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Singapore's Got Talent *Talentine's* Greatest Hits

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Director's Note

As some of you would've noticed, we recently installed a public piano in the lobby of the National Library Building and it's been a wonderful addition to the space. Every day, someone will slide up to the concert grand to play a tune, whether it's a classical piece or a pop song. There's just something about music that makes us want to sing and dance. This remarkable ability of music to move us goes a long way to explain why Talentime, the local talent show, struck a chord with Singaporeans between the 1960s and 1980s. Jamie Lee and Mark Wong's duet is a fitting tribute to a show that once ruled the airwaves.

Back in 1973, Karen Carpenter sang about how she'd listen to the radio waiting for her favourite songs while Elton John remembered when rock was young. That was also the year that Patricia Chan, Heather Merican and Glory Barnabas helped everyone stand taller thanks to their exploits at the 7th Southeast Asian Peninsular Games that were held in Singapore. Lim Tin Seng's account of their achievements is a commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the games as well as a fitting way to mark Shanti Pereira's amazing performance at this year's Asian Games in Hangzhou.

On a more sombre note, it was 60 years ago that a car bomb exploded in Sennett Estate, killing two bystanders. The two men who died were the first victims of the bombing campaign in Singapore that was part of Konfrontasi. Unfortunately, more innocents would perish before a peace treaty was signed in 1966. Alvin Tan uncovers the gruesome details of this undeclared war.

While even undeclared wars have armies, not all armies fight literal wars. One well-known army that sees a different kind of battle is the Salvation Army, a Protestant church and charitable organisation whose roots in Singapore go back to the 1930s. Lee Geok Boi recedes the situation to trace how the Army fought to provide a better life for young men and women in need, and how the Army reacted when faced with an actual hostile army during the Japanese Occupation.

This issue also looks at what happened when officials of the Qing Imperial Court visited Singapore in 1876, the challenges of restoring classic Asian films, a history of Malay comic books, the life of the late architect William Lim, and what inspired Rachel Heng to write her critically acclaimed novel, *The Great Reclamation*.

As you can see, we spare no effort to unearth great stories for your reading pleasure. Enjoy!

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On the cover
The Crescendos on the cover of their first record, *Mr Twister/Frankie* (1963), released by Philips.

