attached to the Imperial Japanese Navy in Java, Fujiyama, together with his naval unit, was ordered to relocate to Riau after Japan's surrender.⁵ Being a famous singer, though, Fujiyama probably had it easy. On both islands, he was given administrative duties and had to sing for British military officers.⁶ Many of his compatriots were not so fortunate.

Hunger and Starvation

The majority of the Japanese who were relocated to Rempang believed that they were being sent to an "uninhabited island" (無人島) where humans had been unable to survive. Some had heard that 3,000 German prisoners-of-war had been transported there, either during or after the First World War, and had all died of malaria and other diseases, and starvation.⁷ Many were thus probably expecting to die on the island. Contrary to the rumours, however, Rempang did have people living on it. According to the interpreter Beck Swee Hoon, who was involved in evacuating the inhabitants of Rempang before the arrival of the Japanese, about 1,000 Chinese and Malays had lived on the island. (The 14th Army Headquarters of the South East Asia Command gave a figure of 200 inhabitants.)⁸

On Rempang, the Japanese discovered, to their relief, that there was "a small native village" as well as "shrines and huts decorated with Spring Festival couplets that clearly belonged



Japanese soldiers building the jetty on Rempang, 1945. Image courtesy of the National Army Museum, London (NAM. 2009-11-4-7).

to Chinese inhabitants”.⁹ The island, however, did not have facilities to house the thousands of incoming Japanese. Establishing a sustainable living environment proved difficult, and during the internment period, more than 150 died on Rempang and Galang together, mainly from malaria.¹⁰

The situation was exacerbated by severe food shortages. When the Japanese first arrived, they had enough supplies to last 30 days.¹¹ Each person was supposed to receive 280 g of rice per day – an amount considered sufficient for light labour. But this amount was reduced to just under 50 g per meal by the time it reached those at the bottom of the chain.¹²

As there was insufficient rice for civilians across Southeast Asia, rations for the Japanese were reduced as well. On 24 November 1945, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia Command, announced: “Due to the fact that the Japanese left the food stocks in Malaya very low at the time of the surrender, the civilian population of the country is now on a very reduced ration scale. This is the fault of the Japanese. The ration of rice issued to the Japanese Surrendered Personnel will not at any time be more than [what] the civilian population in Malaya is getting. Reductions in the Japanese ration may therefore be necessary but as the civilian situation improves so the Japanese ration will be increased.”¹³

To stretch their meagre food supplies, the Japanese made porridge with as much water as possible. They also foraged for what they could find to supplement their rations. This included grass, leaves, mice, snakes, scorpions, bats and pythons.¹⁴

The novelist Kazuo Takemori, a private in the Imperial Japanese Army, had been relocated to Rempang in October 1945. In his memoir, he wrote that the lack of food caused once healthy faces to become darkened and distorted, with “eyes sharpened into narrow triangles”, showing that

“hunger begins its work on a person through the eyes”.¹⁵ This is how Rempang acquired its nickname “Love Meal Island” (恋飯島, which is pronounced the same way as the Japanese name for Rempang Island, レンパン島).¹⁶

After nearly two months of “a marked decline in health due to malnutrition and hard work”, the situation improved.¹⁷ In early December, the Japanese began to receive rations packed in small tin cans, with each can containing 3,300 calories or three meals. The rations consisted of, for instance, coffee powder, powdered soup, biscuits, a fruit bar, canned fish, sugar cubes, lemon juice, chocolates and candy. According to Takemori, “[everyone] devoured [the food] in tears of joy” and the food revitalised them dramatically. “Unsteady legs straightened, the swelling in their faces subsided, and their eyes regained their vitality.”¹⁸

The British rations, equivalent to Japanese dried noodle packages and hardtack, also made the Japanese aware of the material gap between themselves and the British.¹⁹ Takemori recalled that “before they had even taken a single bite, they deeply felt their defeat simply by looking at the splendid packaging of the rations”. “Even though we came to realise that wars are not won by military force alone, it was already too late,” he wrote.²⁰

When a British naval officer visited Rempang at the end of January 1946, he claimed that “[a]ll the Japanese looked incredibly healthy and well-fed,



Japanese soldiers stacking tree bark into a pile, 1945. Image courtesy of the National Army Museum, London (NAM. 2009-11-4-4).

although there were several sick, particularly from the Andamans and Nicobars”.²¹ That may have been true, but a month later, rice rations were cut from 14 to 4 ounces (400 g to 113 g) a day to ensure that civilians in Malaya had enough.²²

In response to the Japanese request for an increase in rice rations, the British cited – along with the shortage of ships and the political uncertainties in some regions – the general “shortage of tens of thousands of tons of rice throughout [Southeast Asia]” as the main cause. They also remarked that this situation had been caused by the Japanese themselves during the war: “There had not been sufficient sowing and planting under Japanese control.”²³

According to British Chief of Staff Lieutenant-General Frederick Browning, the only remaining solution to the food shortage was for the Japanese to become more self-sufficient: “The more the Japanese surrendered personnel themselves sowed and grew, particularly in Rempang Island, the more they would have to eat.”²⁴

Creative Efforts

Although the soil in Rempang was “almost universally bad, being a thin layer of topsoil on laterite”,²⁵ the Japanese were able to grow crops, with tapioca as the main staple. In April 1946, the *Singapore Free Press* praised their efforts in creating a self-sufficient settlement. “Rempang and Gelang,

hitherto a dense mass of jungle growth, have been turned into fertile, food producing islands.” The paper further noted that the Japanese had “rapidly converted [the islands] into a ‘Little Japan’”.²⁶

The Japanese showed considerable creativity and resourcefulness despite the shortage of materials. “Ingenuity took the form of a persistent struggle to improve adverse conditions,” Kiyotsugu Hibino wrote in his memoir *Stars in Rempang* (1949).²⁷ A banker who worked for the Accounting Inspection Department of the Southern Army Military Administration, he had been relocated to Rempang in March 1946, and his memoir about internment on Rempang was the first such work to be published.

To combat the insects that destroyed tapioca crops, they managed to make a pesticide. They also fashioned mortars from wood and stone, and made creative use of old ration cans. Hibino recalled that from the cans they created utensils, bowls, plates, pots, buckets and various kinds of stationery. By scraping wax from the waterproof wrappers of food rations, they made candles and also used the wrappers as roofing material.²⁸

The Japanese found ways to sustain their spirits. Apart from playing cards and the board game Go, they played string instruments made from ration cans.²⁹ They also organised various artistic and musical performances and events. They established theatre groups, and musicians travelled around the island to give concerts.³⁰ To celebrate



Japanese soldiers sorting felled trees, 1945. Image courtesy of the National Army Museum, London (NAM. 2009-11-4-6).

Emperor Hirohito's birthday on 29 April 1946, comedy performances and historical plays were held.³¹ In their leisure time, they also composed poems to cope with the challenges of everyday life and express their longing for home.³²

Around 450 poems were included in the booklet, *The New Earth: A Record of Captivity on Rempang Island*. This booklet was printed and distributed on 29 April 1946 among members of the 254 Independent Infantry Battalion. Many of the poems were written in either the haiku (5-7-5 syllables) or tanka (5-7-5-7-7 syllables) formats and reflect “the cry of life in the struggle against starvation”.³³ They mostly depict scenes of landscapes, farming and fishing, insects, animals and birds in a celebratory and aesthetic manner, capturing the essence of haiku and tanka poetry: a close engagement with the natural environment.

The following poem expresses the discovery of the joy of life in nature amid harsh living conditions:

吾が植し初めての種芽をふきし
一坪農園に おきる喜び³⁴

*Waga ueshi hajimete no tane me o fukishi
hitotsubo nōen ni okiru yorokobi*
Seeds I planted sprout for the very first time,
in my little plot, a joy begins to grow.

Interestingly, quite a few poems mention spring and autumn – seasons that do not exist in the tropics.

タピオカや 若芽の青さ 春の色³⁵
Tapioka ya wakame no aosa haru no iro
Tapioca pearls, the green of young sprouts,
the colour of spring.

常夏に 螢一匹 秋近し³⁶
Tokonatsu ni hotaru ippiki aki chikashi
In the everlasting summer, a single firefly,
autumn draws near.

Japanese soldiers building a thatched hut, 1945. *Imperial War Museums* (A 30956).



Poems composed by the Japanese soldiers on Rempang were compiled in *The New Earth: A Record of Captivity on Rempang Island* (April 1946). This cover is from the 1977 edition. Courtesy of the National Diet Library.

Postwar Recollections

After their return to Japan, a number of soldiers wrote memoirs about their experiences on Rempang and Galang. Novelists who had not been interned on the islands but had heard about the internment experience were also inspired to write historical fiction.³⁷ What ties the fictional works together is their romanticised portrayal of the internment experience on the islands, including fictional encounters between the Japanese and local inhabitants. This reflects the longstanding Japanese fascination with Southeast Asia that persisted even after the war.

The short story, “A Beloved Uninhabited Island” (1946) by Haruo Sato, formerly a member of the Writers’ Unit stationed in Java and Malaya during the war, recalls the hardships of life on Rempang. “We had all fallen into the realm of the hungry ghosts.”³⁸ The story reaches its climax with the protagonist’s unexpected encounter and fascination with a Chinese fishmonger, his Malay wife and their newborn child during his visit to Galang. The protagonist is invited into their hut where he is struck by their dwelling and captivated by the beauty of the wife’s clothing, “a lavishly decorated sarong made of Pekalongan batik”.³⁹

The short story “A Travelling Companion” (1949) by Fumiko Hayashi, a former war correspondent in Java, Singapore and Borneo,

describes the experience of a Japanese police officer who was previously interned on Rempang. The protagonist, now back in Japan, faces a female criminal who reminds him of his difficult time in Rempang. Longing to “bring back” the memory and to “relive [it] again”, he serves dinner to the woman before she is imprisoned, just as a Javanese guard had secretly brought him food during periods of starvation.⁴⁰ However, this gesture is misinterpreted, and the police officer is accused and condemned. Although he is eventually exonerated, the officer resigns from his position. He then denounces Japanese society for its moral decline and the erosion of innate human compassion, while elevating his memory of the Javanese guard as the antithesis of that decline.

“A Story About an Uninhabited Island” (1948) also romanticises the Rempang experience. Written by Jiro Osaragi, a former war correspondent in Malaya and Sumatra, the story portrays life on Rempang as harsh and exhausting, marked by starvation, illness and forced labour. Yet, it concludes with the protagonist expressing his longing for Rempang, remarking that it was preferable to postwar Tokyo, which was dominated by black marketeers who exploited the people. “In Rempang we had to do everything on our own, so we were full of spirit and could sense the vitality of strong and healthy people.”⁴¹

The full-length historical novel *Rempang Island* (1974) by war veteran Ryojin Shimizu, tells the story of the friendship between a pet monkey named Hanako, her owner, and his subordinate. The subordinate uplifts the spirits of the others with creations such as “Rempang milk” (a milk

substitute made from water left over from washing rice), cigarettes made from tea leaves and portable sundials (wrist watches).⁴² In the end, however, the subordinate and Hanako both meet a tragic fate just before repatriation.

Postwar Reconstructions

Despite the existence of the literary works and an abundance of memoirs, the postwar Rempang and Galang experiences remain largely unknown in Japan. Historian Eiichi Hayashi notes that studies of postwar internment in Southeast Asia are far fewer than those of the Japanese interned in Siberia. He attributes this disparity partly to the relatively brief duration of internment in Southeast Asia and also to the ambiguous status of those interned. Having themselves been implicated in Japan’s wartime violence and occupation in the region, those interned on Rempang were not purely victims.⁴³

Southeast Asian studies scholar Hiroyuki Yamamoto argues that literary representations of the internment experience, or what he terms “[literary] purification of the South”, contributed to the ignorance.⁴⁴ By “literary purification”, he means the transformation of internment narratives by fiction writers into Robinson Crusoe-like stories in which the experiences of hardships are idealised and become depictions of pure human relationships and alternative values. Yamamoto’s argument is that the downplaying of Japanese suffering in these fictional narratives has helped erase Rempang and Galang from the wider Japanese collective memory.

Although many in Japan are unaware of the Japanese internment on the two islands, some

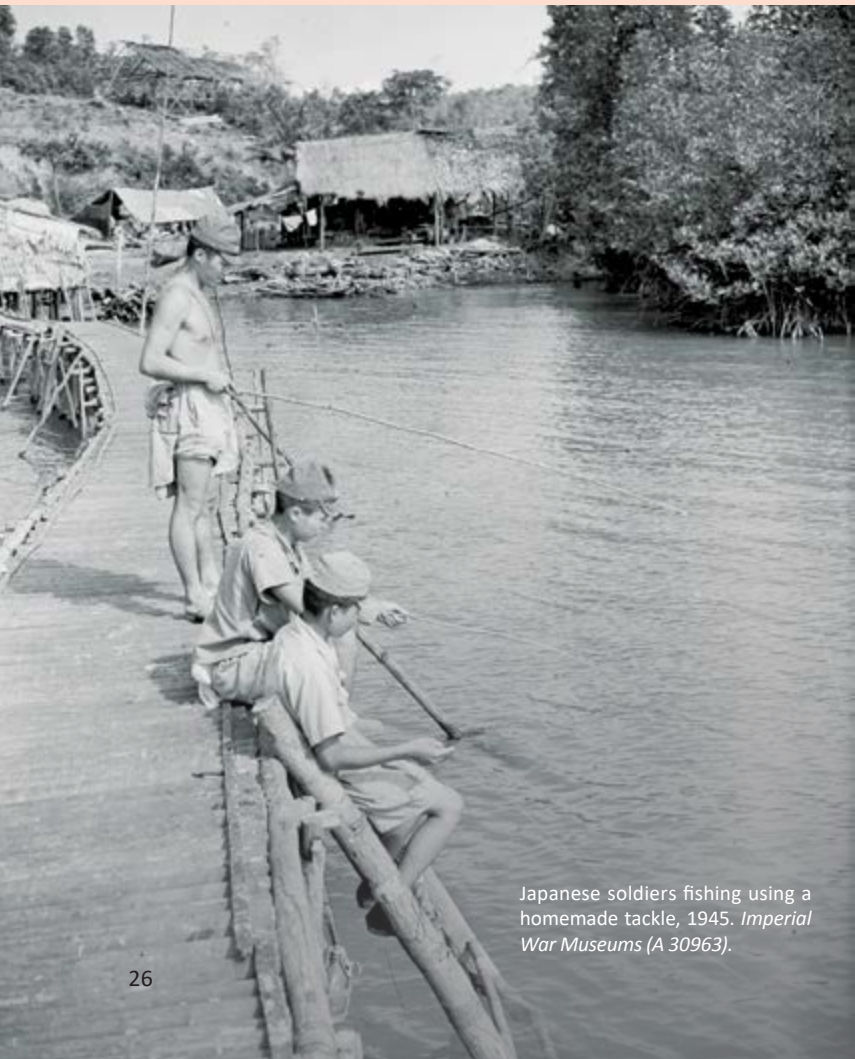
Japanese soldiers sharing cooked rice, 1945. *Imperial War Museums* (A 30962).



Rempang residents remember the former Japanese soldiers who visited the island from the 1970s, but few know that these men had been interned there after the war. In 1978, more than 30 years after their repatriation, some former soldiers established the Rempang Friendship Association and began visiting the island on an annual basis. The association’s original goal was to share their postwar experiences with younger generations in Japan.⁴⁵ After members erected a monument on Rempang on 23 August 1981, they continued to visit the island regularly to search for the remains of their fallen comrades and to promote friendship with the locals. The Minamisebo monument (Tugu Jepang Sembulang) stands as a memorial to the former Japanese soldiers interned on Rempang and as an expression of the desire to foster postwar friendship between Japan and Indonesia.

Rempang resident Pak Long Iwan, son of the late village chief M. Amin Bujur, has kept photographs of the visits by the Japanese as well as newspaper articles reporting on the visits. An Indonesian newspaper report from August 1995 mentions M. Amin Bujur’s aspiration to turn Rempang into a historical tourism site in response to the Japanese visits and their fascination with nature.⁴⁶

Pak Long Iwan and his generation, who were primary school pupils at the time of the visits in the 1980s, have fond memories of the Japanese visitors.



Japanese soldiers fishing using a homemade tackle, 1945. *Imperial War Museums* (A 30963).

