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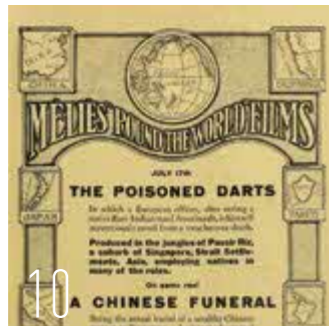
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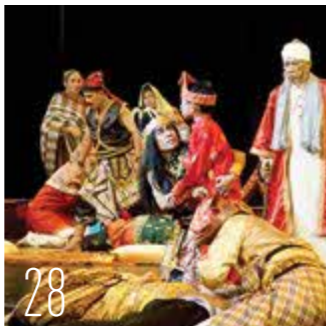
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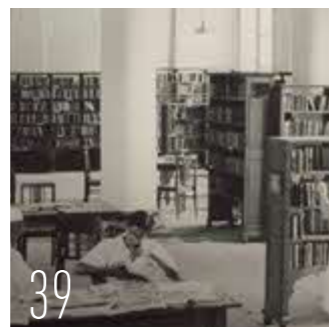
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Director's Note

That's Entertainment is a delightful vintage MGM film that strings together scenes from the best Hollywood musicals from the 1920s through the 50s. This issue of *BiblioAsia* may not be in the same league as that film, but it does celebrate the best of entertainment – books, magazines, film, theatre, radio, television, and the like.

The amusement parks of yesteryear, New World, Great World and Happy World, may be physically gone, but these old-fashioned theme parks will always have a special place in the memories of older Singaporeans. Librarian Lim Tin Seng revisits these lost wonderlands in "Old-world Amusement Parks".

One of the crowd-pullers at these amusement parks was *bangsawan*, the traditional Malay theatre that recently made a comeback at the Esplanade with the lavish staging of *Raden Mas* – based on the story of a 16th-century Javanese princess in Temasek. Senior Librarian Juffri bin Supa'at traces the evolution of this erstwhile theatre form in "Seni Persembahan Bangsawan".

On the subject of lost art, the first fiction films of Singapore were likely made in 1913 by the Frenchman Gaston Méliès. Unfortunately, none have survived the passage of time. How do you write about a film that doesn't exist? Film director, producer and critic Raphaël Millet fits the pieces of the jigsaw together in "Gaston Méliès and His Lost Films of Singapore".

Moving from the silver screen to the stage, Stella Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill* and Kuo Pao Kun's *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* take centre stage – literally – in two iconic plays whose universal themes have captivated audiences time and again. In "One Small Voice: The Monodrama in Singapore Theatre", drama critic Corrie Tan examines the history of this physically demanding form of theatre.

Radio in Singapore had its modest beginnings in 1924 when expats from the Amateur Wireless Society of Malaya used an aeroplane transmitter to make broadcasts. Chua Ai Lin of the Singapore Heritage Society chronicles "The Story of Singapore Radio" from its nascent days to the pre-war years.

Then came television, 39 years later to be exact – when Television Singapura was launched on 15 February 1963. Media studies lecturer Lau Joon-Nie charts television's meteoric rise – from the first monochrome broadcasts to on-demand Internet TV – in "Singapore TV: From Local to Global".

Reading and anything connected with reading is something that resonates soundly with us here at the National Library Board. In her opinion piece, "In Remembrance of Reading", guest columnist Loh Chin Ee from the National Institute of Education explains why our memories of reading are inextricably linked to the pleasure we derive from reading and the places where we read.

Still on the subject of reading, librarians Barbara Quek and Zoe Yeo showcase a selection of entertainment magazines from the 1930s to more recent times in "From Cover to Cover". (Some of us may recall reading magazines like *Fanfare* surreptitiously lest they were seized by disapproving parents or teachers!)

Senior Librarian Gracie Lee goes back even further to 1837 to chart the history of the Raffles Library and Museum – precursor of the National Library as we now know it. Some of the treasured rare books from the old Raffles library (now part of the Rare Materials Collection) are featured in the exhibition "From the Stacks: Highlights of the National Library" on level 10 of the NLB building. The exhibition ends on 28 August, so catch it soon.

Mrs Wai Yin Pryke
Director
National Library

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On the cover:
A reproduction of a Philips radio advertisement that appeared in the 24 May 1936 issue of the *Malayan Radio Times*. See page 26 for the original. Cover illustration by Oxygen Studio Designs Pte Ltd.

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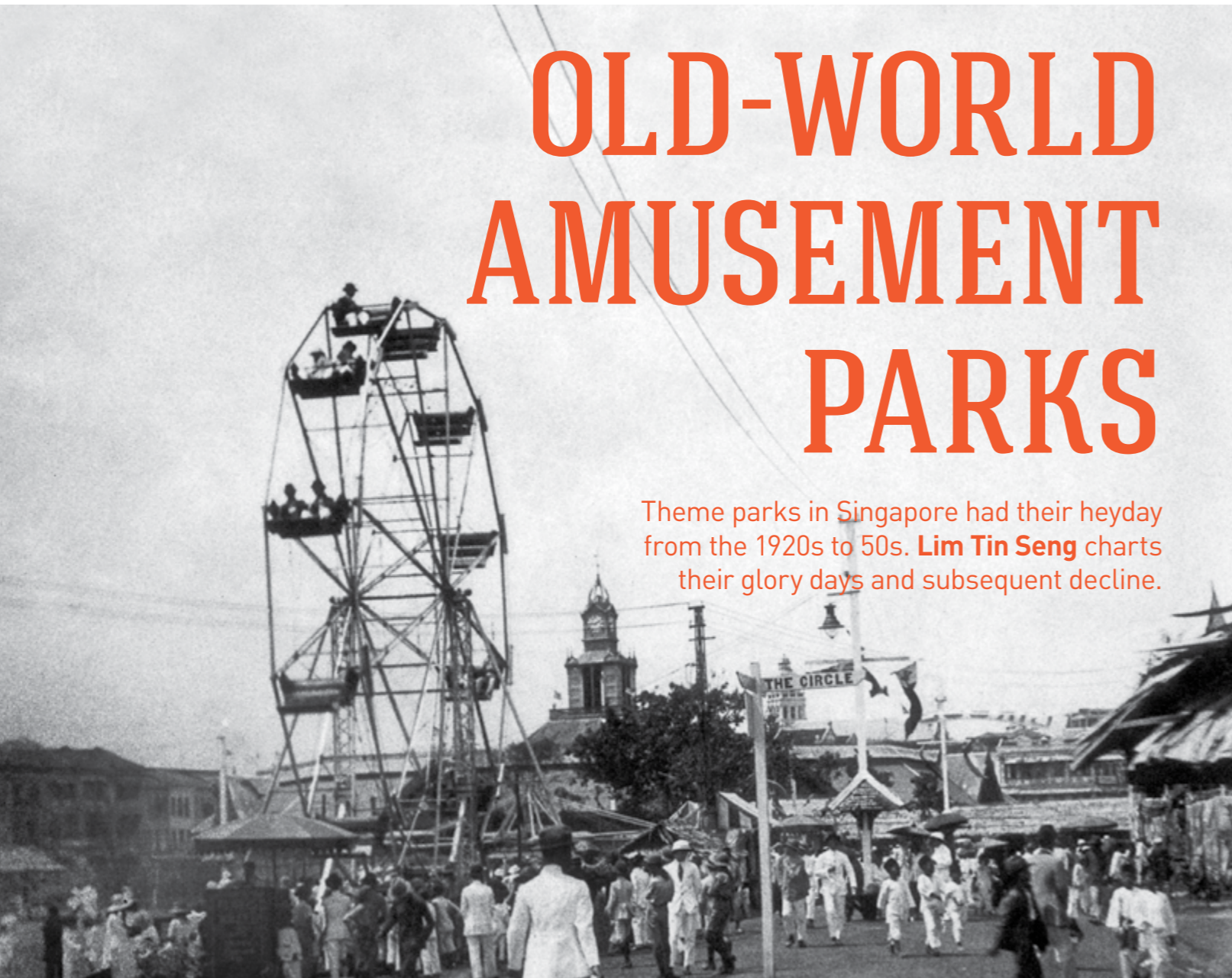
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OLD-WORLD AMUSEMENT PARKS

Theme parks in Singapore had their heyday from the 1920s to 50s. **Lim Tin Seng** charts their glory days and subsequent decline.



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

Built between the 1920s and 30s during the pre-television era, Singapore's three amusement parks – New World, Great World and Gay World – provided a unique form of entertainment in colonial times. These “worlds” were permanent venues that provided an interesting East-meets-West blend of entertainment, with offerings as diverse as carnival rides, circus acts and boxing contests to Chinese opera and risqué cabaret shows.¹

Rise of the “Worlds”

When New World, the first of the three parks, opened in 1923, the amusement park industry was already well established

in the West (the concept likely originated in the religious festivals and trade fairs of medieval Europe). The World's Columbian Exposition (also known as the Chicago World's Fair), held in Chicago in 1893 to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, is considered to be the first of its kind and included a separate amusement area distinct from the exhibition spaces. More than 26 million people from the world over visited the fair during its six-month run. It featured the world's first Ferris wheel, a 260-ft (79-m) tall megastructure that could take 2,160 passengers.²

The amusement park came to be defined as a self-contained site featuring

a hotchpotch of attractions, shows and carnival rides assembled for the express purpose of entertaining the masses. By the first quarter of the 20th century, amusement parks had begun to emerge in major Asian cities such as Shanghai and Beijing in China, and Tokyo and Osaka in Japan.³

Singapore's first experience with the thrills and spills of an amusement park took place in 1922 when the colony held the Malaya-Borneo exhibition from 31 March to 17 April to showcase the economic achievements of British Malaya and Borneo as well as commemorate the visit of Edward, Prince of Wales, to Singapore. The exhibition was a massive endeavour; it took six months to set up and occupied a 68-acre (27-ha) site bordered by Telok Ayer Market, Mount Palmer, Anson Road, McCallum Street and the coastline. The site included a Ferris wheel and carousel, an international trade fair, and exhibits of the flora and fauna of Malaya and Borneo. There were also cinemas and a football pitch for matches as well as cultural performances and shows by various ethnic groups.⁴

Despite its size, the Malaya-Borneo exhibition was held for only three weeks. When it ended on 17 April, the exhibition was estimated to have attracted more than 300,000 visitors. Its resounding success inspired the Straits Chinese brothers and businessmen Ong Boon Tat and Ong Peng Hock to establish the New World amusement park along Jalan Besar.⁵ When the 6-acre (2-ha) park opened on 1 August 1923, *The Straits Times* reported that its attractions – which included a Ferris wheel, carousel and a football field – were laid out “in a style reminiscent of the Malaya-Borneo exhibition”.⁶ New World continued to expand after its opening and by the time it celebrated its 10th anniversary in 1933, it had a ghost train ride, a dodgem or bumper car enclosure and an open-air cinema. By then, New World had gained a reputation for its thrilling boxing contests, colourful opera performances and raucous cabaret shows.⁷

Great World, the second of the three “Worlds”, opened nearly a decade after New World on 1 June 1931. Situated on a 6.8-acre (2.7-ha) site bounded by Kim Seng, River Valley and Zion roads, the park was founded by Lee Choon Yung, a relative of philanthropist Lee Kong Chian. When Great World first opened, its attractions were mainly live shows and performances, including Shanghainese and Cantonese operas, Malay *bangsawan* theatre and a Western-style vaudeville act. Other attractions included a zoo, a coloured water fountain and open-air cinemas.⁸ In

subsequent years, Great World expanded to include a British trade fair and a replica model of an ancient Chinese city complete with landscaped areas, waterfalls, temples, pagodas and even people dressed as Chinese peasants.⁹

Happy World, the last of the three parks, opened on 6 May 1937 (and was known as such until it was renamed Gay World in 1964). Owned by George Lee Geok Eng, founder of the *Nanyang Siang Pau* Chinese newspaper, the new park was located on a 10-acre (4.5-ha) tract of land at the junction of Geylang Road and Mountbatten Road, and housed some impressive facilities. Its amenities included a 7,000-capacity covered stadium that hosted boxing matches and sports competitions; an oval-shaped cabaret hall that “set a new standard for Singapore”; theatres for Chinese, Malay and Indian

shows; an open-air cinema with a seating capacity of 300; and some 300 stalls selling various goods and refreshments. The opening ceremony of Happy World was a lavish affair attended by some 1,000 guests who reportedly “consumed nearly 100 gallons of champagne”.¹⁰

Although the three “Worlds” opened in different years, they shared many similar characteristics. First, all were established during the pre-television era – when owning a radio was still the preserve of the rich – and provided a convenient and affordable means of entertainment. The parks opened daily from 6 pm to midnight, and the entrance fee was priced at a reasonable 20 cents per person (with individual attractions ticketed separately).

Second, the parks were patronised by people of all ages, ethnic groups and

(Facing page) Singapore's first experience with the thrills and spills of an amusement park took place in 1922 when it held the Malaya-Borneo exhibition. The exhibition featured rides such as a Ferris wheel and carousel, an international trade fair, and exhibits of the flora and fauna of Malaya and Borneo. *Arshak C. Galstau Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) This photo, taken in the 1950s, shows the entrance of New World at Jalan Besar, the first of three amusement parks established in Singapore. It was opened on 1 August 1923 by brothers Ong Boon Tat and Ong Peng Hock. *Singapore Chinese Clan Associations Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Bottom) Great World was opened on 1 June 1931 by Lee Choon Yung, a prominent Chinese banker and community leader. The amusement park was situated on a site bounded by Kim Seng, River Valley and Zion roads. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



social classes, united in their pursuit of fun and entertainment. On some nights, these parks could attract as many as 50,000 visitors. Festive occasions such as Lunar New Year, Hari Raya and Deepavali were grand events, often culminating in a spectacular fireworks display. The three amusement parks conjured up images of fun and gaiety as *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* newspaper aptly described in 1937:

“Follow the streams of cars purring east and west, the sweating rickshaw pullers... [and] the walking crowd... you eventually come to huge gate-ways. Electric words proclaim you are entering a “World” – a “Great” and a “New” world – a world bounded by high fencing, inside which can be found laughter and happiness and the comedies – and tragedies – of life... These huge playgrounds... patronised by Europeans, Eurasians, Chinese, Malay, Indians, Japanese and the rest of the racial conglomeration of Singapore, are products of the past twenty years. From scant and scraggy plots of ground... they have developed into lusty and strapping parade grounds of the rich and poor alike, where a Towkay may entertain twenty friends to dinner in the “million dollar” private apartment of the expensive restaurants... and where the humblest member of the working class may spend his very hard-earned fifty cents or more unostentatiously at the gaming booths, the open-air cinema, or the laneside hawkers.”¹¹

A Thrilling World of Rides and Games

Taking a spin on the Ferris wheel, carousel, ghost train and the dodgem or bumper car was the main attraction for many. Considering this was the 1920s and 30s when the rickshaw was still the most common mode of transportation, these automated mechanical rides were seen as marvellous engineering feats. According to Richard Woon, who used to frequent Great World during the 1950s, each ride cost around 30 to 50 cents, with the ghost train being his favourite. The mini train would make its way through a darkened enclosure the size of a basketball court, passing through many closed doors that opened to reveal ghoulish surprises on the other side.

Theatre personality Margaret Chan, who spent many weekends at Great World when she was a child, preferred the car-



(Above) Happy World, the last of the three “Worlds”, was opened on 6 May 1937 by George Lee Geok Eng, the founder of the *Nanyang Siang Pau* Chinese newspaper. The amusement park was renamed Gay World in 1964. *R. Browne Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) The carousel ride at the Great World amusement park in 1954. Along with the Ferris wheel, ghost train and dodgem or bumper car, the carousel was one of the most sought-after rides at the amusement parks. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Facing page) Traditional theatrical performances such as *bangsawan* (Malay opera), *wayang Peranakan* (Peranakan theatre) and Chinese opera (pictured here) were performed to near-capacity crowds at the amusement parks. *Donald Moore Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



ousel: “My little sister and I would rush for the one and only elephant on the carousel, and [we] loved sipping the free Milo... out of little conical cups”.¹²

In addition to the rides, there was also a wide variety of carnival games. These included ring toss, swinging cans and dart throwing. There were also gambling stalls called “tikam tikam” (Malay for game of chance) where people could bet on numbers to win either cash or prizes. Woon recalls that one of the most popular booths at Great World was the shooting gallery. The game required the player to shoot a target from various distances using a rifle to win prizes such as watches, bags, fans and vacuum flasks.¹³

As each carnival game cost at least \$1 to play in the 1950s, they were considered expensive, and out of reach for most children and even some adults. Nonetheless, just watching those playing these games was entertainment enough. Alternatively, there were hawker stalls, coffee shops and sundry shops selling an eclectic mix of textiles, toys, sweets and medicinal products to patronise. Some of these stalls even put up demonstrations as sideshows to attract the crowds. All these attractions and amenities breathed life into the amusement parks and transformed them into glittering, heady places of unbridled fun for the people. Writer Felix Chia describes a typical night scene at Great World:

“Hundreds of multi-coloured bulbs blinked at us as we approach the gate... There is already a large crowd though it is only 7 o’clock in the

evening. We are being stopped politely by an old Jew, who offers to sell us boot polish and shoelaces... As we look in the distance we see a Chinese medicine pedlar exerting himself in feats of strength, in apparent attempts to impress those who gather around him. And the energetic Indian snake-charmer is busy exciting his pet to twirl and curl above its basket, as the notes of his music shrill through the noisy air... we [also] hear the “om-pah-pah” of the brass band coming quite distinctly from the enclosure of the Ferris wheel, attracting the crowd to the thrill of riding with the night wind.”¹⁴

A Colourful World of Shows and Performances

When recounting the sights and sounds of Great World, Chia remembers the lure of traditional theatre like Malay *bangsawan*, *wayang Peranakan* (Peranakan theatre) and Chinese opera.¹⁵ In the pre-television era, such stage performances were one of the main forms of entertainment for the people.

When the amusement parks first opened, they tried to entice performers from their makeshift street theatres to proper stage venues at the parks, offering perks not usually extended to other tenants. For instance, rental fees for performance venues used by Chinese opera troupes were waived; to sweeten the deal they were rewarded with a daily or monthly remuneration and could even retain the earnings from the sale of tickets. In addi-

tion, the park owners made a conscious effort to construct performance stages that were customised to the needs of the opera troupes. New World, for example, had two venues for Peking opera – the teahouse-style Ba Jiao Ting (八角亭; Octagon Pavilion) and the indoor Da Wu Tai (大舞台; Great Stage), another for Cantonese opera called Ri Guang Tai (日光台; Sunshine Stage), one for Teochew opera called Bai Lao Hui (百老汇; Community Assembly or Broadway Hall), and yet another for Hokkien opera. Similarly, Great World had two stages – Xiao Guang Han (小广寒; Little Winter Space) for Peking opera and Guang Dong Xi Yuan (广东戏院; Guangdong Theatre) for Cantonese opera.¹⁶

These incentives enabled the parks to attract the best opera troupes, such as the Teochew troupe Lau Sai Thor Guan and its Hokkien counterpart, Sin Sai Hong, and also non-Chinese troupes like the popular Dean’s Opera troupe, run by the *bangsawan* star Khairuddin, and the Peranakan theatre group Oleh Oleh Party. Over time, the amusement parks became synonymous with specific operatic genres. For instance, Cantonese and Hainanese operas usually performed at Great World and New World, while Teochew and Hokkien opera troupes staged their shows at Gay World.¹⁷ Peranakan plays were performed at Gay World Stadium and Twilight Hall in New World, while *bangsawan* theatre was staged at all three parks.¹⁸ In those days, entrance tickets cost between 10 cents and \$3. However, those who could not afford tickets could still catch snippets of the show through the open doors or listen to the music from the outside.¹⁹

Those who preferred Western fare could watch the latest films from Hollywood. New World had three cinemas – Pacific, State and Grand – while Great World had four – Sky, Globe, Canton and Atlantic. Eng Wah’s first three cinemas – Victory, Silver City and Gay – all had their beginnings in Gay World. The first films that were screened in the parks were from the silent era. But as the film industry developed, cinemas began screening “talkies” or sound films. The post-war period saw the golden age of the Malay film industry in Singapore with Cathay-Keris and Shaw Brothers as the two major players. Cinemas began screening locally produced Malay films along with Chinese imports from Hong Kong. Shaw Brothers, sensing a business opportunity, became the eventual proprietors of New World and Great World.²⁰

Another attraction were the *getai* (歌台) shows. Literally translated as “song stage”, *getai* are live stage performances

of popular song, dance and dramatic acts. *Getai* is believed to have originated during the Japanese Occupation (1942–45) when New World set up the first *getai* troupe called Da Ye Hui (大夜会). Comprising a five-member band and two singers, Da Ye Hui performed a repertoire of traditional Chinese songs every night. There was no admission fee for these shows and patrons were only required to pay for their drinks.²¹

After the war, *getai* became a mainstay of the amusement parts. At its peak in the 1950s, there were more than 20 *getai* venues altogether in the three parks.²² Typically, a *getai* consisted of a stage with a fabric backdrop and a viewing area that could accommodate 60 square, wooden tables that could seat four patrons each. There was no allocated seating, and patrons who did not arrive early enough to reserve seats before the show began at 8 pm risked having to stand throughout the night. Audience members were also given slips on which they could request for a song by their favourite vocalist. The shows were wildly popular, attracting as many as 500 patrons a night, and up to 1,000 when business was good.²³

As *getai* gained popularity, its repertoire was expanded to include folk dances, comedy sketches, drama skits and crosstalk (相声) performances. To attract the menfolk, striptease acts were added to the repertoire. New World's Fong Fong Café broke new ground by staging a skit titled "Artist's Model" in 1951. Based on a 1930 act by Chinese playwright Xiong Fo Xi (熊佛西), the skit featured a model undressing as she prepared to pose for a figure-drawing session. After its second performance two years later in 1953, other *getai* groups became emboldened enough to introduce similar raunchy acts. For the next few years striptease shows became the main attraction at these parks until the government had a change of heart and launched an "anti-yellow" campaign in 1959 to snuff out activities it considered as promoting a morally corrupt lifestyle.²⁴

Sports events were another attraction at the amusement parks. The most popular were wrestling fights featuring favourites such as King Kong (alias Emile Czaya) and Ho Wah Peng, and boxing matches involving greats like Felix Boy (alias S. Sinnah).²⁵ These matches were held in purpose-built stadiums, including Gay World's 7,000-capacity covered stadium, which also served as the venue for the 1952 Thomas Cup badminton tournament and the basketball matches of the 7th Southeast Asian Peninsular Games in 1973.²⁶



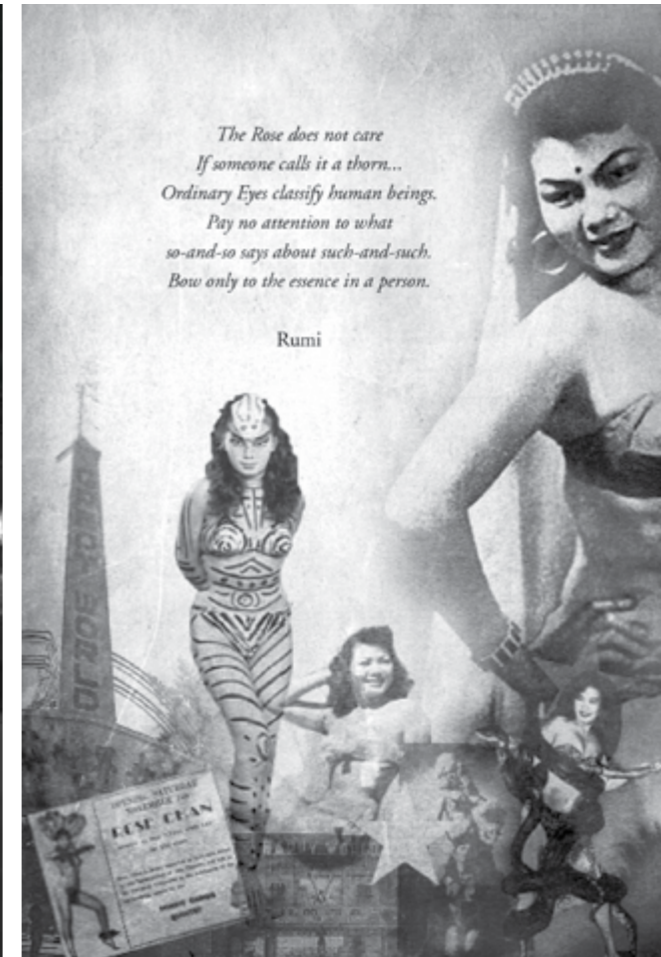
Apart from hosting trade fairs and industrial exhibitions, the amusement parks also entertained visitors with a motley assortment of sideshows such as strongman acts by Mat Tarzan (also known as "Tarzan of Malaya"), juggling and acrobatics performances, miniature zoos and beauty contests like "Miss Trade Fair".²⁷

A Glittering World of Dance and Cabarets

"I went into the dancing-hall. There was an excellent orchestra, hired, I think... It was playing 'Auf Wiedersehen' when I came in, and a crowd of dancers, mostly young Chinese – the men in white European clothes with black patent-leather dancing shoes, the girls in their semi-European dresses slit at the side – filled the dancing floor. When the dance was over, I noticed a number of girls who left their partners as soon as the music stopped and went to join other girls in a sort of pen. They were the professional Chinese dancers who can be hired for a few cents a dance."²⁸

This was the scene in the cabaret hall at New World as described by former British intelligence officer and journalist Bruce Lockhart in 1936. Each amusement park had its own cabaret complete with dance halls, big bands and cabaret girls, or taxi-dancers as they called them, because patrons could hire these girls for a dance by purchasing a ticket.²⁹

The first cabaret opened in New World in December 1929, and featured a glittering show led by a company of some 30 cabaret girls and vaudeville artistes. They were considered "the cream of Manila" and personally handpicked by the park's co-founder Ong Peng Hock. As cabarets became more popular following the opening of Great World and Gay World, the park owners began recruiting cabaret girls from different ethnic groups and from cities such as Hong Kong and Shanghai to cater to a wider customer base. Local Chinese businessmen for instance preferred Chinese dance hostesses, while the British and other non-Chinese customers made a beeline for the Eurasian girls because they could speak English. The alcohol-fuelled cabarets were patronised by all segments of society but invariably only the *towkays*



(Top left) A typical night at the Great World amusement park in 1962. Amusement parks were very popular with families and courting couples in the pre-television era. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Top right) The riveting story of the stripper Rose Chan, who found fame at the Happy World cabaret in the 1940s and 50s is documented in the book *No Bed of Roses: The Rose Chan Story*. Pictured here is the frontispiece of the book. *All rights reserved, Rajendra C. (2013). No Bed of Roses: The Rose Chan Story. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish.*

(Above) A 1945 photograph of a cabaret performance at the Great World amusement park. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(businessmen) and the wealthy could afford to hire the girls.³⁰

To hire these comely girls for dances, patrons had to buy a booklet of coupons, which were priced in the 1940s at a dollar each for a set of three dances in New World and Great World, and four dances in Happy World. This was in addition to the entrance fee of between 50 cents and a dollar, and their mandatory drinks. To engage the services of the more popular girls whose dance cards were perpetually filled, patrons had to pay a "booking" fee of \$13 that would entitle them to a one-hour dance with a hostess. The fee also included a date with the hostess after the cabaret had closed, and it is very likely that some of the more enterprising girls would trade sexual favours on the side.