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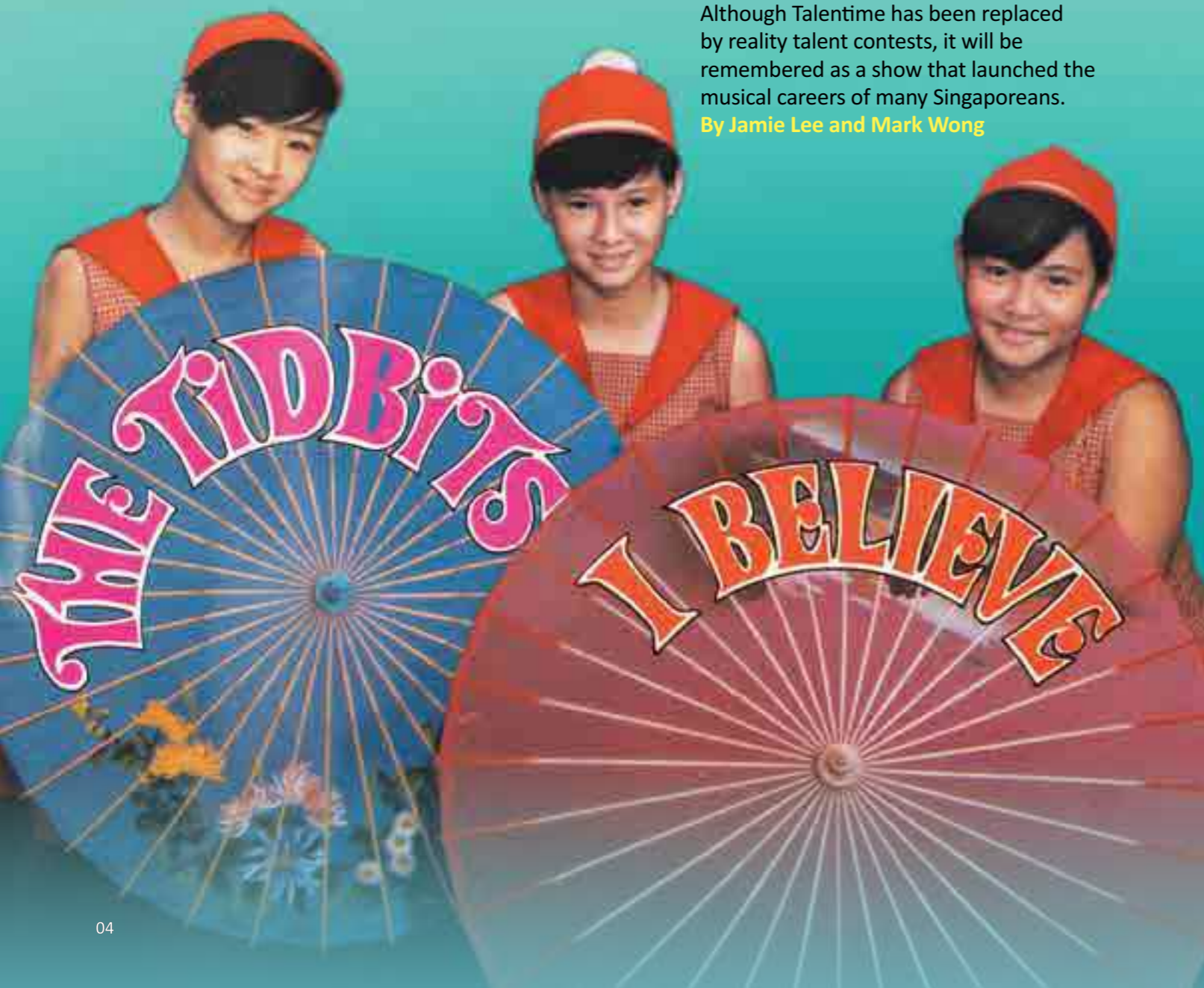
SINGAPORE'S GOT TALENT

A BRIEF HISTORY OF

TALENT TIME

Although Talentime has been replaced by reality talent contests, it will be remembered as a show that launched the musical careers of many Singaporeans.

By Jamie Lee and Mark Wong



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In its heyday, Talentime was a major cultural phenomenon in Singapore. Through radio, and later television, the talent show gave aspiring singers and bands a chance to make it big on the national stage. In the 1960s, The Crescendos and The Quests were picked up by record labels after being talent-spotted on the show. Singer Jacintha Abisheganaden got her big break when she won the contest in 1976 as part of the group Vintage.

Its hold on the public's imagination, at least at one point, was remarkable. "[T]he first year that we put Talentime on to [sic] television [in 1967], there was no traffic on the road," recalled veteran broadcaster Vernon Cyril Palmer in his oral history interview. "All traffic came to a halt. Anybody who was near an electronic shop would stop by and watch the programme through the display window. And most people stayed at home to watch the programme. That was how effective Talentime was."¹

The history of Talentime goes back to the early postwar years. In January 1949, Radio Malaya Singapore – Singapore's first public radio service – released the results of a listeners' survey. It found that people enjoyed "request programmes, dance and Hawaiian music and variety shows employing local talent" and they disliked "too many news bulletins, the stock market news and broadcasts of church services".² Later that month, the station announced that they were hosting a talent competition to discover Singapore's "hidden talent" by inviting amateur artistes including singers, vocal groups, instrumentalists and even impersonators to compete in a series of six rounds.