“We received coloured pencils, and the Rempang residents cooked shrimp and seafood for the guests from Japan,” said Marsita, who goes by one name, and is now an entrepreneur and property advisor at Brighton Batam.⁴⁷ The Japanese painter Naotoki Yamada visited Rempang in 1991 to search for the remains of his father, who had died on the island, and he gave the children painting materials.⁴⁸ Although these visits gradually ceased in the mid-1990s as the former Japanese soldiers grew older, Rempang residents who had been children at the time have passed on memories of their encounters with the Japanese to their next generation.⁴⁹

Nenek Amlah, now 106 and formerly a fisher, recalled that on returning after the war, she found the landscape around her home transformed by the Japanese internees, although she had never encountered them herself. She was among those who fled to nearby Jemara Island at the outset of the Japanese Occupation and did not return until all the Japanese had been repatriated. “When I saw that the Japanese had built three huts near my

NOTES

- 1 As at October 1945, the exact number was 718,314 in regions controlled by the South East Asia Command (SEAC), and this did not include the Philippines which was part of the U.S. Pacific Theatre of Operations. See National Archives (United Kingdom), “WO 203/5469: Joint Planning Staff Paper No 195: Concentration Areas for Surrendered Japanese Personnel,” 11 October 1945, 23. (From National Archives, United Kingdom Collection, National Archives of Singapore accession no. WO 203/5469)
- 2 National Archives (United Kingdom), “WO 203/2567: Concentration of Japanese Forces to Islands in the Riouw Archipelago. Part 1,” 4 October 1945, 128. (From National Archives, United Kingdom Collection, National Archives of Singapore accession no. WO 203/2567)
- 3 As at 20 April 1946, five days before the first repatriation to Japan on board a Liberty ship which began on 24 April, in North and South Rempang as well as Galang, a total of 79,82[9] Japanese Surrendered Personnel were living there. See National Archives (United Kingdom), “WO 203/2460: British Liaison Staff Rempang: Report on the Concentration of Japanese Surrendered Personnel in the Riouw Islands 1945 October to 1946 July,” 20 July 1946, 47. (From National Archives, United Kingdom Collection, National Archives of Singapore accession no. WO 203/2460)
- 4 Ichiro Fujiyama 藤山一郎, *Utagoe yo hibike minami no sora ni: Fujiyama Ichirō nanpō jūgunki* 歌声よひびけ南の空に: 藤山一郎南方従軍記 [Let the singing voice echo across the southern skies: The record of Ichiro Fujiyama’s wartime service in Southeast Asia] (Tokyo: Kojinsha, 1986), 199, National Diet Library, <https://ndlsearch.ndl.go.jp/books/R100000002-I000001797575>.
- 5 In his memoir, Ichiro Fujiyama did not mention exactly when he arrived on Galang. It could have been either at the end of April 1946 or later, as Captain R.G. Kerr of the British Liaison Office who met him upon his arrival on Galang was not stationed there until 26 April 1946. See Fujiyama, *Utagoe*, 191; National Archives (United Kingdom), “WO 203/2460: British Liaison Staff Rempang,” 20 Jul 1946, 65.
- 6 For Ichiro Fujiyama’s experience on Galang and Rempang, see Fujiyama, *Utagoe*, 190–208. For a picture of his performance, see “Jap Film Star at Rempang,” *Singapore Free Press*, 9 July 1946, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
- 7 Kiyotsugu Hibino 日比野清次, *Marai-gun yokuryūki* レム／ン島の星: マライ軍抑留記 [The stars of Rempang: An interment memoir of the Malaya armed forces] (Tokyo: Kōhaku shobō, 1949), 21, National Diet Library, <https://ndlsearch.ndl.go.jp/books/R100000002-I026240498>. No evidence of this German episode has been identified. See for instance, Gerhard Dannemann, *Gefangen am anderen Ende der Welt: Deutsche im Ersten Weltkrieg in Ostasien und Australien* [Trapped on the other side of the world: Germans in East Asia and Australia during the First World War] (Hamburg: BoD, 2018), Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, <https://d-nb.info/1159684790>.
- 8 Beck Swee Hoon, “Kepala Jernih: A Story of the Rhio Archipelago,” *Straits Times*, 7 October 1946, 4. (From NewspaperSG); National Archives (United Kingdom), “WO 203/2567: Concentration of Japanese Forces to Islands in the Riouw Archipelago. Part 1,” 5 Oct 1945, 128. For a historiography of studies on inhabitants on Rempang Island since the 19th century, see Dedi Arman, *Orang Darat di Pulau Rempang: Tersisih Dampak Pembangunan Kota Batam* [The Orang Darat on Rempang island: Marginalised by the impact of Batam city’s development] (Yogyakarta: Sulur, 2023), <https://sulur.co.id/product/orang-darat-di-pulau-rempang-tersisih-dampak-pembangunan-kota-batam/>.
- 9 Tatsuo Yamamoto 山本立夫, *Kyokugen no shima “Renpan”*: *Sei heidan sanbō no kaitaku shuki* 極限の島「レンパン」: 静兵団参謀の開拓手記 [Rempang, an island of extremes: A Sei brigade staff officer’s memoir of pioneering] (Tokyo: Tamiko Yamamoto, 1979), 54, 61, National Diet Library, <https://ndlsearch.ndl.go.jp/books/R100000002-I000001438187>.

residence, I decided to leave. At 5 am, before the sun rose, we escaped from Rempang. When we returned [more than four years later], all the Japanese were gone,” she said. Upon her return, Nenek Amlah recalled: “The surroundings were brighter than before because a new road had been constructed near my residence and trees had been cut down.”⁵⁰

Today, Rempang is at the centre of public debate over the Rempang Eco-City Project, a large-scale plan to transform the island into an industrial, urban and tourism hub. While some see new opportunities for economic growth, many local residents oppose the project because they fear the loss of their homes and traditional way of life.⁵¹ Whichever direction this takes, Rempang has entered a new chapter in its complex history. ♦

The writers thank Dedi Arman and Bobi for making the fieldwork on Rempang possible, as well as Marsita and Rara Restu Humaira for acting as interpreters.

- 10 Malaria was the primary cause of death, responsible for 52 out of 156 deaths between November 1945 and June 1946. See National Archives (United Kingdom), “WO 203/2460: British Liaison Staff Rempang,” 20 Jul 1946, 52.
- 11 National Archives (United Kingdom), “WO 203/2460: British Liaison Staff Rempang,” 20 Jul 1946, 13.
- 12 Yoshiharu Mori 森由治, “Shūsen soshite kiga no Renpantō e: Dai 3 kishō rentai” “終戦そして飢餓のレンパン島へ: 第3気象連隊” [“The end of the war and to Rempang island of starvation: 3rd weather regiment”], in *Heiwa no ishizue gunjin gunzoku tanki zaishokusha ga katarisugu rōku* VI 平和の礎 軍人軍属短期在職者が語り継ぐ 労苦 VI [The foundation of peace: The hardship passed down by short-term military personnel] (Tokyo: Public Foundation for Peace and Consolation, Incorporated Administrative Agency, 1996), 36, https://www.heiwaiken.go.jp/wp-content/uploads/archive/library/roukunote/onketsu/06/O_06_030_1.pdf.
- 13 National Archives (United Kingdom), “WO 203/2727 Japanese Surrendered Personnel: Organisation and Policy,” 24 November 1945, private records, 297. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. WO 203/2727)
- 14 Mori, “Shūsen,” 36; “Wide News: Renpantō nihonjin horyo shūyōjo tomo no kai sengo 34-nen-me no tanjō” “Wide News レン／ン島日本人捕虜収容所の会戦後34年目の誕生” [“Wide news: The establishment of the Friendship Association of the Rempang Island Japanese internees 34 years after the war”], *Shūkan Yomiuri* 週刊読売 16 July 1978, 143, National Diet Library, <https://ndlsearch.ndl.go.jp/books/R100000002-I00000010824-d1814987>.
- 15 Kazuo Takemori 竹森一男, *Renpantō* レン／ン島 [Rempang island] (Tokyo: Hodaka Books, 1958), 72, National Diet Library, <https://ndlsearch.ndl.go.jp/books/R100000002-I000000984402>.
- 16 See for instance, Mori, “Shūsen,” 33.
- 17 National Archives (United Kingdom), “WO 203/2460: British Liaison Staff Rempang,” 20 Jul 1946, 48.
- 18 Kazuo Takemori, “Renpantō” (“Rempang island”), *Seikai Ōrai* 政界往来 20, no. 5 (1954), 195, National Diet Library, <https://ndlsearch.ndl.go.jp/books/R100000002-I0000000012797-d2740322>.
- 19 Yamamoto, *Kyokugen no shima “Renpan”*, 102.
- 20 Takemori, “Renpantō,” 195.
- 21 National Archives (United Kingdom), “WO 203/4936: Treatment of Japanese Forces,” 29 January 1946, 34. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. WO 203/4936)
- 22 As at February 1946, rice rations had been cut from fourteen to four ounces per day “in order that supplies to the inhabitants of Malaya should not be curtailed”. See National Archives (United Kingdom), “WO 203/4936: Treatment of Japanese Forces,” 27 Feb 1946, 24.
- 23 National Archives (United Kingdom), “WO 203/4936: Treatment of Japanese Forces,” 29 Jan 1946, 38. The postwar food crisis, and especially rice shortage in Southeast Asia, led to an organisation of conferences in March and April 1946. See “Spore Food Talks a Success—Killeam,” *Malaya Tribune*, 29 March 1946, 4/1. (From NewspaperSG)
- 24 National Archives (United Kingdom), “WO 203/4936: Treatment of Japanese Forces,” 29 Jan 1946, 39.
- 25 National Archives (United Kingdom), “WO 203/2460: British Liaison Staff Rempang,” 20 Jul 1946, 11.
- 26 “Japs ‘Colonise’ Two Dutch Islands,” *Singapore Free Press*, 9 July 1946, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
- 27 Hibino, *Remupan no hoshi*, 126–27.
- 28 For the full list of items created by the Japanese in Rempang, see Hibino, *Remupan no hoshi*, 126–35.
- 29 Hibino, *Remupan no hoshi*, 135.
- 30 Mori, “Shūsen,” 39; “Wide News,” 144.



The Minamisebo monument (Tugu Jepang Sembulang) erected by the Rempang Friendship Association on 23 August 1981. Inscribed on the monument are names of the association members. Below the names are the photos of some members. *Photo by Eriko Ogihara-Schuck.*

- 31 Goro Nagai 長井五郎, ed., *Aratsuchi: Toraware no shima Renpantō no ki* 新土: 捕われの島レン／ン島の記 [The new earth: A record of captivity on Rempang island] (Tokyo: Shigekuni Iwata, 1977), 164, National Diet Library, <https://ndlsearch.ndl.go.jp/books/R100000002-I000001352838>.
- 32 The Japanese in Woodlands Camp in Singapore also wrote many poems and published them in the magazine *Kaenju* (火焰樹) between June 1946 and June 1947. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RRARE 895.685 K)
- 33 Shigekuni Iwata 岩田茂邦, “Preface,” in Nagai, *Aratsuchi*, 5.
- 34 Nagai, *Aratsuchi*, 71.
- 35 Nagai, *Aratsuchi*, 28.
- 36 Nagai, *Aratsuchi*, 29.
- 37 Eiichi Hayashi 林英一, *Nanpō yokuryū: Nihon-gun heishi, mōhitotsu no higeki* 南方抑留: 日本軍兵士、もう一つの悲劇 [Interment in Southeast Asia: Another tragedy of Japanese soldiers] (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 2025), 52, National Diet Library, <https://ndlsearch.ndl.go.jp/books/R100000002-I034176902>.
- 38 Haruo Sato 佐藤春夫, “Natsukashii mujintō” “なつかしい無人島” [“A beloved uninhabited island”], *Kuraku* 苦楽 2, no. 10 (1946): 18, National Diet Library, <https://ndlsearch.ndl.go.jp/books/R100000002-I00000006031-d3546615>.
- 39 Sato, “Natsukashii mujintō,” 26.
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- 44 Hiroyuki Yamamoto 山本博之, “Sengo Nihon ni okeru nanpō yokuryū no kioku: Renpantō no bungakuteki junka to zaichisei no danzetsu” “戦後日本における南方抑留の記憶: レン／ン島の文学的純化と在地性の断絶” [“The memory of southern interment in postwar Japan: The literary purification and local disconnection of Rempang Island”], *Intākaruchuraru* インターカルチュラル 24 (2026), 100, National Diet Library, <https://ndlsearch.ndl.go.jp/books/R000000004-I034750189>.
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INTERPRETING THE TURK

EVERYDAY ENCOUNTERS AND URBAN
MEMORY IN COLONIAL SINGAPORE



During the 19th and 20th centuries, Turkish imagery appeared in a variety of popular media in Singapore, reflecting the fascination with the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish world, as well as the island's status as a cosmopolitan port city.

By Bahar Gürsel



(Facing Page) A shipper's ticket bearing the motif of an Ottoman ruler. Collection of the National Library Singapore (Accession no. B35800823G). Acquired with the support of the Tun Tan Cheng Lock Trust.

(Left) The imperial Ottoman frigate *Ertuğrul*. Courtesy of Istanbul University Rare Books Library, Sultan Abdülhamid II Photograph Albums (Accession no. NEKYA91242/7).

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In 19th-century Singapore, the Ottoman Empire was an alluring and exotic presence in the public imagination, even if it was rarely encountered in person. For the local Muslim community, awareness of the Turkish people was reinforced by prominent Arab merchant families such as the Aljunieds and the Alsagoffs. The former served as honorary representatives of the Ottoman Empire, while the latter acted as important intermediaries linking Singapore to Istanbul. Yet despite these connections, the Empire itself remained a distant and largely unseen entity merely known by locals through news reports, religious networks, correspondence, literary works and the accounts of travellers.

This enduring sense of connection would continue into the early 20th century when Ahmed Ataullah Efendi arrived in Singapore in 1901 as the Ottoman Empire's first resident consul. Yet, the true turning point in how ordinary residents perceived the Ottomans had been a decade earlier when a physical piece of the Empire finally sailed into their waters with its crew. For the first time, Singapore encountered not merely the occasional Ottoman merchant or traveller, but an official and significant representation of the Empire itself.

The Ottoman Warship that Fascinated Singapore

In June 1889, the Ottoman frigate *Ertuğrul*, named after Ertuğrul Gazi, the father of the empire's founder – a name symbolising honesty and bravery – departed Istanbul on a historic goodwill mission to Japan. Commanded by Captain Osman Pasha (who was promoted to rear admiral during his stay in Singapore), the vessel carried a prestigious diplomatic charge: to present an imperial order to the Emperor of Japan on behalf of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909).

Although the outward journey successfully fulfilled its purpose, tragedy struck on the return voyage. In September 1890, the *Ertuğrul* was caught in a fierce typhoon off the coast of Wakayama, Japan, striking a reef and sinking into the Pacific. The disaster claimed the lives of more than 500 sailors, including the captain, leaving just 69 survivors.

While history largely remembers the *Ertuğrul* for its tragic end, the long voyage also wove a lesser-known connection with Singapore. In November 1889, after departing Colombo, Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), the *Ertuğrul* cast anchor two miles from the bustling Johnston's Pier, marking the beginning of a remarkable visit. At the time, Johnston's Pier was the beating heart of Singapore's waterfront. Extending out from Collyer Quay, the pier acted as the main gateway to the city, serving as a lively gathering place where international merchants, visiting officials and ordinary travellers first set foot on land.

The Ottoman frigate was neither the largest nor the most imposing vessel in this busy port. Yet for Singapore's Muslim community, it held a significance that far exceeded its size – offering a tangible connection to a world they had previously known only through reports, newspapers, and their own imaginations fed by numerous tales and accounts. All of a sudden, the faraway and venerated Ottoman Empire had arrived on their shore.