At the end of each night, the hostesses would cash in the dance coupons they had collected. The more popular girls would be allowed to keep their entire coupon earnings, while others retained 40 percent, with the remainder going to the cabaret owner. The girls were also paid a fixed monthly salary of \$25.³¹

One of the most well-known personalities in the cabaret scene was Rose Chan, who joined Happy World cabaret as a dance hostess in 1942. An accomplished dancer and a former beauty queen, Chan quickly rose to fame. By 1951, the brassy Chan had her own dance company – the Rose Chan Revue – which saw her touring Malaya and Singapore, bending iron bars with her neck, inviting a motorcycle to run over planks placed across her body, and wrestling with a slithering python. Her most notable shows, however, were her striptease acts that were often performed to sold-out houses.³²

However, most of the cabaret girls did not share the same luck (and gumption) as Chan. Many came from impoverished and broken families, and were forced to join the cabaret to earn a living. To make matters worse, the girls were frequently subjected to harassment by inebriated customers on the dance floor, and had to fend off men who tried to touch them inappropriately or kiss them while dancing.³³

While the cabaret girls were a key attraction at the dance halls, there were those who came solely for the purpose of dancing. The dance halls were impressive and considered huge at the time. For instance, Gay World's oval-shaped hall – skirted by marbled columns and bordered by a three-tiered dining area – had a dance floor that could accommodate up to 300 couples. New World's dance hall was air-conditioned and its octagonal dance floor could take more than 1,200 people; its

star attraction was a stage that could rise and revolve.³⁴

The dance halls also featured their own resident bands, with fancy names like American Dance Band and D'Souza's Famous Band playing tunes from "peppy, snappy and real hot" to "sweet, swingy and rhythmic" to accompany dancers doing the waltz, foxtrot, quickstep, tango and the rhumba. Special events were also regularly held at the cabarets, including song and band championships, dance com-

petitions and the Annual Malaya Kebaya Queen Competition.³⁵

Decline of the "Worlds"

The popularity of amusement parks began to wane towards the end of the 1960s. The death blow came from the advent of television but there were other contributing factors like the proliferation of shopping malls, bowling alleys, roller skating rinks, public swimming pools,

and attractions such as the zoo and bird park. Amusement parks were forced to shutter many of their attractions, leaving only the cinemas and restaurants open. Although Gay World tried to reinvent itself by setting up a shopping emporium within its grounds, it came a little too late. The *New Nation* reported in 1976:

"Today, the Worlds are not what they used to be... By night, it is ghostly and deserted, pitch-black except for oases of activity like the cinemas and the penny arcade. By day, office workers traverse its grounds to reach lunchtime places in buildings nearby. The amusement machines... stand as monument to better times. Some are coated with rust and are slowly falling apart. Grass sprouts from the tracks of the miniature train."³⁶

Without the heaving crowds, the amusement parks were unable to survive and eventually closed. Gay World was the last park to cease operations in 2000.³⁷ Over the years, the land occupied by the parks has been taken over by commercial or residential buildings. Only the faded memories of older Singaporeans linger, recalling the once glorious past of these "Worlds" and the joy and laughter they brought to their lives. ♦

The crowd visiting the booths at a trade exhibition at Happy World in 1953 (renamed in 1964 as Gay World). The three amusement parks were popular venues for large trade fairs and exhibitions due to their generous expanse of space. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



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Amusement Parks: A Timeline

New World

- 1923: Opens on 1 August.
- 1929: Establishes Singapore's first cabaret.
- 1938: Shaw Brothers acquires New World.
- 1942: Remains open during the Japanese Occupation.
- 1987: City Developments buys over New World.
- 2009: Site is redeveloped into the first eco-friendly mall called City Square Mall.

Great World

- 1931: Opens on 1 June.
- 1940: Shaw Brothers acquires Great World.
- 1942: Remains open during the Japanese Occupation.
- 1964: Ceases operations but its cinemas and restaurants remain open.
- 1979: Malaysia's Sugar King Robert Kuok buys over Great World.
- 1997: Site is redeveloped into a residential-commercial project called Great World City.

Gay World

- 1937: Opens as Happy World on 6 May.
- 1942: Remains open during the Japanese Occupation.
- 1952: Its indoor stadium is used as a venue for the Thomas Cup.
- 1964: Renamed Gay World and transferred to the British and Malayan Trustees Ltd.
- 1973: Used as a venue for the 7th Southeast Asian Peninsular Games.
- 2000: Tenants are given notice by the Land Office to move from the park in March; main tenant Eng Wah Organisation terminates its lease.
- 2001: Demolished and the unoccupied site is zoned for residential projects.

(Below) City Square Mall, Singapore's first eco-friendly mall, was launched in 2009. The mall stands on the site of the former New World amusement park along Jalan Besar. New World was the first of the three amusement parks to open. *Courtesy of City Developments Limited.*
(Below right) A photo of the exterior of Great World City taken during its official opening in 1997. This mixed-use development comprising retail, office and residential units occupies the site of the former Great World amusement park. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



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GASTON MÉLIÈS AND HIS LOST FILMS OF SINGAPORE

Gaston Méliès may be the first filmmaker to have directed fiction films in Singapore. Unfortunately, none have survived the ravages of time. **Raphaël Millet** tells you why.



Between 1912 and 1913, while the renowned French filmmaker Georges Méliès was still filming imaginary trips to faraway places in his studio in Montreuil, near Paris, his US-based brother, Gaston Méliès, undertook a 10-month-long trip around Asia Pacific to places such as Polynesia, New Zealand, Australia, Java, Singapore, Cambodia and Japan. During this cinematic adventure, the older and less famous Méliès brother churned out no less than 64 fiction and non-fiction films.

Raphaël Millet is a film director, producer and critic with a passion for early cinema the world over. He has published two books, *Le Cinéma de Singapour* (2004) and *Singapore Cinema* (2006), as well as directed the documentary *Gaston Méliès and His Wandering Star Film Company* (2015), screened as part of the official selection of the 2015 Singapore International Film Festival.

Made in Singapore

Four of these were filmed in Singapore in January 1913 – which were among the first foreign films shot on location here – and subsequently released in cinemas in the US between 10 July and 4 September 1913. Two of them, *The Poisoned Darts* and *A Chinese Funeral* were screened together, “on the same reel” – to use the filmmaking jargon of the period (during the silent film era, the “split reel” comprised two short films of different subjects spliced together into a single reel). This seems to indicate that both films were relatively short; each must have been approximately 150 metres in terms of reel length, and about 5 to 7 minutes in duration. The other two films, *His Chinese Friend* and *A Day at Singapore*¹ were released separately, which might indicate they were slightly longer productions, what would have been called “one-reelers” (films contained within a standard motion picture reel of film).

Unfortunately none of the films that Méliès produced in Singapore have survived the passage of time. This is the fate that all silent films of the era share. According to the Film Foundation in the US, an estimated 80 percent of films made before 1929² have been lost through improper storage or fire. As nitrocellulose, the chemical base used for these films is highly flammable, nitrate films have the potential to self-ignite when stored over long periods. It was not unusual for fires to suddenly break out at cinemas when such films being screened in the projection booths would overheat and combust – with patrons running out of the cinemas in panic.

Putting the Pieces Together

In the absence of the physical works, one can only try to piece together what may have taken place during Méliès’ brief but highly creative sojourn in Singapore – one that saw him shoot four films in quick succession. The findings can never be conclusive given the absence of material evidence, but to disregard these early works is tantamount to ignoring a precious part of Singaporean film heritage.

Some details of Méliès’ stay in Singapore can be traced to what remains of the letters he wrote to his son Paul in the US,³ photographs taken during the trip (including those likely taken by his wife Hortense who accompanied him),⁴ as well as the letters and a photo journal of his cinematographer Hugh McClung.⁵

(Facing page) As none of the four films that Gaston Méliès shot in Singapore in January 1913 have survived, photographs such as these taken by members of Méliès’ entourage when they were here at the time likely indicate scenes that may have been captured in the film *A Day at Singapore*. Pictured here from left to right are Sri Mariamman Temple on South Bridge Road, a shophouse in Chinatown and Masjid Jamae (Chulia Mosque), an Indian-Muslim mosque on South Bridge Road. *Courtesy of “Gaston Méliès and his Wandering Star Film Company” © Nocturnes Productions, 2015.*

(Below) Portrait of Gaston Méliès. *Courtesy of “Gaston Méliès and his Wandering Star Film Company” © Nocturnes Productions, 2015.*



Arriving from Batavia on the steamship S.S. *Montoro* after having toured Java, Méliès disembarked at Singapore on 10 January 1913. Interestingly, he may not have planned to stay long in Singapore, as the weather was reported to have been bad (it had been storming heavily during the last few days of his stay in Java, and the forecast called for rain in Singapore too).⁶

McClung, in a letter dated 6 January 1913 sent from Batavia to his sister, wrote of his experience in Singapore: “Just a few lines as we leave tomorrow for Singapore on account of rain, here. And as it is also in Singapore, we will only remain there a day and go on to Bangkok – through Siam and Indo China”.⁷ But once settled in Singapore, Méliès found it to be “one of the most interesting cities” and rich with filming opportunities. Plans were swiftly changed, and Méliès and his Star Film Company would stay for three full weeks before leaving in early February for his next destination, Cambodia.⁸

Méliès has been called a “picture-maker”. He was more of a producer than a director, and also a bit of both at the same time, in short, a man who fronted everything himself. This was a time where only the name of the studio mattered: people spoke of “a Gaumont film”, “an Essanay movie”, or “a Vitagraph picture”, the great film studios of the time. Directors, and even less so actors,

were rarely credited for their efforts. During both his years in the US and his voyage around Asia Pacific, his productions were known simply as “Méliès movies” – which may have led some to think that they were the works of his better known filmmaker sibling, Georges Méliès.

Gaston Méliès travelled with what the press called “a complete cinematograph outfit”. He was initially accompanied by a director by the name of Bertram Bracken, whom he quickly got rid of as soon as they reached New Zealand. This left Méliès as the de facto director, with the support of George Scott, his “operator for educational pictures” and Hugh McClung, his “dramatic operator”.⁹

In some of the surviving photographs taken during his trip to Australia and Cambodia, Méliès can be seen seated on a chair, right next to the camera being operated by Scott or McClung, clearly giving them instructions on what to do; Méliès certainly looks like he was playing the part of a film director. This is corroborated by the fact that McClung was only officially promoted to director in April 1913 after the troupe arrived in Japan, where another counterpart, Elgin Lessley, joined them from the US to take over the position of “operator”.¹⁰

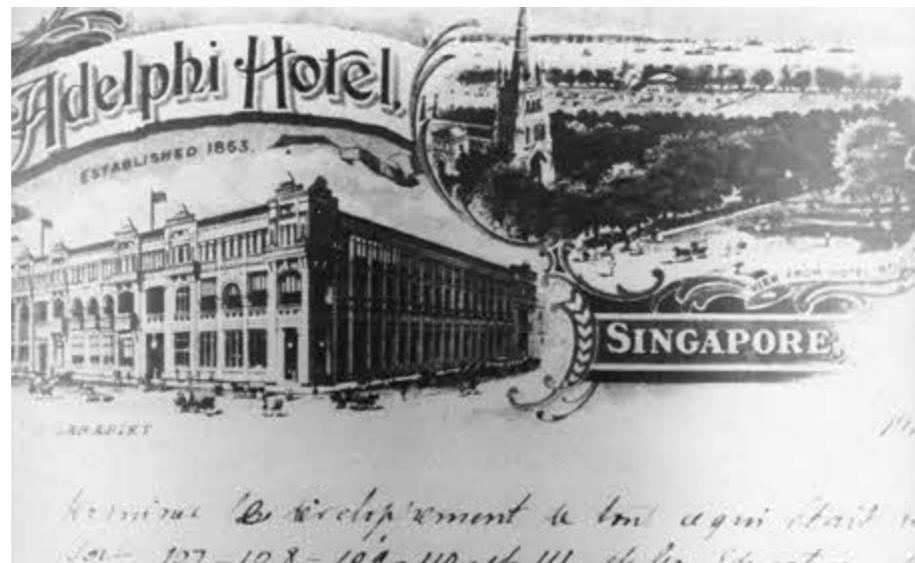
Part of the travelling posse that arrived in Singapore also comprised a screenwriter by the name of Edmund Mitchell, a Scottish novelist and journalist who had been writing for the daily newspaper *The Age* in Melbourne, before moving to California where he started penning film scripts for Méliès.¹¹

Although the Singapore press in 1913 seems to have ignored Méliès, they were suitably impressed with Mitchell, who had quite a reputation: “An interesting visitor to Singapore[...] is Mr Edmund Mitchell, who is here in connection with an American Company of cinematograph actors who are engaged in representing eastern plays and legends in their natural settings. Mr. Mitchell

has had a long career of travel, having spent many years in India, Australia and America, and he has written a number of interesting books and given lectures in many parts of the world”.¹² Known for his stories with “strong plots and vivid local color” and for being “thoroughly familiar with the islands in the South Sea and with Australasia”,¹³ Mitchell was very likely involved in the screenwriting of the two fiction films – *The Poisoned Darts* and *His Chinese Friend*.

Méliès’ entourage also included a few American actors, such as Fanny Midgley¹⁴

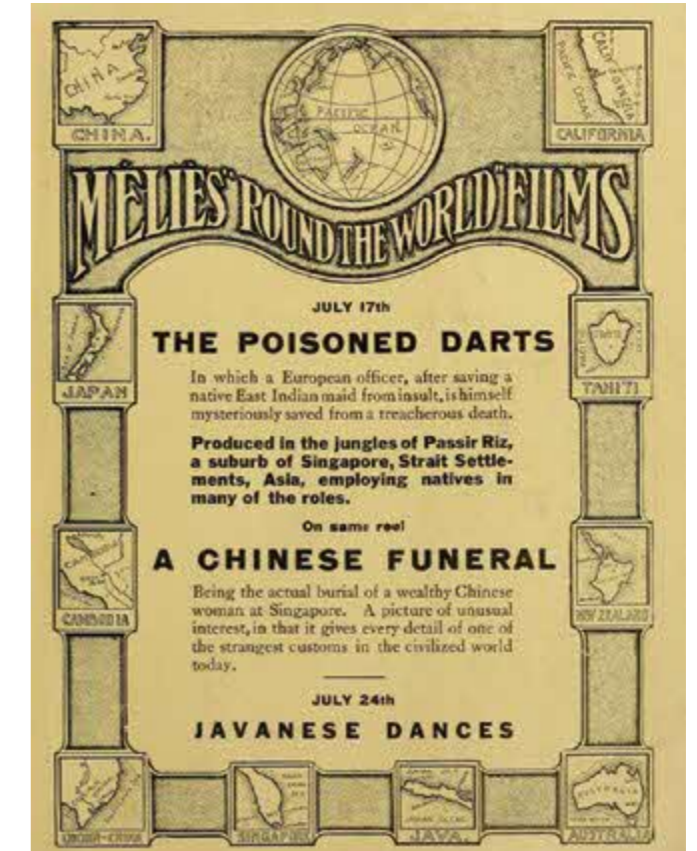
from Ohio, who began her acting career in Méliès’ *Immortal Alamo* – shot in Texas in 1911. Did she act in one of Méliès’ made-in-Singapore films? There is no evidence to indicate this, as none of the four film synopses contained any major female roles. Besides, the long journey had taken a toll on Midgley; only the comforts of the Adelphi Hotel, where the crew of the Star Film Company stayed, would provide her with some much-deserved respite before she would be ready to face the scorching heat and suffocating humidity of Indochina [their



(Top right) This was the vessel, the S.S. *Montoro* that brought Gaston Méliès and members of his Star Film Company from Batavia, in Java, to Singapore, on 10 January 1913.

(Middle) Another photo taken by a member of the Gaston Méliès’ Star Film Company. Likely shot in Chinatown and depicting an elaborate Chinese funeral procession, a similar scene could have appeared in the documentary *A Chinese Funeral*.

(Right) Gaston Méliès and his entourage stayed at the Adelphi Hotel on Coleman Street during their time here in Singapore. This Adelphi Hotel postcard written by Méliès in French is dated 6 February 1913 and was mailed from Cambodia (where Méliès had travelled to after Singapore). The card, addressed to his son Paul in the US, describes Méliès’ stay in Singapore. It also contains instructions on what Paul should do with the films when the reels arrive in the US. *All three photos courtesy of “Gaston Méliès and his Wandering Star Film Company” © Nocturnes Productions, 2015.*



(Above left) *A Day at Singapore*, a short documentary film shot in Singapore in January 1913, by Frenchman Gaston Méliès has sometimes been incorrectly attributed to his younger brother Georges as they share names that begin with the letter “G”. In reality, the more famous filmmaker Georges Méliès (who worked at his studio in a Parisian suburb) had never set foot in Singapore. *Courtesy of “Gaston Méliès and his Wandering Star Film Company” © Nocturnes Productions, 2015.*
(Above right) Film poster of Gaston Méliès’ *The Poisoned Darts* and *A Chinese Funeral*. Both the fiction film and documentary, respectively, were part of the same reel and screened together in the US on 17 July 1913. These were short films, approximately 5 to 7 minutes each in duration. *All rights reserved, Moving Picture World, 19 July 1913, Vol. 17, No. 3, p. 379.*

next destination).¹⁵ The Adelphi on Coleman Street – torn down in 1973 – was one of the classic hotels of early Singapore, along with the Raffles Hotel and Hotel de l’Europe.

Also on the same trip were Ray Gallagher, a Californian actor who usually played the role of the archetypal villain, and Kansas-born Leo Pierson, who was known for acting as the “juvenile”.¹⁶ Both had acted before in some of Méliès’ American productions, and as there were a few Western male parts in *The Poisoned Darts* and *His Chinese Friend*, it is reasonable to assume that they took on lead roles in these two films. Indeed, a review of the film *His Chinese Friend* reports that there are “three leading players, two of them white”.¹⁷

Movies Before Méliès

Méliès and his team were certainly not the first foreigners to film Singapore. Joseph Rosenthal had done short documentaries on the island for the UK-based Warwick Trading Company as early as 1900.¹⁸ So did H. M. Lomas for the Charles Urban Trading Company in 1904, and the French film company Pathé Frères in 1910.¹⁹ As for the Vitagraph

company, it released its first Singaporean film around the same time as Méliès’, in the summer of 1913.²⁰ However, all of these were strictly non-fiction films, meant to educate and entertain at the same time.

Similarly, two of Méliès’ four films were documentaries: *A Day at Singapore* and *A Chinese Funeral*. Both must have been filmed by George Scott, his “operator for educational pictures”. Whether these were shot under the direction of Méliès is not clear. Having arrived in Singapore a few days ahead of Méliès (who had stayed behind in Surabaya with the rest of his crew to film Java and its “monuments of bygone splendor”²¹), Scott would have had time on his own to film at least some of the scenes in *A Day at Singapore*.

The film was advertised as “a most interesting trip around the show places of Singapore, Straits Settlements, one of the largest seaports in the world”.²² Since there is no surviving reel, it is impossible to offer a direct assessment of the work. The only reference is a review published in September 1913 that said “perhaps too many feet were given to these scenes in Singapore, on account of the dark photo-

graphy. [...] The offering includes street and water scenes with some buildings. It has good educational value”.²³

As for *A Chinese Funeral*, it was apparently an “actual burial of a wealthy Chinese woman”, advertised as “one of the oddest sights that can be beheld by the traveler in the Far East. The procession is led by a gong band creating terrific noises to scare away the evil spirits. Giant grotesque figures are employed for the same purpose. All the friends of the deceased parade to the grave where, while the casket is being lowered and covered with cement, they partake of a meal furnished by the deceased’s relatives. It is the Chinese custom to feast and be happy as a fitting culmination to the long days of prayer and vigil”.²⁴ The documentary was reviewed as a “remarkably instructive picture. [...] It is very well photographed and there is an astonishing amount of matter on it. A very good offering.”²⁵

The First Singapore-Shot Fiction Films

But what distinguishes Méliès and makes him a true pioneer is that he produced what are possibly the first two made-in-Singapore

fiction films. Even more outstanding is that he hired local people (unfortunately referred to as “natives”) to act in his films, not just as extras in the background, but as real actors. This was unusual for the time as the practice was to use poorly made-up Caucasian actors to play non-Western parts of Africans, Indians and Asians.

Right from the start, Méliès was intent on having locals act in his films, declaring to the press: “Our actors will take the leading roles and will be aided by the natives of the country through which we are passing”.²⁶ As soon as Méliès reached Polynesia, he hired some Tahitians. Finding them as good or even better than some of his Western actors, he quickly decided to give them lead parts in his films. It worked out so well that he did

the same in New Zealand with the Maoris, in Australia with the Aborigines, and in Java with the Javanese, moving away from the racist practice of hiring a white person to act as a black-face or yellow-face – using make-up to look African or Oriental.²⁷ Yet, hiring local “players” (as they were called back then) was not just an ethical choice or an idealistic move on the part of Méliès: it was probably a hard-nosed business decision aimed at keeping his costs low while, at the same time, increasing the marketability of his own productions and giving him an edge over his competitors.

With this mindset, Méliès immediately set out to work with locals when he arrived in Singapore on 10 January 1913. When *The Poisoned Darts* was released six months

later on 17 July 1913, the advertisement in the *Moving Picture World* magazine dated 19 July proudly proclaimed that it was “produced in the jungles of Passir Riz [Pasir Ris], a suburb of Singapore, Strait Settlements, Asia, employing natives in many of the roles”.²⁸ The actors were most likely inhabitants of Malay villages in the Pasir Ris area, as the only surviving footage of this film on the facing page seems to corroborate. The film was reviewed as being “fresh and of great interest, because it has been made truly convincing”, wrote the commentator adding that: “The photography of the jungle and its people is clear and often beautiful.”²⁹

Similarly, Méliès obviously found a local actor to play Wing, the lead Chinese part in *His Chinese Friend*. An advertisement published in the 12 July 1913 issue of *Moving Picture World* hailed the film as “a picture thrilling to the point of hair-raising, introducing a Chinese actor of rare ability and old scenes in the streets of Singapore”.³⁰ Another review in the 26 July 1913 edition of *Moving Picture World* stated that “it is a good picture” for “it has a Chinese player who is cheery-faced and who acts very creditably”.³¹ Unfortunately we know nothing more about this Chinese actor, much less his name.

Méliès’ own approach to film raises many questions of identity, otherness and representation, giving us a better understanding of his place in early cinema and in Singapore’s film history. At the time of writing, there is no surviving print of Méliès’ made-in-Singapore films. These are what film historians and archivists call “lost films”, the same fate that befell most of the other works he filmed during his cinematic journey across Asia-Pacific in 1913. Out of the 64 films that Méliès shot during his eventful trip, only five survived, some of which are literally in fragments today. And out of four films made in Singapore, none exist. But lost films are not always lost forever, as a print can surface, sometimes in the most unexpected of places. There is hope yet for what might seem like an obscure French filmmaker who was also one of the pioneers of Singapore’s film history. ♦



This still from Gaston Méliès’ fiction film *The Poisoned Darts*, published in the 19 July 1913 edition of *The Moving Picture World* – one of the earliest periodicals on the motion film industry – is the only known scene taken from the film that was shot on location in Singapore. Filmed at “Passir Riz” (Pasir Ris), the non-Caucasian actors in the scene are likely Malay “natives” living in the kampongs in the area. Courtesy of “Gaston Méliès and his Wandering Star Film Company” © Nocturnes Productions, 2015.

Méliès’ Fiction Melodramas

The Poisoned Darts³²

A shipwrecked crew, comprising an officer and several men, find themselves on a remote island in the East Indies. After consuming the scant stores saved from the ship, they venture inland into the forest. One of the crew, having seized a native girl one evening, is upset when the officer releases the girl and sends her on her way. Unhappy by this turn of events, the men lay hold of the officer the next morning and bind him to a tree. They resolve to kill him, and lots are drawn to determine who shall commit the heinous deed. One man is chosen, and is in the act of raising the officer’s pistol to shoot him when a poisoned dart from the

direction of the jungle ends the would-be perpetrator’s life. The officer’s bonds are at the same time severed by a knife, and a dusky silhouette quickly disappears into the bushes behind the tree, unseen by the captive officer.

Wondering how he became untied, but thankful to be free, the officer follows his men and once more takes command. The survivors struggle through the forest, but one by one, as they try and manhandle the officer, the attackers fall victims to poisoned darts mysteriously shot from the jungle. At last the officer is alone, and, utterly wearied, falls asleep under a tree. On awakening he finds fruits, cakes and water by his side. Then he realises that

because he saved the girl, the unseen natives have been paying the good deed back. Eventually the natives appear, invite him to their village, and nurse him through a fever. News is brought of a passing ship, and the castaway is carried to the beach by his newfound native friends, and eventually rescued by the passing vessel.

His Chinese Friend³³

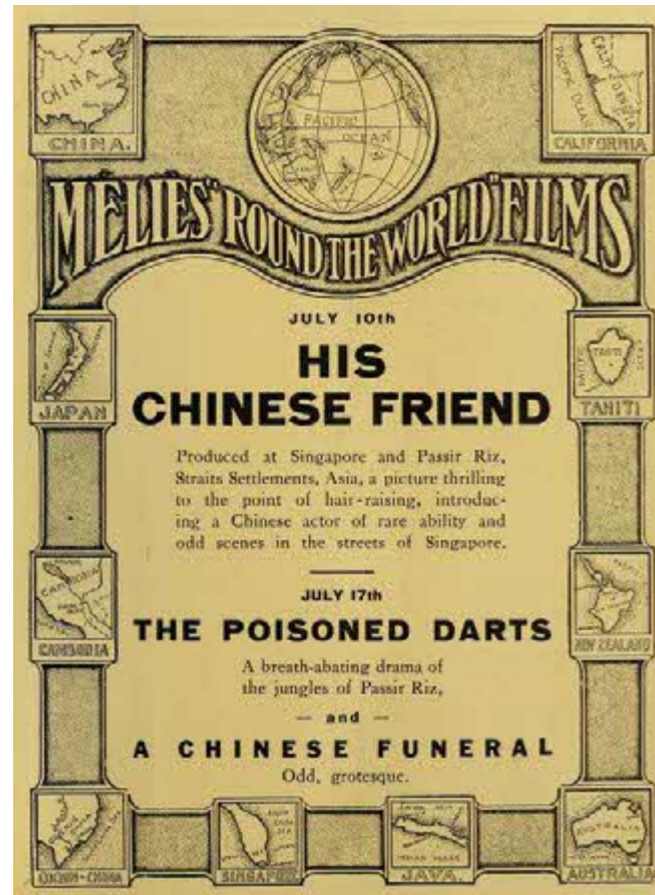
Playing on the streets of Singapore with Wing, his little Chinese friend, three-year-old Charlie Foster, an American lad, is suddenly kidnapped. It does not take long for Wing to grasp the severity of the situation; he promptly informs the police and saves his playmate’s life.

Fast forward 25 years and the two are still firm friends. Foster, now married, is a speculator of rubber. However, as a result of a slump in the stock market, financial ruin stares him in the face. Once more Wing comes to the rescue of his friend, using his savings and raising money on his personal credit to tide Foster over until another boom in rubber makes him wealthy.

Some 10 years pass and Wing is a high official, but secretly a leader in the Chinese revolution. The authorities become aware of his double dealing and issue a warrant offering a reward for his arrest. Foster learns of this and quickly hurries in his car to Wing’s palatial home, and spirits him away to his office. But they are followed and Wing is fired at. He drops to the ground, apparently lifeless.

News spreads that Wing is dead and a great funeral is held. But Wing is very much alive, and Foster, in a bid to save his loyal friend’s life, nails him shut into a box marked for shipment to Europe. Once the box is hoisted onto the steamer, it is prised open and Wing emerges. The two friends part, swearing eternal devotion to each other.

Film poster of *His Chinese Friend*, *The Poisoned Darts* and *A Chinese Funeral*. Both *His Chinese Friend* and *A Day at Singapore* were longer standalone films that were released separately. The fiction film *The Poisoned Darts* and the documentary *A Chinese Funeral* were shorter films that were part of the same reel and screened together. All rights reserved, *Moving Picture World*, 12 July 1913, Vol 17, No. 2, p. 271.



Notes

- In Vol. 2 Issue 01 (April 2015) of *BiblioAsia*, in the article “From Tents to Picture Palaces: Early Singapore Cinema” by Bonny Tan, *A Day at Singapore* was incorrectly attributed to Georges Méliès when it should be Gaston Méliès. The article cites the online film source IMDb, which mentions Georges Méliès in the film credits. Promotional posters of the film that contain the words G. Méliès is a likely reason why this confusion may have arisen. Georges Méliès rarely filmed outside the confines of his studio in the Parisian suburbs and there is no record of him ever travelling to Singapore.
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ONE SMALL VOICE

The Monodrama in Singapore Theatre

A Chinese street storyteller (circa 1950) regales his enraptured audience with stories from Chinese classics, legends and folktales. From the Kouo Shang-Wei Collection (郭尚慰收集). All rights reserved, Family of Kouo Shang-Wei and National Library Board Singapore 2007.

Emily of Emerald Hill is one of Singapore's most iconic single-person plays. **Corrie Tan** tells you more about the history of the monodrama on the Singapore stage.

An unnamed man stepped onto a bare stage in 1985. He was dressed in a plain white shirt and black pants, the colours of mourning – but also the Singaporean workingman's uniform. Anonymous, blending in, like everyone else. His attire echoed the type of clothing that itinerant Chinese storytellers wore during the colonial period and into the 1960s as they regaled audiences with tales of martial arts and straying deities.¹

But this man was not a storyteller, even though he did tell a story that would go on to captivate Singaporean theatre audiences and leave such a mark on local theatre history that the play has become, perhaps, one of the country's most cited productions today. It was Kuo Pao Kun's cutting allegory *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole*, where a frustrated, man-in-the-street narrator grapples with a bizarre bureaucracy and society's traps of conformity at his grandfather's funeral because the deceased's coffin is, as the title puts it, just too big for the hole.