"This is a chance for Singaporeans to show what they can do," said Tony Beamish, Radio Malaya's English programmes supervisor in the *Straits Times*. He said he hoped to have "many new voices over the air through discoveries for these programmes".³ Performances would be held fortnightly, recorded in front of a live audience on a Friday, then aired on radio the following Monday.⁴

Beamish had been the one to come up with the name Talentime. "[The name] 'Amateur Hour', it wasn't good enough," recalled Palmer. "So we went through many titles and eventually we came up with the suggestion of 'Talentime'. Actually it was suggested by Tony Beamish. We all agreed it was a good title."⁵

(Facing Page) The Tidbits clinched the top prize with their rendition of "I Believe" at the 1968 Talentime. They were one of the local bands to have recorded with RCA. *Jean Dabel Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

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The winner of the first Talentime round was 32-year-old Eurasian clerk Freddie Jansen, who sang "Surrender". He "clocked highest on the applause meter" at the show on 18 February 1949.⁶ "Crooning is again the rage in Singapore," trumpeted the *Sunday Times*. "With the introduction of Radio Malaya's 'Talentime', the crooners and their soft mellow voices will no longer be confined to the microphones of the amusement parks and cabarets – or the bathrooms. Crooners will compete with each other in 'Talentime', and over the ether will come the voices of Singapore's Bing Crosbys, Frank Sinatras and Perry Comos."⁷

From left: Raymond Ho, Susan Lim, Leslie Chia and John Chee of The Crescendos, 1963. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*





Larry Fenton and the Tin Can Toledos. From left: Carl Miles, Leo Miles, Larry Fenton and Larry's wife. Image reproduced from "It's Talentime Tonight," *Malaya Tribune*, 27 April 1949, 8. (From NewspaperSG).

Eurasian clerk Freddie Jansen was the winner of the first broadcast Talentime on 18 February 1949. Image reproduced from "It's Talentime Tonight," *Malaya Tribune*, 27 April 1949, 8. (From NewspaperSG).

It turns out that the *Straits Times* was mistaken that the future was crooning. On 27 April 1949, Larry Fenton and his Tin Can Toledos took the winner's title at the first Talentime finals. The Tin Can Toledos were not crooners. Instead, they were a "cowboy novelty act in which Larry... sang, yodelled, did vocal gymnastics and impressions".

The finals were held at the Victoria Memorial Hall and a thousand-strong audience came to watch while thousands more listened to the subsequent broadcasts.⁸ It was so popular that 200 forged tickets were collected, in addition to the 850 officially issued tickets.⁹ (Remarkably, some five decades later, Larry would go on to win the first prize in Singapore Broadcasting Corporation's *Talent Quest* in February 1989. Then 73, he gave a "gutsy impersonation of a radio broadcasting station".¹⁰)

The Young Ones

Talentime benefitted from the growing popularity of rock 'n' roll, which introduced an electrifying new culture of consuming music that was energetic, raucous and youth-oriented. By the 1950s in Singapore, "a healthy rock 'n' roll culture was already in place", paving the way for the "diverse and lively" pop music scene in the 1960s.¹¹

Then there was the element of audience participation. This gave ordinary people the power to



decide the winners. "The audience were the judges," said 1952 Talentime winner Sam Gan Tiang Choon. "They were asked to clap after each contestant's name was announced. An applause meter measured who won the loudest applause, hence the winner." As a result, noted Gan, "nobody would risk a lengthy number and bore the audience to sleep. After all, they were the ones who decided our fate."¹²

At least in the early years, the atmosphere was relaxed. "There were no rehearsals," Gan recalled. "We just turned up and banged it out."¹³ According to Reginald (Reggie) Verghese of The Quests, during the band's 1963 Talentime experience, their "[g]uitars were out of tune. [Music director] Charlie Lazaroo threw us out. You know, there were no tuners at that time. So we tuned, then in the air-con, somebody's guitar [goes] slightly out."¹⁴

Budding musicians saw Talentime as a way of gaining visibility and kick-starting their careers. "During that time, there was only one English radio station," recalled John Chee of The Crescendos. "So whoever it is would listen to that radio station would ultimately hear us because the disc jockeys at the time were also wanting to push local talent."

The Crescendos themselves were catapulted into stardom after catching the eye of producer and compere Kingsley Morrando while participating in Talentime in 1962.¹⁵ Morrando talked Philips into recording the band's debut single, *Mr Twister/Frankie* (1963),¹⁶ which became the first record by a Singapore pop band released by an international record company.