During the five months that the ship remained in port, until 15 March 1890, the abstract geography of empires became immediate and perceptible. Upon its arrival, anchored two miles off Johnston's Pier, the 24-year-old, 1,800-ton vessel was described by the local press as a “wooden ship of somewhat antiquated style”. It carried 590 men over the age of 20, including 20 officers, 15 cadets, 60 firemen, 24 marines and a 24-piece military band. For Singapore's Muslim residents, the arrival of a warship crewed by fellow Muslims was a deeply emotional event. “[L]arge throngs of Malays have been continually crowding on and around Johnston's Pier, off which the vessel is lying, expressing their admiration and pleasure at beholding a war-ship of the great Caliph,” reported the *Straits Times*.¹

The crew also encountered numerous expressions of profound affection. According to the memoirs of Engineer Captain Mehmed Ali Bey, one of the few sailors who survived the disaster, local Muslims regularly visited the ship to offer gifts and extend their hospitality.²

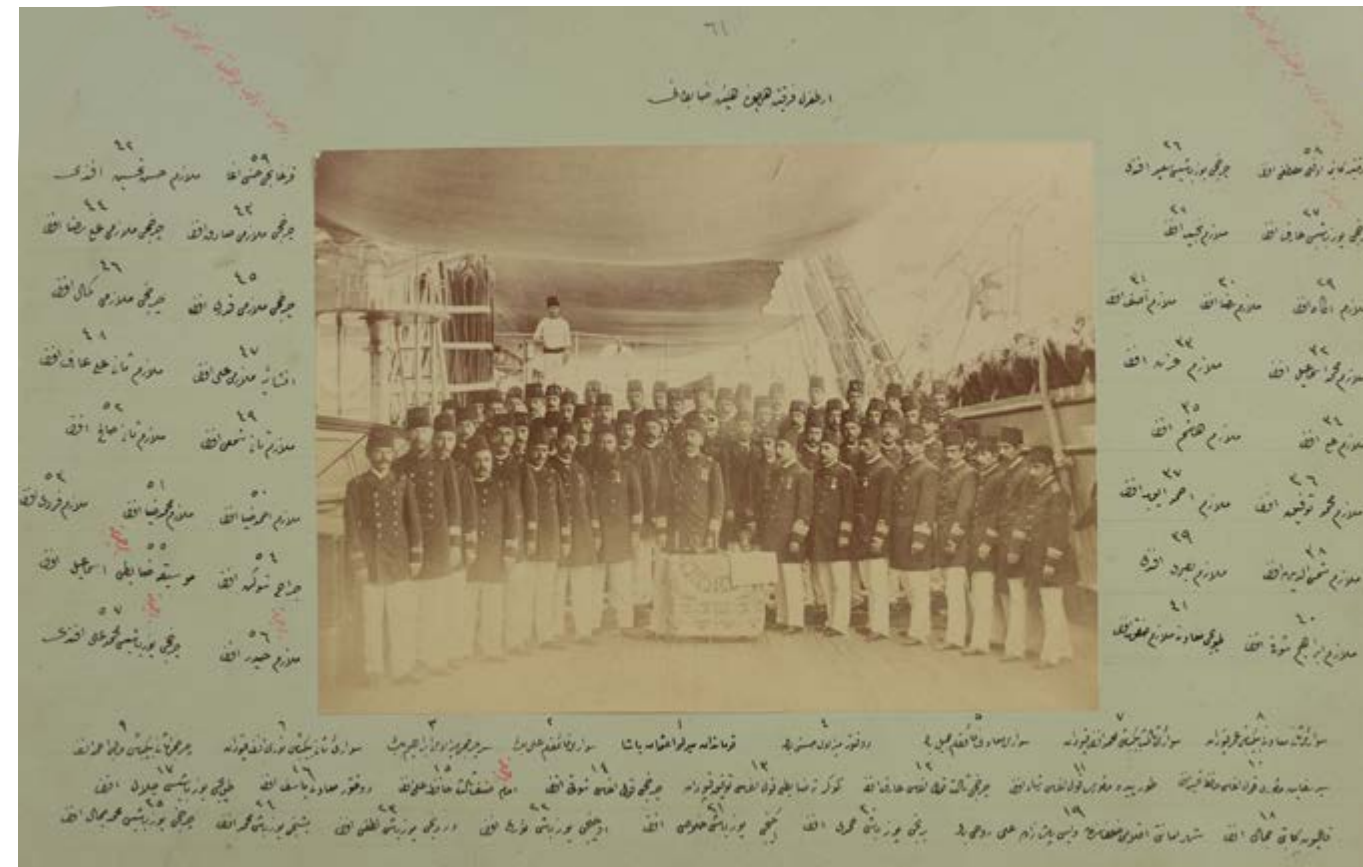
The community was thrown into a state of “feverish excitement”. The vessel's reputation grew rapidly, with claims circulating around the port

that it could “vanquish all comers”. When Ottoman officers walked the streets, they were “looked upon as demi-gods” and “followed about by a horde of the faithful”. Eager locals constantly sought to “shake or touch the hands of the curious naval warriors”, viewing the simple physical contact as a “special blessing conferred upon them from the founder of the religion”, according to the *Straits Times*.³ For many residents in Singapore, the distant figure of the Turk had suddenly become a real person encountered amid the hustle and bustle of daily life.

The enthusiasm reached its peak on 22 November 1889 when news that the *Ertuğrul*'s band would perform at the Esplanade sent a wave of excitement through Singapore. By three o'clock that day, the Singapore Cricket Club's grounds were already packed with horse-drawn carriages and an excited crowd. The sheer flow of the crowd instantly demolished the makeshift roped barricades before a single note could even be played, and the resulting gridlock was so intense that the police commissioner himself had to step in to direct the chaos.⁴

When the band finally began to play, nearly two hours later, the roar of the crowd created a “babel which simply drowned the music”, leaving onlookers to guess they were playing chiefly by “the distended cheeks of the bandsmen” and the visual cues of a “fine Ethiopian” musician, wrote the *Straits Times*. Yet, even without actually hearing the tunes, the enthralled crowd pressed forward in absolute admiration, with “evident satisfaction depicted upon their open-mouthed countenances”.⁵

Johnston's Pier, Singapore, where the frigate *Ertuğrul* docked, 1880s. Royal Tropical Institute Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media-Image No. 20060000347 - 0104).



While some of these newspaper reports have been recently translated and utilised in various Turkish sources – highlighting a continuing interest in the *Ertuğrul*'s Southeast Asian sojourn – a deeper study into the archival materials unveils previously overlooked details regarding the ship's cultural imprint.

The concert on the Esplanade was only one encounter, and the frenzy easily crossed the strait into Johor. Although Captain Osman Pasha could not bring the warship to Johor without special permission from his superiors after receiving an invitation, he accepted a personal invitation to visit Johor in late November 1889. The *Straits Times* reported that he “came round in Syed Mahomed's [Alsagoff] s.s. *Lingie*, accompanied by the reporter who [was] making the voyage with the ship for the purpose of writing a journal”. The paper also observed “some little excitement amongst the Mahomedan population, who crowded on the pier to see the Turkish Captain land, and a large crowd awaited his departure”. Dressed in the distinguished uniform of a naval aide-de-camp to the Ottoman sultan, Osman Pasha was hosted at a special “tiffin” to meet top European and Malay officials, before eventually being given a driving tour of the town and departing on the sultan's yacht.⁶

Even after the frigate raised its anchor in March 1890, the cultural imprint of the *Ertuğrul* lingered. The adoration was so enduring that during a large picnic in Johor a month later,



(Above) The officer corps of the imperial Ottoman frigate *Ertuğrul* in Japan. Courtesy of Istanbul University Rare Books Library, Sultan Abdülhamid II Photograph Albums (Accession no. NEKYA91222/61).

(Left) Ahmed Ataulah Efendi, the first Ottoman Consul General to Singapore, took office in 1901. Courtesy of the Embassy of the Republic of Türkiye in Singapore.

which included 200 Malays, some people were spotted playfully bringing the crew back to life. A correspondent with the *Straits Times* noted that the person “who represented the Captain had on white shoes and ‘spurs,’ and nearly all were wearing false beards, whiskers and moustaches”, delightedly playing the parts of the “Turkish men-



Mustafa Kemal Pasha in Izmir, Türkiye, 1922. Image reproduced from Wikimedia Commons.

of-war's men" who had memorably captured their imaginations.⁷ The distant Ottoman had finally stepped off the pages of books and newspapers, and into the lives of ordinary people.

Visualising the Turk in Shipper's Tickets

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, representations of the Turk also entered everyday consumer culture. The glamour and prestige of the Ottoman Empire became a powerful medium in Singapore's dynamic marketplace, firmly attached to a variety of imported goods. The image of the Turk was a common motif on shipper's tickets, also known as bale labels and bolt labels, which were "attached to the ends of cotton bolts exported from British mills around the world".⁸

According to Adrian Wilson, artist, interior designer and collector of shipper's tickets,⁹ these labels were used "on the 'faceplate' (front) of fabric pieces... in conjunction with water soluble ink trademarks to identify the brand, type and length of fabric in the piece". Since these labels were the primary way buyers identified quality cloth, each ticket was meticulously designed specifically for its target market to attract the attention of the purchaser. "Colour coding and recognisable symbols" were of particular importance, and "the florid and often exuberant and exaggerated designs [were] frequently responsible for the sale of the fabrics", especially in Asian bazaars.¹⁰

By placing Turkish imagery on these bolts, British mills were intentionally appealing to the deep-rooted local respect for the Ottoman Empire. As Wilson further observed regarding these merchant strategies, "respecting and celebrating the culture of your customer was obviously good business".¹¹

Beyond these vibrant textile labels, the Ottoman and Turkish presence in the commercial imagination extended into many other facets of daily life. The residents of Singapore could buy Turkish cigarettes, savour Turkish delight and dried figs, and use famously plush Turkish towels manufactured by British companies.¹² These items kept the allure of the Ottoman Empire constantly present on local store shelves and in homes. Yet, within this steady flow of imported charm, one particular local commercial enterprise attracted the attention of both the public and the courts in a more apparent and contentious manner.

Tea, Trademarks and Turkish Imagery

During the 1920s in Singapore, the use of Ottoman and Turkish historical figures on the packaging of various commodities, including tea, became an effective marketing strategy. As symbols of quality, authority and prestige, these distinctive motifs were adopted by merchants to appeal to consumers in the region.

T.G. Kiat and Co. and Haroon bin Ali and Co., two highly respected trading firms, were prominent players in this branding trend. Their subsequent legal dispute is significant not merely as a commercial dispute, but as a testament to the market value and widespread public visibility of Turkish imagery.

In July 1934, the need to establish clear trademark boundaries regarding these images brought the two companies before the Supreme Court of Singapore and Chief Justice of the Straits Settlements Walter Huggard. The plaintiff, T.G. Kiat and Co., requested a ban against the defendant, Haroon bin Ali and Co., over allegations of trademark violation. At the heart of the dispute was the former's well-known product, widely recognised among consumers in the Straits Settlements and Malaya as "Raja Stambul" tea or "Tea Stambul". This popular tea had been sold since 1927, and featured a distinctive red-and-white wrapper with "a picture of a Mohammedan ruler at the top left hand corner" and "a seascape showing a ship, a lighthouse and a locomotive with the words 'Best and Selected'".¹³

Also printed on the plaintiff's tea wrapper were the words "Best and Selected", and beneath the image of "Raja Stambul" and on each side of the packet were the words "Rose Pekoe Tea".¹⁴ The

purpose of these images was to emphasise that "both by sea and rail, the tea is distributed all over the world".¹⁵ T.G. Kiat and Co. had originally sold this tea in tins, but in May 1930, the owner Tjoa Guan Kiat "decided that it would be more profitable to sell his tea in packets instead of tins".¹⁶

T.G. Kiat and Co. claimed that the packaging used by Haroon bin Ali and Co. was "almost identical" to his own product and "calculated to deceive intending purchasers and cause the tea to be sold and passed off as tea sold by the plaintiffs".¹⁷

The wrappers of Haroon bin Ali's rose pekoe tea, which had also been manufactured since 1927, featured portraits of two historical Turkish military figures based on contemporary studio photographs,¹⁸ with the court text noting that "the names 'Anver [sic] Pasha', and 'Mustafa Kemal Pasha' were shown".¹⁹ [Ismail Enver Pasha was the minister for war who played a central role in aligning the Ottoman Empire with Germany during World War I, while Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founded the Republic of Türkiye in 1923. "Pasha" was a high-ranking administrative and military title in the Ottoman Empire.]

Haroon bin Ali and Co. was a well-established merchant who had published a notice in the *Straits Settlements Government Gazette* as early as November 1927 claiming these marks,²⁰ and



from 1927 until 1932 had similarly sold his tea in tins. However, conflict erupted in October 1932 when Haroon bin Ali began "to sell his tea in packets instead of tins," creating large packets "of apparently the same size and weight as the plaintiff's packet".²¹

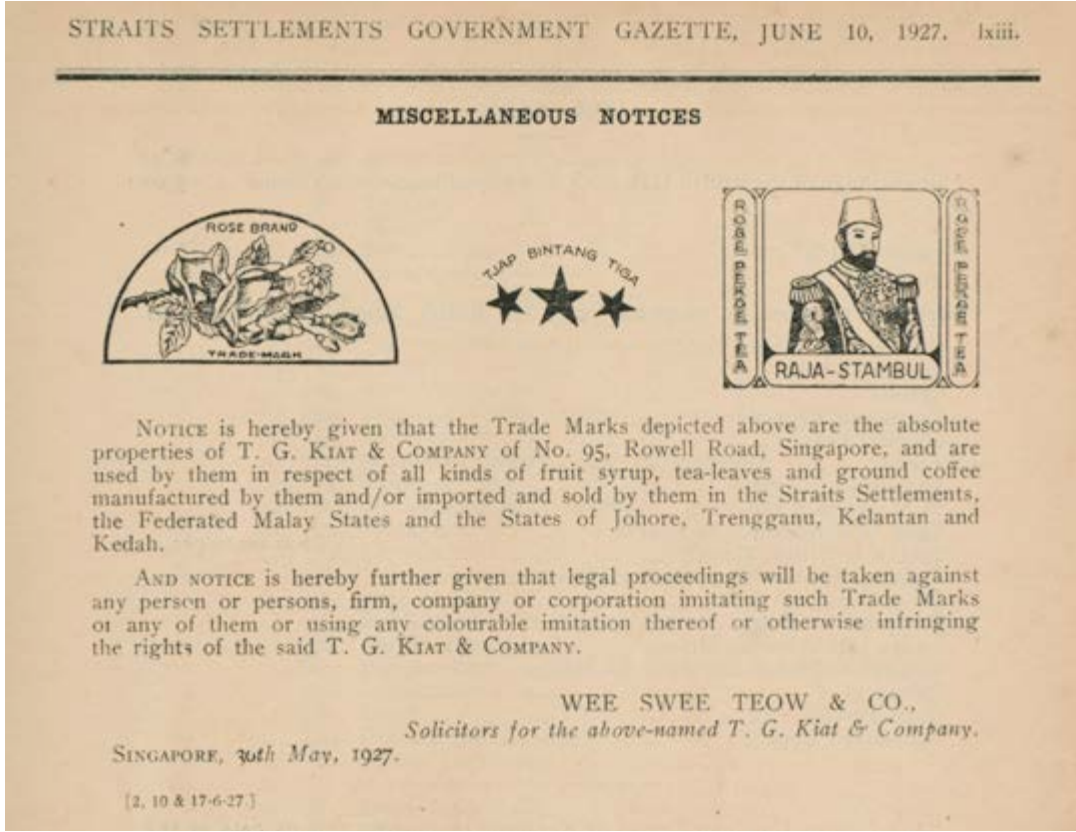
Haroon bin Ali and Co. also utilised a seascape on the wrapper which featured "a ship, a lighthouse, a motor van instead of a locomotive and they had brought in an aeroplane", while still using the same "The Best and Selected" slogan as the plaintiff.²² Both companies also printed "Rose Pekoe Tea" on the sides of their packaging, further blurring the visual distinctions between the two brands.

The resemblance between the two designs formed the basis of T.G. Kiat's claim that the wrappers "had given rise to confusion" in the marketplace. His main objection was to the defendant's use of a "picture of the seascape and the medallion of a Mohammedan ruler". Advertising agent Choo Tay Beng testified that upon visiting a shop on Beach Road to purchase "Raja Stambul" tea, he was instead handed "two packages of the defendant's tea", despite the shopkeeper writing "Raja Stambul tea" on the bill.²³ Upon discovering this parallel packet marketing, the plaintiff rushed to protect his consumer base, causing "the writ in the present action to be filed on the 27th of that month" in January 1934.

(Left) T.G. Kiat & Co.'s advertisement for their Raja Stambul tea bears the image of an Ottoman ruler. Image reproduced from *Malaya Tribune*, 15 September 1934, 7. (From NewspaperSG).

(Below) This advertisement by Haroon bin Ali and Co. features a tea tin depicting Enver Pasha (left) and Mustafa Kemal Pasha (right). Image reproduced from *Malaya Tribune*, 30 November 1927, 6. (From NewspaperSG).





The registered trademark of T.G. Kiat’s Raja Stambul tea (right). Image reproduced from the Straits Settlements Government Gazette 62, no. 35–36 (10 June 1927). Collection of the National Library Singapore (Accession no. B02969106K).

a Turkish delight,” demonstrating how deeply the brand had become embedded in local popular consciousness.²⁸

This interest found one of its most vibrant expressions on the local stage through Kairo Dean (Khairudin), the renowned performer who rose from being “a handbill boy for the Wayang Kassim at 15 cents per day” to becoming “the talk of the town during the

glorious era of bangsawan (Malay opera) in the early twenties”. Dean went on to establish his own theatre company, Dean’s Star Opera. Together with his leading lady and wife, Miss Tijah, he was one of the “Big Four” of Malay *bangsawan* theatre in its heyday.²⁹

Among the ambitious productions staged by his company in the 1930s was *Mustapha Kemal in Siberia* (1930). Announced as having been “under preparation for many months”, the production invited audiences with the promise of a spectacular stage novelty, an “Aeroplane”. Advertisements promoting the show used the tagline, “Remember. Mustapha Kemal is the Saviour of Turkey”.³⁰

NOTES

- 1 “The Turkish Man-of-War in Port,” *Straits Times*, 16 November 1889, 2. (From NewspaperSG)
- 2 Serpil Sürmeli, “The Memoirs of Engineer Captain Mehmed Ali (Balkir) Who Survived the Tragedy of Ertuğrul,” *History Studies: International Journal of History* 15, no. 2 (May 2023): 171–96, https://www.historystudies.net/eng/the-memoirs-of-engineer-captain-mehmed-ali-balkir-who-survived-the-tragedy-of-ertugrul_2098.
- 3 “The Turkish Band on the Esplanade,” *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, 26 November 1889, 9. (From NewspaperSG)
- 4 “The Turkish Band on the Esplanade.”
- 5 “The Turkish Band on the Esplanade.”
- 6 “Johore News,” *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, 3 December 1889, 6. (From NewspaperSG)
- 7 “Johore News,” *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, 15 April 1890, 2. (From NewspaperSG)
- 8 Ashley Jackson and David Tomkins, “Ephemera and the British Empire,” in *Exhibiting the Empire: Cultures of Display and the British Empire*, ed. John McAleer and John M. MacKenzie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 153, <https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9780719091094/>.
- 9 “Tan Cheng Lock Trust Donation to Enlarge Nation’s Showcase of Rare Materials,” National Library Board, 27 January 2025, <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/about-us/press-room-and-publications/media-releases/2025/Tan-Cheng-Lock-Trust>. For details see “Annex A: Highlights of the Adrian Wilson Collection of Shipper’s Tickets”.