Actors Lim Kay Tong and Zou Wenxue were the original leads, with Lim performing in English and Zou in Mandarin. The late Kuo, a charismatic dramatist and director who shaped much of Singapore's early contemporary theatre, used rehearsal methods that, to Lim, were quite bewildering. The veteran actor discussed these preparations in a 2014 interview with *The Straits Times*:

"For me, that was panic stations. I had never done a long monologue. In drama school, we had to prepare monologues based on a Shakespearean character. Nothing like this, which was 30 to 35 minutes long. And he [Kuo] spent at least a couple of weeks just talking to

Corrie Tan was the theatre correspondent and critic for *The Straits Times*, where she wrote on the performing arts and cultural policy. She also co-organised and sat on the judging panel of the annual M1-The Straits Times Life Theatre Awards. Her work has been published in journals such as *Drama Box's Draft*, the *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *POSKOD* and *Ceriph*.

me. I was worried. Because I thought, when is he going to get down to it?"

One of the few directions Lim recalls Kuo giving him was to stand up at certain points in the play:

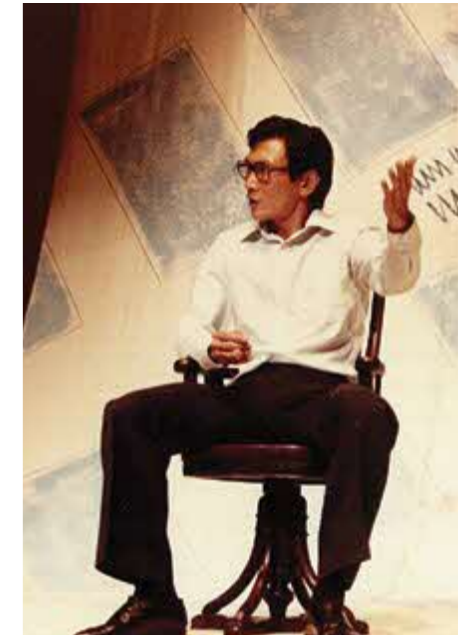
"He seemed to focus on whenever the script came back to the coffin. Those were the moments of focus. The rest of the time he just said, 'Tell the story'. That was all."²

The simplicity of Kuo's direction proved powerful. To stand, to sit, to gesture, to speak meaning into a small, empty space – one might call to mind what British theatre director and luminary Peter Brook wrote in his seminal 1968 text, *The Empty Space*:

"I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across an empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged."³

But one might also look at Singapore's street storytellers of the 1950s and 60s, the likes of Lee Dai Sor and Ong Toh who popularised what was known as *jiang gu* (讲古; "telling old stories" in Chinese), and who understood not just the simplicity or the individuality of the theatre, but the possibilities of communality. Theatre is, after all, also a communal experience, where a single character's journey is magnified through the sympathies and empathies of the audience.

The storytelling tradition is still strong in Singapore today, with various groups and festivals dedicated to the art of telling a story, but it is hard not to see the connections between these traditional forms of storytelling and its theatrical cousin, the monodrama,⁴ which has been a key dramatic form in the development of contemporary theatre in Singapore. The monodrama replicates the spirit of that environment, with its stripped-down set and props, and asserts the magic of performance: as one person can play a



Lim Kay Tong performs in the 1985 English production of Kuo Pao Kun's *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole*, where a frustrated, man-in-the-street narrator grapples with a bizarre bureaucracy and society's traps of conformity at his grandfather's funeral. Courtesy of The Theatre Practice Ltd.

multitude of characters, so too can one small country contain legions of stories.

The Beginning of the Monodrama

Immediately preceding the seminal *Coffin* was Stella Kon's 1984 classic, *Emily of Emerald Hill*. Kon had written the play in 1981 but could find no one to direct or perform it after submitting it for the 1983 Singapore National Playwriting Competition. She said in an interview with the *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* in 2002:

"When it won the award, we couldn't get any Singapore director to produce it because, well, this one-woman-play format, it was very unseen in Singapore. You know that I didn't invent the form, I'd seen one-person plays abroad, but it wasn't known here. So the local directors, they asked how can one person maintain the attention of the audience for that length of time."⁵

It was not until Malaysian director Chin San Sooi and playwright-actress Leow Puay Tin took the plunge in 1984 – staging the monodrama in remote Seremban – that *Emily* emerged into the spotlight. The monodrama was produced in Singapore a year later, starring stage actress Margaret Chan and directed by university lecturer Max Le Blond.

The success of *Emily* in terms of its one-woman format and warm audience

reception marked a high point of a fertile period in Singaporean theatre in the 1980s;⁶ the Ministry of Community Development, which organised the 1985 Drama Festival, wanted to repeat *Emily's* success by publicising the National Playwriting Competition, which Kon had won in 1983 with *Emily*. A deputy director at the ministry was reported as saying: "*Emily* proves that there is a Singaporean audience appreciative of Singaporean works."⁷ The play was also invited to the UK's Commonwealth Arts Festival and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, both in 1986.

But until that point, the monologue and monodrama had made few ripples in Singaporean theatre. Chinese-language theatre in Singapore in the early 1900s comprised mostly ensemble productions with a strong moralistic or didactic streak. A 1914 Chinese-language production of *The Heroine* (巾幗須眉), for instance, had strong feminist leanings, "depicting the importance of women's education and social morality". It featured the female principal of a girls' school who goes through great familial ordeals but eventually saves the day. In 1918, a trilogy of plays staged in Singapore as part of a fundraiser to aid victims of floods in Guangdong, China, dealt with various hot-button issues of the day, including one that critiqued arranged marriages, another that spelled the downfall of the rich and heartless, and one where a promiscuous man ends up bankrupt and in disrepute.⁸

The monologue in Singapore's English-language theatre was, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, often presented as part of a revue line-up or an evening of light entertainment, always by expatriate groups or individuals passing through the region. They were usually staged at the Victoria Theatre, formerly known as the Town Hall, as early as 1892, when a W. M. Freear, who was "spoken of very flatteringly in all places where he has shown his entertaining talent", presented his "monologue entertainment" titled *Frivoly*—something more of a stand-up comedy bit from a stage entertainer than a monodrama.⁹ A subsequent review in *The Straits Times* affirmed his skill, that "From the commencement to the finish, Mr. Freear ably succeeded in keeping his audience in excellent humour evidenced by the continual round [sic] of laughter".¹⁰ Subsequent "monologue artistes" included Harry Quinborough, part of a line-up by the London Musical Comedy Company in 1911;¹¹ Harry Russon from the Humphrey Bishop Company in 1916;¹² and Percy Baverstock with a "heartily encored" *Tale of a Dog* from the Leyland Hodgson Revue Company in 1920.¹³

Monologues continued to be staged throughout the 1930s, prior to World War



II, but gradually drifted out of popularity until the 1970s, when English actor Brian Barnes performed two one-man plays at the Regional English Language Centre in 1972 that also demanded audience participation. Violet Oon, writing for the *New Nation* newspaper, described it as "a new form of theatre" for the Singaporean audience – "one couldn't quite tell when Barnes was playing himself, the actor on stage or the actor acting the actor".¹⁴

The Individual versus Society

The reputation of the monodrama in Singapore was cemented only by the dramatic peaks of *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* and *Emily of Emerald Hill*, staged almost back to back in Singapore in 1985. One represented the frustrations of an everyman tired of Singapore's bureaucratic system, and the other, the universal story of motherhood and what it meant to be a woman in a man's world.

It was part of a tide of theatre that decisively sought to distinguish itself as Singaporean or Malayan theatre, a break from the colonial tradition, including the amateur theatre societies often set up by expatriates that featured imported work from other English-speaking countries or from China. Other playwrights and writers working to establish an indigenous identity in the arts included Goh Poh Seng, Lim Chor Pee and Robert Yeo, who were experimenting with the flavour of the Singaporean play – the lexicon, the language, and the country's social and political preoccupations from the 1960s to the 1980s. In 1960, the former Nanyang University's Drama Research Society presented three plays by Singaporean and Malayan playwrights in response to Singapore's self-governance



in 1959.¹⁵ There was a desire for work that resonated with a local audience – a locality and culture that set itself apart from the region as Singapore took steps towards nationhood.

Perhaps another reason why the monodrama occupies such prime estate in Singapore's theatre history is because of the David and Goliath imagery it evokes – of one person facing an oppressive, chaotic world and trying to make sense of it, or standing up against what they believe is wrong and should be righted.

Prominent theatre group The Necessary Stage was one of the companies that was founded during the burgeoning growth of indigenous theatre in the late 1980s, and one of their earliest productions was the monodrama *Lanterns Never Go Out* (1989) by the company's founder and artistic director, Alvin Tan, and resident playwright, Haresh Sharma. Their inspiration was actress Loh Kah Wei, with whom they did extensive interviews, and who eventually starred in the play.

In his 2004 essay analysing The Necessary Stage's aesthetic strategies in the late 1980s, writer Tan Chong Kee notes:

(Facing page top and below) Stella Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill* (1984) is one of Singapore's most iconic single-person plays. The monodrama was first produced in Singapore in 1985, starring stage actress Margaret Chan and directed by university lecturer Max Le Blond. *Courtesy of Dr Margaret Chan.*

(Below) *Best of* (2013), written by Haresh Sharma and performed by award-winning actress Siti Khalijah Zainal, is about a confiding, charming young Malay-Muslim woman who wants a divorce from her husband but cannot get one. Photo by Alan Lim. *Courtesy of The Necessary Stage.*



"The artists observed their immediate surroundings and asked how an individual could stand up to normative social strictures. In *Lanterns Never Go Out* (1989), the central character, Kah Wei, is torn between submitting to social expectations that is moulding her life into a fixed progression from school, university, work, marriage, babies to grandchildren; and her own desire for something else, symbolised by a goldfish-shaped lantern. Even while Kah Wei struggles to resist hypocritical and conformist social norms, she is carried along by its current. Her struggle is between doing what she wants and doing what others want of her."¹⁶

This struggle between what is desired and what is expected found the perfect conduit in the monodrama – one could draw a line from the acerbic elderly Peranakan *bibik* (auntie) of *Emily of Emerald Hill* to the beleaguered Kah Wei in *Lanterns* and to the recent monodrama, *Best of* (2013), written for The Necessary Stage's 25th anniversary, where a confiding, charming young Malay-Muslim woman wants a divorce from her husband but cannot get

one. Kon and Sharma's three monodramas all cast their eye on strong women hemmed in by society's dictates.

For Alvin Tan, the form of delivery was key. In his preface to *Best of*, published in 2014, Tan wrote that they "had wanted a monologue where the virtuosity of the performer is not measured by the number of characters she is able to perform with aplomb, but rather to maintain a direct conversation flow, engaging the audience with an aggregate of minute vignettes and quick exchanges between characters".¹⁷

Best of, which was performed by award-winning actress Siti Khalijah Zainal, bore thematic similarities to provocative Tamil writer Elangovan's fiery *Talaq* (1998), a 90-minute one-woman play mired in a censorship tug-of-war between the artistes involved and the Public Entertainment Licensing Unit (PELU) that made headlines over the course of several weeks in 2000. The show's second run in Malay and English was ultimately not granted a performance licence, as noted in an *Asiaweek* article:

"*Talaq* is really the story of [actress Nargis] Banu's broken marriage – and that of 11 other Indian Muslim women like herself. *Talaq*, which loosely translates as "divorce", gives voice to the abuse and misery they have endured in silence. Though there have been just three shows so far [all to packed houses], the Tamil-language drama has enraged sectors of the Indian Muslim community in Singapore."¹⁸

Actress Nargis Banu, who played the lead, became the target of hate mail and death threats as the controversy broke, as did Elangovan. Many objected to what they felt was the inaccurate and unfavourable depiction of Islamic law as it applies to marriage. The play was first staged in Tamil in December 1998 and then in February the following year with the go-ahead from both PELU and the National Arts Council. While *Talaq* "provoked strong protests from Muslim Indians, with religious groups calling for it to be banned", it was also "lauded by press reviews for its raw power and intensity, even reducing many in the audience to tears".¹⁹

Once again, the monodrama format heightened both Banu's aloneness – but also her courage. Here was a woman who refused to be silenced despite knowing the enormity and difficulty of telling her story, that "violence and rape, already sensitive subjects, would be even more controversial in the context of a Muslim marriage".²⁰ But

both Banu and Elangovan were heartened by the women who approached them, in private, to express their support for the play.

Several other Singaporean monodramas have had strong feminist themes that put leading ladies and the challenges of womanhood in the spotlight. There is Haresh Sharma's *Rosnah* (1995), which looks at a young Malay-Muslim woman from Singapore who travels to London to study, where she encounters culture shock and values that are discordant with her own upbringing; and Zizi Azah's *How Did the Cat Get So Fat* (2006), in which a nine-year-old girl goes on a fantastical journey where she meets Singaporeans from all walks of life and deals with race relations, political rhetoric and class issues.

Theatre practitioner Li Xie's one-woman Mandarin play, *The Vagina Logue* (阴道独白), an examination of the symbol of the vagina and its place in society – in the spirit of Eve Ensler's groundbreaking *The Vagina Monologues* (1996) – was also staged in 2000 to critical acclaim. Former theatre critic Clarissa Oon wrote in *The Straits Times* that the "wonderfully layered" show had "a real identification with all those nameless women, and occasionally, a conceptual distance for you to mull on the issues...It was that rare thing: a journey into the private reaches of the self, without a shred of indulgence".²¹

Making the Private, Public; the Personal, Universal

By making what is private public, a well-crafted monodrama can move beyond the confessional – the "indulgence" that Oon implies – and into the realm of the universal. The personal story becomes a shared one, with the actor or actress speaking on behalf of the marginalised and the voiceless, or confronting issues that have been swept under the rug and giving them a public airing, garnering a much wider resonance.

Writer-director Oliver Chong based his critically-acclaimed monodrama, *Roots* (2012), on a story highly specific to his own family. After a cryptic conversation with his grandmother about a branch of his family tree, Chong decides to return to his ancestral hometown in China to trace what seems to be a family secret. Blending humour, pathos and a virtuosic array of characters, Chong's one-man act struck a chord with its audience – an audience of Singaporeans largely descended from immigrants who arrived here several generations ago.

As Chong goes in search of his roots, a netizen from Hong Kong writes to him in traditional Chinese script, oozing condescension: "My surname is also Chong. But

my 'Chong' is different from yours. Yours has been castrated. So why bother to find any roots? You don't have roots any more."²²

There is a strong echo of the words of Kuo Pao Kun in his play *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (1995), not specified as a monodrama but completely written in prose, without any demarcations of various characters or different voices. At first glance, *Descendants* looks at the life of Admiral Cheng Ho (郑和; Zheng He), who was sent by the Ming emperor to explore the world in the 15th century. There are scenes detailing the strange and great wonders he sees, the painful act of losing his manhood as a eunuch in his majesty's court, and his great loneliness as he traverses the oceans. But the lyrical piece is also a meditation on rootlessness, displacement and being a "cultural orphan". Kuo had lamented that Singaporeans were cultural orphans, the "children" of the castrated Cheng Ho, separated from our cultural homelands, yet unable to identify with them as our cultural homes – and cursed to wander and search at the margins.

This anxiety over ancestry is perhaps a symptom of larger issues of memory and remembrance that weigh heavily on the Singaporean conscience. While *Roots* is the story of one man unravelling his family's past, it also reflects a larger narrative – that of an immigrant nation, whose ancestors left their families to forge new ones, as this author pointed out in a *Straits Times* article:

"The power of Chong's intimate, compelling *Roots* lies both in that anxiety over ancestry, but also the ability to lay it to rest – to embrace it as part of our history and soldier through it to find an identity of our own."²³

These preoccupations also come to light in playwright Huzir Sulaiman's *Occupation* (2002), a monodrama revolving around his own grandmother, Mrs Mohamed Siraj, and her real-life experiences growing up in Singapore during the Japanese Occupation. The monodrama, first performed by Claire Wong in 2002 and Jo Kukathas in 2012, was a popular and critical success. As Mrs Siraj responds to questions and prompts from an oral history collector, the audience becomes aware of a larger tapestry at work, as writer and editor Kathy Rowland states in the preface to Huzir's collection of plays:

"The conceit of the oral history collector archiving Mrs Siraj's wartime memories gives motion to the action, allowing the narrative to

move between past and present in a fluid way. Indeed, this confluence of past and present is essential, for the play looks at how contemporary needs shape the way the past is remembered."²⁴

One woman's recollection then becomes one country's meditation on memory. It reframes the narrative of World War II and how the generations since then have been conditioned to reflect on that period of time. The questions that Sarah, the oral history collector, poses to Mrs Siraj, are likewise recontextualised:

Mrs Siraj: (...) It all came down to food, and who had food to share, and so we shared our things until the room was bare and mocking, still a secret, empty

(Right) Jo Kukathas performs in the 2012 production of Huzir Sulaiman's *Occupation* (2002). The monodrama revolves around Huzir's grandmother, Mrs Mohamed Siraj, and her real-life experiences growing up in Singapore during the Japanese Occupation. Photo by Tan Ngiap Heng. *Courtesy of Checkpoint Theatre.*

(Below) Oliver Chong in *Roots* (2012), a monodrama that he also wrote and directed. Blending humour, pathos and a virtuosic array of characters, Chong's one-man act struck a chord with its audience – an audience of Singaporeans largely descended from immigrants who arrived here several generations ago. Photo by Tuckys Photography. *Courtesy of The Finger Players.*

(Facing page) Programme booklet of Huzir Sulaiman's *The Weight of Silk on Skin* (2011), about a well-heeled and erudite Singaporean man, played by Ivan Heng, who looks back at the loves and loves lost in his life. *Courtesy of Checkpoint Theatre.*



now, the hoard dispersed to hordes of worse-off folk[s] than us, the store exhausted twelve months in. But for that year we gave to poor and rich of every sort.

Sarah (voice over): You probably saved their lives.

Mrs Siraj: I doubt we saved their lives. We didn't think dramatically like that. It was just the thing to do – to help and not to bat an eyelid doing so. Before the war we'd done the same, and when the war came, we stayed as we'd begun.²⁵

Both Chong's character in *Roots* and the character of Mrs Siraj in *Occupation*, anchored in real-life and performed in

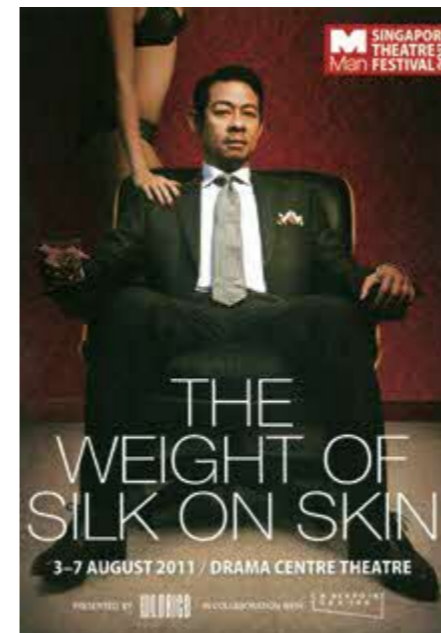


rich detail on stage, were conduits through which audience members could reach back through time and make sense of the histories that had come before, or witness a shift in perspective at something taken deeply for granted.

The Monodrama in Singapore Today

The 2010s have witnessed a flourishing of the monodrama, with well-received works such as Huzir's *The Weight of Silk on Skin* (2011), where a well-heeled and erudite Singaporean man looks back at the loves and loves lost in his life; Chong Tze Chien's *To Whom it May Concern* (2011), a fast-paced monodrama about Internet scams featuring an unreliable narrator; and young playwright Irfan Kasban's *94:05* (2012), where a man on the cusp of an invasive surgery re-evaluates his role as father and husband.

There have also been more recent group productions of short monologues such as The Theatre Practice's *Upstream* (2015) and Teater Ekamatra's *Projek Suitcase* (2015), featuring many young and upcoming practitioners. These intimate evenings of solo work also paid particular attention to the spaces they were performed in – Stamford Arts Centre and the Malay Heritage Centre respectively. *Upstream*, for one, was a farewell to The Theatre Practice's long-time premises as the centre undergoes refurbishment and rebranding as a traditional arts space. The monologues presented were often laden with yearning and tinged with regret. Often, there was very little movement – one performer presented his half-hour work standing completely still. Another



sat on a bench, his back to the audience for almost the entire performance.

Many of these recent monodramas were not inspired by their source material alone, but were buoyed also by a nostalgia for simpler storytelling times – a pre-Internet, pre-smartphone era. Director Alvin Tan wrote in his preface to *Best of* (2013) that they wanted the audience to focus their full attention on the storyteller without the help – or perhaps the distraction – of sound, multimedia or technology:

"With our contemporary environment bombarded with high tech presences and our senses often preoccupied with the iPad, iPhone, Facebook and Twitter, we have lost much human interactive abilities. (...) Can we ever listen deeply to another human being in person? *Best of* brings us back to storytelling basics. Just the storyteller and a chair."²⁶

For *Roots* (2012), creator Chong said in an interview with *The Straits Times* that he, too, wanted to bring the show back to the "roots" of theatre:

"I think we are forgetting what theatre can be. Because it all started with rituals and street performances, where they had nothing – just maybe a table and two chairs, and they could tell the whole play. I thought that was the beauty of theatre."²⁷

By going "back to basics", theatre-makers invite greater scrutiny of not just the quality of the solo performance – an ability to engage an audience, alone, and for an extended period of time – but also their narrators and central characters. Often, these protagonists, from *Talaq* to *The Weight of Silk on Skin*, are flawed and bruised. Each carries with them a compelling emotional nakedness, inviting the audience to help shoulder part of the burden they cannot bear.

This direct address, a hallmark of most monodramas, draws out the magnetic vulnerability of the single person on stage – regardless of whether the performer channels 12 characters or just one. And this, in turn, evokes a sense of communal empathy. A monodrama is nothing without its audience; it is only with the audience present, to listen, to seek to understand, that these characters – who in turn reflect the audience – can come to terms with their struggles and find some sort of inner peace. ♦

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THE STORY OF SINGAPORE RADIO 1924–41

The advent of wireless broadcasting created the same ripples that the Internet unleashed in more recent times. **Chua Ai Lin** traces its development in colonial Singapore.

Although 1935 marks the year the first official broadcasting company in Singapore – the British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation (BMBC) – was granted a monopoly licence, the origins of radio broadcasting can be traced to more than a decade earlier in 1924, when the Amateur Wireless Society of Malaya was established. But even before the BMBC was launched, people in Singapore were already listening to short-wave broadcasts from around the world, including the Empire Service of the British Broadcasting Corporation (now known as BBC World Service).

The Nascent Days of Broadcasting

As in Britain, radio broadcasting in Singapore was started by amateur enthusiasts and supported by commercial enterprises dealing in radio equipment. They were responsible for setting up amateur radio

stations, lobbying the government for better broadcasting policies, promoting radio through various means, and educating the public on the technical aspects of wireless reception.

In 1924, a group of like-minded radio enthusiasts from the expatriate community, Fred Keller and “Messrs. Sutherland, Howard, Taylor and Robinson”, founded the Amateur Wireless Society of Malaya (AWSM) in Singapore; it was the first of its kind in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States. The founders were representatives of companies with a vested interest in wireless, namely General Electric, Marconi’s Wireless Telegraph Company, and Standard Telephone.¹ It was only after much lobbying on the part of the AWSM that the Straits government finally issued the society with a temporary transmitting licence, and at the same time, receiving licences to private listeners.²

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The fledgling AWSM studio began life in the Union Building at Collyer Quay at the end of 1924, using an aeroplane transmitter on loan from Marconi Company, with the help of United Engineers. A technical committee was cobbled together, and working with a concert committee, soon put up twice-weekly broadcasts. These featured mostly well-known amateur performers from the European expatriate community, namely Mme. Fecilia Dietz, Mrs Ida Kinloch and Mrs Druddell, as well as non-Europeans like the Eurasian violinist Mr Eber, and “various bands, notably that of Mr Roy Minjoot and his ‘Scamps’”. The venture also had the support of local businesses: S. Moutrie & Company loaned new HMV gramophone releases, while Robinson Piano Company provided musical instruments and records from the American record label, Columbia.

However, the AWSM soon ran into financial difficulties as well as technical problems. Using a mediumwave transmitter that was only effective over short distances, reception became impossible at distances over one mile (1.6 km) away, and made worse because of increasing interference. At the same time, shortwave radio stations from other parts of the world began to compete for listeners in Singapore. All this sounded the death knell for the society, and on 28 January 1928, the AWSM made its final transmission.³

It took two years for the AWSM to recover, and in November 1930, the society

launched its official monthly magazine *Omba Pende* – a contraction of the Malay words for “short” (*pendek*) and “wave” (*ombak*).⁴ The climate seemed favourable for the association to become active again, as reported by the magazine in July 1931:

“There is a revival of interest here in radio, in fact a more widespread interest than we have ever known. The evidences of it are the rebirth of the Amateur Wireless Society of Malaya, a definite increase (reported in several directions) in the purchase of radio apparatus, more space given to radio in the local press, the renewed and intensified demand for broadcasting of British programmes locally and from Home, and the promising replies of the authorities concerned to that demand.”⁵

However, the main impetus for the renewed vigour of the society was a new regulation – which took effect in 1931 – by the Posts and Telegraphs Departments of the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States. The authorities mandated that “all radio receiving sets must incorporate at least one stage of screen-grid H.F. amplification”, which would increase the capability of the receiver set. The AWSM felt this was unnecessary and a “tall order” as there was no such regulation even in Britain.⁶ The society, therefore, became

an organised voice for citizens to express their objections.

Active promotion by the major English-language newspapers in Singapore, coupled with the AWSM’s close relationship with pressmen who shared the society’s concerns and ideals, contributed to the surge in interest in radio. For instance, the *Malaya Tribune* – which had a wide readership among the Asian community as the “*kranis* paper” (clerk’s paper), and a history of lobbying the government on various issues from municipal matters to political rights for Asians – was the key mover behind the revival of the AWSM in 1930.

Starting out with sporadic articles in the late 1920s, the *Tribune* moved on to running a weekly Friday column on wireless radio. The writer of the radio articles and column used the moniker “Radiofan”, whose true identity was almost certainly C. H. Stanley Jones, the *Malaya Tribune*’s assistant editor. He became a committee member in the revived AWSM and took on the role of editor of the *Omba Pende*. The magazine was even printed at the *Malaya Tribune* press.⁷

Other newspapers also caught the enthusiasm for radio – first *The Singapore Free Press*, followed by *The Straits Times* – which began giving more coverage to radio news. In 1930, the radio correspondent of *The Singapore Free Press* joined Jones as one of the convenors of the AWSM.⁸ By November 1932, all three English-language daily broadsheets had become firm supporters of radio broadcasting.

Local and Foreign Broadcasting Services

In September 1926, the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States governments accepted the recommendations of the Malayan Wireless Committee, one of which was to issue an exclusive broadcasting licence – to be awarded by competitive application – for a five-year period. In addition, there would be an accompanying fee increase for receiving licences, from \$5 to \$20 each, with \$18 going to the broadcaster. It is not clear why these recommendations were not implemented subsequently.

With the cessation of the AWSM’s transmissions in 1928, enthusiastic individuals soon dominated the broadcasting scene. In 1931, the society’s long-standing vice-president, R. E. Earle, of the Singapore Harbour Board’s electrical department, and his wife set up their own independent shortwave station, VS1AB, at their home in Tanjong Pagar, and transmitted gramophone record music every Wednesday and Saturday night for two hours starting from 9.30 pm. Listeners in Malaya, China and Australia,



(Left) The studio of the Amateur Wireless Society of Malaya (AWSM) began operations in the Union Building at Collyer Quay at the end of 1924, using an aeroplane transmitter. *Roland Craske Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Above) Guglielmo Marconi (1874–1937), Nobel Prize winner and inventor of the radio. He is seen here with his early radio apparatus – the transmitter (left) and the receiver (right). In 1897, Marconi established the Wireless Telegraph & Signal Company Limited (renamed Marconi’s Wireless Telegraph Company in 1900). Creator/photographer unknown. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

and even from as far away as America and England, could tune in.