Another group that found fame via Talentime was The Tidbits – a trio comprising teenage school-girls Serene Wee, her sister Merlina Wee and their cousin Bernadette De Souza. They clinched the top prize in the vocal group category with their rendition of "I Believe" in 1968.¹⁷ The Tidbits went on to release a vinyl recording featuring four songs, "I Believe", "Breaking Up Is Hard to Do", "Never My Love" and "Lace Covered Window",¹⁸ becoming Southeast Asia's first recording artistes on RCA's international label.¹⁹

While the early Radio Malaya versions of Talentime used an applause meter, by 1954, the contest began to rely on judges.²⁰ And though it must have been nerve-racking being judged on stage, being a judge was no easy task either. Judges were also under the microscope for their verdicts. Following heated rounds of competition, complaint letters appeared in local newspaper forums like clockwork.

"This is not the first time I have considered the three judges to have erred but it is the first time they have failed to select two good entertainers. It has been announced that they judge solely on what they hear, and I am now inclined to agree, only it appears they give points on the APPLAUSE they hear and not the quality of the performers," wrote W.A. Morton to the *Straits Times* in May 1962.²¹

It was critical for a talent competition to get its judging criteria right. Eleven days before the finals of the 1971 Talentime, a meeting involving the broadcaster and show judges was convened for this precise purpose. A glimpse of the meeting notes reveals the thinking of the Talentime organisers: "Some of the judges would concentrate on the visual and presentation aspects of the contestants, while the others pay more attention to the musicianship qualities – e.g. voice, musical interpretation, etc. The ration of the marks for presentation and showmanship should be around 30%, while 70% would go towards musicianship... During the transmission of the final, compere Kenneth Lim would make a specially prepared announcement explaining the way the contestants are being judged."²²

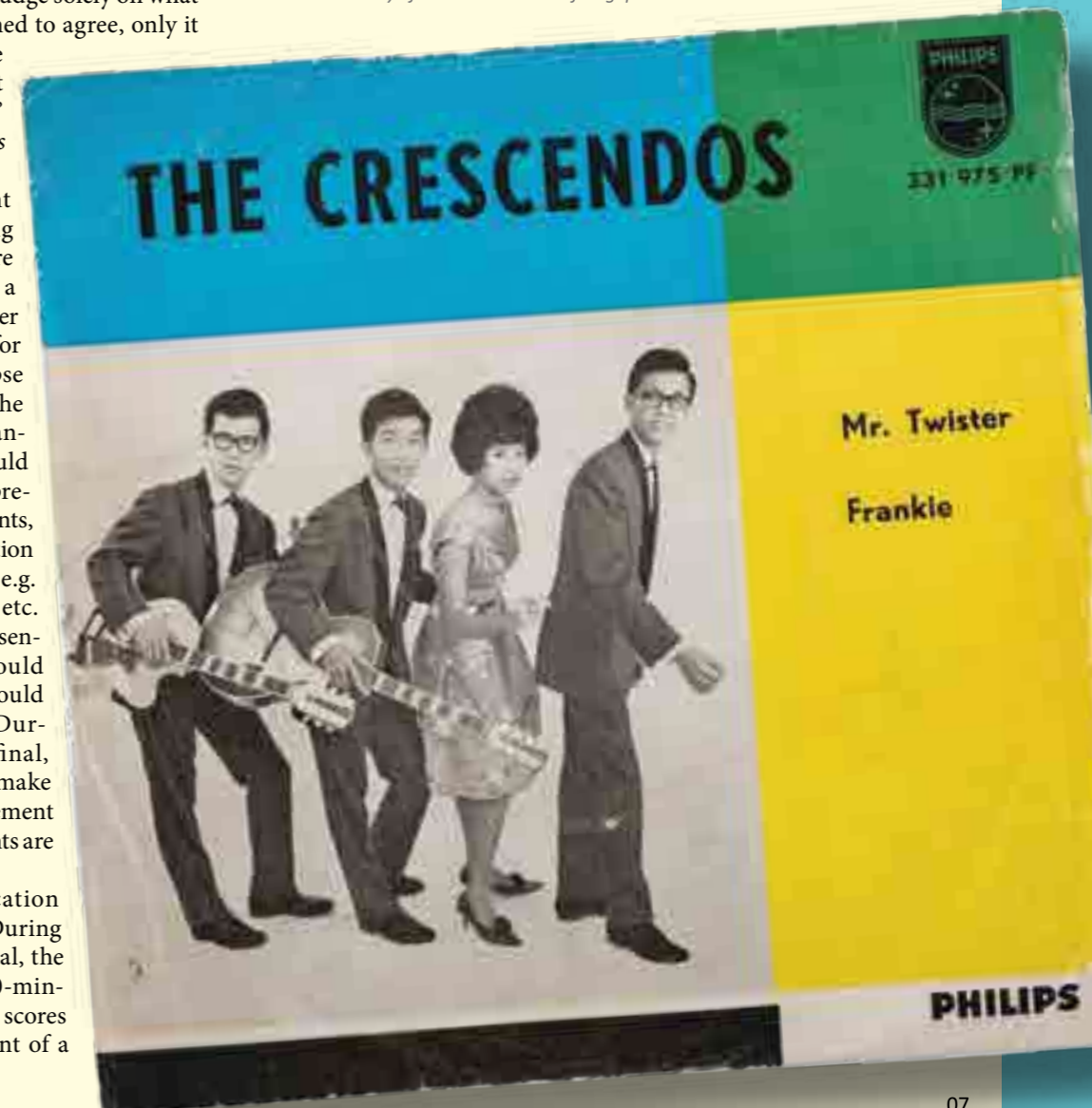
This fixation on adjudication could seem excessive at times. During the 1976 English Talentime final, the two emcees spent half of the 70-minute programme tallying up the scores from individual judges in front of a live audience.²³