This map is from an Ottoman geographical work published in Istanbul in 1732. It depicts Singapore, Melaka and Indonesia. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

In reality, the play was entirely fictional as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had never stepped foot in Siberia. Since the exact script has not survived, it is impossible to determine the sources that inspired the story. Kairo Dean staged another play, *Anwar Pasha in the Balkans*, in 1931 and again in 1935.³¹ As the title suggests, the play is likely related to Enver Pasha, who had fought in the Balkan Wars (1912–13) and was killed in 1922 during an attack by Bolshevik forces near Baldzhuan, Turkestan (present-day Tajikistan). In April 1934, Dean was featured in the *Sunday Tribune* wearing a uniform reminiscent of a Turkish pasha, presumably in connection with one of these productions.³²

What had begun decades earlier with the arrival of the Ottoman frigate *Ertuğrul* at Johnston’s Pier continued to evolve in unexpected ways. The Turk was no longer a distant foreign figure but a familiar presence in Singapore’s popular imagination, appearing in advertisements, consumer products, newspaper quizzes and theatre announcements. From tea labels to shipper’s tickets, Turkish imagery was repeatedly reimagined and repurposed, becoming part of the cultural fabric of colonial Singapore. ♦



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The defence, led by Roland Braddell,²⁴ pushed back against the accusations, criticising the plaintiff for resorting to a lawsuit without prior warning and argued that the defendant was “quite willing to change the make up of his packages and to do anything that the plaintiff wanted him to do” had he simply been asked.²⁵ Furthermore, Braddell stated that the defendant had actually been “selling tea in the packages [then] complained of since 1932” and that “no damage had been done to [the] plaintiff’s business”, which had in fact increased considerably.²⁶

Eventually, on 5 September 1934, Chief Justice Huggard “held in favour of the plaintiff in a voluminous judgment covering fourteen folios and granted the injunction”, preventing the defendant from continuing to use wrappers that could be mistaken for those of the plaintiff.²⁷

This trademark war revealed how the imagery of the Ottoman Empire and the nascent Turkish Republic had become woven into the fabric of life in colonial Singapore. For consumers purchasing daily provisions, the appeal of a Turkish “raja” or a wartime “pasha” transcended geopolitics, serving as a powerful symbol of quality and prestige.

The Long Echo of the Turk

This Turkish imagery enjoyed remarkable longevity in Singapore’s collective memory. Even as late as 1954, a *Singapore Standard* quick quiz cited “Raja Stambul Tea” as the answer to the clue, “This is indeed

- 10 Jackson and Tomkins, “Ephemera and the British Empire,” 153.
- 11 Adrian Wilson, “Shipper’s Ticket Book Review: Labels of Empire by Susan Miller,” Textile Trademarks, 14 August 2023, http://www.textiletrademarks.com/?cat=6&_sv_p_id=ipVb-_23hVa9i4SX.
- 12 Among numerous examples, see for Turkish delight, “Page 1 Advertisements Column 2,” *Straits Times*, 25 January 1912, 1; for Turkish towels, “Page 2 Advertisements Column 1,” *Straits Echo*, 5 January 1917, 2; for Turkish figs, “Page 6 Advertisements Column 1,” *Straits Times*, 21 November 1910, 6; and for Turkish cigarettes, “Page 1 Advertisements Column 3,” *Straits Times*, 8 July 1937, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
- 13 “Tea Traders at Variance,” *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 19 July 1934, 12. (From NewspaperSG)
- 14 “Tea Traders at Variance,” “Tea Trade Mark Injunction,” *Straits Budget*, 13 September 1934, 16. (From NewspaperSG)
- 15 “Local Traders’ Dispute,” *Malaya Tribune*, 18 July 1934, 13. (From NewspaperSG)
- 16 “Tea Trade Mark Injunction.”
- 17 “Local Traders’ Dispute.”
- 18 “Page 6 Advertisements Column 3,” *Malaya Tribune*, 30 November 1927, 6. (From NewspaperSG)
- 19 “Local Traders’ Dispute,” “Tea Traders at Variance,” “Tea Trade Mark Injunction.”
- 20 The same notice was also published in newspapers during the same period. See “Page 6 Advertisements Column 3.”
- 21 “Local Traders’ Dispute,” “Tea Traders at Variance,” “Tea Trade Mark Injunction.”

- 22 “Tea Traders at Variance.”
- 23 “Tea Traders at Variance.”
- 24 Sir Roland St. John Braddell (1880–1966) was a prominent Singapore-born lawyer, colonial public figure and historian known for his influential writings on Malaya, including the popular 1934 work, *The Lights of Singapore*. For a detailed overview of his life and career, see Gracie Lee, “A Glimpse of 1930s Singapore,” *BiblioAsia* 11, no. 4 (January–March 2016): 79–81.
- 25 “Tea Traders at Variance.”
- 26 “Tea Wrappers Bring Merchants to Court,” *Singapore Free Press*, 18 July 1934, 7. (From NewspaperSG)
- 27 “Tea Trade Mark Injunction.”
- 28 “Page 11 Advertisements Column 2,” *Singapore Standard*, 14 August 1954, 11. (From NewspaperSG)
- 29 “Malay Opera Star (70) Still ‘Young to Think of Retiring,’” *Singapore Free Press*, 28 May 1960, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
- 30 The advertisement was republished several times. See, for example, “Page 11 Advertisements Column 2,” *Malaya Tribune*, 8 November 1930, 11. (From NewspaperSG)
- 31 “Page 11 Advertisements Column 3,” *Malaya Tribune*, 13 June 1931, 11; “Page 9 Advertisements Column 2,” *Malaya Tribune*, 30 October 1935, 9. (From NewspaperSG)
- 32 “Malay Songs and Pantuns on the Gramophone,” *Sunday Tribune*, 22 April 1934, 10. (From NewspaperSG)

SINGAPORE'S EXPERIENCE OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION

When the Great Depression struck, Singapore's trade-dependent economy faltered, tin and rubber prices plummeted, businesses closed and people faced immense hardship.

By **Darren Seow**

In February 1933, a correspondent with the *Malaya Tribune* cast a doleful eye over the streets of Singapore. "Oh! [H]ow sad it is to see so many shops which, before the slump, used to be full of all sorts of valuable goods, are now closed," wrote the correspondent using the pseudonym "Lucky Star". "I wonder whether you will be moved with pity and sympathy, when you see these rows and rows of vacant shops." She lamented that many people were suffering from starvation and even the educated could not find a job. "Oh, what a sad place Singapore is!"¹

"Lucky Star" was describing a scenario common during the Great Depression, which lasted from 1929 to 1939. As it swept across the globe, Singapore – dependent on international trade and the export of Malayan rubber and tin to the American market – was badly hit.² The collapse of the US automotive industry caused rubber demand and prices to plummet, falling from an average of 34 cents per pound in 1929 to an all-time low of 4.95 cents in June 1932. Tin prices also fell from an average of \$104.27 per picul in 1929 to \$60 in 1931.

Between 1929 and 1932, the value of Singapore's rubber exports declined by 84 percent and tin by 68 percent. This contrasted with the period 1921 to 1925, when rubber exports rose by 384 percent and tin by 74 percent.³

The Depression affected all segments of the community: rubber planters and tin miners, labourers, hawkers, businessmen, shopkeepers, clerks, school leavers, office workers, Europeans, locals, the wealthy, the poor, the educated, the uneducated – nobody was spared.⁴

Collapse of Trade

In 1929, business in Singapore weakened. The building boom subsided, land prices fell and further private development largely ceased. Speaking at the annual meeting of the Singapore Chamber of Commerce on 25 March 1930, chairman J. Bagnall said: "All the surrounding territories from which Singapore draws its trade became financially embarrassed as rubber and other produce declined in value, and the resulting contraction of business and credit led to many failures among various classes of dealers and shopkeepers in Singapore, some very heavy and almost all having liabilities out of all proportion to assets."⁵

Six months later, the situation deteriorated further. Around 500 shops had closed since 1 June 1930, and the value of imports in the first half of that year fell by 11.5 percent to \$37.5m compared with the same period in 1929, while exports plunged nearly 15 percent to \$39m. The new

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Chamber of Commerce chairman, J. Robertson, noted that while "[i]t is almost a truism to say that trade recovery may confidently be expected in course of time, but an examination of all the circumstances, can only lead to the conclusion that the time is not yet". He called upon merchants to "exercise a further measure of patience and courage before the end of this slump is sighted".⁶

High Cost of Living

While businesses struggled, ordinary residents faced financial strain from high living costs and rents. In May 1930, the *Malaya Tribune* observed that although the prices of necessities in Singapore had generally fallen by a negligible margin, some items actually became more expensive, with imported foods remaining costly. This was contrary to expectations that the widespread depression would bring about a "welcome deflation". It was difficult to persuade the ordinary individual that he was not being "stung" by high costs.⁷

Rents were a particular concern. Despite poor financial conditions, house rents saw a general increase of 4 percent in 1930. Many landlords preferred to leave their houses vacant rather than rent them out.⁸

People wrote to the press to voice their displeasure. In a letter published in the *Malaya*

Tribune on 21 June 1930, a reader stated: "In Singapore here and there a few concerns and individuals have made slight reductions, but the majority have so far turned a deaf ear to the woes of their tenants." The writer added that it was "high time they realised that it would pay them better to reduce rents and keep all their houses occupied than to retain high rents and have most of the houses unoccupied for months". The writer also pointed out that the Municipality "have not seen fit to reduce their boom-time rates" for electricity and gas.⁹

Living costs remained high by mid-1932. "Singapore is rightly ranked among the most expensive cities in the world," the *Malaya Tribune* reported. Rents stayed above prewar levels, causing many people to share houses with relatives or friends. Although food prices had fallen to some extent in line with the general price decline and clothing was relatively cheap, "the sum total of living costs is considerably above what might be recognised as a reasonable level".¹⁰

To provide shelter for those in need, the *Malaya Tribune* reported in April 1933 that cheaper municipal houses off Balestier Road were available for rent at \$7 per month and included free water supply, while three- to four-room houses in Geylang were leased for \$18 to \$20 per month. These working-class dwellings were "a boon to the poorer classes in these days of depression".¹¹

Many people turned to pawning their valuables to raise funds. Pawnbrokers not only used their own capital but also accepted deposits, paying about 8 percent interest per annum. By charging over 20 percent interest on pledged articles, they made considerable profits. Despite these margins, pawnbroking was not a sure win. As the *Malaya Tribune* noted, “there are more people pledging articles than redeeming them”. The paper added that “[t]here is no market for expired pledges, so that they have to be sold at sacrifice prices in order that they might be turned into money”.¹²

To make things worse, some pawnbrokers used deposits from customers to invest in rubber plantations, tin mines and other businesses, which were badly hit by the Depression. “They place these deposits in the pawn-shops to earn a little interest and for safe-keeping,” reported the *Malaya Tribune*, “Imagine the plight and disappointment of these poor people!” According to the newspaper, the “liabilities in these failures amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars”.¹³

In November 1930, the *Straits Times* reported that the proprietor of a pawnshop on Havelock Road had received deposits ranging from \$500 to \$1,000 from hundreds of poor people. They earned an interest of 90 cents to \$1 on \$100 per month during the slump; in normal times, the rate was 70 to 80 cents. The pawnbroker admitted he “had acted as banker for hundreds of poor people, and that from their deposits he had lost as much as \$200,000”. The money was used to speculate in the proprietor’s jewellery business, which had failed when gold prices fell.¹⁴

Street hawkers with their customers, 1920s. Hawkers were among the most vulnerable during the Great Depression. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 19980005092 - 0034).



Hard Times

The Depression brought widespread unemployment and hardship. Many able-bodied people, along with the aged and infirm, were begging on the streets by May 1930. “One of the biggest blots on the fair name of Malaya is the almost resolute lack of provision for the destitute,” wrote the *Malaya Tribune*. “These – able-bodied people who cannot find work, and the decrepit and the aged poor – are many in number, and are to be seen any day in the principal streets of all our towns, begging of all who pass, and often exposing vile diseases as an incentive to the charitable,” the paper noted.¹⁵

A letter to the *Malaya Tribune* describing “Singapore’s destitute people” highlighted the growing problem of starving beggars, particularly able-bodied individuals willing to work. At eating stalls, beggars asked diners for leftovers and “sometimes a man putting down his chopsticks for a moment finds his food grabbed from his plate”.¹⁶

Coolies were hit particularly hard. The *Straits Times* reported on 6 June 1930 that unemployment had led to “terrible consequences” among the “coolie class”, reaching the “proportions of a menace”. Applications for repatriation at the Chinese Protectorate had surged. In normal times, about 50 coolies unable to support themselves were sent back to China yearly. That week, 170 left within two days, while 250 to 300 applied for free passage on each of two other days. Many were able-bodied men thrown out of work; others had been nearly starving for months. The *Straits Times* suggested suspending immigration “since every new arrival serves to complicate further a problem which may have far-reaching effects on the future of Malaya”.¹⁷

Since June 1930, the government had begun repatriating “decrepit and destitute Chinese” from Singapore. It also introduced quotas on Chinese male arrivals from August that year. As Secretary for Chinese Affairs A.M. Goodman reported at the Legislative Council: “There was a great deal of unemployment among able-bodied labourers... it was apparent that it was still on the increase.” He was of the view that restriction of new arrivals was imperative. This quota system worked as Chinese immigration fell sharply from 242,139 to 27,796 between 1930 and 1933.¹⁸

Additionally, between 1931 and 1933, there were around 443,000 more Chinese who left Singapore than those who arrived. As W.G. Huff, an economic and social history professor noted, mass emigration was a “safety valve” that prevented “the depression from turning into a disaster in the city”.¹⁹

Domestic servants were similarly affected by the Depression as European families cut back on household staff to reduce expenses. On 7 August 1930, the *Straits Times* had written about the



Coolies unloading goods from a ship at the Singapore River, 1930s. Many labourers and other workers were unemployed during the Great Depression. Allen Goh Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 20060000783 - 0089).

“excessive rate” of servants’ wages which ranged from \$35 to \$45 a month. By 1933, *amahs* (female domestic servants) were “anxious to receive a good post for as little as \$10 a month or even less”, down from \$30 a few years earlier, to “ensure that they have at least a home and somewhere to sleep”.²⁰

Hapless Hawkers

As the slump deepened, many unemployed individuals took to hawking as their sole means of “earning even a small pittance”. However, this caused problems within the Municipality and by December 1929, it had enforced reforms that prohibited itinerant hawkers “not only in the area bounded by New Bridge Road, Anson Road, Cecil Street, Cross Street and Upper Cross Street, but also in practically all the streets of Singapore,” the *Straits Times* reported.²¹

Numerous hawkers were arrested for obstruction or for hawking without a licence. The *Straits Times* estimated some 4,000 unlicensed hawkers on the streets. With unemployment rising and the “vigilant trekking of the police from every conceivable angle”, the newspaper described their situation as “precarious and unenviable”. Yet they “cannot simply sit down and starve” – one might become “a beggar tomorrow, and a thief the next day”.²²

Each morning, the court’s holding areas were filled with the “flotsam and jetsam of Singapore streets”: people who had tried to earn a living by hawking, only to breach municipal bylaws.