Around the same time, another active AWSM member, E. C. Yates, who worked in Capitol Theatre overseeing the electrical equipment,⁹ obtained a transmission licence as well as some equipment from the Radio Service Company of Malaya to build a transmitter. Station VS1AD was thus born, broadcasting musical programmes from Capitol Building. It was no coincidence that both Earle and Yates dealt with electrical equipment as a profession, with Yates specialising in the latest technology in sound equipment for “talkies” (sound films) at the brand new Capitol cinema. At the time, anyone keen on working with wireless radio was required to possess a certain amount of technical aptitude, and even more so for those attempting radio transmission. Then AWSM president, A. B. Sewell, also had a transmission licence, but his station, VS1AF, was mostly inactive, reflecting the dismal state of affairs in amateur broadcasting during that period.¹⁰

The pressure for a more organised broadcasting station in Singapore became more intense after the Kuala Lumpur Amateur Wireless Society (KLAWS) officially began its regular transmission service on 5 April 1930. It was far more successful than the AWSM in Singapore. The Kuala Lumpur society had access to better equipment with a transmitting range of up to approximately 60 miles (97 km). KLAWS also managed to attract many listeners with a high-profile

One of the first wireless receivers created by Guglielmo Marconi in 1896. It was used in his public demonstration of wireless communication at Toynbee Hall, London, in 1896. © Museum of the History of Science, University of Oxford.



broadcast of the opening speech made by Sir Cecil Clementi, Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner of the Federated Malay States, at the Kuala Lumpur Agri-Horticultural Exhibition on 19 April, just two weeks after the station's opening. The effect was not vastly dissimilar to the excitement created when the renowned opera soprano, Dame Nellie Melba, was first heard in test broadcasts in Britain in 1920.

Perhaps the most significant reason for the success of the Kuala Lumpur station was the large degree of non-European involvement in the society. About half of its 75 members were Asians, with the Chinese, including its vice-president, making up 80 percent. This aligned the society's needs and interests with that of the wider public at large compared with the European-dominated AWSM in Singapore. Programmes in Chinese dialects, Malay and Tamil were produced, including a Tamil drama titled *Kovlan* in 1934. Weekday transmissions on Tuesdays and Fridays would begin with 30 minutes of “Asian music”. In 1931, the renamed Kuala Lumpur Amateur Radio Society acquired its own shortwave transmitter, which was

capable of sending signals across the length of the Malay Peninsula, as well as parts of the Netherlands East Indies and Borneo.¹¹

Having witnessed the significant developments in radio broadcasting in Kuala Lumpur, the AWSM began to lobby hard for the Straits government to set up an official Singapore broadcasting station, or at the very least, allow the society access to the expensive transmission equipment required to broadcast their programmes. The AWSM argued that “... there is a strong demand, that broadcasting is not a luxury but a necessity to a civilised country. It has been proved for years by Singapore amateurs VS1AA, VS1AB and VS1AF, and more recently by the Kuala Lumpur Radio Society, that broadcasting of speech and music on short and medium waves, is a practical possibility here.”¹²

With the Straits Settlements Association (Singapore) and the Rotary Club having already discussed the matter, the AWSM called on other organisations in Singapore to back up their demands for an official broadcasting station in the colony. The society also lodged a protest with the Colonial Office and the BBC over its transmissions from its shortwave station at Chelmsford in England, which were too weak to be received in Singapore. *Omba Pende* carried strongly worded editorials and satirical cartoons on the matter. The society's main grouse was the lack of reliable transmission, whether Malayan or British, and to make matters worse, listeners were asked to pay \$5 for a receiving licence.¹³

Apart from the lack of good programming and clear reception, listening to the radio in early 1930s Malaya was an exercise in frustration, especially if one did not have the patience and expertise to solve frequent technical issues and breakdowns. The government, in the meantime, was unconvinced of the need to invest in broadcasting when there were so few listeners. It was assumed that there was a correlation between the number of receiver licences issued and the spread of radio in Malaya, when in fact this was probably a gross underestimation of the actual figures – most people from several households would usually come together to listen to broadcasts, thus dispensing with the need to apply for their own radio licences.

Turning Point of Radio

The turning point of radio in Singapore took place on 19 December 1932, when the new Empire Service of the BBC was launched. By mid-June 1933, Malayan listeners could tune into Empire programmes for seven-and-a-half hours each day.¹⁴ The programming comprised Big Ben time signals, news bulletins, music (both live and gramophone recordings), religious services, talks and sports reports. Correspondingly, a reliable radio schedule titled “Empire Radio To-Night” was published in the daily press, a vast improvement over the days when the *Malaya Tribune* depended on its readers to submit reception reports and schedules of “likely transmissions”. No longer did local

listeners have to depend on Radio Saigon – the most reliable daily service available in Singapore at the time – or try their luck with the erratic reception of foreign stations for their regular dose of entertainment. With the launch of the Empire Service, one of AWSM's key objectives was finally fulfilled. The *Malayan Radio Review and Gramophone Gazette* declared in its inaugural editorial in June 1933 that Malaya had finally caught up with other British colonies in terms of radio development.¹⁵

The second major boost for Singapore broadcasting was the establishment of the first professional broadcasting station, Radio ZHI, which started test transmissions on 3 May 1933. The private radio station was owned by the Radio Service Company of Malaya, which boasted “the most varied and comprehensive radio stocks in Malaya”, specialising in wholesale and retail wireless receivers and equipment with its retail and service outlet at No. 4 Orchard Road. The radio station was located next door, on the upper floor of the shophouse, known as Broadcast House (since demolished), at No. 2 Orchard Road.¹⁶

The company's foray into broadcasting had begun sometime earlier when E.C. Yates, who ran the amateur station VS1AD, left his job at Capitol Theatre to join the Radio Service Company of Malaya, where he rebuilt and improved on his transmitter. The company seized the opportunity to fill a gap in local broadcasting as well as increase its sales revenue – the theory being that more

radio programming would attract potential buyers of receiver sets and raise the profile of the company through its association with the broadcasting station.

Transmissions were four times a week: on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 6 to 8.30 pm, and Sundays from 11 am to 1.30 pm, providing listeners in Singapore with locally produced content. Besides gramophone record music, there were daily 15-minute news bulletins compiled from *The Straits Times*; Monday concerts arranged by Felicia Dietz (who had performed a similar role in the early broadcasting efforts of the AWSM in 1924); Wednesday stock market reports from Fraser and Co., the exchange and share brokers in Collyer Quay; and Sunday morning religious services relayed by means of a land line from the “Presbyterian Church” (presumably the Orchard Road Presbyterian Church across the road from the station). The church's Tomlinson Hall was also leased to the station for broadcasting live musical performances. Later, a land line was laid to the bandstand on Waterloo Street, where the Straits Settlements Police Band usually performed, and also to the Raffles Hotel, for transmitting dance music.

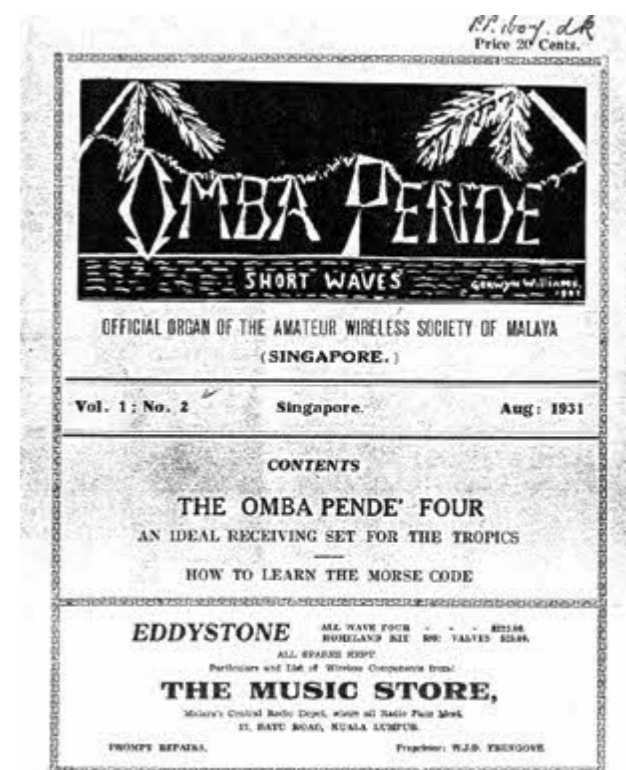
The Radio Service Company of Malaya soon found these arrangements to be more expensive than originally anticipated. An Advisory Committee for Broadcasting Programmes was formed and voluntary subscriptions collected, with the aim of improving programming standards. By 1935, part of these funds had been used to improve



(Top left) R. E. Earle, vice-president of the Amateur Wireless Society of Malaya, and his wife set up their own independent shortwave station, VS1AB, at their home in Tanjong Pagar, and transmitted gramophone record music every Wednesday and Saturday night. *All rights reserved, Malayan Radio Review*, 20 June 1932, pp. 3, 5.

(Above) Renowned opera soprano, Dame Nellie Melba, making her famous broadcast in Britain in 1920. © Museum of the History of Science, University of Oxford.

(Right) Cover of *Omba Pende* (Vol 1. No. 2, August 1931), the first radio magazine in Malaya and the official voice of the Amateur Wireless Society of Malaya.



the station's facilities, including a new dedicated studio at its retail and service outlet at No. 4 Orchard Road.¹⁷ By broadcasting on mediumwave, Radio ZHI was able to attract and retain a strong following of listeners in Singapore, especially those who could only afford mediumwave radios that received local transmissions, as opposed to the more expensive shortwave sets.¹⁸

The Rise (and Fall) of the BMBC

In 1934, the colonial government finally decided to issue an exclusive broadcasting licence for Malaya, eight years after it was first proposed by the AWSM in 1926. This might have been precipitated by the popularity of Radio ZHI, which proved that local broadcasting was a viable endeavour.

In addition, as a result of recommendations made by the Telegraphs and Telephone Communications Committee in 1931, the Posts and Telegraphs Department of the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States, as well as that of the Unfederated Malay States, came under a new Malaya-wide board that was better equipped to deal with the new challenges.¹⁹

Whatever the case, on 21 July 1935, the broadcasting licence was awarded to the British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation (BMBC), a Singapore-based company established by a "small band of wireless enthusiasts". The cost of running the station came from receiver-set licence fees, which were increased from \$5 to \$12 each per annum, of which 90 percent was channelled to the BMBC. The government reserved the right to censor all broadcasts.

The BMBC built a new station on Caldecott Hill, which was chosen for its elevated location and considerable distance away from electrical interferences in the built-up town area.²⁰ Initially, a mediumwave transmitter was used to serve Singapore and southern Johor. The station decided against the use of shortwave receivers as these had fewer users, were more expensive and technically more complex. The BMBC's normal service was officially launched on 1 March 1937, and in July the following year, the station began shortwave transmissions to serve the entire Malay Peninsula. With the BMBC designated as Malaya's exclusive broadcaster, the authorities unwisely terminated the broadcasting licence of Radio

ZHI at the end of 1936, while the station of the Kuala Lumpur Amateur Radio Society ceased operations in November 1938.²¹

However, the BMBC was not a sustainable set-up, and internal and external reasons soon led to its demise. The company was unable to raise the funds required by selling shares, it had been incurring losses since operations began, and the revenue derived from receiver-set licence fees was insufficient to cover the costs of running the station. A government subsidy was earlier disbursed to keep the station afloat.²²

The Threat of World War II

The outbreak of World War II in Europe and the looming threat of Japanese aggression in Asia introduced a new set of circumstances. The British Ministry of Information set up the Far Eastern Bureau in Singapore to counter enemy propaganda in Asia. Seeing the urgent need to disseminate propaganda information the government's initial tepid interest in broadcasting took an about-turn, and for the first time, substantial resources and planning were devoted to enhancing the broadcasting service in Malaya.

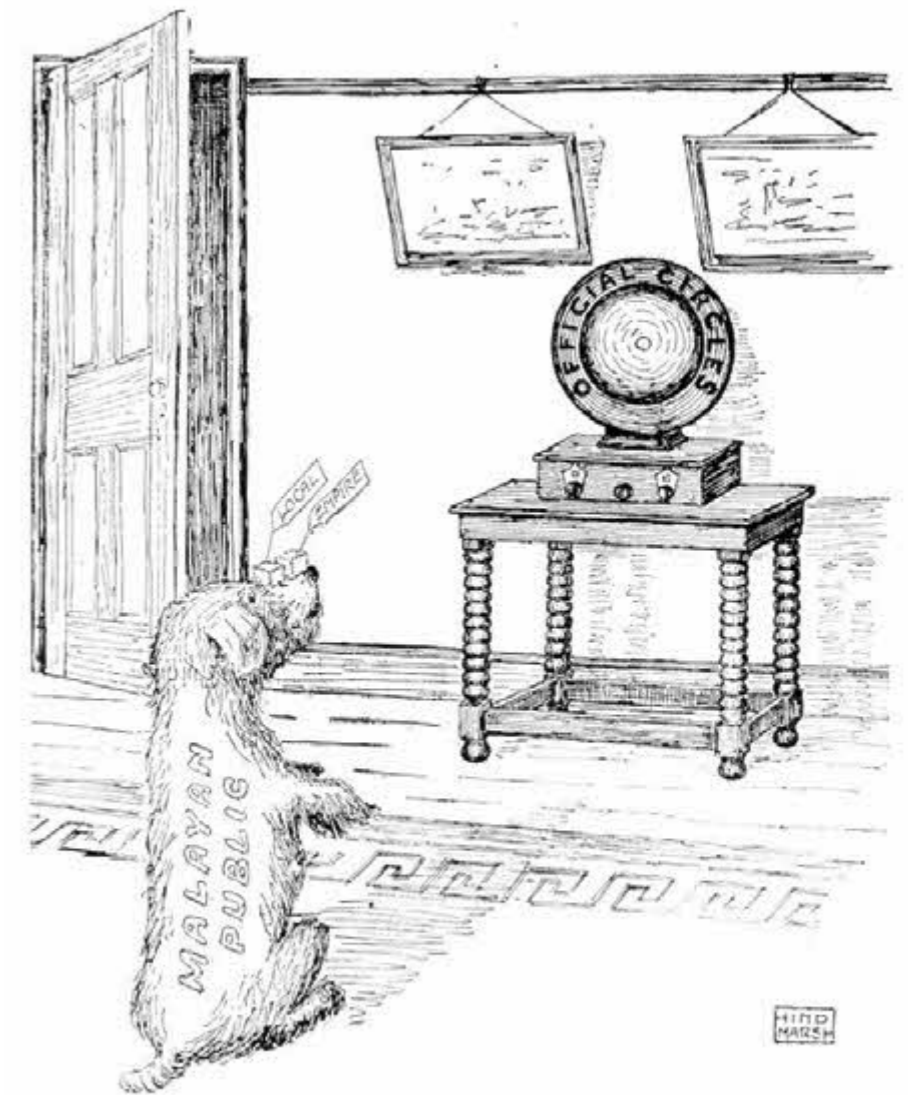
In March 1940, the Straits government acquired the BMBC and reorganised it as the Malayan Broadcasting Corporation (MBC). The government appointed Eric Davis, a British educational broadcaster, as Director-General of Broadcasting, Straits Settlements, and Chairman of the MBC, with plans for the MBC to be the most impressive station outside of Europe.²³ However, these grand plans were forestalled by the Japanese invasion of Singapore in February 1942. Nonetheless, by this time, the MBC had achieved considerable progress: broadcasting was taking place on four simultaneous shortwave and mediumwave transmissions in 13 languages, including Malay, Hindustani, French, Arabic and Dutch; new equipment had been acquired; and 290 staff, mostly Asians, had been recruited and trained locally.²⁴ The last move was a strategic one as these staff went on to form the backbone of broadcasting in the post-war years.

Future of Broadcasting

The growth of radio broadcasting in Singapore and Malaya is the result of the enterprise and perseverance of a group of stalwart pioneers and private entities, as well as the introduction of shortwave radio. But reliable and creative radio broadcasting needed the financial investment and infrastructure of state-run efforts, and it was only after much lobbying that the British colonial government began to reach out to the people through its shortwave Empire Service, and at the end of the 1930s, responded to the threat of war with the establishment of the Malayan Broadcasting Corporation in Singapore.

Radio broadcasting in Singapore has come a long way – from its shaky start in 1924 to 13 FM stations operated by Mediacorp today. Broadcasting has much to celebrate in 2016 as Mediacorp gets ready to move from Caldecott Broadcast Centre to its brand new premises at Mediapolis@one-north in the Buona Vista area. ♦

A cartoon lampooning His Master's Voice (HMV) gramophone label to express the Malayan public's frustration at having to wait for the government to start its local and Empire-wide broadcasting. *All rights reserved, Omba Pende*, September 1931, p. 17.



WHEN WILL MASTER SPEAK?

(Below) An advertisement publicising the second issue of *The Radio Magazine of Malaya* in the 19 February 1936 copy of *The Straits Times*. The magazine was published by the Radio Service Company of Malaya, which operated its retail and service outlet and radio station on Orchard Road. © *The Straits Times*.

(Below right) An advertisement for Philips radio receivers sold by William Jacks & Co. (Malaya) Ltd. This appeared on the front cover of the *Malayan Radio Times* magazine dated 24 May 1936. The wavy lines and star spangles depicted in the logo of the Philips company, which was founded in Eindhoven (Netherlands) in 1891, are said to represent radio waves.

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SENI PERSEMBAHAN BANGSAWAN

Bangsawan is a form of traditional Malay opera or theatre that usually involves elements of drama, music, singing and dancing. The art form has its origins in the theatre of the immigrant Parsi community (Indians of Persian extract) in Malaya and was first performed in Penang in the 1870s. By the early 20th century, many *bangsawan* troupes emerged and the theatre form soon spread to other parts of Malaya. Stories used in *bangsawan* theatre are adapted from Indian, Arabian and Chinese folk tales, and the *Sejarah Melayu* (*Malay Annals*). This article by **Juffri bin Supa'at** traces the historical development of *bangsawan* in Singapore and showcases some of the more famous *bangsawan* troupes that have made an impact since the art form was introduced in Singapore in 1880. The article also examines the evolution of *bangsawan* theatre into its modern and contemporary forms – to appeal to a younger audience – that were later recorded and broadcast on radio and television in Singapore. *Bangsawan* has today become part of the fabric of Malay life and culture in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei.

Juffri Bin Supa'at is a Senior Librarian with the National Library of Singapore. He has curated several exhibitions featuring the works of literary pioneers such as Masuri S. N., Muhammad Ariff Ahmad and Abdul Ghani Hamid. Juffri has also compiled poetry selections by Muhammad Ariff Ahmad and Suratman Markasan, and has put together bibliographies on Singaporean Malay literature and its pioneer writers.

"Persembahan bangsawan mengikut amalan tradisi tidak berpandukan skrip. Pelakon-pelakon hanya diberitahu tentang rangka atau sinopsis cerita, dan bertolak daripada pokok cerita itu terserahlah kepada mereka untuk membina dialog dan membuat improvisasi lakon."¹

- Rahmah Bujang, 1989

Menurut Haji Hamid Ahmad,² bangsawan berasal daripada dua kekata iaitu "bangsa" dan "wan". Perkataan "bangsa" itu diberikan kepada orang yang berbangsa dan perkataan "wan" pula diberikan kepada golongan yang berketurunan "Wan" atau "Syed" atau berdarah raja. Jadi bangsawan asalnya dipentaskan untuk istana. Namun ia dapat dinikmati sebagai hiburan rakyat selepas zaman raja-raja. Perkataan bangsawan ini telah banyak dikaitkan dengan opera Melayu kerana pada awal mula persembahan seni bangsawan ini, sering dipaparkan kisah raja-raja dan orang-orang bangsawan. Cerita-cerita pementasan bangsawan ketika itu seringkali memetik cerita-cerita daripada India, Arab, Barat, China, Jawa dan juga cerita-cerita daripada *Sejarah Melayu*.

Permulaan Bangsawan

Asal mula bangsawan sebenarnya bukanlah dari rantau ini, sebaliknya bangsawan lahir daripada pengkuburan sebuah teater



bergerak dari India.³ Dalam tahun 1870an, Pulau Pinang telah menerima pengaruh sebuah pementasan teater bergerak bernama Wayang Parsi atau Mendu. Kumpulan ini melakonkan cerita-cerita dengan menggunakan Bahasa Hindi dan dilakonan oleh pelakon lelaki dan wanita yang didatangkan dari India.

Wayang Parsi ini kemudian diambil alih oleh tuan dari kalangan Jawi Pekan tempatan bernama Mohamed Pusi pada tahun 1884 dan diberikan nama Wayang Bangsawan. Mohamed Pusi merupakan seorang hartawan di Pulau Pinang dan bertanggungjawab menubuhkan sebuah "kumpulan bangsawan secara profesional yang pertama setelah beliau membeli perkakas-perkakas serta kelengkapan pementasan dari rombongan Wayang Parsi".⁴ Nama kumpulan bangsawan pertama ialah Pusi Indera Bangsawan of Penang yang bergiat pada tahun 1885 yang menggunakan Bahasa Melayu dan menjadi titik tolak penerapan pengaruh-pengaruh "Melayu" dalam aspek-aspek pementasan.

Perkembangan Bangsawan

Setiap persembahan kumpulan bangsawan mendapat sambutan yang hebat daripada para penduduk di Pulau Pinang kerana corak

permainan mereka belum pernah dilihat sebelumnya. Tambahan pula, cerita-cerita yang dipaparkan seringkali mengajak para penonton mengembara ke alam khayal. Ini dikuatkan lagi dengan pandangan bahawa di pulau itu wujud ramai penduduk dari India terutama selepas pembukaannya oleh Sir Francis Light pada tahun 1868.⁵

Oleh itu, pengaruh kebudayaannya juga mula berkembang sejajar dengan perkembangan penduduk India itu yang juga menimbulkan masyarakat kacukan Melayu/India. Antara nama-nama mereka yang masih lagi menunjukkan keturunannya ialah "Marican, Babjan, Pak Wan Teh, Haron Bee, Patma Bee dan sebagainya".⁶

Kumpulan-kumpulan bangsawan ini yang mendapat sambutan yang baik terutama di kawasan negeri-negeri Selat (Straits Settlements) seperti Pulau Pinang, Singapura dan Melaka ini bergerak ke seluruh tanah Melayu hingga ke Sumatera. Di Kuala Lumpur, tapak Sungei Wang Plaza dahulunya merupakan tempat bangsawan dipentaskan dan dikenali sebagai Happy World. Kumpulan-kumpulan yang telah bergiat cergas sejak kumpulan pertama terlalu banyak jumlahnya.

Menurut Rahmah (1975), kumpulan yang lebih lama bergiat adalah seperti Nahar



Bangsawan Malaysia Opera, Kinta Opera, Indera Bangsawan of Penang, City Opera, Peninsular Opera, Seri Permata Opera, Jaya Opera, Zanzibar Bangsawan, Dean Union Opera, Gray Opera, Indera Permata of Selangor, Constantinople Opera, Rahman Opera, Kencana Wati Opera, Bangsawan Jenaka Melayu dan Bolera Opera.

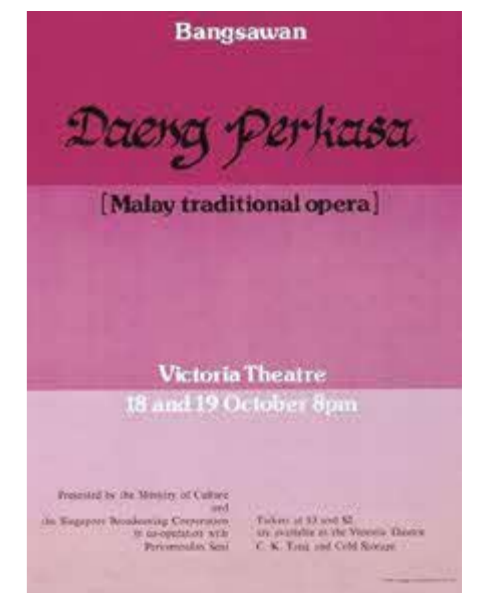
Bangsawan di Singapura

Bangsawan dipercayai telah dibawa masuk ke Singapura pada tahun 1880an.⁷

(Kiri) Pementasan bangsawan *Raden Mas* pada 15–17 Januari 2016 di Teater Esplanade. *Ihsan Sri Mamanda Bangsawan Pte Ltd.*

(Bawah) Poster bangsawan *Daeng Perkasa* yang dipentaskan pada 18 dan 19 Oktober 1980. Gambar kepunyaan Kementerian Kebudayaan. *Ihsan Arkib Negara Singapura.*

(Bawah sekali) Gambar awal pementasan bangsawan, 1900. *Koleksi Mohd Amin Bin Kadarisman. Ihsan Arkib Negara Singapura.*



Ketibaan bangsawan Melayu ke Singapura bersama seri panggungnya yang terkenal iaitu Siti Hawa dan kumpulan Wayang Mama Pushi dari Pulau Pinang. Mohamed Pushi telah menubuhkan kumpulannya yang dikenali dengan nama Pushi Indera Bangsawan.

Beliau telah membawa rombongan wayangnya ke Alor Setar, Kedah dan menuju ke Singapura. Di Singapura, kumpulan Pushi Indera Bangsawan menetap di kawasan North Bridge Road berdekatan dengan Bras Basah Road.⁸



[Atas sekali] Gambar awal pementasan bangsawan, 1900. Koleksi Mohd Amin Bin Kadarisman. Ihsan Arkib Negara Singapura.

[Atas] Pementasan bangsawan di Perpustakaan Awam Geylang East oleh Perkumpulan Seni pada 26 September 2015. Ihsan Perkumpulan Seni Singapura.

Semenjak itu muncul pula kumpulan-kumpulan bangsawan yang lain seperti Wayang Setambul, Wayang Kassim, Indera Zanibar dan banyak lagi. Kumpulan-kumpulan ini telah dapat menarik ramai penonton di setiap persembahan mereka di Singapura. Di antara sebab-sebab yang ditanggap oleh Sabri⁹ yang menjadikan bangsawan digemari ramai ketika itu ialah:

- Para pelakon yang terdiri daripada orang kebanyakan,
- Ramai orang-orang kaya yang tertarik kepada para pelakon bangsawan yang cantik dan
- Ramai peniaga atau tauke kaya yang menampung atau membiayai penubuhan kumpulan bangsawan yang baru kerana seni persembahan dianggap sebagai pelaburan yang menguntungkan.

Bai Kassim merupakan seorang tokoh yang sememangnya masyhur dengan kebolehannya sebagai pengarah dan pemimpin kumpulan bangsawan. Beliau telah membuka sebuah kumpulannya sendiri pada tahun 1902.¹⁰ Kumpulan ini telah diubah nama kepada Indera Zanibar dan menjelajahi Tanah Melayu dan Indonesia termasuk Jawa, Sumatera dan Borneo. Kumpulan ini kemudian diraikan oleh Sultan dan diberikan kebesaran. Kemudian pada tahun 1907 kumpulan ini ditukar namanya kepada The Zanzibar Royal Theatrical Company of Singapore oleh Sultan Pontianak, salah sebuah negeri di Kalimantan.¹¹

Tahun 1902 – 1935 boleh dianggap sebagai tahun-tahun gemilang seni pementasan bangsawan. Pada masa itu, setiap pementasan bangsawan dapat menarik ramai penonton ketika ia dipentaskan seperti di Happy World di Geylang

Road, New World di Jalan Besar, Panggung Alhambra, Diamond dan Royal.

Dalam kajian Rahmah Bujang,¹² terdapat beberapa kumpulan bangsawan yang pernah bertapak di Singapura. Antaranya ialah International Opera of Singapore. Kumpulan bangsawan ini telah dibukakan oleh seorang Cina bernama Baba Koh. Kumpulan ini telah diterajui oleh Nasir dan Midah sebagai pelakon utamanya.

Star Opera merupakan sebuah kumpulan lagi yang terdapat di Singapura. Kumpulan ini telah ada sejak tahun 1919. Pelakon lakinnya ialah Khairuddin Tairo. Nahar Bangsawan merupakan sebuah kumpulan lagi yang ditubuhkan di Singapura. Pada tahun 1920, ia telah membuat sebuah pementasan di Geylang. Tuan punya kumpulan bangsawan ini ialah Syed Ahmad Alsagoff dan pelakon utamanya Cik Sartinah.