I Want My MTV

The launch of television on 15 February 1963 in Singapore, and eventually a televised version of Talentime four years later, resulted in the show emphasising spectacle. Audiences in the age of television had more stringent expectations for singers – not only did their musical performances have to be up to mark, but their entire visual language had to impress – from costumes and movements, down to facial expressions.

In 1978, The Masquerades performed in skin-tight costumes, red capes and sequinned masks.²⁴ The group continued their gimmick of appearing masked until the finals. "The revelation of their faces at the end of their song, I Want to Give Everything to You (including their identity) was an appropriate close to their performance," reported the *Straits Times*. The Masquerades eventually took third place in the vocal groups category.²⁵

The Crescendos' first record, *Mr Twister/Frankie* (1963), was a great success. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.





People waiting outside the Victoria Memorial Hall to catch their first glimpse of black-and-white TV images at the launch of Television Singapura on 15 February 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Following Singapore's independence in 1965, the airwaves were brought under the Ministry of Culture's Department of Broadcasting. Public radio and television services were reorganised into a monolithic broadcasting entity, Radio and Television Singapore (RTS). Radio and television programmes were then used as critical tools in the government's efforts to create a Singaporean cultural identity.

Government policy had an impact on the kinds of music that was deemed acceptable for Talentime. While musical genres such as psychedelic rock, metal and punk rock blossomed in North America and Western Europe between the 1960s and 1970s, RTS played it safe in compliance with the government's anti-yellow culture campaign at the time.²⁶

The government also sometimes intervened directly during the contest. During 1971's Talentime, Johnny Tan tried his luck again. (He had made it to the finals of *Radio Talentime* in 1968.²⁷)

Tan, apparently, was notable because of his campy stage persona. The *New Nation* reported that "[h]alf-way through the recording, the shocking, bell-bottomed Johnny Tan, who had TV viewers here in fits of laughter two years ago, makes an equally hip-swaying entry. Blowing kisses around the studio and swinging his arms wildly, he makes his declaration with *This is My Song*".²⁸ After watching one of Tan's performances, Culture Minister Jek Yeun Thong issued an order that "[n]o contestant similar to Johnny Tan may be allowed to participate in subsequent heats".²⁹

The Quests were talent-spotted while taking part in Radio Talentime. They signed with EMI and their hit single "Shanty" knocked The Beatles off the local charts. From left: Quest members Jap Chong, Henry Chua, Lim Wee Guan, Reggie Verghese and Vernon Cornelius, 1966. Photo taken at the Peter Robinson Studio on Orchard Road. Courtesy of Vernon Cornelius.