One Chinese woman arrested for selling ice water explained: “I thought I would at least eke out an honest living by becoming a hawker... I was fined \$2, but I have not the means to pay the fine, so I have to spend the day behind these bars until this afternoon.”²³

People voiced their support for hawkers through letters to the press. In November 1930, a *Malaya Tribune* reader described the “deplorable” situation of these hawkers: “The struggle for existence, particularly among the hawker class, is by no means easy. They are confronted not only with the difficulty of disposing of their goods, which seem to yield no very great return, especially during the slump period, but also with the need to battle against the law.”²⁴

Public figures also expressed sympathy. On 26 March 1931, Municipal Commissioner Seow Poh Leng wrote to the *Straits Times* and the *Malaya Tribune* that “the law should be administered with leniency and tolerance, and a means of obtaining food and other necessities of life at a cheap rate which these hawkers provide should not be denied to the poor citizens who form by far the larger proportion of the population”.²⁵ In desperation, some hawkers decided to end their lives. On 23 January 1931, 25-year-old hawker Ng Cheu killed himself, leaving behind his parents. “He committed suicide because he was deprived of his means of livelihood,” Seow later recounted.²⁶

Relief came only in late 1931. The Municipal Town Cleansing Department reported a relaxation in enforcement: “[T]he revenue from licensing

of hawkers decreased by \$6,168, as compared with 1930. This was partly due to stall-holders in specified streets giving up their licences and the cancellation of many others... Relaxation of measures against unlicensed hawkers was undoubtedly the cause of this, as it was more profitable to hawk without a licence.” Fines collected from hawkers in arrest and summons cases also decreased by \$12,687, reflecting the reduced enforcement pressure.²⁷

The Educated Unemployed

By May 1930, distress among the middle class was evident. As the *Malaya Tribune* reported, “[v]ery many people of a good social class, Europeans and Asiatics, are unemployed and dependent on relations or friends, or upon the debasing art known as ‘scrounging’ or ‘cadging’”.²⁸

The *Straits Times* described one unemployed European as “tramping miles and having scores of abortive interviews, and developing a pronounced inferiority complex”. In response, the paper offered free advertising space for “victims of the slump” – Europeans and Asiatics who had lost their jobs due to the Depression – to advertise their skills. The first advertisement, featuring five individuals, appeared on 10 July 1930.²⁹

The unemployment situation worsened towards the end of that year. A *Malaya Tribune* reader described the extent of the problem: “[E]nergetic, educated Europeans and Eurasians, shabbily

dressed, can be seen hanging round eating-houses and coffee-shops, and walking about the streets looking for employment and unable to find it.” The writer proposed that the government establish a “Labour Bureau to keep men of good character until they find employment instead of letting them be disgraced by deporting them from the country, and wasting public funds”.³⁰

The crisis also extended to clerks and other middle-class workers residing permanently in Singapore. “The sad and depressed faces of out-of-work clerks who are to be met with in Change Alley and Raffles Square are reminders that something must be done quickly to relieve the victims of the slump,” said H.C. Chan, honorary secretary of the Clerical Union, at a meeting in October 1930. Several hundred clerks were unemployed by November, with their dependents likely numbering over a thousand. The *Malaya Tribune* called on those still in employment to contribute to the Asiatic Unemployment Fund set up by the Clerical Union. “[E]very dollar given brings a handsome repayment in the heartfelt gratitude of unhappy people whose only fault is that Fortune has frowned upon them.”³¹

Women Seeking Work

As husbands or fathers lost their jobs, women often became breadwinners. Many women without training and work experience as well as qualified stenographers sought assistance at the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA). In July 1932, the YWCA at Raffles Quay established the Goodwill Service Depot to assist women without any means of support. Under experienced supervision, women fulfilled service orders by sewing, knitting, mending and cooking.³²

At the YWCA’s annual general meeting on 14 February 1933, Mrs A. Eklund, president of the Singapore branch, said that the association “had given help to a large number of women and children during the past year” and even some men. The president of the Malayan branch, Mrs B.C. Roberts, noted that the YWCA was doing “very valuable work in Singapore... especially in these times when things were very distressed”. “I think there is absolutely no indication that this Association is giving way to the natural depression in this country,” she added.³³

In April 1933, more than 70 women had registered for work at the depot, and those whose work had proved satisfactory were employed. Over time, their output improved. “The women receiving orders appreciate this opportunity of self-help (no charity is given), and endeavour to please customers. Any orders, however small, may be of value to women who are without any means of support,” the *Malaya Tribune* reported. Services included sewing and mending men’s and women’s pyjamas

and shirts (prices ranging from \$1 to \$2.50), as well as hand hemstitching and simple embroidery.³⁴

On 2 December 1933, the YWCA put up a stall selling goods made by the women at the Christmas Bazaar held at the Victoria Memorial Hall. Lady Clementi, wife of Governor Cecil Clementi, awarded the cup for the most decorative stall to the YWCA. “I have decided to give the cup to this stall because it is the most original, inasmuch as the work on display has been done by the women themselves and shows good industry,” she said.³⁵

Hope and Recovery

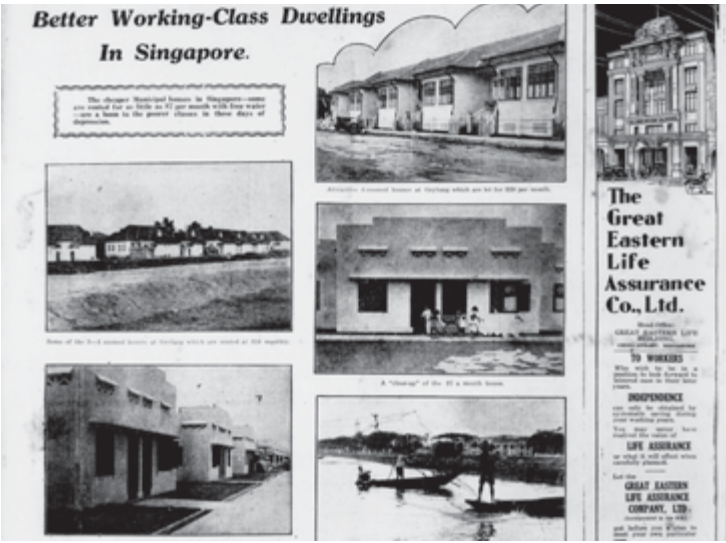
Singapore’s economy began to recover in late 1933 – though only partially – alleviating some of the earlier hardships.³⁶ On 25 July 1933, speaking at the Durbar (meeting of Malay rulers and British administrators) at Kuala Kangsar, Governor Cecil Clementi welcomed the recent rise in tin and rubber prices. “[T]he worst of the slump is over,” he said. “We may... look forward into the years ahead with full confidence that before long prosperity will return to Malaya.”³⁷

On 2 October that year, at a meeting of the Legislative Council, Clementi noted that the “Colony had made headway against the ‘economic blizzard’ and Malaya as a whole had weathered the storm better than most other countries”. He felt the worst was over and hoped that “we might soon be once more in smooth waters”.³⁸

Three weeks later, Acting Treasurer L. Rayman told the council that the colony’s financial situation was “fortunate and enviable”, with a higher than expected surplus. “We must be careful of this surplus and guard against being moonstruck by ‘beams from larger economic lunacy’,” he cautioned. “[W]ith prudent management of our surplus, [we can] win through to smoother waters safely and unimpaired.”³⁹

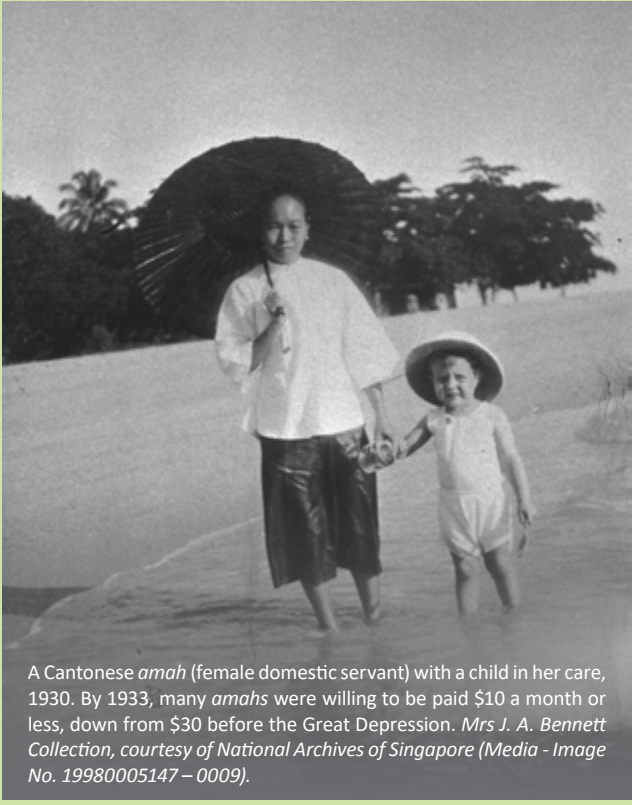
By the mid-1930s, rising rubber prices – still well below 1929 levels – led to higher wages and renewed immigration. As Huff observed, “the built-in shock-absorption capacity of emigration allowed a relatively speedy recovery from the worst effects of economic downturn”. Singapore ended the 1930s “shaken but not fundamentally changed, nor pressing for change”.

Singapore’s recovery revealed how closely its fortunes were tied to global trade. Its commitment to an open economic system and free trade held firm throughout the depression – a foundation that underpinned the rapid industrialisation from the mid-1960s, after independence. Today, Singapore’s prosperity continues to rest on an open economy driven by trade in goods and services, and facilitated by an extensive network of free trade agreements.⁴⁰



During the Great Depression, the Municipality provided affordable housing for the people. Image reproduced from “Better Working-Class Dwellings in Singapore,” *Malaya Tribune*, 1 April 1933, 20. (From NewspaperSG).

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A Cantonese *amah* (female domestic servant) with a child in her care, 1930. By 1933, many *amahs* were willing to be paid \$10 a month or less, down from \$30 before the Great Depression. Mrs J. A. Bennett Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 19980005147 – 0009).

The Singapore River (Re)Imagined

Across changing eras and artistic movements, artists have returned to the banks of the Singapore River to reflect on what the river means to them and what it means to be an artist.

By Luke Chua

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Throughout human history, rivers have been more than mere water bodies and geographical features. Rivers provide fresh water, support aquatic life, and facilitate transportation and trade.

Rivers also form part of a community's collective memory and history, embodying the stories of people who live along their banks and depend on them for their livelihoods.

Like the Seine in Paris and the Thames in London, the eponymous river of Singapore has

inspired storytellers, artists and poets. It was the commercial lifeline of a thriving British colony in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the birthplace of the Singapore Watercolour Society in the 1960s and, in the 1980s, found itself at the centre of a debate on artistic expression.

A survey of artworks about the Singapore River uncovers not just stories of how the river evolved, but also a narrative of Singapore art itself, painted by artists who have been inspired by the historical waterway over the years.

Ong Kim Seng, *S'pore River – From Raffles Landing Site*, 1989. Watercolour on paper, 51.5 × 72 cm. Collection of the National Gallery Singapore, courtesy of National Heritage Board.

Commerce

Early visual representations of Singapore date from the 19th century, coinciding with increased European presence in the region. During this time, images of the local landscape were often produced in Western artistic styles by Europeans for Europeans, offering a glimpse of life on the tropical island from a Western worldview.

It comes as no surprise that the Singapore River was the subject of many prints and drawings since it was the centre of commercial activity in the 19th century, supporting an entrepôt port where goods were unloaded, stored in godowns along the river and then reloaded onto vessels for export. “Images of the entrance into Singapore through the river dominate from [the] 1830s to the end of the 19th century, reflecting how the river remained the focal point of Singapore for most of the century,” wrote curator Wong Hong Suen.¹

For instance, commercial activity along its banks fills the pictorial space in the watercolour and ink painting *The River from Monkey Bridge* (1842–43) by Charles Dyce (1816–53), dwarfing the settlement of the Orang Laut (“sea people”) on the left. The now-demolished Monkey Bridge once

stood at the site of present-day Elgin Bridge and likely served as the centre of commercial activity along the Singapore River.²

Dyce was a merchant and amateur painter who stayed briefly in Singapore between 1842 and 1847, serving as the sheriff of the Straits Settlements towards the end of his stay. His paintings reflect his fascination with and documentation of the sights of tropical lands. “Dyce sought to affirm Singapore and the Straits Settlements as sites of order and mastery where colonial interests for commerce and industry may be sustained and advanced, and at the same time, to evoke the very poetics that promote emotional engagement with these lands,” observed Ahmad Mashadi, head of NUS Museum at the National University of Singapore.³

It would have been difficult to separate the Singapore River from the commercial activities that took place along its banks, as the river housed the primary port for shipping activity in Singapore until the late 1800s when it was replaced by New Harbour (later renamed Keppel Harbour), which served ships that required deep-water berths. Despite this development, the Singapore River did not lose its importance as a commercial centre in the early 20th century – merchants, trading houses

Charles Dyce, *The River from Monkey Bridge*, 1842–43. Watercolour and ink on paper, 35.8 × 51.5 cm. Collection of NUS Museum, National University of Singapore.



and businesses continued to proliferate along the river, which developed into a logistics hub.

It was also during this time that artistic activity began to flourish in Singapore, with the establishment of groups such as the Singapore Amateur Drawing Society (1909). There are few surviving examples of paintings from this period, but the Singapore River was likely a subject of artistic interest. In 1912, the *Singapore Free Press* reported that an artwork titled *Singapore River* by Mrs L.G. Felkin clinched the first prize in the watercolours category in an exhibition organised by the Singapore Art Club – an informal club established in the 1880s whose members were mostly European ladies accompanying their husbands on postings to Malaya.⁴

As one of the main waterways on the island, the Singapore River also caught the attention of artists who travelled to or made Singapore their home from the early to the mid-20th century.⁵ For instance, artist Georgette Chen, who moved to Singapore in 1953, painted the river in works such as *Singapore Waterfront* (c. 1958), attesting to the importance of the site as a source of artistic inspiration. This painting shows Chen’s keen interest in bumboats as the key pictorial element giving life and vitality to the river, with shophouses receding into the background.



(Top) Georgette Chen, *Singapore Waterfront*, c. 1958. Oil on canvas, 59 × 72 cm. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board. © Estate of Georgette Chen.

(Above) Ong Kim Seng painting by the Singapore River, 1982. Family of Kouo Shang-Wei and National Library Board Singapore.



Cheong Soo Pieng, *Singapore River*, c. 1961. Chinese ink and colour on paper, 60 × 111 cm. Gift of Ministry of Culture. Collection of the National Gallery Singapore, courtesy of National Heritage Board.

Connection

The connection these artists felt to the Singapore River took on deeper significance in the 1960s as it became a popular site for an informal group of artists who gathered on weekends to paint together. Visiting different parts of Singapore, they practised the artistic tradition of *plein air* (French for “open air”) where scenes were painted onsite from direct observation.⁶

Many artists, working across different mediums, favoured the Singapore River as the place to practise their craft. “Long before the advent of the younger generation of watercolourists, the Singapore River had cast its spell on the pioneers namely: Chen Chong Swee, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi, Georgette Chen, Liu Kang and of course Lim Cheng Hoe,” wrote artist, educator and art critic Chia Wai Hon.⁷

Lim Cheng Hoe, in particular, led other watercolourists such as Ong Chye Cho, Gog Sing Hooi and Ong Kim Seng. “They unobtrusively observed and learned from him [Lim Cheng Hoe], and painted with him on the spot. As they matured as painters in their own right, they in turn became mentors to a new generation of painters now in their early thirties,” Chia added.⁸

It was along the riverbank that discussions on starting the Singapore Watercolour Society began.⁹ The society was eventually founded in 1969 by 13 individuals, many of whom were participants of the informal weekend artistic activities.¹⁰ Among the founders were Lim Cheng Hoe, Gog Sing Hooi and Chen Chong Swee, who went on to mentor and inspire many younger artists.

During this time, the river was not just a site for art practice; it was a home for artistic connections between senior artists and younger beginners, some of whom could not afford the time or money for a full-time art education. “This was a self-generating process, spontaneous and unplanned, that involved the older artists sharing their expertise and skill, not through formal lessons or organised activities, but by simply allowing the youngsters to look over their shoulders as they painted,” Chia wrote. “For the young artists this was more than just free tuition and demonstration; it was a strong motivating force which urged them to emulate their ‘master’, and to learn from one another.”¹¹

Sculptor Ng Eng Teng was one of those who remembered the Singapore River as an informal art school. During lunchtime, Ng and a few classmates would drive out and set up their easels in front of kampongs or along the Singapore River. “Back

then, there was no proper syllabus,” Ng told the *Straits Times* in 1998. “One week, all the students would crowd round Cheong [Soo Pieng], who would demonstrate. Then you would produce your own work. The next week, he would look at your painting and give his comments, adding a stroke here and a dash there.”¹²

Artist Andrew Yeo Kian Hwee also looked back fondly on the time he spent painting by the Singapore River. “I used to *ponteng* (cut classes) Chinese painting lessons and go to the Singapore River to sketch,” said the artist. “There used to be so many artists there and it was very common to see them squatting by the river side and drawing.”¹³

Between 1977 and 1987, there was a massive cleanup of the river, and artists painting along its banks would have witnessed the epochal transformation of the river from a heavily polluted waterway to a tourist attraction. Painting the river thus became a way to capture and memorialise that period in history.