Tradisi Improvisasi

Bangsawan merupakan seni persembahan yang sentiasa mengalami perubahan oleh pembaharuan yang berlaku atau terpaksa dilakukan dari semasa ke semasa. Keadaan zaman masyarakat sekeliling dan ruang pementasan turut mempengaruhi proses perubahan dan pengadaptasian cara bagaimana bangsawan dipentaskan. Menurut Syed Mohd Zakir:

“Perubahan pertama berlaku daripada penggunaan bahasa Hindi kepada bahasa Melayu akhirnya menetapkan penggunaan bahasa Melayu Riau kerana dianggap halus dan lembut dalam mencerminkan kebangsawanan. Perubahan seterusnya berlaku dalam pelbagai aspek seperti watak-pelakon, repertoire-cerita, muzik-nyanyian termasuk dalam extra turn dan sebagainya. Menepati namanya ‘bangsawan’, persembahan ini menjurus kepada kisah golongan bangsawan yakni kisah raja-raja dengan penggunaan bahasa istana sebagai teras persembahannya. Maka dalam bangsawan mesti juga diselitkan seni kata-kata tradisional Melayu seperti pantun, syair, dan sebagainya termasuk juga unsur moden seperti monolog dan solilokui. Ciri utama cerita bangsawan ialah temanya kebaikan mengatasi kejahatan, watak-watak utama terdiri daripada golongan bangsawan, dan lokasi ceritanya di bumi dan kayangan. Latar pokok

cerita bangsawan dilihat perlu ada balairong istana, taman bunga dan hutan serta jalan.”¹³

Satu lagi faktor ialah kebolehan atau kemahiran para pelakon seni pementasan bangsawan ialah menguasai teknik improvisasi kerana para pelakon tidak diberikan skrip. Mereka hanya diberikan sinopsis atau jalan cerita yang akan dipentaskan. Perjalanan jalan cerita agak ‘versatile’ dan daya penarikannya bergantung kepada kemahiran para pelakon membuat improvisasi.

“Tradisi improvisasi dalam persembahan bangsawan boleh memberi ‘versatility’ kepada barisan pelakon yang mahir dan berbakat. Teknik improvisasi yang baik menuntut taraf profesionalisme yang tinggi. Dalam konteks persembahan bangsawan, menentukan ciri stereotaip peranan yang tertentu akan membantu pelakon menyimpan perbendaharaan dialog yang khusus bagi sesuatu peranan. Jika pelakon itu memang petah berbicara dan cepat pula untuk menjawab atau menangkis dalam pengucapan antara dua watak yang sedang berlakon itu maka persembahan akan lebih menyenangkan. Kegiatan dan sambutan masyarakat terhadap seni persembahan bangsawan itu turut membantu gaya improvisasi lakonnya. Sebagai satu sumber mata pencarian, para pelakon perlu berusaha lebih giat dan tekun menguasai sesuatu bidang kerjayanya dalam bangsawan, umpamanya bidang lakonan, menyediakan set tirai dan sebagainya. Jika ia pelakon, kebolehan menyanyi atau menari merupakan kualiti yang dapat memantapkan kerjayanya itu.”¹⁴

- Rahmah Bujang, 1989

Maka tidaklah menjadi satu yang menghairankan bangsawan merupakan suatu bidang seni yang memerlukan tahap kemahiran dan kreativiti yang tinggi dari setiap anggota-anggotanya yang terlibat sama ada di depan atau belakang pentas.

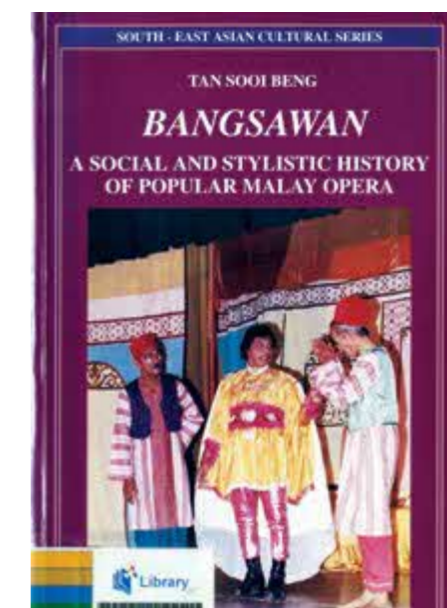
Namun selepas perang dunia kedua, seni pementasan bangsawan mula merudum sebelum akhirnya hilang pada tahun 1960an. Tetapi terdapat usaha-usaha untuk meneruskan seni lakon ini melalui wadah-wadah lain. Umpamanya pada tahun 1954,¹⁵ bangsawan mula ke udara melalui rancangan mingguan di Radio Malaya yang berpangkalan di Singapura. Pada tahun-tahun 1970an dan 1980an, bangsawan

mula dipentaskan kembali dan muncul di kaca televisyen melalui penerbitan Radio Televisyen Singapura (RTS). Ini dibolehkan kerana ketika itu masih terdapat “orang-orang kuat” bangsawan seperti Almarhum Haji Shariff Medan, Almarhum Haji Ahmad Sabri dan Almarhum Haji Hamid Ahmad yang pernah melibatkan diri mereka dalam kegiatan dan pementasan seni bangsawan. Pada tahun April 1987, Seri Anggerik Bangsawan telah ditubuhkan dan diterajui oleh Almarhum Haji Hamid Ahmad.

Radio Televisyen Singapura (RTS) pernah terlibat dalam beberapa pementasan bangsawan di Panggung Victoria. Antaranya ialah *Jula-Juli Bintang Tiga* (1978) dan *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (1979). Walaupun mendapat sambutan yang menggalakkan, namun setiap pementasan ini menelan belanja yang agak besar ketika itu. Kali terakhir seni bangsawan dipentaskan di Singapura ialah pada 15–17 Januari 2016. Ia telah dipentaskan di Teater Esplanade oleh Sri Mamanda Bangsawan yang membawa cerita *Raden Mas* yang ditulis oleh Encik Nadiputra.

Namun, setiap perubahan ruang di mana bangsawan ini dipentaskan juga sering menimbulkan perbincangan tentang keaslian seni pementasan bangsawan itu sendiri sama ada dari segi penampilan, cerita, lakonan dan sebagainya. Sebagaimana yang dikehendaki tadi, seni pementasan bangsawan adalah seni yang sering mengalami perubahan. Perubahan yang berlaku atau perlu dilakukan demi untuk memenuhi keperluan penonton semasa dan juga untuk mengadaptasikan ruang-ruang pementasan yang terdapat bagi pementasan seni bangsawan pada masa kini. ♦

Bangsawan: A Social and Stylistic History of Popular Malay Opera oleh Tan Sooi Beng diterbitkan oleh The Asian Centre pada tahun 1997.

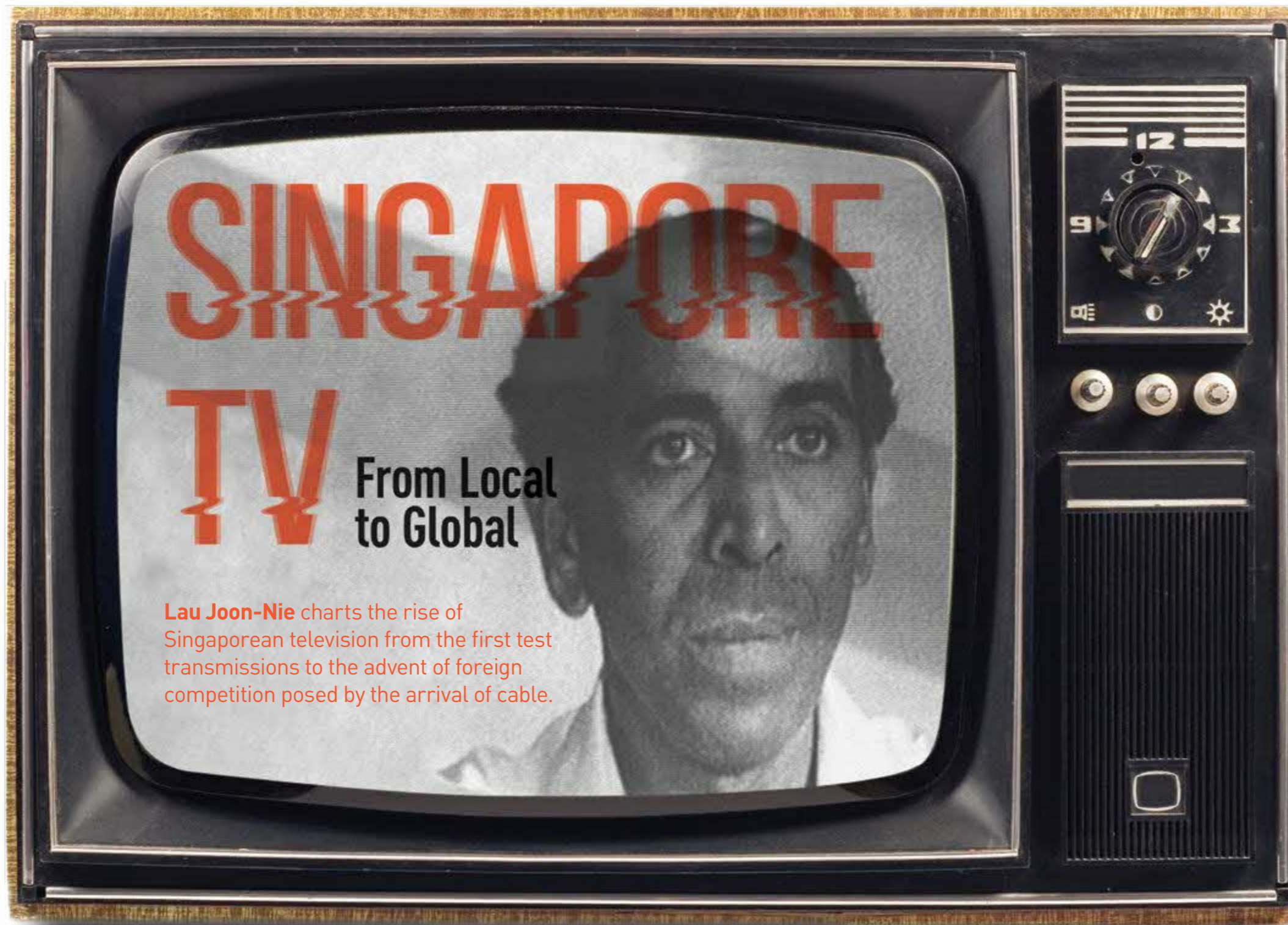


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Lau Joon-Nie charts the rise of Singaporean television from the first test transmissions to the advent of foreign competition posed by the arrival of cable.

Mention *Growing Up* to any 30-something Singapore TV fan and watch his or her face light up with a wistful look of nostalgia. Singapore's longest-running English language drama series – which debuted in 1996 and ended its run in 2001¹ – ran for six seasons, detailing the ups and downs of the fictional Tay family who lived through the 1960s to the 80s. Viewers lapped up the meticulously recreated scenes of yesteryear with its retro outfits and hairstyles, and carefully curated furniture, cash registers, telephones, radio and TV sets, and other such miscellany of the period.

By coincidence, the Tay family grew up in an era when television first made its foray into Singapore. 15 February 1963 was a momentous day for TV in Singapore when the government started a pilot service, following a feasibility study in the 1950s² and a series of test transmissions before the official launch. "Tonight might well mark the start of a social and cultural revolution in our lives," said then Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam, the first person to appear on national TV when he launched Television Singapura at the Victoria Memorial Hall.

Outside, thousands had gathered in anticipation to watch the first black-and-white TV images come to life on a few dozen TV sets placed around Empress Place for the occasion. The first programme aired at exactly 6.05 pm was a 15-minute documentary, *TV Looks at Singapore*, introducing the concept of television and its impact on the lives of Singaporeans. This was followed by two cartoon clips, news in English, a comedy skit and a variety show titled *Rampaian*

A lawyer by training, **Lau Joon-Nie** spent 15 years in broadcast television as a reporter, interactive producer, current affairs producer and editor at Mediacorp's Channel News Asia and its predecessors SBC News and TCS News. She now heads Newsplex Asia, a convergent training newsroom and media lab at the Nanyang Technological University.

Malaysia ("Malaysian Mixture"). Transmission ended at 7.40 pm.³

At the time of the launch in 1963, just 8 percent of households owned a TV set.⁴ For those without one, 50 public viewing points were set up across the island, at places such as community centres. Within six months, the Channel 5 broadcasts in English and Malay increased from a weekly one-hour programme to five hours a day on weekdays and 10 hours a day over the weekend. Channel 8 was launched in November that same year with programmes in Mandarin and Tamil. By 1965, all programming was handled by Radio and Television Singapore (RTS), under the Department of Broadcasting of the Ministry of Culture.

Colour Comes to Singapore

Singaporeans were ecstatic to be among the first in Southeast Asia to enjoy colour broadcasts in mid-1974, snapping up home colour TV sets during the first 10 weeks of its launch. Not all programming was available in colour though. Newscasts only went full colour during phase two of the roll-out in November that year. Colour TV sets soon replaced black-and-white ones at the

(Facing page) "Tonight might well mark the start of a social and cultural revolution in our lives," said then Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam, the first person to appear on national TV when he launched Television Singapura at the Victoria Memorial Hall on 15 February 1963. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) *Growing Up* was Singapore's longest-running English drama series and lasted six seasons from 1996 to 2001. *Courtesy of Mediacorp Pte Ltd.*





Then Minister for Culture Jek Yeun Thong tours the colour television studios at Radio and Television Singapore in 1974. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

community centres, the five-year roll-out costing S\$8 million.

By the mid-1970s, entertainment accounted for about 74 percent of the content broadcast across RTS' combined programme schedules, with drama forming the bulk, followed by variety shows. Most content – about 60 percent – was imported, mainly from North America. Older viewers will fondly recall popular detective shows such as *Hawaii Five-O*, *Toma* and *Mannix*. Soon enough, the influx of imported programmes, particularly crime dramas, was blamed for the rise in violence and delinquency among Singapore's youth.

The authorities drew this spurious conclusion based on figures from agencies such as the Prisons Department and Reformatory Training Centre. This led to the scheduling of several violence-free days of programming. Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays saw dramas such as *The Six Million Dollar Man*, *I Love Lucy* and *The Waltons* taking up prime time slots. Unbeknownst to Singaporeans, they were watching fewer American police and detective shows than their counterparts in Southeast Asia, even as US shows remained the most affordable to buy. Television Singapore had a US\$1.2 million a year acquisition budget in the mid-70s to buy content from overseas.⁵

For the remaining 40 percent of content that was produced locally, the *Chinese Variety Show* and *Malay Pesta Pop* proved to be hits. There were also Singaporean family magazine shows featuring everything from personality profiles to flower arrangement demonstrations. Without the pressing bottomline concerns that plague corporate broadcasters today, officials had the luxury

of ignoring the game-and-quiz show format, preferring to maintain a low commercial profile instead.

When it came to factual content, RTS had a central production arm for civics and international affairs programmes. It produced radio and TV current affairs programmes such as talks, interviews, discussions and documentaries that were aired during prime time.

Greater Autonomy

However, bigger changes were afoot. On 1 February 1980, RTS was restructured into a statutory board called the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC). This would free RTS from governmental administrative and budgetary constraints that hampered it from upgrading its production facilities and skills pool. With its newfound flexibility in hiring and procurement, SBC increased its staff strength from 1,335 to 1,648 and spent S\$8.6 million on new infrastructure and technology in its first year, including a new radio transmission tower at Bukit Batok and electronic news gathering equipment.⁶

Then Acting Minister for Culture Ong Teng Cheong said in a newspaper interview that the idea of a semi-government radio and TV station was first mentioned in 1966, "but because of manpower resources and other more urgent requirements in other sectors of the country, it dragged on for so long." While SBC was formed to liberate the old RTS from the bureaucratic shackles that had long impeded its development, the new entity would continue playing an important role in nation-building and communicating government policies and objectives. Ong

was appointed chairman of SBC, with the government categorically stating that it would "retain control over the policy of the corporation in the public interest" to ensure that air time for minorities would not be reduced.⁷ There was some loosening of control, however, when changes were made to reduce the amount of public service broadcasting and messaging SBC would have to carry. These programming changes enabled more advertisements to be sold, raising revenue rapidly and laying the groundwork for subsequent privatisation.

The changes also paved the way for more local programmes. In 1984, SBC launched a third free-to-air channel, SBC 12, to meet the need for more Malay and Tamil programming, children's content, and foster an appreciation for arts and culture. Much of the children's and minority programming was produced by SBC. In 1994, the Media Development Authority (MDA) began awarding grants to production houses to increase the number of hours of locally made public service broadcasting and grow the media industry.⁸ Funding came from the mandatory radio and TV licence fee paid by every household and vehicle owner. When this fee was abolished in 2011, the government maintained its commitment to funding such content, and this has in fact increased since.⁹

Turning Point

By the early 1990s, moves were underway to prepare the broadcast industry for the inevitable influx of foreign competition. While the government would not budge on allowing residential households to own TV satellite dishes,¹⁰ it did, however, permit SBC to launch the country's first pay TV channel, NewsVision. This was done through the creation of Singapore Cable Vision (SCV), a 65:35 percent tie-up with Temasek Holdings-owned Singapore International Media and SBC in 1991.¹¹

NewsVision began transmission on 2 April 1992, providing 24-hour news mainly from CNN, with some newscasts from Independent Television News and SBC's 9 pm bulletin. This broke SBC's local monopoly over TV news and for the first time, the public had access to foreign news broadcasts on local TV. Two other subscription channels, MovieVision and VarietyVision, were launched on 1 June 1992. All three channels were transmitted on the Ultra High Frequency (UHF) band,

which was not ideal given that 80 percent of the population lived in high-rise buildings, affecting signal reception.¹² Viewers also did not warm up to the high monthly subscription costs.

The launch of these early pay TV channels proved unnecessary when in the same year, the government announced the nationwide cable TV roll-out as part of a wider plan to wire Singapore for the Information Age. SCV won the bid to build the hybrid-fibre coaxial network and in a nod to its massive cabling effort, it was granted the right to be the exclusive provider of pay TV services until June 2002.¹³ In June 1995, SCV launched its cable TV pilot in 10 public housing blocks in Tampines, offering subscribers an unprecedented broadcast buffet of over 25 channels. Non-subscribers could receive their regular free-to-air channels by simply plugging their TV sets into the cable points in their homes and not be at the mercy of the weather for clear TV reception. Today, this is how we watch free-to-air content now that all local channels are fully digital.

Local Drama and Sitcoms Take Off

In the year before SCV launched its cable TV pilot project, a major restructuring of the local broadcast industry took place. In 1994, SBC was corporatised to form Singapore International Media (SIM), the parent company of Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS), Singapore Television

12 (STV12) and Radio Corporation of Singapore (RCS). These newly created corporate structures gave the respective entities greater autonomy and flexibility in making strategic business decisions. Both Channel 5 and Channel 8 started 24-hour transmission in 1995, and STV12 was revamped that year into two channels: Prime 12 for Malay and Tamil programming, and Premiere 12 for arts, documentaries and children's programmes. Singapore now had four TV channels. Local production flourished during this time. Between 1994 and 1995, local output increased by 60 percent, with the Mandarin Channel 8 producing an average of 600 hours of sitcoms, dramas and variety shows each year, thus making TCS one of the most prolific stations in the world.¹⁴

Chinese drama production in Singapore began in earnest in 1983 with the setting up of SBC's Chinese Drama Division, resulting in hundreds of serials since. What is officially regarded as the first locally produced Mandarin drama, the 50-minute long *The Seletar Robbery*, was actually filmed a year earlier.¹⁵ When the 1979 Broadcasting Act limited the amount of foreign programming allowed on TV, SBC was spurred to nurture its own team of actors, directors and scriptwriters. Specialists from Hong Kong and Taiwan were recruited to work and train the local staff. The Chinese Drama Division's first major success was *The Awakening* (雾锁南洋) in 1984, a highly popular series about the toils and troubles of Singapore's

early Chinese immigrants in the 19th century. Indeed, local dramas became such a staple that by 1987, they were telecast five nights a week on Channel 8.¹⁶ SBC also developed an overseas market for its dramas, selling them to broadcasters and home video distributors regionally. This has become so successful that, today, thousands of hours of content are sold to partners in Australia, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam, in the process increasing the profile and popularity of our home-grown stars.¹⁷

English-language dramas in Singapore had a rockier start. The English Drama Division was set up in the early 1990s and produced its first series, *Masters of the Sea* (1994) with the help of Joanne Brough, a former executive producer of the hit American soap operas *Dallas* and *Falcon Crest*, and a team of foreign writers.¹⁸ However, local viewers were unable to relate to the tumultuous tale of a wealthy Chinese shipping family and decried it for its lack of authenticity and local actors who spoke with fake British and American accents.

Eventually, producers struck the right chord with viewers with *Under One Roof* (1994), about "Singapore's funniest family" living in a public housing estate in the middle-class suburb of Bishan. *Under One Roof* ran for nine years and remains one of TCS' greatest commercial successes, garnering multiple wins at the Asian Television Awards over its seasons.¹⁹



(Left) *Under One Roof*, about "Singapore's funniest family" living in a public housing estate in the middle-class suburb of Bishan, ran for nine years and remains one of TCS' greatest commercial successes, garnering multiple wins at the Asian Television Awards over its seasons. *Courtesy of Mediacorp Pte Ltd.*
(Below) SBC's Chinese Drama Division's first major success was *The Awakening* (雾锁南洋) in 1984, a highly popular series about the toils and troubles of Singapore's early Chinese immigrants in the 19th century. *Courtesy of Mediacorp Pte Ltd.*



In 1996, TCS struck gold again with *Growing Up*, which “was praised for its convincing performances, high-quality scriptwriting and credible depiction of Singapore in the formative post-separation years.”²⁰ Buoyed by its success, the English Drama Division went on to tackle modern-day themes, churning out a series of shows around corporate and “dot.com” lifestyles such as *Three Rooms* (1997), *VR Man* (1998) and *Spin* (1999). These, however, gave way to local sitcoms as audiences sought relief from the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s. *Phua Chu Kang* (1997) rode on this wave, cheering up audiences with its delightfully subversive storylines that appeared to go against the grain of governmental exhortations, e.g. to speak good English, have (more) children, and work hard.²¹ Audiences embraced the loveable Singlish-speaking contractor, Phua Chu Kang – “the best in Singapore, JB and some say Batam” – and his dysfunctional family members for 10 years, making the show Singapore’s longest-running English-language sitcom.

Making News

With Singapore-made dramas already making forays into other parts of Asia, it was only a matter of time before a dedicated news channel would be set up. In March 1999, the English-language Channel NewsAsia (CNA) was launched, initially for a Singapore-only audience. Its international feed began in September 2000. Then Minister for Information and the Arts George Yeo hailed the launch at a time of economic

crisis as a “bold move”. He said that CNA would “help meet a growing demand for news in real-time presented from an Asian viewpoint” and that it would “supplement other international news channels and help make Singapore a business centre and a media hub.”²² Today, CNA, which broadcasts primarily out of Singapore, has correspondents in over a dozen Asian cities and major Western capitals and is watched in over 25 territories across the world.²³

In June 1999, TCS’ parent holding company, Singapore International Media, underwent a name change to Media Corporation of Singapore (MCS) or Mediacorp Singapore. This paved the way for a subsequent restructuring of Mediacorp just three weeks later. Seven strategic business units were formed for TV channel management with TCS (running Channels 5, 8 and taking on sports programmes from STV12), public service broadcasting (STV12), radio (Mediacorp Radio), TV film production and distribution (Mediacorp Studios and Rain-tree Pictures), news and current affairs (Mediacorp News), print (Mediacorp Press) and multimedia (Mediacorp Interactive). In 2001, TCS was renamed Mediacorp TV and STV12 took on the name Mediacorp TV12.²⁴

Media Wars

These name changes were far from just cosmetic; they were to prepare Mediacorp’s business units for the onslaught of competition to come. Then Minister for Information and the Arts Lee Yock Suan (who succeeded George Yeo as minister in

1999) hinted at the possibility in Parliament in March 2000 and by June, announced a measured Singapore-style approach to media liberalisation. Lee said the loosening up would be done gradually, through the introduction of “controlled competition”.²⁵

What this meant was that Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) would be issued broadcast licences for radio and TV, while Mediacorp would be allowed to operate a newspaper. The announcement sparked off a frenzy within both local media giants. Almost overnight, in a bid to outdo each other, staff members were poached, new newsrooms were built, haggling over content licensing deals began and advertising rates were drastically slashed. The fallout was brutal. By the end of four years, the two companies had racked up losses totalling over S\$200 million. By September 2004, they declared a truce, and in fact, a merger. Mediacorp CEO, Ernest Wong, summed it up by saying: “We are married.” The government denied it had directed the companies to do so, saying the commercial entities were answerable to their shareholders.²⁶

It was not all doom and gloom however. The four years of controlled competition spurred both companies to think more strategically and produce better content. Mediacorp pre-emptively locked SPH out from bidding for popular Hollywood shows by aggressively securing the rights for eight of the 10 top American series for its TV station SPH MediaWorks – the remaining two, *Sex and the City* and *Will and Grace* would not have been allowed on air due to censorship regulations.²⁷ MediaWorks created the hit

(Below) Audiences embraced the loveable Singlish-speaking contractor, Phua Chu Kang – “the best in Singapore, JB and some say Batam” – and his dysfunctional family members for 10 years, making the show Singapore’s longest-running English-language sitcom. *Courtesy of Mediacorp Pte Ltd.*

(Below right) *The Little Nyonya* topped ratings on Malaysia’s ntv7 and Astro’s AEC cable channel, even surpassing viewership for popular Hong Kong dramas in Malaysia. *Courtesy of Mediacorp Pte Ltd.*



Timeline of Television

- 1956** Preparations begin for TV with feasibility study and test transmissions.
- Feb 1963** Television Singapura is launched with a weekly hour-long programme on Channel 5. Within six months, this goes up to 5 hours on weekdays, and 10 hours on weekends in English and Malay.
- Jan 1964** First commercials debut on Channel 5.
- Nov 1963** Channel 8 is launched with Mandarin and Tamil programming.
- 1965** Broadcasting comes under Radio and Television Singapore (RTS).
- 1966** PM Lee Kuan Yew opens the TV Centre on Caldecott Hill.
- 1974** Colour TV broadcasts begin.
- 1979** Singapore Broadcasting Act is passed to give RTS more autonomy.
- 1980** RTS is restructured as Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC).
- 1983** SBC’s Chinese Drama Division is set up.
- 1984** SBC 12 is launched to provide more Malay, Tamil and children’s programming, and arts and cultural programmes.
- 1991** Singapore Cable Vision (SCV), a joint venture between SBC and Singapore International Media (SIM), is set up.
- 1992** Cable TV is rolled out. SCV builds \$600-million hybrid-fibre network and is appointed exclusive pay-TV provider for 10 years.
- 1994** Corporatisation of SBC into Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS), Radio Corporation of Singapore (RCS) and Singapore Television 12 (STV12).
- 1995** STV12 revamped into Prime 12 and Premiere 12. Channels 5 and 8 begin 24-hour transmission. SCV launches cable TV pilot project in Tampines, offering over 25 channels.
- 1997** 40 channels available island-wide on SCV.
- 1999** Channel NewsAsia is launched. SIM renamed Media Corporation of Singapore (Mediacorp Singapore).
- 2000** Singapore Press Holdings receives licence for two TV channels (TVWorks and Channel U) and launches SPH MediaWorks. Prime 12 and Premiere 12 channel restructured as Suria (Malay programmes) and Central (Tamil, arts and children’s programmes).
- 2001** SPH’s TVWorks channel is renamed Channel i. STV12 becomes Mediacorp TV12 and TCS is renamed Mediacorp TV.
- 2002** SCV merges with StarHub to form StarHub Cable Vision.
- 2005** Over 90 percent of households receive free-to-air programming via cable.
- 2007** StarHub Cable Vision is rebranded as StarHub TV.
- 2008** Central splits into Vasantham (Tamil programmes) and okto (children’s, arts and sports programmes).
- 2010** Mediacorp and Microsoft launch xinmsn, offering free video-on-demand from Mediacorp’s archives, “catch-up” TV from the previous night’s telecasts, and Microsoft Network’s entertainment and sports news feeds.
- 2011** Mediacorp and StarHub launch 8 On-Demand (StarHub TV Channel 116) offering Channel 8 productions before they are aired on free-to-air TV and access to video archives.
- 2013** Mediacorp launches Toggle, a personal entertainment service on the Internet.
- 2015** StarHub launches Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) service which uses the high-speed Next Generation Nationwide Broadband Network. PM Lee Hsien Loong opens Mediacorp’s new campus, Mediapolis@one-north, marking the start of a nine-month move from Caldecott Broadcast Centre.

sitcom, *Ah Girl* (2001–03), and produced excellent nightly newscasts containing in-depth analyses of local developments and polished TV graphics. Unfortunately for SPH, these innovations and the many Chinese and Chinese-dubbed dramas it acquired were not sufficient to persuade more viewers to switch the channel in its favour.