The Winner Takes It All?

While everyone obviously wanted to win, being crowned rarely translated into professional success and many winners faded quickly into obscurity. The more fortunate ones include T.F. Tan, winner of the 1971 Talentime, and Sugiman Jahuri, first-prize winner in the English section of the 1973 Talentime, who went on to become household names.³⁰ Tan, a tropical fish dealer whose powerful voice called to mind singers like Tony Bennett and Andy Williams, had won "more [T]alentime quests than any other amateur in Singapore". One *New Nation* article claimed that "anyone old enough to remember the series remembers T.F".³¹

Sugiman released a string of records, including *I Look at You* (Columbia; 1968), *Kesah Chinta* (Parlophone; 1971) and *Woman Woman* (Columbia; undated).³² Another notable winner was, of course, Jacintha Abisheganaden.

If winning automatically translated into commercial success, losing the competition did not spell failure either. Quite a few contestants who did not make the finals went on to have long, successful careers in music.³³ These include Joe Chandran of the X'periment, Alban De'Souza³⁴ and Talib Ismail of Tania, and Mel Ferdinands of Gypsy.³⁵

Breaking Up Is Hard to Do

On 31 January 1980, RTS was dissolved and its functions were transferred to the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC). SBC reprised the Talentime format "uneventfully" through to the 1980s.³⁶

By 1988, SBC had articulated a new "entertainment concept" for the programme, which emphasised presentation and showmanship. "I want to do away with nervous contestants quaking on centrestage," said producer Lim Sek. Under Lim, Talentime participants were accompanied by backup dancers. He also overturned the decades-old rule that barred professionals from participating.³⁷ The era of Talentime as an amateur competition was no more.

Talentime was put on hiatus in the 1990s, as local broadcasting entities went through a process of privatisation to give broadcasters greater flexibility in order to compete with cable television and other foreign competitors.³⁸ It was not until the new millennium that Mediacorp, the media conglomerate that succeeded SBC, launched *Talentime 2001* in a bid to unearth local "pop stars".³⁹

The show, unfortunately, received scathing comments in the press after the first quarterfinals on 14 October 2001. "Talentime 2001 appears so far to be no more than a one-hour, glorified karaoke session, with prizes in place of the alcohol," wrote Lionel Seah for the *Straits Times*. "[W]hat Talentime 2001 seems to be looking out for is a mediocre singer who looks fabulous and can do complex dance routines for the duration of one short song."⁴⁰

Talentime would soon seem like an anachronism when the British reality television singing competition *Pop Idol* debuted in October 2001 and eventually spawned an international *Idols* franchise. *American Idol* began airing in the US in June 2002 and was hugely popular in Singapore. Mediacorp replaced Talentime with its own *Singapore Idol* in 2004, incorporating confessionals and melodramatic interviews with contestants – it was a hit.

Auditions for *Singapore Idol* that began in June 2004 attracted more than "3,000 wannabe-stars to warble for a shot at fame and a recording contract". In the finals on 1 December that year, 8,000 people turned up at the Singapore Indoor Stadium to watch Taufik Batisah emerge as the winner.

"Singapore Idol's claim to fame is the fact that it managed to collectively rally Singaporeans from all walks of life to cheer, cry and hammer away at their mobile phones to vote for their favourite singer – not an American crooner or a British rapper, but a true-blue Singaporean soulster," wrote Sujin Thomas of the *Straits Times*.⁴¹ *Singapore Idol* continued for two more seasons – in 2006 and 2009.