Despite the filth, stench and industrial waste that characterised the river before and during the cleanup, art critic Chin Oi Tow believed that artists preferred to paint here rather than at newer and more modern sites. He wrote in the *Straits Times* in 1981: “The Singapore River, one of the last strongholds of the fast-vanishing old-world Singapore, has always been the hub of much artistic activity, frequented both by mature and vastly-experienced artists as well as by younger aspirants, all of whom gather here primarily to paint and also to hold discussions on all matters relating

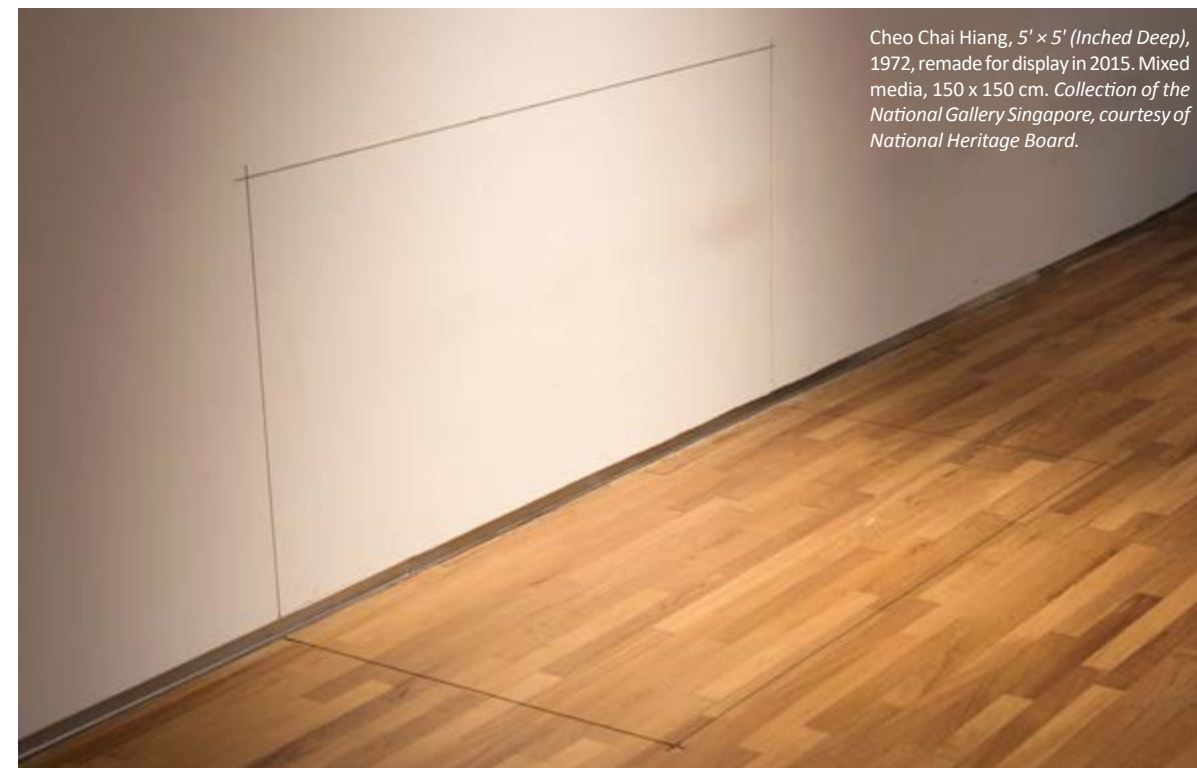
to art.”¹⁴ Against a rapidly changing Singapore, perhaps the grime represented a connection to a past that was disappearing, and this was what attracted the artists to the river.¹⁵

In 1980, Gog Sing Hooi acknowledged the need for art to reflect such changes, and that “a new art [had] to evolve to reflect the fiercely progressive nation that is Singapore”. “But right now,” he added, “the duty of the artist is to capture on canvas all that will soon disappear.”¹⁶ The Singapore River features prominently in his oeuvre, among other sites such as temples and kampongs, many of which no longer exist today.

Cliché?

At the same time, other artists were beginning to question this approach to painting the Singapore River. Cheo Chai Hiang was studying in England in 1972 when he submitted a proposal for a work titled *5' × 5' (Singapore River)* to be shown at the Modern Art Society’s (MAS) annual exhibition that year. The work consisted of a set of instructions to create a blank square measuring 5 ft by 5 ft, half to be marked out by lines on the floor and half on its adjacent wall. According to art writer and independent curator Teo Han Wue, the work “challenged the dominant status accorded to painting in Singapore, especially with the Singapore River as a ubiquitous subject matter for landscape works”.¹⁷

Rejecting the proposal, MAS’ co-founder Ho Ho Ying explained in a letter to Cheo: “In terms of the work’s intention, the way the two rectangular frames



Cheo Chai Hiang, *5' × 5' (Inched Deep)*, 1972, remade for display in 2015. Mixed media, 150 × 150 cm. Collection of the National Gallery Singapore, courtesy of National Heritage Board.



(Above) Lim Cheng Hoe, *Untitled (Singapore River)*, 1960. Watercolour on paper, 34.8 × 45.5 cm. Gift of Lim Hock Ann. Collection of the National Gallery Singapore, courtesy of National Heritage Board.



(Left) Debbie Ding, *Here the River Lies*, 2022. Installation. Collection of the Singapore Art Museum, courtesy of Debbie Ding.

are connected is unconvincing. Viewers will not get any satisfaction even if they look at it for a whole day... Art, besides being new, also has to possess intentionality and particularity in order to strike a sympathetic chord in the viewer's heart. Imagine an artist installing nothing other than a bare cube in a big public square, and declaring, "This is real art". The viewer can also place a dead tree in the middle of a park and say this is art too. It is very confusing when an artist mixes art with non-art."¹⁸

According to art historian Isabel Ching, Cheo's work should be "placed in the context of the numerous formulaic representations of the Singapore River paintings exhibited in the annual shows of major art societies... and the dominance of a discourse that values the lyrical and the beautiful maintained by the Modern Art Society which saw itself as being at the forefront of artistic

practices. Cheo's proposal precisely targets this, emptying out Singapore art – characterised as being a world of painting then – of representational content as well as the values of beauty and skill".¹⁹ In other words, in stripping his work of the beautiful Singapore River images that have come to dominate the art scene, Cheo is radically reformulating what it means to create art.

His proposal was not realised until 2005 when it appeared as 5' × 5' (*Ao Tou, Another Source*) in Tong An, Fujian, China, and 5' × 5' (*Source of the Singapore River – Uncovered/Covered*) in Singapore.²⁰ In 2015, a recreation of the work, titled 5' × 5' (*Inched Deep*), was installed in the National Gallery Singapore.

Another instance of the river becoming a flashpoint in public discourse of what defined Singapore art was the 1986 exhibition titled *Not the Singapore River* at Arbour Fine Art. With its provocative title, the exhibition questioned prevalent artistic trends by foregrounding works from five young artists – Goh Ee Choo, Oh Chai Hoo, Yeo Siak Goon, Peter Tow and Katherine Ho – whose works departed from the mainstream, lyrical paintings of the Singapore River that were commonly seen at many exhibitions.

Older artists such as Ong Kim Seng reacted to the framing and title of the exhibition. In a letter to the *Straits Times*, Ong wrote: "It is an effective title, but I am very concerned if it indicates that we are getting tired of our source of nationhood, the Singapore River, and that artists, especially the younger ones, are discouraged or refrain from painting it." He added: "[I]f the clever title is there because the artists need a change in expression, a change in their publicity – then I ask, why at the expense of the Singapore River?"²¹

Arbour Fine Art's Lim Jen Howe replied that its motivation was "neither negative nor anti-Singapore River... it is a declaration that this is an exhibition to show that we have in Singapore young artists who are expressing their artistic ideas and talents in ways that are different from what we normally come across, for example, paintings of the Singapore River or Chinatown (Not Chinatown, however, does not have the same ring)". He added: "There is no intention on our part to imply that the Singapore River as a 'national emblem' of our history is to be rejected."²²

The Singapore River had become a victim of its own artistic fame, and such episodes could be seen as the disavowal of prevailing pictorial conventions rather than outright rejections of the river as a subject for artistic creation. By provocatively using "Singapore River" as a title, a younger generation of artists wanted to embrace new artistic expressions appearing on the horizon.

Concept

In the 1970s and 1980s, these new languages shifted artmaking from the visual towards the conceptual, where the idea behind a work became more important than visual realism. More artists started to experiment with modes of creating art beyond traditional canvases and paints.

Artist Teo Eng Seng's work *The Net (Most Definitely Singapore River)* (1986) showcases his signature "paperdyesculp", a medium he pioneered that involves shaping dyed papier-mâché and other materials into sculptural artworks. This installation features a fishing net entangled with paperdyesculp debris, capturing the pollution that defined the river before the massive cleanup. According to the National Gallery Singapore, the work is "Teo's wry response to the overuse of the Singapore River as a subject by local artists", "emphasising rawness and spontaneity in his re-creation of the river's debris".²³

This is a sharp departure from idyllic scenes of the river, with the artwork looking nothing like the watercolour paintings of the 1970s. Visual realism is not the objective here, and experimentation takes centre stage, where an unfamiliar presentation of the Singapore River demands a different type of audience engagement.

Such audience participation is a defining feature of contemporary art. Artist-scholar Debbie Ding's *Here the River Lies*, first exhibited

Teo Eng Seng, *The Net (Most Definitely the Singapore River)*, 1986. Paperdyesculp on net, 350 × 350 cm. Gift of the artist. Collection of the National Gallery Singapore, courtesy of National Heritage Board.



in 2010 at the Substation, is an interactive map installation that invites participants to contribute their stories and memories to a large hand-drawn map of the Singapore River, regardless of whether these are real, partially real, or imaginary. “The river is a site of significant historical, economic, and social importance – yet despite its centrality, it seems that many Singaporeans do not know its history, its exact location or even its appearance,” Ding noted.

The resulting map does not aspire towards stable representations or visual realism since it is meant to show that our mental and emotional impressions of places are fluid. In fact, we think that we know what the Singapore River looks like, but we may struggle when asked to chart the exact shape of the waterway. What informs our relationship with the river is not just an image, but also the memories and emotions evoked by it.

In 2022, as part of *Curiosity: Places & Perspectives*, an initiative of the National Library Board and in partnership with the Light to Night Festival, artist Ong Kian Peng unveiled his immersive media installation, *The River Connects*, at the Asian Civilisations Museum. The work showed how human connection could be represented by the bridges along the Singapore River. Sights, sounds and memories were reawakened as audiences encountered archival images of the river and its bridges, experiencing the connections and social interactions that they have represented throughout history.²⁵ Similarly, in this work, visual representations were dissolved as participants “experienced” the river through sounds, images and movement.

Confluence

Despite a shift towards conceptual art, contemporary artistic practices never completely replaced traditional modes of creation. Similar to the earlier years of the Singapore Watercolour Society, students and artists today still sit along the riverbanks painting their favourite scene,²⁶ and artworks inspired by the Singapore River continue to be produced using a wide variety of artistic languages.

Rather than viewing these approaches as belonging to separate eras or opposing camps, it is more fruitful to see them as part of an evolving conversation about how Singapore’s art history is not a linear progression from tradition to innovation, but a layered confluence of artistic expressions. Embracing this diversity allows us to recognise how different artistic practices can collectively shape the visual memory and cultural imagination of a nation. ♦



Ong Kian Peng, *The River Connects*, 2022. Installation. Digital copy (c) National Library Board Singapore.

NOTES

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10 Other than a shared interest in the medium, the formation of the Singapore Watercolour Society can also be attributed to other factors. Artist and writer Chia Wai Hon suggests that the society was set up partly in reaction to the Modern Art Society’s push for new forms of artistic expression. See Chia, *Bits and Pieces*, 131.

11 Chia, *Bits and Pieces*, 169.

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TRENDS IN MALAY WEDDING PHOTOGRAPHY 1950S–EARLY 1980S

The evolution of Malay wedding photography since the 1950s has been shaped by several factors, including the changing needs of newlyweds, professionalisation of the craft and services provided by the *mak andam*.

By Zhuang Wubin



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(Facing page) At the *bertandang* of Salleh Sariman and Noribah M. Serat, the couple wore the traditional *Baju Melayu Pengantin*, tailor-made from luxurious songket material, 31 August 1969. Courtesy of Salleh Sariman.

(Above and right) By 1967, Salleh Sariman had been promoted to a full-fledged cameraman at Radio and Television Singapura, and stopped offering his service as a part-time wedding photographer. This was the second last wedding he photographed, probably in 1969 or 1970. The groom Razak was a family friend and Salleh could not turn down the request. Courtesy of Salleh Sariman.

In the 1950s and '60s making a stop at the photo studio was an important part of Chinese marriages. On auspicious days, couples queued outside popular photo studios waiting for their turn to capture a memento of their special day.

During the same period, photography for Malay weddings tended to take a different form. Instead of visiting a photo studio, family members, neighbours and friends were roped in to take photographs at Malay weddings in a display of *gotong-royong*, the communal spirit of helping one another. Around the 1960s, a small group of pioneering Malay photographers began to offer their services at Malay weddings on a part-time basis, existing alongside non-professionals in a burgeoning market.

The informal nature of Malay wedding photography at the time allowed the photographers to shape the scope of their practice in collaboration with the *mak andam* (wedding attendant), while also responding to the wishes and preferences of their customers. The *mak andam* played a central role in the wedding by managing the couple's attire, applying the bride's makeup, and overseeing the rituals and ceremonies.

Photography of Malay Weddings in the 1950s

When literary pioneer and Cultural Medallion recipient Suratman Markasan married educator and activist Saerah Taris at her home village on Pulau Blakang Mati (present-day Sentosa) in June 1958, her family engaged a part-time Malay photographer to photograph the *bersanding* (sitting-in-state ceremony).¹

The *bersanding* marks the wedding finale when the couple sit on a *pelamin* (throne-like wedding dais) as king and queen of the day during the *walimah* (communal wedding feast). Today, the *walimah* and *bersanding* continue to be the core ceremonies of Malay weddings in Singapore, preceded by the *nikah* (solemnisation) and followed by the *bertandang* (welcoming the bride/in-laws). The *berinai* (applying henna on the hands and feet of the couple) used to be an important ceremony, but has been rarely observed since the early 2000s.²



According to Suratman, around half of Malay weddings in the late 1950s involved some form of photographic documentation. He said that it was uncommon for Malay couples to visit photo studios, which were mostly Chinese-owned, for wedding photographs.³ Instead, those who could afford professional photography might commission a Chinese studio photographer to take their photos at the wedding dais during *bersanding*. Even so, only a few photographs would be taken to save cost.⁴

In most cases, if the bride and groom wanted photographs of their wedding, they would ask someone – a family member, a relative, a neighbour or a friend – who knew photography and had access to camera equipment to help them out, with the *mak andam* directing the couple's poses.⁵ Their main constraint was cost as the photographers shot on medium-format cameras using what was called 120 film. This format had fewer exposures than the 36 shots per standard roll of 35 mm film.⁶

Learning Photography

Salleh Sariman, who was born in Singapore in 1945, was among the earliest Malay photographers who contributed to the gradual professionalisation of Malay wedding photography. He was a television cameraman at Mediacorp who began his career at Radio and Television Singapura (RTS) in 1964 before retiring from Mediacorp in 2007. His most active years as a freelance wedding photographer was from 1962, when he joined Cathay-Keris Film Productions

as an apprentice, until 1967 when he was promoted from an assistant to a full-fledged cameraman at RTS. Salleh subsequently stopped accepting part-time wedding photography assignments since his full-time job required him to work on weekends. However, he did shoot a few more weddings until 1970 due to his close relationship with the couples.⁷

Salleh's first encounter with the camera was in 1958 when he was 13. His friend had brought along a Zeiss Ikon camera for their Hari Raya Aidilfitri outing to the Botanic Gardens. Salleh was hooked the moment he pressed the camera shutter. Two years later, he used his savings to purchase a Japanese-made Pax M4 camera, although his grandfather had to top up the shortfall.⁸

After he had taken some family photographs, Salleh's neighbour asked him to help shoot her wedding even though he was only 15 at the time. "I was in jitters," Salleh recalled. "My 35 mm camera was not good enough for enlargements, so I borrowed a Yashica medium-format camera as the main camera."⁹ At Siglap Secondary School, Salleh was the school magazine's photographer and his works were featured in the 1961 issue of the *Siglap Clarion*.¹⁰

After Salleh joined RTS, he befriended Woon Kee Fee, a Cantonese cameraman from Malaysia and they worked together for three years. Outside of work, Woon became his mentor in photography, loaning him books and teaching him the artistic aspects of the medium. Woon stressed the importance of lighting and composition in the

When literary pioneer and Cultural Medallion recipient Suratman Markasan married Saerah Taris in June 1958, her family asked a part-time Malay photographer to photograph the *bersanding*. The photograph is kept in Suratman's photo album. Courtesy of Suratman Markasan.



medium.¹¹ "When I first picked up photography, I was fascinated by its look of precision and the joy it gave me and my subjects when we saw the photographs," Salleh recalled. "Later, I came to value its ability to capture a beautiful scene and make it better by selective framing and composition."¹²

Professionalising Malay Wedding Photography

Salleh and his contemporaries introduced pricing and payment models that aligned with market practices, while also expanding and standardising the scope of Malay wedding photography. This was not a conscious and collective attempt at professionalising the craft. Instead, the changes occurred in an organic fashion. In Salleh's case, he responded to the requests of his clients and subjects while balancing the authority of the *mak andam*, and at the same time learning from other practitioners how to enhance his skills and range of services.

When Salleh started out in 1962, he would visit New City Photo Studio at 467 Changi Road to develop his film and print his photographs. The studio was opened in 1958 by Kuet Gin Bok, a Hainanese who began his apprenticeship in studio photography in Malaya towards the end of the 1940s.¹³ There were two other studios in the vicinity, but Salleh preferred the print quality from New City. As a rookie, Salleh often sought Kuet's expertise on the right type of film for his wedding shoots. On a few occasions, he even asked Kuet to comment on his photographs. Speaking in Malay, Kuet told Salleh: "Select your subject and go closer in order to avoid the unnecessary surroundings." His advice has stuck with Salleh since then.¹⁴ (Salleh subsequently set up a darkroom in his home in 1964.)