In the early 2000s, Mediacorp found a new cash cow when it bought the rights and adapted Western TV game shows such as *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, *The Weakest Link* and *The Wheel of Fortune Singapore*, for local audiences. These proved so popular that Channel 5 increased the proportion of hours of game shows it aired from 8 to 20 percent over four months in 2002.²⁸

Going Global

In a new development, Mediacorp started selling its own home-grown programme formats to other broadcasters to adapt. In 2013, it closed a deal with the Thai Public Broadcasting Service to license Mediacorp's *The Arena* debate show for young people in the Thai market. The broadcaster

is also finding growth in lucrative markets abroad, such as Vietnam, where it sold nearly 1,500 hours of Mandarin content to distributor, Goldia One Vision; THVL 1 and THVL 2 channels and Today TV. In the same year, Vasantham channel's most popular police drama series, *Vettai*, was acquired by Malaysian terrestrial channel, ntv7. Other major buyers of Mediacorp productions include broadcasters in Hong Kong, Indonesia, the Philippines and Taiwan. Such deals are an important source of revenue for the home-grown broadcaster to expand in an increasingly fragmented and globalised market.²⁹

Singapore has also become home to a host of foreign broadcasters, including AXN, BBC, CNBC Asia, Discovery Asia, HBO Asia, MTV Asia, Nickelodeon and Walt Disney Television, in no small part due to the efforts of MDA. The state broadcasting regulator and promoter has gone beyond encouraging media companies to provide services for hire to providing funding and promoting Singapore-made content.³⁰

In recent years, many foreign broadcasters have set up regional sales and distribution offices in Singapore. In some

cases, they also commission content to be made by local production houses. For example, Singapore-based Infinite Studios worked with HBO Asia, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Great Western Entertainment to co-produce HBO Asia's first original series, *Serangoon Road* (2013), a 10-episode detective series set in 1960s Singapore. HBO Asia has since inked a partnership with MDA to grow and develop drama production in the local media industry.

Several times a year, MDA leads delegations of local media companies to major industry marketplaces such as Cannes and Hong Kong to promote the sale and distribution of Singapore-made content. It also provides grant schemes to support local production houses, from pitch and production to promotion of their content.³¹ These efforts have helped home-grown media producers and directors win international awards and have their works seen in over 70 countries around the world, putting Singapore on the world map for original English-language TV and animation content from Asia. ♦

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Collecting the Scattered Remains

The Raffles Library and Museum

Gracie Lee charts the history of the Raffles Library – precursor of the National Library – and its enigmatically named “Q” Collection.

“The Raffles Library and Museum... is well worth a visit, for the Library is one of the largest and most comprehensive in the East, and the Museum, which is daily enriched by zoological, mineralogical, ethnological and archaeological collections from the Peninsula and the Archipelago, promises to be, in time, one of the finest exhibitions of its kind in Asia.”¹

– George Murray Reith in *Handbook to Singapore* (1892)

(Above) The library section of the the Raffles Library and Museum, circa 1950s. The building on Stamford Road (which is today the National Museum of Singapore) housed the library on the ground floor and the museum on the first floor. *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

The National Library began life in 1837 as a school library of the Singapore Free School (precursor of the Raffles Institution). The idea of a library was first conceived in 1819 when Stamford Raffles drew up his vision of a native college that would educate the sons of the Malay elite and employees of the East India Company. Part of his plan was a library that would “... collect the scattered literature and traditions of the country, with whatever may illustrate their laws and customs.”

Raffles believed that “by collecting the scattered remains of the literature of these countries, by calling forth the literary spirit of the people and awakening its dormant energies...will our stations not only become the centres of commerce and its luxuries, but of refinement and the liberal arts.”²

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However, the vision of a library that would spur intellectual inquiry in this region would only be realised years later in 1874 with the establishment of the Raffles Library and Museum.

The First Library in Singapore

After its founding in 1823, work on the Singapore Institution progressed in fits and starts until 1836 when an effort was made to revive the educational institution in memory of Raffles. Restoration to the building on Bras Basah Road was completed in 1837, and in a fortuitous confluence of events, the Singapore Free School, which taught elementary classes at High Street since 1834 – in premises that had fallen into disrepair – was invited to move into the building meant for the Singapore Institution.

The library at the Singapore Free School was first mentioned in the third school annual report in April 1837. In response to its appeal for suitable educational materials, the school had received donations of Malay school books and tracts as well as English grammar books and dictionaries from missionaries and supporters. Some of these gifts were channelled into what became a well-used school library.

In December 1837, the Singapore Free School and the library moved into the Singapore Institution building. (The Singapore Free School later amalgamated with the Singapore Institution in 1839 to form the Singapore Institution Free School.) The library had a modest collection of 392 volumes of mostly elementary readers and primers, and was open to all for perusal. Borrowing privileges were, however, reserved for teachers, students and subscribers.

The First “Public Library” in Singapore

The school library became popular with residents in the fledgling years of the settlement when entertainment and news from Europe were limited. Soon, calls were made for the establishment of a “public library” that would serve the community beyond school hours. Taking heed, the Singapore Library was officially opened on 22 January 1845.

The library operated from the north wing of the building with a core collection that was moved from the school library. Among the notable users of the Singapore Library was the renowned naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace. However, the Singapore Library was not a public library by any modern definition. Though aimed at the

wider community, it was not supported by public funds, nor was it free. It was in fact a private enterprise managed, funded and opened to shareholders and subscribers only.

Although, the management committee was understandably concerned with procuring popular reading material from London in order to sustain readership and stay profitable, it recognised the library’s place in Asia. According to the sixth report of the Singapore Library, “any valuable new publications on India, China, or other Eastern British Settlement” would be given “first consideration on all occasions”³ in the selection of new titles.

The library also benefited from prominent residents such as William Henry Macleod Read, Alexander Laurie Johnston and William Napier who generously offered Asian titles to its collection. Today, several titles from the Singapore Library remain and have been preserved in the National Library’s Rare Materials Collection. These include George Finlayson’s *The Mission to Siam*, and Hue the Capital of Cochin China

(1826), *The Private Letters of Sir James Brooke* (1853) and *The Private Journal of the Marquess of Hastings* (1858). The earliest extant copy of the Singapore Library catalogue, published in 1860, serves as a record of the reading tastes of that period.

Establishment of the Raffles Library and Museum

Although mention of a museum as part of the library had surfaced as early as 1823 by the missionary Robert Morrison, co-founder of the Singapore Institution, this

(Below) The Town Hall (present-day Victoria Theatre) in an 1870s photo. The Raffles Library and Museum, located on the top floors of the building, opened on 14 September 1874. It comprised a Reference Library, a Reading Room and a Lending Library. *Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved. Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.*

(Bottom left and right) Portraits of Alexander Laurie Johnston and William Henry Macleod Read. Both pioneers of Singapore generously donated Asian titles to the Singapore Library in the 1850s. *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*



(Above) A postcard reproduction of the Raffles Library and Museum on Stamford Road with its neoclassical architecture and 90-foot-high dome, 1900s. Today, the building is home to the National Museum of Singapore. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Right) Rules of the Raffles Library, 8 March 1882. *The National Library’s Rare Materials Collection.*



only took root in 1849 when the Temenggong of Johor presented the library with two gold coins of probable Achehnese origins. With this donation, the library committee resolved that the coins would form the “nucleus of a museum, tending to the elucidation of Malayan history” and that the public museum named “The Singapore Museum” would “illustrate the general history and archaeology of Singapore and the Eastern Archipelago”.⁴ Thus began the link between the library and museum that would last 106 years until their separation in 1955.

In May 1873, public interest in the colonial products displayed at London’s Exhibition Building prompted the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements to lobby for a similar permanent exhibition in Singapore that would showcase commercial products from the Straits Settlements as well as artefacts on the ethnology, antiquities, natural history and geology of the region. Some seven months later, the matter was revisited, but this time the call was for a museum showcasing objects of interest on natural history.

The proposal was welcomed by the new governor of the Straits Settlements, Andrew Clarke, who suggested that a public library be combined with the museum. The committee of the new library and museum concluded that it would be expedient for the government to take over the operations of the new entity. So, on 1 July 1874, the Singapore Library and its collection of 3,000 books were

transferred to the newly formed Raffles Library and Museum, which officially took on the name on 16 July that year.

Origins of the Malayan “Q” Collection

The new Raffles Library and Museum, now located on the top floors of the Town Hall (today’s Victoria Theatre), opened its doors on 14 September 1874. It comprised a Reference Library and a Reading Room that provided free access to the public, and a Lending Library for subscribers. The creation of a Reference Library marked the formal beginnings of a Malayan collection. The objective of the Reference Library was “to collect valuable works relating to the Straits Settlements and surrounding countries”⁵ as well as general works on the sciences and the arts. With its fast expanding collection, the library ran out of space in just two years and had to be relocated to temporary premises at the Raffles Institution (the Singapore Institution had been renamed in honour of Raffles around 1868) while a new and bigger building was constructed.

The move back to the Raffles Institution building in 1876 presented the library with an opportunity to re-catalogue its books. Departing from the six-genre arrangement, the books were now organised into 26 subjects, each represented by a letter of the English alphabet. The letter “Q”, inexplicably, was the shelf mark for “Works on Singapore, the Straits Settlements and the Eastern Archipelago”.

With the re-organisation, the first general catalogue and synoptical index of the Raffles Library was published in 1877. This was followed by possibly the first bibliography on Malayan works compiled by the librarian and curator Nicholas Belfield Dennys. Published in 1880, the bibliography listed works in the Raffles Library as well as holdings from overseas sources such as the British Museum Library (today’s British Library), the Royal Asiatic Society library, the William Marsden collection at King’s College, and publishers such as Trübner and Company and Bernard Quaritch. Dennys had delineated Malaya as the area bounded by the Malayan/Siamese border, Borneo, the Philippine islands, New Guinea, Java and Sumatra. In all, he listed nearly 400 titles in his catalogue.

In 1880, the “Q” Collection received a much needed boost when the library acquired the philological library of James Richardson Logan. Logan was the editor of the scholarly *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*. His collection consisted of 1,250 volumes of “nearly all existing works on the languages of Malaya, Melanesia, etc.; some of the volumes being of high value”.⁶ To aid researchers, a catalogue of the Logan Library was published in the same year.

Owing to its identity as a library and museum, the development of the library’s collection was significantly influenced by the work of the museum. Scientific publications concerning the flora and fauna of the region, such as Pieter Bleeker’s

multi-volume tome *Atlas Ichthyologique des Indes Orientales Neerlandaises* (1862–78) on the fishes of the East Indies, were acquired with the aim of building up the library and museum as a research centre for visiting naturalists.

Growth of the “Q” Collection

On 12 October 1887, the new Raffles Library and Museum building on Stamford Road was finally inaugurated on the occasion of Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee. The striking neoclassical structure with its 90-foot-high dome initially housed the library on the ground floor and the museum on the first floor. Today, the building is home to the National Museum of Singapore.

The move was timely as the library had begun receiving the first Straits Settlements publications forwarded under the Book Registration Ordinance of 1886 – the precursor of the Legal Deposit function that is in place today. The new law required three copies of every book printed in the colony to be deposited with the colonial secretariat. These deposited materials were, however, kept distinct from the rest of the collections. Thanks to the generous space in the new

building and subsequent extensions made in 1906, 1916 and 1926, much headway was made with the Malayan Collection.

In 1897, the library made another important acquisition. The Rost Collection, part of the private library of the late Dr Reinhold Rost, librarian at the India Office, London, was acquired from the executors of his estate. The collection comprised 970 volumes on the philology, geography and ethnology of the Malay Archipelago. The philology section, which formed the bulk of the corpus, contained works on over 70 different languages and dialects of the East, with the Malayan and Javanese languages being most represented. A catalogue following an arrangement similar to the one done on the Logan Collection earlier was published to facilitate access to the collection. The same year, special efforts were made to improve the library’s zoological collection, particularly in the area of marine zoology, which it woefully lacked. A sum of 500 Straits dollars was set aside for the procurement of these works. It was also decided then that if the library and museum were ever to separate, these works would remain with the museum, providing an early hint that it

had become untenable to administer the two institutions as one.

Progress was also made in the area of cataloguing and collection maintenance. In 1898, the backlog of materials on the Straits Settlements that had been lying neglected for years were finally organised; a number of important discoveries were made in the process, including a near complete set of the *Straits Times Directory* from 1846. The commercial directory, known colloquially as *Buku Merah* (Red Book) in reference to its red cover, is an important historical source on early businesses and European residents in Singapore.⁷ To protect the collection from frequent handling and insect damage, book binding and fumigation using a toxic solution of mercuric chloride, carbonic acid and methylated spirit were carried out.

Donations continued to be an important way of expanding the collection, and several valuable ones from institutional and private donors were received. The government and the Straits Philosophical Society were faithful donors, ensuring that the library had a comprehensive set of official papers and the Blue Books – annual statistical reports bound in blue covers – and the society’s journal, *Transactions of the Straits Philo-*

sophical Society. The Singapore Chamber of Commerce was also a long-time supporter – faithfully donating copies of its reports every year, and in 1909, its archives of Singapore and Penang newspapers. The donation was gratefully received as it filled gaps in the library’s collection of *The Straits Times* for the years 1874–86. The library also has the first issue of *The Straits Times* dated 15 July 1845 that was displayed at the ArtScience Museum from 17 July to 4 October 2015 in an exhibition celebrating the newspaper’s 170th anniversary.

In 1923, the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, which had been operating its private library in the library building since 1893, made a “permanent loan” of its collection of 2,000 books on the ethnology, flora, fauna, geology and geography of the Malay world to the Raffles Library. The valuable books were catalogued and merged with the rest of the collection, thus strengthening the library’s standing as a centre for Malayan scholarship. One such prized title is the 1849 lithographed edition of the *Hikayat Abdullah*.⁸

Besides institutional donors, the library also benefited from the generosity of private donors. Examples of donated items from this period, complete with the original gift plates, include *The Hindu Ruins in the Plain of Parambanan* (1901) presented by William Nanson, partner of the legal firm Rodyk & Davidson and John Brooke Scrivenor’s collection of his geological papers on Singapore and Malaya (1908).

Important historical events also provided opportunities for expanding the

collection. Of note was the British Empire Exhibition, held in London in 1924 and 1925. Regarded as the largest trade fair ever staged, the exhibition showcased agricultural, industrial and cultural displays from the far-flung corners of the British Empire. In support of this endeavour, James Johnston, the librarian of the Raffles Library, prepared a bibliography of almost 200 popular works on Malaya to support publishers and booksellers involved in the Malayan pavilion of the exhibition. The occasion also led to the publication of several books on Malaya: *Illustrated Guide to British Malaya* (1924); *Malaya in Monochrome* (1924); *Malayan Agriculture: Handbook* (1924); *Report on the Malaya Pavilion* (1926); and 18 pamphlets on topics such as the agricultural crops of Malaya, Malay arts and crafts, and labour in Malaya.

By 1925, the “Q” collection had grown to 897 volumes, on top of the Logan and Rost collections. The increase necessitated a revision of the library’s in-house classification scheme. With advice from leading British orientalist Richard Olaf Winstedt, the shelf mark “Q” was divided into eight geographical regions, beginning with Q10 for books on the Malay Archipelago and ending with Q18 for New Guinea. The “Q” collection comprised principally works on the Malay Archipelago, extending up to Formosa (present-day Taiwan) but excluded Indochina or what is known today as mainland Southeast Asia. The latter as a concept only came to the fore after World War II. In 1932, “Q11: Works on the British Malaya” was further divided by the different states of the Malay Peninsula.

The year 1925 also marked the first time that the term “Malaysian Collection” was used by the library. In the *Descriptive Catalogue of the Books Relating to Malaysia in the Raffles Museum & Library Singapore*, published in 1941, Malaysia is defined as “all land on the Sunda Shelf which includes the Malay Peninsula south of Lat. 10°N, Sumatra, Borneo, Java and all the adjacent small islands west of Wallace’s Line.”⁹ Wallace’s Line refers to an imaginary boundary separating the ecozones of the Indo-Malayan and the Austro-Malayan Regions proposed by Alfred Wallace in 1859. This bibliography, which contains 1,787 titles, presents the most detailed description of the composition of the Malayan Collection prior to World War II.

The map collection of the library began in 1932 when all its maps and charts were collated and housed in a single section. The collection grew in importance in 1934 when the library commissioned a study of the early maps and charts relating to the Malay Peninsula found in the libraries of overseas entities such as the British Museum, Royal Geographical Society, School of Oriental Studies and the Royal Asiatic Society. The result was four portfolios of 208 facsimiles that documented Malayan cartography from pre-1600 to 1879. As Malayan cartography had hitherto been a little explored subject, the survey provided a good knowledge base of the types of maps on Malaya and their availability. A catalogue titled *Mills Collection of Historical Maps of Malaya*, named after its compiler J. V. Mills, was published in 1937. Today, the Mills Collection serves as a useful reference for researchers who do not have ready access to the original maps in European libraries. While the maps are uncoloured copies, they are of sufficient quality to be used as a study aid.¹⁰

In 1932, a legal section comprising the laws, enactments and ordinances of the Straits Settlements and Malay States, as well as government gazettes and official publications, was formed. Six years later in 1938, the first archivist, Tan Soo Chye, was hired to organise the official records which had been transferred from the colonial secretariat, laying the foundation for today’s National Archives. Work on the archives proceeded smoothly and a year later in 1939, the *Index to the Straits Settlements Records 1800–1867* was produced. The index is popularly known today as the Tan Soo Chye Index, named after its compiler.

The War Years: Syonan Tosyokan

The Japanese Occupation of 1942–45 brought untold suffering to Singapore as well as the destruction of printed heritage.



(Facing page) *Illustrated Guide to British Malaya* (standing upright), *Malayan Agriculture: Handbook and Malaya in Monochrome* were three publications produced in 1924 in conjunction with the British Empire Exhibition held in London. *The National Library’s Rare Materials Collection*.

(Below) Wallace’s Line is depicted in red on this map of the Malay Archipelago from Wallace’s paper “On the Physical Geography of the Malay Archipelago” (1863). His concept of a discontinuity in fauna between Asia and Australasia influenced the collecting scope of the Malayan Collection. *The National Library’s Rare Materials Collection*.





(Above) Japanese staff of the Syonan Hakubutsukan (Syonan Museum), July 1943. Photo donated by Mdm Michiyo Haneda. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

(Right) Edred John Henry Corner with his son, John, mid-1941. Corner was the Assistant Director of the Botanic Gardens (1929–45) and deserves much of the credit for saving newspapers published during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. All rights reserved, Corner, J. K. (2013). *My Father in His Suitcase: In Search of E. J. H. Corner the Relentless Botanist*. Singapore: Landmark Books.



The official papers of the Straits Settlements were thrown out and reportedly used in markets to wrap fish, meat and vegetables. Fortunately, the library, renamed Syonan Tosyokan, escaped relatively unscathed. While the building suffered from slight shelling and some books destroyed, looted or siphoned off to Tokyo, the collection stayed largely intact. Through the swift action of a few British and Japanese staff, the library was sealed off just three days after the fall of Singapore.

The Japanese researchers, attached to the library and museum (the museum was renamed Syonan Hakubutsukan), were also sympathetic to the work of the institution and protected it from being ravaged by the Japanese military. Through the ingenuity of British and local staff, valuable books were also kept away from sight, hidden among unsorted piles of less important books. Nonetheless, the

adverse storage conditions of the Occupation wreaked irreparable damage to part of the newspaper collection and the manuscript documents of the archives.

The library played a pivotal role during the Occupation years in protecting the collections of the institutional and private libraries of the colonial secretariat, survey office, consulates, law firms and other key entities. The materials were deposited by the Custodian of Enemy Property and stowed away in the library and in Wesley Methodist Church located behind – and returned to their rightful owners after the war. During the Occupation, William Birtwistle of the Fisheries Department and a team of library staff also salvaged the manuscript records of the East India Company which were found drenched and strewn across the floors of the Fullerton Building. As for the lending library, some of its books were sent to Allied prisoners-of-war camps and the rest transferred

to the old St Andrew's School. The space was then converted into a public library for Japanese books.

A tangible link to this tumultuous period is the library's collection of newspapers published during the Japanese Occupation. *The Syonan Times* (later *The Syonan Shimbun*) and the Chinese version, *Zhaonan Ribao* (昭南日报).¹¹ Museum and library staff, and the renowned botanist, Edred John Henry Corner, deserve much of the credit for saving these papers. In his autobiography, Corner wrote: "In a moment of inspiration in February 1942, I had seen that the only written record, however propagandist and fallacious it might be of the Occupation, would be the newspapers."¹² At great personal risk, he surreptitiously kept them in the archives room and managed to collect about half of the issues. When the collection grew too large to conceal, he hid them in the specimen cabinets of the Botanic Gardens. Today, these newspapers serve as a vital record of this dark period in Singapore's history.

Separation of the Library and Museum

After the Japanese left Singapore, a slew of plans were proposed for the modernisation of the library. Principal among these was the establishment of a free public library. To this end, the businessman and philanthropist Lee Kong Chian offered \$375,000 towards the formation of a free public library in 1953 on condition that the library also agreed to collect vernacular books. This paved the way for the establishment of the National Library and the separation from the museum.

The idea of a separation was not new. As early as 1894, librarian and curator George Darby Haviland had made the observation that "that the narrower interests of Singapore residents, centred in the Lending Library, are in great part antagonistic to the broader Rafflesian interests of a Public Museum and Library for the benefit of all who make use of Singapore as a commercial centre."¹³ In 1920, the matter was raised again but no decision was made in view of the recent building extensions. Instead, a Biological Library, attached to the museum, was formed with a selection of literature taken from the Raffles Library. In 1923, the botany books from the Biological Library (also called the Museum Library) were given away to the library of the Botanic Gardens.

By 1949, the library and museum had three specialist libraries, the "Q" Room, the Zoological Library and the Anthropological Library, all of which came under the museum to support research on Malaya. A catalogue of the scholarly journals was published in 1950, titled *A Working List of the Scientific*

Periodical Publications Retained in the Raffles Museum and Library.

It was only in 1955 that the formal administrative split of the library and museum took place. The special collections on zoology, anthropology and archaeology went to the Raffles Museum, while the "Q" Collection came under the Raffles Library. However, it would take another five years before the library had a building of its own, with the "Q" Collection forming the nucleus of the Southeast Asia Room at the future National Library.

These sweeping changes, which also saw the Printers and Publishers Ordinance and the States Archives coming under the administration of the library, were officially instituted through the enactment of the Raffles National Library Ordinance in 1958. On 12 November 1960, the library finally moved out of the museum building into its new premises, the red-bricked National Library building on Stamford Road.

Today, the dispersed holdings of the Raffles Library and Museum exist in the collections of the National Library at Victoria Street and the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum at the National University of Singapore. Parts of the collections can also be found in the Library of Botany and Horticulture of the Botanic Gardens and the staff collection of the National Heritage Board museums. ♦

Notes

- 1 Reith, G. M. (1892). *Handbook to Singapore* [pp. 36–37]. Singapore: Singapore and Straits Print. Office. Call no.: RRARE 959.57 REI; Microfilm no.: NL 7522
- 2 Raffles, T. S. (1819). *Minute by Sir T.S. Raffles on the establishment of a Malay College at Singapore* [pp.17, 24]. [S.l.: s.n.]. Call no.: RRARE 371.9799205957 RAF; Microfilm no.: NL 9827
- 3 Singapore Library. (1850). *The sixth report of the Singapore Library* (p. 7). Singapore: Printed at the Singapore Free Press Office. Call no.: RRARE 027.55951 SIN; Microfilm no.: NL 5040
- 4 Singapore Library. (1849). *The fifth report of the Singapore Library* (pp. 10, 20). Singapore: Printed by G. M. Frederick at the Singapore Free Press Office. Call no.: RRARE 027.55951 SIN; Microfilm no.: NL 5040
- 5 Hanitsch, R. (1991). Raffles Library and Museum, Singapore. In W. Makepeace, G. E. Brooke & R. St. J. Braddell, (Eds.), *One hundred years of Singapore* (Vol. 1, p. 546). Singapore: Oxford University Press. Call no.: RSING 959.57 ONE[HIS]
- 6 *Report on the Raffles Library and Museum, for 1879* (p. 1). (1880). [S.l.: s.n.]. Call no.: RRARE 027.55957 RAF; Microfilm no.: NL 3874
- 7 This title is currently on display at the library's "From the Stacks" exhibition.
- 8 This publication is currently on display at the "From the Stacks" exhibition.
- 9 Daniel, P. (1941). *A descriptive catalogue of the books relating to Malaysia in the Raffles Museum & Library, Singapore* (p. ii). Singapore: [Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society]. Call no.: RRARE 016.9595 DAN; Microfilm no.: NL 11219
- 10 The author wishes to thank Dr Peter Borschberg for his assessment of the Mills Collection.

From the Stacks: Catch it Soon!

"From the Stacks: Highlights of the National Library" is an ongoing exhibition that features several items from the Rare Materials Collection mentioned in this article: the first reports of the Singapore Library (1844–52); books inherited from the Singapore Library; the first edition of the *Straits Times Almanack and Directory* (1846); the first lithographed edition of *Hikayat Abdullah* (1849); and original copies of *The Syonan Shimbun* and *Zhaonan Ribao* (昭南日报) newspapers. These are just a few of over 100 artefacts on display.

Visitors will also get to see letters penned by Stamford Raffles and his wife Sophia; an intricate "Loyalty Address" presented by local Chinese merchants

to Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, in homage of his visit to Singapore in December 1869; as well as some of the the earliest materials published in or about Singapore.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the National Library has planned guided tours, talks and workshops, including a birdwatching tour, a conservation talk by archivists and a heritage cooking demonstration.

The exhibition is held at the National Library Gallery, Level 10, National Library Building, until 28 August 2016. Admission is free. For more information on the exhibition and its programmes, check: www.nlb.gov.sg/exhibitions

- 11 A selection of newspapers from the Occupation period are on display at the "From the Stacks" exhibition.
- 12 Corner, E. J. H. (1981). *The Marquis: A tale of Syonan-to* (p. 151). Singapore: Heinemann Asia. Call no.: RSING 959.57023 COR-[HIS]
- 13 *Annual report on the Raffles Library and Museum, for the year ending 31st December 1893*. (p. 1). (1894). [S.l.: s.n.]. Call no.: RRARE 027.55957 RAF; Microfilm no.: NL 3874

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IN REMEMBRANCE OF

READING

Our memories of reading are inextricably linked to the joy we derive from reading books and the places where we read them. **Loh Chin Ee** explains why.

m

My first concrete memory of reading is of me sitting on the floor of my school library, completely immersed in the pages of the book my head was buried in. I can't recall the title of the book, but I remember my single-minded absorption in the story, and the mild irritation felt when the bell rang to signal the end of recess.

The library at Marymount Convent School was on the first floor, wedged midway between my classroom on the second floor and the canteen in the basement. It seemed like a huge space full of books to a 9-year-old but looking back now, it was probably about the size of three large classrooms. It was here where I borrowed books by Enid Blyton and read about the adventures of Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys. Some of my favourite books tucked away on the shelves included *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell, Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* series and L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*. Years later, another memory etched in my mind is that of fighting sleep in order to read the mammoth *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth in 24 hours – one of the many books I hungrily devoured when I had plenty of time on my hands after the A-level exams.

In Janice A. Radway's classic ethnographic study, *Reading the Romance*,¹ she examines the reading habits of a group of housewives in small-town America. For these women bound to the home, reading romantic fiction served as a form of escapism and pleasure from their mundane lives revolving around the house and children. They saw it as a form of education (transporting them into exotic – and sometimes erotic worlds – that they would have little chance of experiencing); therapy (providing respite from housework and boredom); and community (allowing them to converse with other like-minded readers). While not everyone enjoys reading romance novels, Radway's study illustrates how reading can serve multiple purposes of education, edification and entertainment. That reading can provide endless hours of entertainment or transform one's world-views likely accounts for the significance

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(Above) This selection of books from *The Famous Five* to *Lao Fu Zi* and the Bookworm Club series to the more contemporary *Sherlock Sam* and *The Diary of Amos Lee* represent popular reading tastes from the different decades.

(Facing page) Dr Loh Chin Ee, shot on location at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library at level 11 of the National Library Building. She read voraciously as a child and continues to do so as an adult. Dr Loh is an Assistant Professor at the National Institute of Education, and specialises in reading and school libraries.

that people attach to their memories of reading and of books.