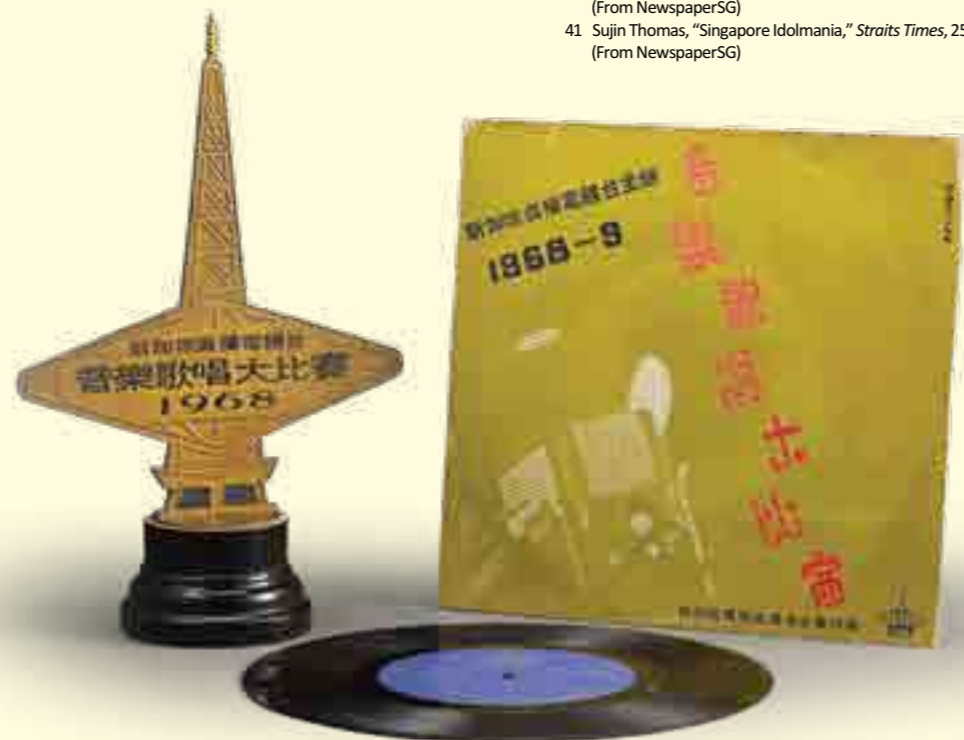
In recent years, reality television shows such as *American Idol*, *America's Got Talent*, *The X-Factor*, *The Voice* and *The Masked Singer* have displaced traditional talent contests. Although these have probably sounded the death knell for Talentime in Singapore, the misty memories of the way we were will undoubtedly continue to light the corners of our minds. ♦



Singapore Idol made its first winner, Taufik Batisah, a household name and launched his career. He is seen here performing at the May Day concert and carnival at Waterfront Bay by the Esplanade in 2005. Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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Trophy and vinyl record from the 1968 RTS Talentime. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