Salleh's first clients were his neighbours and relatives who asked him to photograph their weddings. He charged a small token fee initially, but later asked Kuet for advice on pricing his photography service. He also checked with other newlyweds on the rates charged by fellow Malay photographers.¹⁵ Soon after, Salleh charged \$1.50 per photo, with a minimum order of 50 photographs for a three-day shoot. He carefully kept the negatives of the photographs he took as Kuet had told him

that the request for reprints would be lucrative. Salleh did receive many requests for reprints, and he charged 30 cents for a postcard-size reprint.¹⁶

In the past, the entire kampong was expected to contribute to Malay weddings in the spirit of *gotong-royong*. Villagers were mobilised to put up tents for the reception, construct the pavilion for the band, decorate the bridal chamber, set up the temporary kitchen, cook for hundreds of guests and clean up the dishes, among other tasks. "When I covered [the] weddings of my relatives and neighbours, they would shout at me to snap their photographs, which I obliged," Salleh recalled. "When the newlyweds saw my photographs, they realised I had done more than just photographing them. All the newlyweds whom I had photographed ended up approving my coverage. They could see so much merriment in the photographs."¹⁷

Encouraged by the positive response, Salleh sought to capture the often-overlooked moments such as parents receiving guests, kitchen helpers hard at work and relatives serving food. He also fastidiously documented the key ceremonies: the *berinai*, *nikah*, *bersanding*, *walimah* and *bertandang*. The newlyweds and their guests were happy with his work, and he received additional orders for his photographs.¹⁸

As photography was still a luxury then, there were couples who wanted Salleh to save his film for the most crucial parts of the wedding. However, all of them regarded the three *berinai* sessions (*berinai curi* [to steal], *berinai kecil* [small] and *berinai besar* [big]) as very important.¹⁹ For each *berinai*, the bride was expected to wear a different outfit while reserving another attire for the *bersanding*.²⁰

The colourful *berinai* ceremonies were ideal subjects for the camera. In fact, Salleh noted that as photography became more commonplace in Malay weddings, the

The *kadi* (wearing dark suit and glasses), or religious officer, officiating the *nikah* at Salleh Sariman's wedding. The ceremony was held on 30 August 1969 at the bride's family home. Courtesy of Salleh Sariman.





For the *berinai kecil* on 29 August 1969, Salleh Sariman's wife Noribah M. Serat showcased two distinct looks: a costume from *Jula Juli Bintang Tujoh*, a film released by Cathay-Keris in 1962 (left), and a Japanese kimono (middle). For *berinai besar* the next day, she donned a costume from *Panji Semerang*, a film by Shaw Brothers in 1961 (right). All three outfits were rented from her *mak andam*, Zainab Simen. Courtesy of Salleh Sariman.

berinai became more elaborate and the number of attire changes multiplied. He recalled photographing Malay weddings in the 1960s with two nights of *berinai* ceremonies in which the brides made three costume changes each night.²¹ “The satisfaction for the bride was to hear others say how beautiful she was in this or that costume,” added Salleh.²²

Not everyone could afford multiple changes of outfits though. Because of their modest means, when Salleh married Noribah M. Serat (born Wilhelmina Ema Palar) in 1969, she only had two different attires for *berinai kecil* and one for *berinai besar*.²³ Even though it would make things more expensive, by the 1970s, some couples were making 10 to 15 costume changes for the *berinai* ceremony.²⁴ Over time, the symbolism of giving and receiving blessings between the elders and the newlyweds became sidelined in favour of taking beautiful photographs during *berinai*.²⁵ Today, however, the *berinai* ceremonies are no longer widely performed in Malay weddings in Singapore.

Role of the Mak Andam

Couples rented their outfits from the *mak andam* who would have an attractive and wide selection of costumes. For Salleh's wedding, Noribah's uncle used his connections in the world of *bangsawan* (Malay opera) and the Malay film industry to hire Zainab Simen as their *mak andam*.²⁶ A *bangsawan* veteran with access to an extensive wardrobe, Zainab brought a touch of glamour to the wedding. Noribah picked for her *berinai* two costumes that she had seen in *Panji Semerang* (Outlaw of Semarang; released by Shaw Brothers in 1961) and *Jula Juli Bintang Tujoh* (Jula Juli Seven Stars; released by Cathay-Keris in 1962), two movies that Zainab had provided outfits for.²⁷ This was how the fashion trends of popular cinema intersected with the practice of Malay wedding photography.

The involvement of the *mak andam* in Malay wedding photography went beyond the mere provision of bridal costumes. She was also responsible for directing the photo-taking sessions, especially during the *berinai* and *bersanding*.²⁸

The working dynamic between the *mak andam* and the wedding photographer was recorded – albeit briefly – in Shaik Kadir's autobiography about growing up in Geylang Serai. Invited to help at the

wedding of his friend's sister in the 1960s, Shaik observed that the photographer, a relative of the bride, had already taken many pictures during *berinai kecil*. At the *bersanding* the following day, the *mak andam* urged the photographer to take more photographs as she instructed the newlyweds to pose in different positions, such as “seated on the *pelamin* chairs, standing on the *pelamin* and holding hands, sitting on the dais without the chairs”. The photographer seemed bemused by her desire for more photographs, and he nearly ran out of flash bulbs for the shoot.²⁹

Salleh had always deferred to the experience of the *mak andam* when it came to posing the couple.³⁰ There were typically three standard poses for the bride and groom at the *pelamin*: both standing, both sitting and the groom standing with the bride sitting down.³¹ Salleh could also request other poses, but he had to relay the instructions to the couple through the *mak andam*.³²

Developments in the 1970s

From the 1970s, Malay photographers began to collaborate more closely with the *mak andam* so that she could refer business to her preferred photographers.³³ In 1973, Malay dance pioneer and Cultural Medallion recipient Som Said began offering her service as a *mak andam* on a part-time basis. She set aside space in her home for newlyweds to take photographs after the *nikah*. The *pelamin* setup featured two chairs and a simple backdrop. “The *pelamin* at my home catered to couples who did not want to organise the



(Above right and below) By 1967, Salleh Sariman had been promoted to a full-fledged cameraman at Radio and Television Singapura, and stopped offering his service as a part-time wedding photographer. This was the last wedding he photographed, probably in 1969 or 1970. He could not turn down the request because the groom was his wife's family friend. Courtesy of Salleh Sariman.



walimah and *bersanding* for their wedding because they were trying to follow the Islamic way,” Som explained. “Only the *nikah*, the Islamic part of the rituals, is a must.” However, the couples still wanted to commemorate the occasion by wearing different attires for the camera in the privacy of Som’s house.³⁴

By 1983, Som had gained enough experience to establish Ratu Sari Bridal House & Photo Studio – which is widely believed to be the first Malay bridal boutique in Singapore – in Tanjong Katong Complex. Starting in the 1970s, Som worked closely with two photographers: her husband Ahmad Sawal, and Sazali, a dancer who had some photography skills. The couples who engaged Som were free to hire their preferred photographers. But if they needed referrals, Som would recommend either Sazali or her husband.³⁵



(Above) At the end of the *nikah*, the *kadi* or religious officer (in white skullcap) is seen leading the prayers in the bride’s family home. The groom is seated directly in front of the *kadi*. Courtesy of Salleh Sariman.

(Below) The couple’s *walimah* on Jalan Masjid. Yunos Alwi, a technician at Cathy-Keris, had borrowed Salleh Sariman’s camera to photograph the wedding in the 1960s. Courtesy of Salleh Sariman.



To supplement their income, some contributors to the *Berita Harian* newspaper began photographing Malay weddings on weekends. When Som married Ahmad in 1973, their wedding was photographed by Ahmad Samuri from the newspaper. She also recalled the late veteran journalist Karim Iskandar – who covered the arts and entertainment beat – shooting Malay weddings from around the late 1970s.³⁶

There were also a few Malay women photographers who photographed Malay weddings on a part-time basis during the period. One of them, Che Fatimah, picked up photography in around 1956 or 1958, encouraged by her husband and driven by her interest in the medium. In 1967, she worked as a photographer for a local magazine but resigned for personal reasons. She later pursued freelance photography, offering her services for different events, including Malay weddings. She built a darkroom at home and did her own developing and printing work. It also helped that her husband was interested in photography and that his younger brother was Junid Juani, a veteran photographer with the *Straits Times* group.³⁷

Wedding Photography in the 1980s

Even though Salleh had stopped photographing Malay weddings by the end of the 1960s, he continued to maintain a keen interest in the craft. By the 1970s and the ’80s, most, if not all, Malay wedding photographers had transitioned from medium-format cameras to 35 mm photography because the latter provided more exposures per roll.

Meanwhile, as more Singaporeans were relocated into public housing, Malay weddings increasingly took place in the flat unit and in void decks rather than in kampongs.³⁸ These factors most likely helped to standardise the iconography of Malay wedding photography.

Malay photographers also found new ways to attract more customers. In the 1980s, beyond the *pelamin*, some photographers began setting up temporary paper backdrops at the bride’s house, providing couples with an additional background to pose for the camera.³⁹ There were also some who introduced video recording services at Malay weddings.⁴⁰ In Som Said’s case, the decision to set up Ratu Sari was partly influenced by the Chinese bridal industry. She hoped to pioneer the trend of offering complete wedding packages to prospective Malay clients, which included photo shoots at her studio.⁴¹ Malay bridal boutiques became more common from then on.

Since the 1950s, Malay photographers have negotiated the needs and expectations of newlyweds and the mak andam in defining the scope and practice of Malay wedding photography. Its evolution was also shaped by advances in photographic technology, changing cultural and religious norms, the impact of popular culture, and the commercialisation of photography and bridal services. ♦

The writer would like to thank Zakaria Zainal, Chong Chin Xin and Shio Soon Yi for their assistance with this article.

NOTES

1 Suratman Markasan, interview by author, Singapore, 12 October 2023. Unfortunately, Suratman passed away in 2024. I did not have the chance to confirm with him on whether the Malay photographer was someone who offered his service on a part-time basis, or whether he was someone who knew photography and was known to the wife’s family as a family member, relative, friend or neighbour.

2 For an overview of Malay wedding rituals, see Hidayah Amin, *Malay Weddings Don’t Cost \$50 and Other Facts About Malay Culture* (Singapore: Helang Books, 2014), 89–108. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 305.8992805957 HID); and Asrina Tanuri and Nadya Suradi, “Malay-Muslim Weddings: Keeping up with the Times,” *BiblioAsia* 17, no. 2 (July–September 2021): 16–21.

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The 1970 National Day Parade at the Padang. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media – Image No. 19980006944 - 0012).

MARCHING THROUGH HISTORY 100 YEARS OF THE SINGAPORE POLICE FORCE BAND

The desire of the municipal authorities to have a band perform at publicly funded outreach events was the original impetus for what would become the Singapore Police Force Band.

By Eugene Dairianathan

On 25 March 1927, the Second Straits Settlement Police Band gave its inaugural performance to a large crowd. The *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* reported that a crowd “numbering between three and four thousand greeted the new S.S. Police Band which gave its first performance at the band stand in Waterloo Street last night... [with] several members of the Singapore Municipal Commission present”. E.A. Brown, a member of the Municipal Commission, introduced

bandmaster F.E. Minns – formerly bandmaster of the Second Royal Sussex Regiment – who was “going to make the band one which would be known throughout the East” and a “band for the populace of Singapore”.¹

Subsidised by the Municipality, this presence of a band performing in public outreach concerts under a law-and-order organisation was interesting because the police force at the time already had an existing full military band. Why then was there the need for a second one?

Early Bands in Singapore

During the 19th century, itinerant Indian army regiments stationed in Singapore provided music for concerts and events, most notably commemorating the birthday of King George IV on Government Hill in 1827.² The musical contribution could have been provided either by the 35th Madras Native Infantry Band or the 3rd Battalion Madras Artillery Band stationed in Singapore.³

Another Indian army band performed in 1831: “[T]he Officers of the 29th Madras Native Infantry, who had just come, allowed their band to play once a week on the plain, which is now called the Esplanade... the [itinerant] band used to play... twice a week... opposite Coleman Street and the carriages were driven in, and stood in a circle around the bandstand.”⁴

These itinerant Indian regimental bands of the Madras Army continued to provide public concerts at the Botanic Gardens and Esplanade until the British annexation of the Maratha kingdom into the Presidency of Madras in 1856, and the Madras Army was reorganised.⁵ A letter to the editor of the *Singapore Free Press* in December 1865 expressed concern that there would be no more Indian bands performing in Singapore and appealed for the formation of a local town band.⁶

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In November 1869, the *Straits Times Overland Journal* reported the first appearance of a local Volunteer Band accompanying the Singapore Volunteer Rifle Corps. The paper described how this ensemble “marched through some of the principal streets of the town last evening”, with music “furnished by the Volunteer Band, who give promise of becoming very efficient”.⁷ In December 1878, the same paper reported: “The Band of the Volunteers afforded much delectation to the town residents by playing on the Esplanade by moonlight... a selection of popular airs.”⁸ (“Airs” are simple, song-like melodies or musical pieces that are often lyrical and expressive in nature.)

The cost of sustaining a Municipal Band was raised at the meeting of the Municipal Commission on 7 September 1888 when member W.C. Brown asked “if enquiries [had] been made about [its] probable cost”. The president of the Municipal Commission, W.E. Maxwell, replied that he had done so and was “awaiting further information from Manila [the Philippines]”.⁹

At a special meeting of the Municipal Commission on 3 May 1889, the cost of forming a town band was brought up once again, with the suggestion to appoint a committee to study its feasibility.¹⁰

Santa Cecilia Band

By 1895, Singapore still did not have a town band. On 20 December that year, Alex Gentle, president of the Municipal Commission, wrote to the manager of the Santa Cecilia Band based in Singapore to confirm that the Municipality was prepared to “contribute a sum of \$15 a week for a weekly performance of the band in one or other of the public grounds of this town”. It would be partly funded by the Municipal Commission and partly by the band’s own advertisements for public subscriptions.¹¹

In January 1896, Gentle informed the Municipal Commission that thanks to the large music-loving community of Singapore, “there should be no difficulty in raising the necessary funds” and a “sufficient amount could be easily subscribed to enable the band to give two performances every week instead of one”. With the “many Chinese subscribers to the fund”, Gentle hoped that performances would be held in People’s Park, Hong Lim Green and the Esplanade and that “many [would] eagerly look forward to the commencement of the Band performances”.¹²



The Second Straits Settlement Police Band, c. 1927. Courtesy of the Singapore Police Force Band.

The Santa Cecilia Band comprised 20 trained musicians from Manila who would perform at “Soirees, Balls, Theatres, Funerals, Baptisms, Weddings, Picnics” to name a few.¹³ In June 1895, the band had the opportunity to accompany an orchestral ensemble during a Pontifical High Mass at the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd. They also provided music for a quadrille party organised for the warders of the criminal prison at Boustead Institute.¹⁴

After its commission by the Municipality, the Santa Cecilia Band often played at Government House (the Istana today) with Governor Charles Mitchell and Lady Mitchell in attendance. Following a reception there in March 1896, the band received a note from the governor’s aide-de-camp which read: “H.E. Sir C. Mitchel was much pleased with the way the band played and his Excellency thinks the Band shows considerable improvement.”¹⁵

In September 1896, however, band members addressed a petition to the governor that they were not sufficiently paid and received no remuneration for playing on Sundays.¹⁶ Apparently, these grievances were resolved because the band continued to perform at various locations across the island over the next few years, including the Esplanade and Noordin Lane.¹⁷

Town and Volunteer Band

In 1900, there was some progress made towards having a town band when the *Straits Times* reported that “a sub-committee [had] been appointed for the purpose of organising a band for the Singapore Volunteer Rifles”.¹⁸ This was the proposed “Singapore Volunteer and Town Band” whose committee appealed for public funds in January 1901 for its support and maintenance. The band was expected to “play in public twice a week, and would be available for public and private engagements”.¹⁹

The Town and Volunteer Band was eventually formed in June 1901 with 25 members as well as instruments loaned by the Sultan of Johor.

According to the *Straits Times*, “the direction of the interests of the band was entrusted into the hands of the Municipal Commission, which subscribed \$6,000 annually”. The band was initially popular with the people and became “quite an institution in the town” with two weekly performances. But as time went by, its novelty wore off and public donations dwindled.²⁰

In February 1906, F.J. Benjafield, the secretary of the band, made an appeal for subscriptions as the Municipal Commission had reduced its annual funding support to \$3,000 from \$6,000 in previous years. For every \$25 subscribed, the subscriber may engage the band twice a year at half the price.²¹ Eventually, with the lack of support and funding, the band was reduced to 17 men and had no bandstand to play on. Its last performance was reported to be on 31 December 1906 at the Police Ball.²²

Police Force Fife, Drum and Bugle Band

A new band, the Singapore Volunteer Corps Bugle, Drum and Fife Band, emerged in 1911 and maintained a weekly programme of drills and performances until 1926.²³ It also played at Government House on Tuesday afternoons.