Remembering Books

Trawling through the Singapore Memory Project² portal, I discover echoes of my own memories in the memories of others. People shared their memories of reading *The Adventures of Mooty*³ and being hooked on the Bookworm Club series⁴, both published in Singapore. The latter series was a regular publication in the 1980s and 90s, featuring the adventures of Sam Seng, Simone, Porky, Mimi and Edison in locations that were distinctly Singaporean. The Bookworm Club was innovative in its ability to generate a sense of excitement about reading through school assembly talks and membership subscriptions. I was an avowed Bookworm fan, and at primary four or five, made the pilgrimage with some friends to its office on Selegie Road to buy backdated issues. Students today have greater access to children's and young adult's literature by local authors. Some recent Singapore bestsellers include *The Diary of Amos Lee* by Adeline Foo and the *Sherlock Sam* series by the husband-and-wife team Adan Jimenez and Felicia Low-Jimenez – both published by Epigram Books.

Each generation has its own memory of particular genres and particular books. Singaporeans in their late-20s and early-

30s would have been spellbound by Harry Potter books; the long lines snaking outside Borders bookshop in the early to mid-2000s is a sight many still remember. While I was not one of those who stood in line, I had friends who followed the series (first the book, then the movies) rabidly. Enid Blyton still remains a consistent favourite among primary school children, although parents might be surprised to find their children reading revised – read politically correct – versions of *The Famous Five*, with the language updated for modern audiences.⁵

Students from the 1970s to 90s would be familiar with the comic series *Lao Fu Zi* (老夫子), or *Old Master Q* in English – created by Alfonso Wong in 1962. Students found the stories so engrossing that even those with a shaky grasp of Chinese, such as me, read the simple comics for their illustrations and humour. T. C. Lai recalls that he “grew up in the 70s reading *Lao Fu Zi* all the time, whether it was at clinics, barber shops or bookshops in South Bridge Road”. He enjoyed the “scenes... of Lao Fu Zi (and his sidekicks) dealing with gangsters dressed in bell-bottom pants and garish print shirts”.⁶ Actor Edmund Chen, now in his 50s, recalls that *wuxia* (武俠), or swordfighting novels, were his reading staples during his Catholic High School days (see profile on page 50). But for Wan Zhong Hao, in his mid-20s, a generation later at the same school, manga comics were the rage, along with Tin Tin



The Edwardian-style Methodist Publishing House building at the junction of Stamford Road and Armenian Street opened in 1904. It was subsequently renamed Malaya Publishing House and then Malaysia Publishing House. MPH bookshop has since moved out of this location, but for nearly a century this was the grand dame of the bookshop scene in Singapore. (The Singapore Management University currently leases the building.) This 1984 image is from the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved. Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.

and Asterix and Obelix comics. These books allowed readers to immerse themselves in the parallel story worlds, and enabled them to follow their favourite characters through their adventures, dilemmas, and sometimes, even growth.

Reading Places

Libraries and bookshops rank highly in Singaporeans' memories of places of reading. While each generation remembers different libraries and bookshops, these places remain constant in the memories of the diverse generations. The collective memory of the National Library at Stamford Road generated unprecedented civic activism between 1999 and 2000 when many Singaporeans protested over its proposed demolition to make way for the Singapore Management University and a tunnel to redirect traffic.⁷ Even though the quest for "progress" prevailed and the red-bricked building was eventually torn down in 2005, people of a certain generation still remember it fondly. It would seem that the old National Library, more than any other institution in Singapore, symbolised the nation's love for reading.

Opened in 1960, the original National Library at Stamford Road was for many years a source of entertainment and education for many Singaporeans. People visited the library to borrow and read books, and parents could safely leave their children in the children's section while they browsed in the adult section, all on the ground floor. The library became the haunt of students from the various schools in the Civic District – students from Raffles Institution, Raffles

Girls' School, Victoria School, Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus and St Joseph's Institution hung out at the library to socialise and to study. Reflecting on his time spent in the National Library as a teenager and later, as an adult, poet and essayist Boey Kim Cheng writes that the library is a "storehouse, not only because each book it contains is a work of memory, but more vitally because it contains the memory loci for readers whose lives have been changed by it".⁸

Places are repositories of both individual and collective memories; the sounds, the smells, the feelings evoked by the old National Library are part of our recollections of what the building represented. The iconic but austere building – typical of the functional post-war Modernist architecture of the period – with its concrete steps leading up to the balustrade and main entrance, the slightly musty smell of books, the tattered library card that promised a treasure trove of books (four to be exact) that could be borrowed are some memories that Singaporeans over the age of 30 share. For the younger generation, their memories of reading are associated with the modern glass-and-steel building on Victoria Street or with the new and shiny public libraries found all over Singapore.

Bookshops are also often associated with reading. In the 1960s and early 70s, parents with their school-going children in tow would head to independent bookshops along Bras Basah Road – bearing names like Sultana and Modern – before the start of the new school year to buy freshly minted textbooks. The mother of all bookshops was MPH, established in 1815 in Malacca and

later moving to Singapore in 1890. MPH has gone through several name changes, from Methodist Publishing House to Malaya Publishing House, then Malaysia Publishing House. Entering the scene much later was Times the Bookshop in 1978, Kinokuniya in 1983, and of course Borders in 1997, which has since exited the retail scene.

In a less wealthy Singapore, second-hand bookshops also thrived as hubs of pleasure for avid readers. Secondhand books could be bought for a fraction of the original price, read and then returned in exchange for another book at a reduced price. In secondary school, when I was permitted to roam about by myself after school hours, I would visit Sunny Bookshop in Far East Plaza or patronise a small secondhand bookshop in Ang Mo Kio Central Market and Food Centre, usually on my way to the Ang Mo Kio Public Library. The iconic Sunny Bookshop closed in August 2014. Bank analyst Lynn Teo, reflecting on the imminent closure of Sunny rued its loss, writing: "I feel like another piece of my 'growing up' is gone... I remember taking hours to decide which romance novels I wanted to rent and counting if I had enough money to take out more than one book at a time. I... definitely miss it."⁹

For Chinese books, readers would go to Chinese bookshops in Golden Mile Complex and the various independent bookshops in Bras Basah Complex. Yam Chiang Yee recalls visiting these shops as a young child, where "some of the poor would sit on the floors of the bookshop to read. Back then, the bookshop owners were... very understanding and didn't chase them away".¹⁰ The now ubiquitous Popular began as a Chinese bookshop in 1936 on North Bridge Road, and moved to Bras Basah Complex when it opened in 1980. The presence of so few independent bookshops today represents an erosion of the reading culture in Singapore.

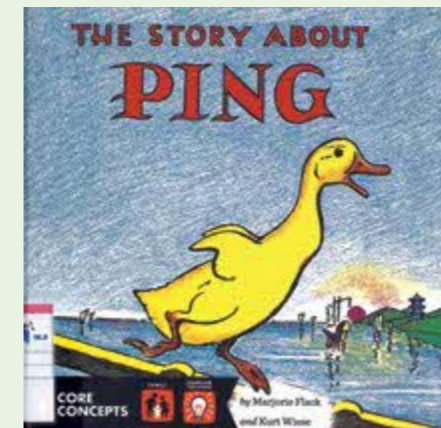
Reading as Social Practice

While reading is often perceived as a solitary activity, there is in fact much social interaction that takes place around reading and readers. In a speech made at the 10th anniversary celebration of KidsRead, a National Library Board (NLB) programme where volunteers read to children of low-income families, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong shared how his mother, the late Madam Kwa Geok Choo, used to read to him as a child.¹¹ A favourite book was *The Story About Ping*, about a duckling living with his family on a boat on the Yangtze River. Reading, as this case illustrates, becomes pleasurable parent-child bonding time over stories. It is also a form of apprenticeship, where parents teach (often without trying)

their children how to read and to engage in reading for pleasure (see profile of Lee family on page 51).

When Borders was launched, it tried to create a community of readers. It brought a different concept of the bookshop experience to Singaporeans, encouraging browsing and reading within its premises with books that were not shrink-wrapped and providing sofas and arm chairs for this express purpose – although many chose to sit (or sprawl) on the carpeted floors to read. Borders was ahead of its time in Singapore, organising various activities such as book launches and book discussions and workshops to engage the community in reading.¹² The presence of Borders resulted in the transformation of the bookshop landscape with MPH and Times revamping their store layouts and Japanese book retailer Kinokuniya expanding its business in Singapore with a capacious outlet at Ngee Ann City in 1999. Although Borders closed in 2011, in part due to poor sales as well as the declining fortunes of its parent company in Australia, it helped significantly in repositioning the entertainment value of reading in Singapore.

Book clubs are another example of how reading can be very much a social activity



[see profile of Rhoda Myra Garcés-Bacsal on page 50]. Read! Singapore, launched in 2005, is a nationwide initiative by the NLB. Featuring a multilingual annual book list, author sessions and book clubs, the initiative aims to generate excitement about reading. The annual Singapore Writers Festival, first organised in 1986, is another example of an initiative that aims to encourage reading and conversations around books.¹³ Independent bookshops such as Caogen (草根书室) and Books Actually continue to thrive, partly because they value their community of readers and create opportunities, whether through book launches or café spaces, for the community to meet. Readers want to see themselves as part of a wider social network and have conversations around books they have read. These conversations can add another layer to the experience of reading.¹⁴

The idea of having conversations around what one's friends and contemporaries are reading is not new. In the 1950s and right until the 70s,¹⁵ the Malay community in Singapore participated in "group reading of the newspapers", passing the papers from "one hand to another or father to son". It was common for individuals to congregate in village spaces, and later coffeeshops, to discuss social issues relating to what they had read. This culture of newspaper reading and coffeeshop talk among older generations of Singaporeans has survived and even spread to other communities – my father, for

(Left) Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's mother, the late Madam Kwa Geok Choo, used to read this book to him as a child, about a duckling living with his family on a boat on the Yangtze River. All rights reserved, Flack, M., & Wiese, K. (2014). *The Story About Ping*. New York, USA: Grosset & Dunlap. (Below) The post-war communal reading habits of older Singaporeans thrive to this day. It is not uncommon to see retirees sitting in coffeeshops or the void decks of HDB flats reading their newspapers in the morning.



instance, now retired, takes a daily walk to the nearby coffeeshop to have his morning coffee and read his Chinese newspaper.

While how we buy and read books today has changed with the presence of online book retailers such as Amazon and Book Depository and e-readers like Kindle and iBooks, reading remains very much alive in the 21st century. The Internet is abuzz with online reading communities that provide opportunities for people to discuss, share and recommend their latest reads. Digital books are downloaded instantaneously on e-readers, especially convenient when travelling. Yet, the printed book remains a popular option,¹⁶ informal books clubs continue to thrive and book-related media events continue unabated. Technology, therefore, supports and encourages the reading of the printed book, and libraries and bookshops are reinventing themselves as places not just to access books, but also to engage in social activities around books. Our memories of reading are closely intertwined with the relationships and conversations that are built around books and the places that allow us to indulge in reading. ♦

Notes

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Edmund Chen: Reading Wuxia and Beyond

Edmund Chen is a multi-talented artist who is well-known in Singapore as an actor, director and producer. Much less publicised is the fact that he is also a gifted storyteller and illustrator who has designed a series of stamps for SingPost (the otter and panda series), set a Guinness World Record for “The Longest Drawing by an Individual” (at an impressive 601 metres), and published several Chinese-language children’s books.

Edmund, who is equally comfortable in both English and Chinese, credits his

affinity for the Chinese language to his time at Catholic High School, where he studied Chinese as a first language. He remembers reading *wuxia*, or swordfighting novels, for entertainment in secondary school. His favourite novels include *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* (神鵰俠侶) and *The Duke of Mount Deer* (鹿鼎記), both by Jin Yong (金庸), and a series of seven *wuxia* novels centred around the character Lu Xiaofeng (陆小凤) by the Taiwanese novelist Xiong Yaohua (熊耀华) under the pen name Gu Long (古龙).

Wuxia novels flourished in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan in the 1950s and the earliest *wuxia* were distributed via newspapers. In the 1970s and 80s, it was a popular genre among teenagers and adults in Singapore, partly for its treatment of serious themes such as chivalry, historicism and nationalism. Well-known filmic explorations of the *wuxia* genre include Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (卧虎藏龙) and the *Once Upon a Time in China* series starring Hong Kong actor Jet Li as folk hero Huang Feihong (黄飞鸿) and directed by Tsui Hark.

As an actor, Edmund read to “understand the different roles” he had to play. Reading reminds him not to be so narrow-minded, to see things from new perspectives and to understand others. More recently, he

initiated an SG50 project, Ah Cai Kopi (阿财搅咖啡), where he produced and co-hosted a multilingual talk-show on web television that featured some of Singapore’s top personalities and professionals. Part of his preparations included reading about the history of the media industry and the personalities he interviewed.

As a father, the first book Edmund read to his daughter was a book that he wrote called *Xiao Qing’s Story* (小青的故事), about a proud bird of paradise that learnt not to judge other animals by their appearances. Set in Malaysia, this book was one of a series of four books about endangered animals (the others being the whale, rhinoceros and proboscis monkey). Through these books, Edmund wanted to create awareness of endangered species and encourage children to protect such animals. Edmund feels that reading should be both enjoyable and educational, and writing stories is a way for him to impart strong moral values to young readers.

Ever the sentimental person, Edmund has two rented storerooms where he stores some of his most treasured books. His collection includes some of his old comics, *wuxia* novels and the books he used to read to his children. ♦

Rhoda Myra Garcés-Bacsal: Gathering Readers

Myra’s enthusiasm for reading is contagious. As the co-founder of Gathering Books (gatheringbooks.org), a website celebrating books, an organiser of the Asian Festival of Children’s Content, and the enthusiastic leader of three book clubs in Singapore, much of Myra’s waking hours are spent reading and promoting books. All this is in addition to her busy day job as Assistant Professor at the National Institute of Education, where she specialises in the study of gifted children.

An avid reader since young, reading is “like breathing” for Myra, an absolute necessity. She shares that reading has enriched her life, heightened her senses and made her more grateful to be alive. For Myra, the most wonderful part about reading is that the experience of reading is available free (from the library), or at a reasonable price (at a bookshop). Over and above the pleasure it provides her, Myra believes that reading gives one a sense of clarity and meaning, and allows us to reflect on the kind of lives that we should lead.

Reading groups are a social phenomena where individuals gather, whether online or physically, to talk about books. Gathering Books started out as a book club in 2007, and Myra was inspired to set up the website in 2010 when she moved to Singapore from the Philippines, as a resource for teachers and parents (and bibliophiles) looking for book titles they wish to share with their students or children. The site is regularly updated by Myra and her collaborators and contains catchy banners such as “Sunday Book Hunting Expeditions”, “It’s Monday, What are you reading?”, “Nonfiction Wednesday,” “Saturday Reads” and “Poetry Friday”.

Currently, Myra is involved in three book clubs in Singapore that meet on a regular basis. Inspired by her daughter, the first club (Gathering Readers) was started in 2012 for tweens from 10 to 15 years old – the age range is adjusted as her daughter gets older – and is held at the Jurong West Public Library. The second book club (Saturday Night Out for Book Geeks) comprises a motley assortment of published (and aspiring) local and foreign authors, illustrators, librarians, art critics, comic geek enthusiasts and educators. The newest reading group (Gathering Readers



at NIE) is made up of fellow colleagues from different departments at the National Institute of Education. This is what Myra calls her “book tribe”, a community of readers who share her love for reading.

When I asked Myra about how she finds time to do all that she does, she quotes sagely from the poet Rumi: “When you do things from your soul you feel a river moving in you, a joy.” She is one of those fortunate individuals where the dividing line between passion and work has become blurred – in a good way. ♦



The family that reads together: Mum Adeline Lee, dad Eng Kiat and their brood of three avid readers, Christabel, aged 12 (left), Isabel, aged 14 (right) and the youngest, eight-year-old Estherbel, in the middle. Photographed on location at the Central Public Library, National Library Building.

The Lee Family: Generational Reading

The Lees are the ultimate poster family for intergenerational reading. In an interview at the Clementi Public Library, they talk about the role of reading in their lives. Mum, Adeline, began the journey with the girls when she decided to use a Christian homeschooling kit called the “American Classical Education” to supplement her children’s education. Using the booklist provided, she bought her children books and read to them – and with them – from an early age. She believes that it’s important to push the children’s reading “to proficiency level” after which they can be left to read and pursue knowledge on their own.

Reading habits differ in the Lee family. Eldest daughter Isabel, aged 14, shares her mother’s love for classics, historical fiction and award-winning books. Isabel’s favourite author is Gerald Durrell “who writes about animals”. Second daughter Christabel, aged 12, shares her father Eng Kiat’s love for comics, science fiction and fantasy, and is currently reading the *Warrior Cat* series by Erin Hunter. Adeline and Isabel cannot understand Eng Kiat’s and Christabel’s fascination with *The Hobbit* and *Star Wars* series of books.

Eight-year-old Estherbel, the youngest, prefers watching television but enjoys listening to audio-books; her favourite series at the moment being *Sophie’s Adventures* by Dick King-Smith and illustrated by David Parkins. Isabel and Christabel have read so widely that they were able to represent Singapore in the Kids’ Lit Quiz, an annual literature competition for students aged 10 to 13, in 2013 and 2014 respectively.

When probed further about their love for reading, it became clear that the family’s habit of book collecting and library trawling was passed down from Adeline’s parents. Adeline remembers growing up with shelves full of *Reader’s Digest* at home, which she and her brother Gary would read voraciously. This was in addition to the books they would borrow when their mother dropped them off at the Queenstown Public Library. These days, Adeline has stopped buying books for her children due to the lack of space at home. In any case, “the public libraries have everything” and visiting the library allows each child the freedom to select her own preferred books.

The family’s dedication to reading is evident in their daily lives. During meal

times, the girls are allowed to read at the table, and it is not unusual to find family members ensconced in their own rooms reading whenever they are free. The Lees frequently share and swap ideas on books: Christabel remembers Isabel recommending that she read *Regarding the Fountain* by Kate Klise and *Holes* by Lousi Sacher when she was in primary 4. Isabel is presently reading books by Jane Austen, a recommendation by her uncle Gary, currently a literature professor based in the US. As the children live in the same household as their maternal grandparents, they have access to the vast collection of materials that three generations of readers have amassed.

When it comes to reading, Adeline and her brother Gary firmly agree that “if you cut out all the electronic devices and allow the kids to be bored, the kids will naturally turn to reading for entertainment.” At the magical point where forced reading becomes voluntary reading, children discover the freedom to entertain and to gain knowledge for themselves. ♦

Cover to Cover

Barbara Quek and Zoe Yeo highlight entertainment magazine covers of yesteryear from the collections of the National Library.

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For many of us (of a certain vintage), entertainment magazines were part and parcel of our growing-up years. We spent many delightful hours poring over such magazines for news and gossip of our favourite celebrities or the latest in film, music and fashion. We eagerly awaited to buy the next issue – much to the exasperation of our parents – or else tried to borrow a copy from friends or read it at the library.

Teenagers today are just as enamoured of entertainment magazines as their parents were many years ago; the big difference is that they are spoilt for choice these days. Although the news is likely to be digitally consumed via a smartphone, tablet or notebook, recent

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research indicates that young people also show a predilection towards reading the tried and tested way – on old-fashioned ink and paper.

Pleasures of the Past

The "golden age of Malay cinema" between 1947 and 1972 saw the emergence of key players like Shaw Brothers' Malay Film Productions and Cathay-Keris, which went on to produce many iconic films during this period. Singapore's film industry began a slow decline in the post-independence years with the influx of movies from Hong Kong and Taiwan. To fill a void in the local entertainment industry, magazines were launched to keep fans engaged.

Since the early 1950s, women in Singapore have fought for basic rights in marriage, education and work. The growing awareness of women's rights, aided by the launch of the Singapore Council of Women in 1952 and the Women's Charter in 1961, unleashed a slew of magazines targeted exclusively at women, such as *Malayan Lady* and *Her World* – launched in 1959 and 1960 respectively. *Her World* was the first of its kind, and has outlived many of its competitors to become the most popular woman's magazine in Singapore today.

The launch of Singapore's first television station, Television Singapura, in February 1963 was a game changer in the entertainment scene. Television was such a novelty in those days that viewers were just as entertained by commercials as they were by the actual programmes. Magazines such as *TV & Radio Magazine* (电视与广播), and later *Fanfare* and *Radio & TV Times*, appeared on the scene to capitalise on the allure of television and the accompanying line-up of local celebrities it ushered. *Fanfare* is no longer around but *TV & Radio Magazine* and *Radio & TV Times* have since evolved to become the hugely popular *i-Weekly* and *8 DAYS* respectively, two of Singapore's longest-running entertainment magazines.

Covers from Yesteryear

The National Library has a rich collection of entertainment magazines acquired over the years or deposited by publishers in the Legal Deposit Collection, an archive of over 1 million items. Highlighted here is a small sampling of magazines from the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and the Legal Deposit Collection. ♦



1. *The Singapore Cinema Review* (7th edition, 1937–38); publisher: William Robert Williams. When "sound" films took off in the early 1930s, it ushered in the Golden Age of filmmaking in Hollywood. Local audiences, bitten by the Hollywood bug, flocked to cinemas such as Alhambra, Palladium, Capitol and Cathay to catch the latest imports. Film-related fan magazines such as *The Singapore Cinema Review* became popular as a result. This annual publication, first launched in 1932, offered the latest news on Hollywood film releases and popular stars of the time, such as Bette Davis and Katharine Hepburn. This issue featured the American actress and singer Alice Faye on the cover.
2. *Singapore Illustrated Weekly* (Vol. 1, No. 1, 2 August 1947); publisher: W. G. P. Davies. From fashion to sports, and travel to theatre, *Singapore Illustrated Weekly* covered a variety of entertainment-related topics from around the world. As a prelude to the release of the film, *Song of Scheherazade* (1947), in Singapore, the Hollywood lead actress Yvonne De Carlo is photographed on the cover of this inaugural issue, poised during a dance performance. The film is based on the life and music of Russian composer, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov.
3. *Indian Screen Guide* (June/July 1952); publisher: Ranjit Singh. This Indian film guide, published in English, was possibly the first of its kind when it was launched in Singapore in 1952. At the time, Tamil and Hindi movies were popular not only among Indians but also with non-Indian film-goers. The cover of this inaugural issue featured the Hindi film *Shin Shinaki Boobla Boo* (1952), starring Ranjan playing the character Boobla Boo and Rehana as Shin Shinaki.
4. *Indian Movie News* (Vol. 5, No. 8, March 1957); publisher: I. S. Menon. In the 1950s and right till the late 70s, Tamil and Hindi films were screened to full houses in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Royal and Diamond theatres, standing side by side along North Bridge Road were two of a handful of cinemas that specialised in screening Indian films. *Indian Movie News*, a bilingual magazine published in English and Tamil, featured happenings in the Indian film industry and interviews with film stars. Actor Dilip Kumar, pictured on the cover of this issue, plays the titular role in the film *Azaad* – the top grossing Hindi film of 1955.



5. **Malayan Lady** (Vol. 1, No. 1, July 1959); publisher: International Service Organisation

This monthly women's magazine in English offered more than just fashion news. Highlights of this inaugural issue included articles on Malay marriage customs, Japanese floral arrangement, home décor tips and "Evening in Singapore", an interview with the late Roland Chow, one of Singapore's foremost hairstylists. Singapore dance pioneer Rose Eberwein, featured in an article inside, graced the cover of the first issue published in July 1959.

6. **Berita Filem Film News** (December 1960); publisher: Mohd. Salleh Haji Ali

This magazine showcased the Malay film industry and the popular stars of the time such as P. Ramlee, Sa'adah and Maria Menado. The years spanning 1947 to 1972, which saw film studios like Shaw Brothers' Malay Film Productions and Cathay-Keris at their peak, is now regarded as the "golden age of Malay cinema". This inaugural issue featured articles written by two special guest writers, the actresses Sa'adah and Normadiyah. Pictured on the cover is the actress Salmah Ahmad, who starred in three films in the 1950s that featured *pontianak*, a vampiric ghost from Malay folklore.

7. **Her World** (November 1962); publisher: Straits Times Press (Malaya) Ltd
Since its inaugural issue in July 1960, this pioneer women's magazine has stood the test of time and continues to reign as the most popular and recognisable women's magazine in Singapore today. As a microcosm of women in Singapore society, *Her World* has successfully captured changing trends in lifestyles and gender-related issues over the decades. Apart from the usual features on fashion, makeup and food, the lead article of this issue was "Are Mothers Responsible for Juvenile Delinquency?" – a headline that will likely make the modern mothers of today fume! On the cover is model Tessie Lim, dressed in a traffic-stopping *sarong kebaya*.

8. **Movie Mirror** (Vol. 1, No. 1, February/March 1963); publisher: Malaysian Enterprises
Movie Mirror first hit Malayan newsstands in 1963, bringing the latest film news in English to fans in this part of the world. The cover of this maiden issue featured Charlton Heston and Sophia Loren in the movie *El Cid* (1961), which American director Martin Scorsese hailed as "one of the greatest epic films ever made". Also mentioned in this issue is the film *Cast the Same Shadow*, a joint production by Cathay Keris and Precitel and loosely based on the life story of Maria Hertogh, whose custody lawsuit triggered a series of riots in Singapore in December 1950.

9. **Bintang dan Irama Star and Rhythm** (June 1967); publisher: Suhaimi Enterprise

Bintang Dan Irama, which means "star and rhythm" in Malay, was a popular magazine that cast the spotlight on the Malay entertainment scene in the 1960s. This issue contains song lyrics and mini biographies of then popular singers such as Hussain Ismail, Jefri Din and Rafeah Buang, who were stars in the Malay pop industry during the "Pop yeh yeh" era, a genre of pop music that was in vogue in the 1960s. Featured on the cover of this first issue are Jefri Din (seated) with Rafeah Buang (left) and Siti Zaiton (right).

10. **妇女俱乐部: 美容美发季刊 Woman's Beauty Club: Hair Fashion and Beauty Culture Edition** (July 1968); publisher: 妇女俱乐部出版

This Chinese women's magazine showcased the latest in hairstyles, fashion and makeup in the late 1960s and early 70s. Bouffant styles such as the voluminous beehive as well as the "Lion City" hairdo, which was designed to "portray light, feathery movements that reflect the classy side of the Singaporean lady", were very popular at the time. These hairstyles were showcased in the maiden issue of the magazine published in July 1968.

11. **Female** (25 March 1974); publisher: MPH Magazines Sdn. Bhd.
Launched in 1974 by MPH Publications, *Female* is probably the closest competitor to *Her World* in the women's magazine business. In terms of

content, it is not vastly dissimilar from *Her World*. The cover girl for the 25 March 1974 issue was Debra de Souza, who was crowned Miss Singapore in 1973 and represented the country in the Miss Universe pageant in Athens and the Miss World pageant in London the same year. *Female* was acquired by SPH Magazines in 2004 and received an extensive makeover. It now markets itself as "Singapore's No. 1 fashion and beauty curator".

12. **Fanfare** (24 October 1969); publisher: Straits Times Press (S) Sdn. Bhd.
Billed as "The Weekly for Swingers", *Fanfare* was the leading English-language entertainment magazine of the 1970s. Printed in colour on newsprint, this digest had a huge following among the hip teenagers and young adults of the day. Readers lapped up "chats" with stars, reports on the local entertainment scene as well as the latest in pop music and film from Hollywood and Hong Kong. Witty articles and columns by journalists Siva Choy, Sylvia Toh Paik Choo, Gloria Chandy, Margaret Cunico and the enigmatically named Kitchi Boy made *Fanfare* a much-loved bestseller for many years. The Beatles – Paul McCartney, Julian Lennon, George Harrison and Ringo Starr – took prime spot on the cover of this issue.



13. [Clockwise from top left] 电视与广播 *TV & Radio Magazine* (18 February 1963); 电视周刊 *TV Weekly* (1 January 1977); *i*周刊 *i-Weekly* (8–15 November 1997); and 电视广播周刊 *TV & Radio Weekly* (24–30 January 1981)

One of the first local showbiz magazines published in Chinese, 电视与广播 (*TV & Radio Magazine*) kept readers up-to-date with the latest entertainment news in the region during the 1960s and 70s. Launched on 18 February 1963 just three days after TV was introduced in Singapore on 15 February (see page 33), the magazine featured TV broadcaster 梁路诗 as its first cover girl. With TV sets becoming more common in households, the magazine was renamed 电视周刊 (*TV Weekly*) on 1 January 1977 to provide more content on TV programmes. Actress Tay Seen Yei (郑心愉), who was also a reporter with the Chinese daily *Min Pao*, graced the cover of the first issue. 电视广播周刊 (*TV & Radio Weekly*), published on 24 January 1981 with Hong Kong actress Carol Cheng (郑裕玲) on the cover, replaced *TV Weekly* at a time when Hong Kong drama serials such as *Man in the Net* became hugely popular with local viewers. In 1997, the magazine was rebranded again, this time as *i*周刊 (*i-Weekly*), touted as Singapore's No. 1 Chinese magazine and an all-time favourite for delivering a weekly staple of celebrity news and interviews, and TV and movie features. Featured on the inaugural issue of *i-Weekly* (8–15 November 1997) are local actresses Ann Kok (郭舒贤) (left) and Zoe Tay (郑惠玉) (right).

14. *BigO* (November 1989 and January 1991); publisher: Options Publications

Launched in September 1985 by journalists (and brothers) Michael and Philip Cheah, *BigO* sold itself as a “self-styled indie magazine” promoting the English music scene in Singapore. Published as a monthly in black and white, *BigO* (or Before I Get Old) had a small but devoted following among fans of homegrown bands. The magazine was also known for organising live concerts and releasing compilations on cassettes and CDs. *BigO* ceased publication in 2002 and later became an online magazine. The cover of the November 1989 issue featured a caricature of singer Chris Ho. In the 1990s, the magazine went full colour as seen in the January 1991 issue featuring the veteran rock band Heritage as well as a new masthead and design.

15. *Radio & TV Times* (25 October 1980) and *8 DAYS* (20 October 1990)

When Radio Television Singapore was restructured as Singapore Broadcasting Corporation on 1 February 1980, it ushered in a new era in television. *Radio & TV Times* became its vehicle to publicise its line-up of both locally produced Chinese dramas and imported Western TV shows – such as the TV series *Battlestar Galactica* on the cover of the maiden issue – as well as the latest news in entertainment to English-speaking readers. In October 1990, *Radio & TV Times* was given a design makeover and renamed *8 DAYS*. This early issue (20 October 1990) featured Whitney Houston on its cover, and in December 2009, the magazine celebrated the launch of its 1,000th issue. The focus of the magazine has since shifted from celebrity gossip and TV-related news to include film, music, books and food reviews.

What is PublicationSG

Launched in October 2015, PublicationSG is a dedicated online catalogue of all physical materials found in the Legal Deposit Collection, a rich archive of nearly 1.1 million items that is now available for public access. Serials and magazines comprise 70 percent of the collection, with 25 percent being books and the rest made up of audiovisual materials and maps as well as ephemera. Members of the public can place reservations to view legal deposit items at \$1.55 each at the information counters of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library on levels 7–13 of the National Library Building, or via an online form at eservice.nlb.gov.sg/forms/publicationsg. The items can only be viewed at designated work stations in the reference library.

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The George Hicks Collection

This valuable collection at the National Library is significant for a number of reasons. Eunice Low explains why.

In order to appreciate the unique value and richness of the George Hicks Collection, one has to understand how these books and materials are interwoven with the personal experiences of their donor, George Lyndon Hicks. Donated to the National Library of Singapore in 2009 and 2013, the collection comprises nearly 7,000 items on China, Japan and Southeast Asia. Covering the main disciplines of social sciences and history, the bulk of the collection is made up of titles on sociology, economic history, political science, culture and customs.

Significance of the Collection

Taken as a whole, the George Hicks Collection represents the personal convictions and philosophies of its donor, who has contributed both academically and philanthropically to advance causes that are close to his heart. The pursuit of truth and moral progress in often controversial and confrontational arenas has been the main *raison d'être* of his writings and contributions. The

collection is all the more relevant today as issues such as violence, racial and sexual discrimination, the stifling of democracy and the concept of moral progress continue to be played out in increasing measures on the regional and world stages.

Two broad themes have captured Hicks' imagination and attention: the interaction between East and West – especially in the exchange and transfer of cultural, economic and socio-political knowledge – highlighted in the titles on China, and in particular, sinologist Joseph Needham's books; and the Enlightenment ideals of enquiry, democracy, freedom and the rights of the individual.

Hicks himself is an accomplished writer. Looking to philosophers and thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, Thomas Paine and Charles Darwin as guiding lights, Hicks has engaged the second theme with zeal and conviction, openly expressing his views on the handover of Hong Kong to China in various opinion pieces and editorials published in the *International Herald Tribune*, *Asian Wall Street Journal* and *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

Especially significant is his seminal work, *The Comfort Women: Sex Slaves of the Japanese Imperial Forces* (1995), a trailblazing book that exposed the plight of Asian women abducted and forced to work as sex workers by the Japanese military during World War II. As part of their research for the book, Hicks and his wife Julia travelled throughout Southeast Asia to interview former comfort women, and obtain first-hand accounts of their horrific ordeals. After disarming their initial suspicions, Julia, who is fluent in several languages, including many Chinese dialects and Malay, was able to earn the women's trust and confidence. One key contact, a Malaysian woman, provided exceptionally detailed information on the location of the comfort stations and how they were organised, describing in vivid detail the interactions between the Japanese officers, doctors and the women.

Piecing together the interviews and translations of Japanese documents, *The Comfort Women* was almost certainly one of the earliest publications to contain in-depth primary source materials on the comfort stations and detailed interviews with the surviving women. More importantly, Hicks' research helped to raise public consciousness of this sensitive subject and brought it to the attention of the world. Hicks recalls *The Comfort Women* as his most difficult work, because of the strength of the emotions behind it – the guilt and

Eunice Low is an independent researcher who has worked in the library and information services sector for over 15 years. Eunice has researched and written on a broad range of subjects, including the social sciences, government information and natural history. She wrote and compiled *The George Hicks Collection at the National Library Singapore: An Annotated Bibliography of Selected Works*.

anguish in the anecdotes he heard, and anger at the Japanese government's repeated denials.

Early Life

Born in Melbourne, Australia, on 13 November 1936, Hicks grew up with vivid memories of World War II, when piercing air raid sirens would puncture the silence of his kindergarten, in anticipation of Japanese bomb attacks. The post-war period was also the time when Hicks had his first encounter with non-Caucasians, when his mother took him to the city. There he saw rowdy scenes of American servicemen on time-off, mainly African-Americans who were stationed in Australia when the war began. He began to see Australia as "white and terrifyingly isolated," and incidents like these began to stir within him an interest in world affairs.

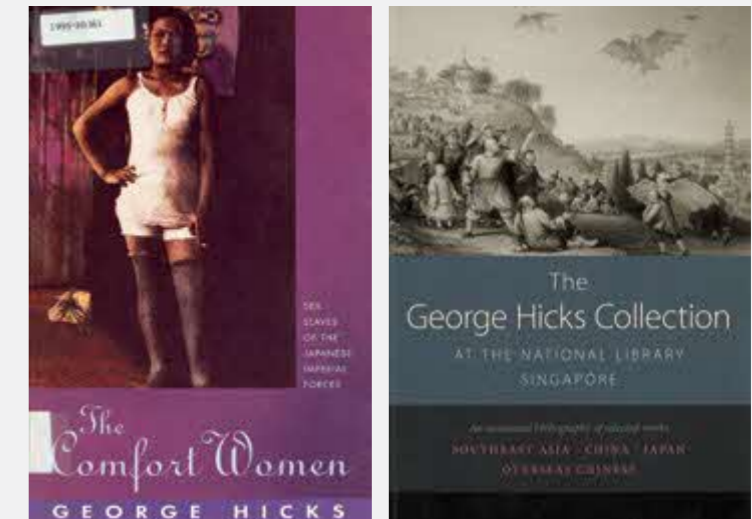
Hicks enjoyed reading the news, and when he started attending college and subsequently the University of Melbourne, he developed an enduring interest in Asian studies, inspired by like-minded academics such as William MacMahon Ball and James Mackie. In 1959, Hicks joined the Immigration Reform Group, led by economics professor Kenneth Rivett, which produced a pamphlet in 1960 titled *Control or Colour Bar?* questioning the "White Australia" policy and calling for immigration reform. This pamphlet and the subsequent expanded publication *Immigration: Control or Colour Bar?* (1962) have been credited as the catalyst in the eventual abolishment of the policy by the Gough Whitlam government in 1972.

Upon graduation from the London School of Economics in 1963, Hicks first worked in Indonesia and then the Philippines, and lived briefly in Japan before settling in Hong Kong in 1975, where he pursued commercial interests in the chemical industry. In 1992, Hicks and Julia relocated to Singapore, where they currently reside.

In each of these countries, Hicks read prodigiously on their cultures, economies and history and began to acquire titles from various sources, including local publishers and booksellers. In Indonesia, he was fortunate to acquire large volumes of annual reports of Dutch companies established during the colonial period, which were hastily left behind when these companies pulled out from the newly independent nation from 1945 onwards. These publications have since been donated to the Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (Indonesian Institute of Sciences) library in Jakarta.

Donations to the National Library

The National Library of Singapore is a major beneficiary of the titles acquired by Hicks on Southeast Asia, China and Japan through two separate donations: the first batch in 2009 comprising about 3,000



titles, and the second in 2013 consisting of another 4,000 titles. Rare and unique additions to the collection include William Thorn's *Memoir of the Conquest of Java* (1815); *Atlas to Lord Macartney's Embassy to China* (1796); Joseph Needham's proof copy of *Heavenly Clockwork* (1959); Simon de la Loubère's detailed observations of Siam in *A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam* (1693); Isaac Commelin's compilation of travel accounts in the East Indies in the two-volume *Begin Ende Voortgangh, Van de Vereenighde Nederlantsche Geocroyeerde Oost-Indische Compagnie (The Beginning and Ending of the Dutch East India Company)* (1646); and *Peking the Beautiful* (1927) by Herbert C. White, a compilation of 70 coloured and monochrome photographic plates of important monuments in the Chinese capital accompanied by detailed descriptions.

In honour of the donations, *The George Hicks Collection at the National Library Singapore: An Annotated Bibliography of Selected Works* was published and launched on 2 March 2016. The bibliography provides an overview of the life and career of George Hicks, including his philanthropic contributions and a list of his edited and authored works. The titles in the collection are broadly structured by geographical regions, namely, Southeast Asia and East Asia (China and Japan). The last section on Overseas Chinese highlights the interconnectivity between Southeast Asia, East Asia and the West. Each section comprises a short introduction, followed by highlights and selected annotations of representative titles.

It is hoped that the George Hicks Collection will inspire the pursuit of knowledge and encourage readers, writers and scholars to reflect and further research the themes that have defined some of the modern narratives in Southeast and East Asian history.

Items in the collection are available upon request at the Information Counter on level 11 of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, National Library Building. ♦

(Above Left) *George Hicks' seminal work, The Comfort Women: Sex Slaves of the Japanese Imperial Forces*, highlights the plight of Asian women abducted and forced to work as sex workers by the Japanese military during World War II. *All rights reserved, Hicks, G. (1995). The Comfort Women: Sex Slaves of the Japanese Imperial Forces. Singapore: Heinemann Asia.*

(Above) The annotated bibliography is broadly structured into four themes: Southeast Asia, China, Japan and Overseas Chinese.



The Bastin Collection on Raffles

The National Library recently acquired a treasured collection of letters and books of Sir Stamford Raffles. **J. B. Stanley** describes some of the highlights.



The National Library of Singapore recently acquired a highly prized collection of materials relating to Sir Stamford Raffles, the founder of Singapore. The collection was assembled over many years by Dr John Bastin, a noted authority on Raffles and author of numerous books and articles on the history of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. This important acquisition, comprising more than 5,000 books, embraces a number of areas, including Java, Sumatra, Malaya, Singapore, Borneo and China, but the core of the collection, including both books and manuscripts, relate to Raffles.

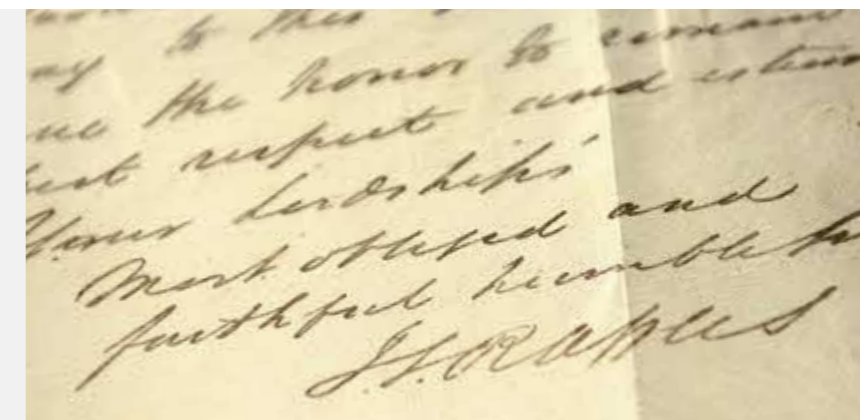
Letters by Stamford Raffles

Of the Raffles manuscripts, the most important is his so-called “autobiographical” letter which he wrote on board the brig *Favourite* during a voyage from Bengkulu to Calcutta on 14 October 1819.¹ The letter, which runs into 14 quarto leaves and written on both sides, is the longest of his private letters and was written in response to reading *A Biographical Dictionary of Living Authors of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1816). In this book, Raffles’ name appears together with the assertion that he owed his appointment as Assistant-Secretary to the Prince of Wales Island government (Penang) to his marriage to a woman connected with William Ramsay, the Secretary of the East India Company.

There was no truth in the statement, but as the matter concerned Raffles’ deceased first wife, Olivia Mariamne Devenish, it caused him great distress. Raffles took the opportunity to write this long letter to his cousin, the Reverend Dr Thomas Raffles, outlining the course of his life, and attributing his successful career entirely to his own efforts and to his good fortune. “Successful as my career may be considered to have been”, he wrote, “my advancement has been entirely owing to my own personal exertions and to what I have always called my good fortune – family, friends, and connections have done nothing for me –”.

Another letter of Raffles’, dated 10 November 1819, calls for his cousin’s missionary support for “an Institution I am about to form for generally educating the higher Class of Natives” – a prelude to the establishment of the Singapore Institution (today better known as Raffles Institution). “You take all Asia within your grasp –”, he wrote, “I only claim indulgence for one half – the portion which is least known but not the least populous – I advocate the cause of 30 millions immediately – and of 300 millions eventually – and think this is sufficient”.²

A third letter written by Raffles, “At Sea off the Coast of Borneo” on 14 June 1823, five days after his final departure from Singapore, refers to his difficulties with the Resident, Colonel William



Farquhar: “I have had a great deal of trouble & annoyance in the details [of the administration] owing to the imbecility and obstinacy of the local Resident Col. Farquhar but as [John] Crawfurd has relieved him & all my measures & plans are approved of & supported by the higher authorities, I have had a great reason to be satisfied with the result upon the whole –”.³

Raffles wrote numerous political and self-promotional pieces for publication in various newspapers in Calcutta and London, but no direct evidence of the fact has survived. It is therefore interesting that the collection includes a letter written by Raffles in Calcutta in 1818 to an unknown newspaper editor alluding to the brutal transactions of the Dutch in the Malay Archipelago in suppressing unrest at Palembang and Saparua, where a number of Indonesians were put to death by the Netherlands colonial authorities.⁴

Rare Book Titles

There are a number of books in the collection that belonged to Raffles, including a volume of the Bible in Jawi, printed in Batavia (Jakarta) in 1758,⁵ and a delightful children’s book, *Conversations on Botany* (London, 1823) that contains an account of the discovery by Dr Joseph Arnold of the giant flower, *Rafflesia arnoldi*, made when he was travelling with Raffles in southern Sumatra in 1818.

There are also Raffles’ own copies of the *Code of Provisional Regulations, for the Judicial and Police Departments* (Batavia, 1812) and *Proclamations, Regulations, Advertisements, and Orders*, issued by him as Lieutenant-Governor of Java between 1811 and 1815,⁶ as well as his own copy of his refutation⁷ of the charges of corruption levelled against his administration by Major-General Robert Rollo Gillespie, the commander of the military forces in Java. The work was printed in Batavia in 1814 in what Raffles describes as “a few private copies”. Raffles’ copy is bound up with his printed *Memorial* addressed to the directors of the East India Company in 1816, together with a printed *Extract* from a public letter addressed by the directors to the Supreme Government in Bengal exonerating him of all the major charges made against him by Gillespie.

(Facing page) A portrait of Sir Stamford Raffles presented by his nephew, W. C. Raffles Flint, to London’s National Portrait Gallery in 1859. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

(Above) Sir Stamford Raffles’ signature on one of the many letters he wrote.

Another extremely rare item in the collection is a copy of the *Addresses, &c. Presented to Mr. Raffles, on the occasion of His Departure from Java*, which was printed by Cox and Baylis of Great Queen Street, Lincoln's-Inn Fields, London, in 1817.⁸ This copy is in its original wrapper and preserved in mint condition as is the copy of his *Statement of the Services of Sir Stamford Raffles*, which was printed privately in London in 1824.⁹ This particular copy belonged to Lady Sophia Raffles, who had inscribed the title of the work in ink on the upper wrapper.

A particularly interesting item is a limited-edition large-paper copy of Raffles' two-volume *The History of Java* (London, 1817),¹⁰ which he presented to his friend Lord Mountmorris and one of the founding members of the Zoological Society of London, with an accompanying letter in which he states that the book "was put together & written in the confusion of a London life" and that he intended to issue an additional volume of plates. This is the only evidence of Raffles' intention to issue a third volume of the book at the time and it is interesting that the collection includes a copy of the rare second edition of *The History of Java*, written by Raffles and published by John Murray in 1830¹¹ with a volume of uncoloured plates, including two hitherto unrecorded plates of Borobudur.

All of Raffles' printed works are included in the collection, including a copy of his paper "On the Maláyu Nation, with a translation of its Maritime Institutions",¹² printed at the Hindostanee Press in Calcutta and published in volume XII

of the *Asiatick Researches* in 1816¹³ and also the Signet Library copy of George Finlayson's *Mission to Siam* (London, 1826)¹⁴ with Raffles' memoir of the author. The latter's two "Discourses" to the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences, printed by the Government Press in Batavia in 1814 and 1815, are also part of the collection,¹⁵ as is Raffles' "Descriptive Catalogue of a Zoological Collection, made ... in the Island of Sumatra and its Vicinity"¹⁶ printed in volume XIII of the *Transactions of the Linnean Society of London* in 1822.

Of particular interest and rarity is an original copy of Raffles' *Substance of a Memoir on the Administration of the Eastern Islands*, which he had printed privately in London in 1824 and is represented here by a copy in its original wrapper, sewn as issued.¹⁷

Raffles' "Address on the Institution of the Agricultural Society of Sumatra," and other papers printed in *Malayan Miscellanies*,¹⁸ are contained in the short-lived publication, *The Investigator, or Quarterly Magazine*, published in London between 1820 and 1824, and edited by the Rev Dr Thomas Raffles. This periodical has never been directly used by Raffles' biographers, and it is interesting that it contains one of the first biographical accounts of Raffles, "Memoir of Sir Stamford Raffles, Knt., F.R. and A.S.", written by his cousin.

Among other periodicals in the collection are the five volumes of *The Java Government Gazette*, which is a key printed source of information on Raffles' administration in Java. It began as a weekly publication on 29 February 1812

under the editorship of a young American printer named A. H. Hubbard and continued until 17 August 1816.¹⁹ This particular copy of the *Gazette* is the most complete of three extant copies of the newspaper, and contains all the supplements, additional supplements and extraordinary issues published by the Government Press in Batavia during the British occupation of the island. The issues of the *Gazette* printed in 1816–17, after the restitution of the Dutch colonial rule in the island, are also in the collection.

Raffles' role in establishing (with Sir Humphry Davy) the Zoological Society of London, which was set up in 1826, is represented in a number of publications and documents, including a copy of the rare original *Prospectus of the Society* with the names of its members added in Raffles' handwriting.²⁰

Lady Sophia Raffles makes her appearance in several works, including a copy of the *Memoir* of her husband which she presented to the Rev Dr Thomas Raffles in 1830. The copy is inscribed "with the Editor's affectionate regards", and contains a letter in which she states that although the book was "too large", her object had been to produce a "record more than a popular reading volume". In this respect, the book proved highly successful because it not only established Raffles' historical reputation but also provided important materials for his subsequent biographers.²¹ In another moving letter to the Reverend Dr Thomas Raffles dated 8 April 1820, Lady Raffles explains that her decision to accompany Raffles on the arduous journey to the central highlands

of Sumatra in 1818 was influenced "only by one motive – affection for my Husband – to be parted from him is the only misery my Soul shrinks from – to be united to him in life & death the bright hope of my existence –".²²

Other books in the collection associated with Lady Raffles include a privately printed copy of the *Memoir of the Life and Writings of the Late William Marsden* (London, 1838) inscribed by his widow Elizabeth Wilkins thus: "Lady Raffles with the Editor's best regards".²³ Most of Marsden's publications, including a presentation copy of the third edition of *The History of Sumatra* (London, 1811), with the large folio of plates,²⁴ and a copy of the unrecorded fourth edition with the plates reduced to quarto format, are in the collection, together with copies of his *Grammar of the Malayan Language*²⁵ and *Dictionary of the Malayan Language*,²⁶ both published in London in 1812.

An item of significant interest relating to William Marsden is a large printed folding map of Sumatra that Raffles constructed from surveys of the island (and printed privately in London in 1829 with a dedication to Marsden).²⁷ It includes an inset map of Singapore that Lady Raffles included in a few special copies of her *Memoir* when it was published the following year.

The collection is particularly strong in books relating to Raffles' other friends and associates, including all the major printed works by the Scottish orientalist, John Leyden, including his translation of the *Malay Annals* (London, 1821), with an introduction by Raffles;²⁸ the publications of his physician and private secretary, Dr William Jack, including the latter's famous and notoriously rare essay titled "Third Paper on Malayan Plants" printed by the Sumatra Mission Press in Bengkulu in 1820; and virtually all the publications by the American naturalist, Dr Thomas Horsfield, who enjoyed Raffles' official patronage in Java during 1811–16. These publications include Horsfield's doctoral thesis on plant poisons, which was printed in Philadelphia in 1798; his papers on the upas tree and medicinal plants of Java; his works on the insects of Java, including the rare *Annulosa Javanica* (London, 1825); and an account of his botanical discoveries as described by Robert Brown and John Bennett in *Plantæ Javanicæ Rariores* (London, 1838–52). Horsfield's contributions to Indonesian zoology are described in his own copy of *Zoological Researches in Java and the Neighbouring Islands* (London, 1821–4),²⁹ which contains a unique proof lithograph plate of the Malayan tapir – the first printed lithograph of any Indonesian subject.

To these and other important works must be added one of the first books printed in Singapore and Malaysia respectively – James Low's *Dissertation on the Soil & Agriculture of the British Settlement of Penang* (Singapore, 1836);³⁰ and William Milne's *Retrospect of the First Ten Years of the Protestant Mission to China* (Malacca,

The Rare Materials Collection

One of the main functions of the National Library is the collection and preservation of rare materials on Singapore's history. As a result of a concerted process that began in the mid-19th century, the library's Rare Materials Collection today numbers over 11,000 items. Preserved in a climate controlled room on level 13 of the National Library Building, the collection comprises mostly books and periodicals, but also materials such as manuscripts, maps, photographs, art prints and illustrations, as well as handwritten letters and documents. The collection covers mainly geography, history, languages and literature, religion and the social sciences, with a special focus on Singapore and Southeast Asia from the 15th to early 20th centuries.

As the materials are in essence equivalent to precious museum artefacts, access to the secured collections room is limited to staff only. To facilitate easy access, the Rare Materials Collection is being digitised and gradually made available on the National Library's BookSG website at eresources.nlb.gov.sg/printheritage.

Microfilm copies are also available to library users at level 11 of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library (Singapore & Southeast Asian Collection) at the National Library Building. If there is a need to view the originals, please email your request to ref@library.nlb.gov.sg



(Below) Stamford Raffles began collecting materials for his book *The History of Java* when he was Lieutenant-Governor of Java between 1811 and 1816. Pictured on the left is the two-volume work by Raffles. It is beautifully illustrated by William Daniell (1769–1837) and remains a classic reference text on Javanese history. This immaculately preserved copy was presented by Raffles to his friend Lord Mountmorris with an accompanying letter. Pictured on the right is *The History of Sumatra*, also in two volumes. This is British orientalist William Marsden's pioneering scientific and ethnographic study on the history of Sumatra. This third edition comes with a separate folio containing 19 large black and white illustrations primarily on the flora and fauna of Sumatra. The opened folio here shows a close-up of the leaves and fruit of the mangosteen tree.

1820);³¹ and the first book on Sumatra – Adolph Eschelskroon's *Beschreibung der Insel Sumatra* (Hamburg, 1781),³² in both the German and Dutch editions.

This remarkable collection of books, which also includes most of the English books on Borneo

– including presentation copies by the first Rajah of Sarawak, Sir James Brooke – constitutes one of the finest private libraries on the Malay Archipelago ever assembled. All this today forms part of the Rare Materials Collection at the National Library. ♦

Notes

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Spinal Guide

The Anatomy of a Book

The book spine is probably one of the most important yet ignored parts of a book, often playing second fiddle to the cover. It might be hard to believe but early books did not have titles on their spines, and books were arranged with their spines facing inwards. While the humble spine holds all the information a potential reader might need before pulling the book out from the shelf, after that point, it holds little significance.

Interestingly, books did not always have spines. During the 15th and 16th centuries, books were unbound and produced in the form

of "rough, unfolded sheets". Buyers would then have the books bound according to their aesthetic preferences and financial abilities.

As books became increasingly cheaper to produce and bind over time, the form of the book began to change too. As blank spines made it hard for people to find their desired books, the book title, and later, the author's name began appearing on spines to facilitate identification. In today's saturated book market, book spines have to go beyond basic functionality; spines have to be as attractive and alluring as book covers in order to entice new readers.

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Text by: Liao Youwen and Natalina Pereira

Thickness of spine

This will affect the size of the font and artwork. Two basic determinants: paper quality (the thicker the paper, the thicker the spine) and page count.

Main title

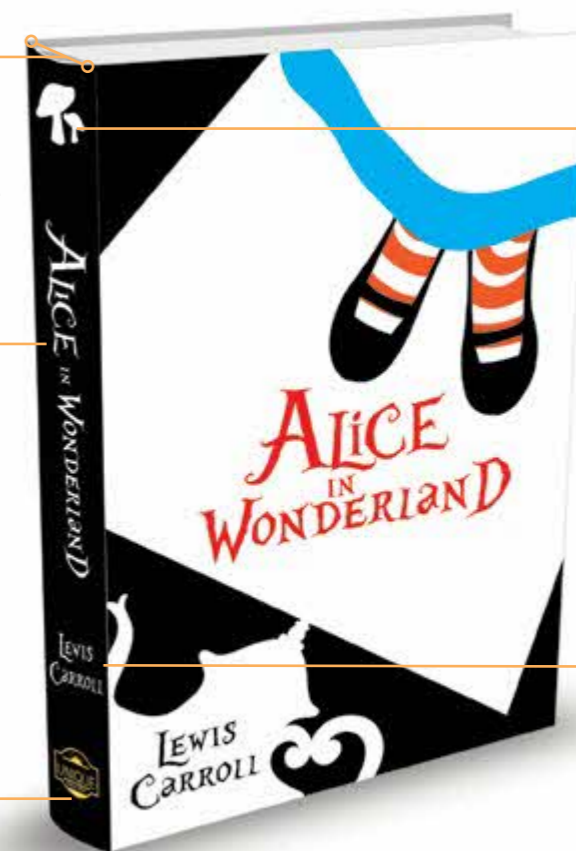
Words should be in big and bold typeface, and legible and readable from 30–45 cm away.

Subtitle

Should be included if there is sufficient space.

Publisher's logo

This is usually located at the bottom of the spine. However, notable publishers or books that are part of a series may place the logo in a more prominent position at the top of the spine for identification and branding purposes.



Artwork

Optional, can be included to tie in with the book cover design.

Author's name

Included to facilitate identification.

LEARNING MALAY USING HOKKIEN

This Chinese-Malay dictionary titled 华夷通语 (*Hua yi tong yu*) was written by Lim Kong Chuan in 1887. To make it easy for Hokkien readers to learn Malay, Chinese characters were used to capture the sounds of Malay words.

Be sure to check out this dictionary and other rare publications at the exhibition!



VISIT THE EXHIBITION



Highlights
of the
National Library

30 Jan – 28 Aug 2016
10.00am – 9.00pm

Gallery, Level 10
National Library Building

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