Meanwhile, the Singapore Police Force Fife, Drum and Bugle Band made its debut in 1923 with reports of the appointment of W.P. Barsby as European Drill Instructor.²⁴ A Police Parade featured “the newly formed bugle and fife band under Inspector Barsby” in November that year.²⁵ In March 1924, the band played at a Police Sports event held on the Esplanade in Penang.²⁶ Those who performed were recruits who had only eight months of service, and they carried out “Police duty, practising in their spare time”.²⁷ Their performance in Penang also served as a recruitment campaign for local bandsmen.

The press reported that when the band returned to Singapore, they “took with them about 50 recruits of smart and keen men”.²⁸ The band later performed opposite the Town Hall in June 1924, marking its first public appearance in Singapore.²⁹ This Singapore Police Force Fife, Drum and Bugle Band was considered the First Straits Settlement Police Band.

Even as the First Straits Settlement Police Band gained public recognition through its performances, the Municipal Commission had argued earlier in a special meeting in February 1922 that the “Town Band” be reorganised and be an “entirely Municipal Band and entirely under their own control”, believing that it would “not only be useful to Europeans but to other classes

as well, such as for Chinese funerals, etc.”. (This was presumably the Town and Volunteer Band that was supposed to wind up after its last performance on 31 December 1906 but was likely resurrected subsequently.) As the municipal commissioners were unable to decide whether to disband the present band or form a new one, the meeting agreed to form a sub-committee to look into the matter.³⁰

Second Straits Settlement Police Band

It took two years before the Municipal Commission appointed a special committee on 25 July 1924 to “inquire into and report upon the practical possibilities of the formation of a Municipal Orchestra for the town of Singapore”. The committee proposed either a band of Goanese or Filipino performers, or a police band subsidised by the Municipal Commission. Its recommendation was a police band, which would cost considerably less than an imported band.³¹ The Municipal Commission agreed to the proposal. “After much discussion, the project now holding the field is that which provides for the Commissioners to subsidise a good Police band, and from several points of view that seems to be the best solution of the problem,” was the committee’s recommendation.³²

Given the challenges with the Santa Cecilia Band, the optimal solution was to approach the police authorities to form a band. There was also consideration to include a philharmonic ensemble to give concerts to children and adults, but the costs were too high.³³

The deliberations resulted in the establishment of the Second Straits Settlement Police Band in May 1925, comprising ex-Indian army bandsmen led by F.E. Minns who retired from the Second Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment. Appointed on 1 June 1925, Minns personally went to India to recruit band members. The band was expected to give public performances and supply the needs of the police force.³⁴

But there was still the existence of the First Straits Settlement Police Band under Barsby. He was subsequently transferred to the Police Depot in Kuala Lumpur in July 1925 to form a drum and fife band there.³⁵ In the meantime, the bandsmen in the newly formed Second Straits Settlement Police Band underwent training and rehearsals,³⁶ and gave their inaugural public performance on 25 March 1927.³⁷

In an interview with the *Straits Times* upon his retirement in May 1935, Minns noted, among other things, the “marked interest taken by the younger generation of Asiatics in the performances of the Police Band”. He was also pleased with the “number of school children who had been conveyed to Katong Park or to the Telok Ayer Bandstand in lorries, listening intently to the strains of classical, light opera and regimental march music”.³⁸

Minns was succeeded by John Cawdor Hitch in 1936, who was previously with the First Battalion of the Cheshire in India and was conversant in Hindustani. “I am all for lively airs, something with a zip in it, and hope to stock our music library here with the best music that can be obtained from all countries,” Hitch told the *Straits Times*. He was “looking forward to giving Singapore some of the best band music yet heard here”.³⁹

Unfortunately, Hitch’s tenure was interrupted by the Japanese Occupation of Singapore from 1942 to 1945. During those years, the Second Straits Settlement Police Band was renamed Syonan Police Band (Singapore was called Syonan-to, or “Light of the South”), and Ganda Singh was assigned band conductor during that period. The band played arrangements of classical pieces at locations such as Farrer Park, Jalan Besar, Waterloo Street, the Police Club and the Botanic Gardens. The national anthem of Japan, “Kimigayo” (“His Imperial Majesty’s Reign”), was included in the band’s repertoire.⁴⁰

Singapore Police Force Band

When the Japanese Occupation ended, Hitch returned as bandmaster of the renamed Singapore Police Force (SPF) band. His retirement in June 1950 was marked by a farewell concert by the band under his direction, which was recorded at Radio Malaya, Singapore. The programme included “a selection of memories from the Shaftesbury Theatre, London, Charles Ancliffe’s waltz ‘Nights of Gladness’ and a cornet duet by Kenneth Alford”.⁴¹

March-past by the Singapore Police Force Band in front of City Hall at the installation of Yusof Ishak as Yang Di-Pertuan Negara on 3 December 1959. Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No. 20090000506 - 0020).





Ridzwan Salmy Mulok, the first Malay bandmaster and local Director of Music, c. 1960. Courtesy of the Singapore Police Force Band.

Upon Hitch’s departure, band sergeant Ujagar Singh conducted the SPF Band in the interim. In November 1950, Robert Edward House of the Devonshire Regiment took over permanently as bandmaster.⁴² The SPF Band continued its public concert commitments in an arrangement with the City Council, which succeeded the

Municipal Commission in September 1951 when Singapore attained city status. The band played at public parks such as Farrer Park, Botanic Gardens, King George V Park and Katong Park.⁴³

James E. Boyle succeeded House in 1957. During his tenure, performances by the Police Band were broadcast on Radio Singapore in four weekly radio concerts starting from March 1960.⁴⁴ In August 1959, Boyle directed performances of German composer Engelbert Humperdinck’s opera *Hansel and Gretel*, and Mozart’s opera *Bastien und Bastienne* (inspired by Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Le Devin du Village*), both staged by the children of Marymount Convent.⁴⁵

History was made on 28 December 1960 when Boyle handed leadership of the SPF Band to his successor, Ridzwan Salmy Mulok, the first local bandmaster and Director of Music, at a ceremony at the Police Training School. “The drums rolled out the introduction to the state’s National Anthem last

night and, for the last time, the Singapore Police Force played under the baton of Mr. J.E. Boyle, their retiring Director of Music,” the *Singapore Free Press* reported. Boyle became emotional as he handed over the baton to Ridzwan. “Again the band struck, and to the strains of ‘Auld Lang Syne’ Mr. Boyle, who was responsible for bringing the band up to its present high standard, marched off the parade ground.”⁴⁶

In 1965, following Singapore’s independence, Ridzwan composed the Singapore Police Force March, which is played as the last piece during any major police event or parade, before the National Anthem. It remains the official police march to this day.⁴⁷ Under Ridzwan, the SPF Band expanded its repertoire to include more contemporary pieces. In December 1978, as part of the month-long Festival of the Arts, the band performed Christmas carols, music from the Swedish pop group ABBA, medleys from the Herb Alpert & The Tijuana Brass band, and movie theme songs from *Exodus*, *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Star Wars* as part of a series of outdoor performances.⁴⁸

In the 1980s, the SPF Band played a part in “paving the way to a good relationship between the police and the public”, as the force “switch[ed] from traditional to community-oriented policing”. One of the band’s objectives then was to project a softer image of the police force.⁴⁹ Today, the band continues to tour and perform overseas.⁵⁰

In 1986, Idris Mohamed Yusof succeeded Ridzwan as Director of Music and later led the band at the prestigious Edinburgh Military Tattoo in 1991.⁵¹ Amri Amin took over in 2004 as the third Director of Music. Under his leadership, the band was transformed from a military unit into a

modern performance band, and was featured in various local and global events.⁵²

The SPF Band’s repertoire has since grown to encompass more local, global and popular music, with original compositions and arrangements by band members. Since 2019, the 64-member band has been led by Director of Music Sulaiman Abdul Wahab.⁵³ The band continues to engage the community through music and public performances at events such as National Day Parades and police community roadshows. Besides the main band, there are also the Military Band, the Women Police Pipes and Drums band, the Gurkha Contingent Pipes and Drums Platoon, and smaller ensembles including the Fusion Quintet, the Combo Band and the Showband.

To cap its year-long celebration commemorating its centennial in 2025, the SPF Band entertained more than 1,000 guests at a gala concert at the Esplanade Concert Hall on 30 December with iconic favourites, classical works as well as original pieces by former and present band members. “It is a tremendous honour to mark 100 years of the SPF Band. This concert celebrates not only our history and growth, but also the passion, artistry, and devotion of every officer – past and present – whose contributions have woven the rich tapestry of our enduring legacy,” said Sulaiman.⁵⁴ ♦

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Deputy Superintendent of Police Lau Lifeng conducting the Singapore Police Force Band during the Lunar New Year Istana Open House on 2 February 2025. This performance marked the start of the band’s 100th anniversary series of performances in 2025. Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.





Yeo Min is the author of *Chinese Pastry School* (Marshall Cavendish Cuisine, 2024), founder of Pastories Bakery (<https://www.thepastories.com/>) and co-founder of the Museum of Food (<https://www.foodmuseumsg.com/>), a nonprofit for heritage food education.

Jimmy

Tell us about the book *Chinese Pastry School*. It has more than 200 pages, and you didn't just write and do the research. You also took the photographs, and the photographs are amazing. You're very talented. Why did you put the book together?

Yeo Min

So I was in pastry school at the time [in the early 2020s]. I quit my job. I want[ed] to be a pastry chef because then I [could] do creative work, maybe earn more money. I was wrong about the second part. So I was there for the Western French skills. Then I met my teacher, my mentor, Chef Pang [Nyuk Yoon]. She's in her 70s. She's this amazing chef, and she had so much to share. She taught one or two classes on traditional pastry. But she also shared that they had been cutting back on the curriculum quite a bit, and it's always the traditional stuff that gets cut.

Jimmy

Because there's no market for it?

Yeo Min

Yeah. You graduate with a diploma in pastry, you [will] most likely go work in a five-star hotel or a Michelin-star kitchen. Very few graduates would go to traditional bakeries.

Jimmy

Kueh also?

Yeo Min

We didn't learn *ang ku kueh* [a pastry made from glutinous rice flour typically filled with mung bean paste]. We learned how to make mooncakes. And I asked, "Why are we not learning how to cook the paste from scratch?" And she said, "You can just buy it outside." It pained her to say that too. So she talked me through the steps, and I was very inspired. Then many traditional pastry shops closed down. So that was around the time that the Hokkien bakery Tan Hock Seng announced their closure.



(Facing page) Yeo Min and her mentor Chef Pang Nyuk Yoon, 2025. Photo by Woo Pei Qi.

(Above) Suzhou-style mooncakes shaped into domes by hand instead of being pressed into mooncake moulds, 2024. Photo by Yeo Min.

Jimmy

Where were they located? And what were they known for?

Yeo Min

Somewhere in Chinatown. They were known for their *beh teh saw* [a flaky pastry filled with maltose], made fresh. I was quite shocked. I thought, "Why am I not doing anything about this? And why is nothing being done about this?" So, as always, I took matters into my own hands because what am I supposed to do, right? I see a problem; I can't just wait around. That's not really my style. So I was like, "What actually is failing here? Why is this happening?"

And I realised that the French are so successful because they are so open with sharing their recipes. They have schools all over the world. They share their techniques everywhere. But at the same time, Chinese people being Chinese people, or Asian people being Asian people, we are like, "*Aiya, paiseh, paiseh lah*" ["Oh dear, I'm so embarrassed."]. This is a very humble technique. I'm not going to force my children to take on this business.

Jimmy

I think you can't force them because they don't want to learn.

Yeo Min

Yeah. And there's this idea of the hardworking Asian. If you want to learn my craft, you commit your whole life to me. There's no such thing as a six-month internship.

Jimmy

You have to come in and scrub the dishes.

Yeo Min

Yes. You have to start by throwing the trash, and you work your way up. I respect that these chefs spend their entire lives building an empire, their business, all these recipes. So I respect that, but that is a sure way for our practices to die, for these techniques to just disappear. And I was like, "Okay, if I can learn all these basic French techniques in 18 months, including a six-month internship... so actually 12 months was all it took to cover all the basic techniques, everything from sugar to chocolate sculpting, to plated desserts, gelato, croissants." So I was like, "Can I do the same for Chinese pastries? Is there a way that I can maybe consolidate all these techniques, translate it to an accessible language?"

Jimmy

Is there a place out there that teaches all these things?

Yeo Min

There isn't a single place because Chinese pastry is very diverse. Everything is divided by region.

Jimmy

It's very complicated.

Yeo Min

It's very complicated. But if you think about it, the French went through the same thing. Certain pastries belong to certain regions, and then they became a huge thing, and then everyone now eats them. I guess there's a bit of knowledge lost, like which part of France this came from. But at the same time, there are so many people making these now, and we are forced to study a bit of the history in pastry school. So I thought maybe I can do the same, but I can't set up a school 'cause I have no funding.

Jimmy

Hence the name of the book.

Published by Marshall Cavendish Cuisine, 2024. Collection of the National Library Singapore (Call no. 641.865 YEO-[COO]).



This is an edited extract of the full interview. Scan the QR code to listen to the full episode on *BiblioAsia Podcast*, "A Woman's Mission to Revive Traditional Chinese Candy".

Check out the book, *Chinese Pastry School* (Call no. 641.865 YEO-[COO]).



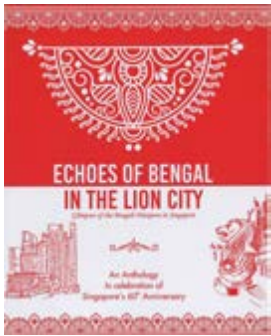
New Books

ON SINGAPORE HISTORY

Echoes of Bengal in the Lion City: Glimpses of the Bengali Diaspora in Singapore

Tagore Society Singapore (2025), 114 pages
From PublicationSG

This collection of stories chronicles the arrival of Bengalis in Singapore in the 19th century, their assimilation into their new home and their efforts to preserve their Bengali identity.



Sim Wong Hoo: The Light We Remember

Edited by Lee Taili

William Tay (2026), 208 pages
Call no. RSING 338.761004092 SIM

Creative Technology founder Sim Wong Hoo died suddenly on 4 January 2023 at the age of 67. Commissioned by his family, this commemorative publication traces his life from a humble kampong childhood to becoming one of Singapore's most successful technopreneurs. Drawing on the recollections of family and friends, and featuring rare photographs, illustrations and Sim's unpublished writings, this volume paints an intimate portrait of a visionary who left a lasting impact on those who knew him.



Singapore: A Cinematic Portrait

By Raphaël Millet

Asian Film Archive (2026), 524 pages
From PublicationSG

Illustrated with archival materials such as film posters, handbills and photographs, *Singapore: A Cinematic Portrait* charts Singapore's transformation on screen, from its early days as a colonial port to its rise as a dynamic, modern and cosmopolitan city-state. Spanning the period from 1900 to 2025, this work explores how the island has been portrayed, imagined and reinvented through film.

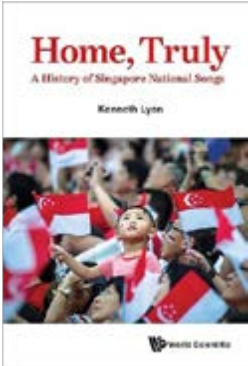


Home, Truly: A History of Singapore National Songs

By Kenneth Lyen

World Scientific Publishing (2026), 209 pages
Call no. RSING 782.421599 LYE

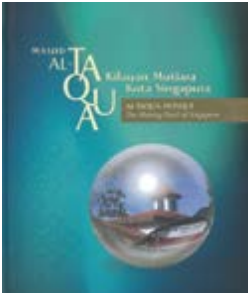
Home, Truly takes a chronological approach to songs that can be considered “national songs” in Singapore. It starts by looking at folk songs and army songs before turning the lens to Zubir Said’s “Majulah Singapura”. The book then surveys all the National Day Parade songs, starting with Hugh Harrison’s “Stand Up for Singapore” in 1984 through to 2025’s “Here We Are”. Profiles of important personalities involved in the creation of national songs round off the volume.



Masjid Al-Taqua: Kilauan Mutiara Kota Singapura = Al-Taqua Mosque: The Shining Pearl of Singapore

Masjid Al-Taqua (2026), 443 pages
Call no. RSING 297.355957 MAS

Located in Bedok South, just off Bedok Road, is Masjid Al-Taqua, a mosque established in 1982. This volume documents the history, role and contributions of the mosque to the religious, social and national development of Singapore – from its beginnings as a village mosque to a key pillar of the Muslim community in Bedok today. Out of the 54 essays, 10 are in English.



Singapore's Dawn: Stories of Our Firsts – Artefacts That Shaped a Nation's Legacy

By Dan Teo Khai Mun

(2025), 181 pages
Call no. RSING 959.57 TEO-[HIS]

Singapore's Dawn takes a unique approach to presenting Singapore's history by featuring 60 significant artefacts that are considered “firsts” of one kind or another. Author Dan Teo looks at, among other things, the first Recorder in Singapore, the first Chinese to win the Queen's Scholarship, the first supermarket, the first registered trade union, the first national campaign and even the first official lottery game.



Paddy Ong
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