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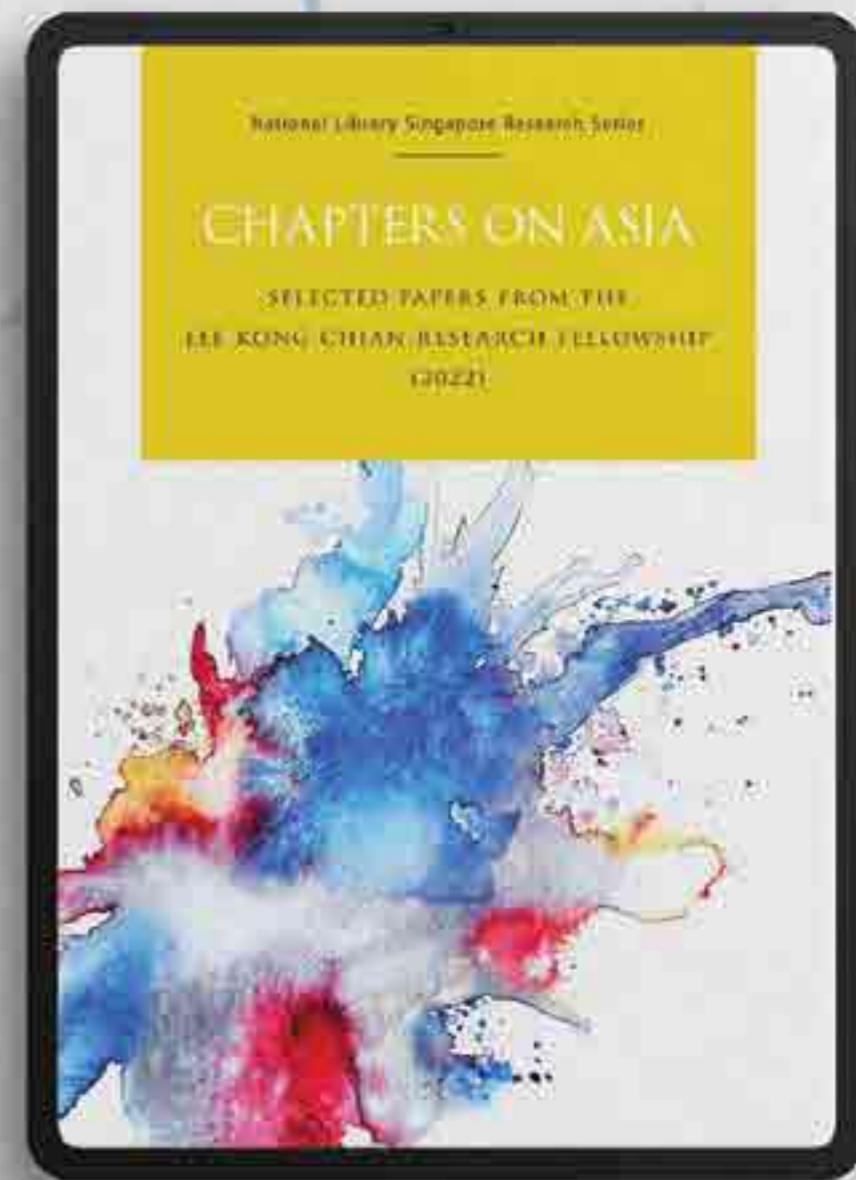
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CHIA BOON LEONG

THE

TWINKLE-TOED OLYMPIAN

Although short in stature, footballer Chia Boon Leong was a force to be reckoned with.

By Nick Aplin

The *Manila Times* called him “small but terrible”. Shanghai’s *North-China Daily News* described him as a “spark-plug and a glutton for work”. Singapore’s *Sunday Tribune* said he was as “swift as a hare, with brilliant ball control and unlimited stamina”.¹

In a report of a 1948 match between Rovers S.C. and RAF Seletar, the *Malaya Tribune* wrote that the year’s “most spectacular goal was scored by Chia Boon Leong. Receiving the ball near mid-field from [Gan] Kee Siang, he cleverly worked his way up the Seletar goal mouth, eluding three defenders on the way and when faced with the goalkeeper, deftly placed the ball into the net wide off him. The entire solo move was so neatly executed that the first to congratulate him were the Seletar defenders”.²

Chia, who died in December 2022 at the age of 97, is widely considered to be one of the most talented and highly regarded football players ever to represent Singapore. He acquired the nickname “Twinkle Toes” after John Mahon, former English international player and coach of the visiting Swedish Gothenburg team, told his men during a match in December 1951: “Watch that little fellow, with the twinkling feet, he works hard, dribbles hard, and is outstanding both in attack and defence.”³

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One of Chia’s major accomplishments was representing China’s soccer team at the 1948 London Olympics (he was one of three Malayan Chinese footballers chosen along with Yeap Cheng Eng and Chu Chee Seng).⁴ Chia later became a household name in the Asian football world during the immediate postwar years. His active playing career also coincided with a period of Singapore’s dominance of the Malaya Cup during the early 1950s. He competed at every available level, and after retiring became manager of the Singapore soccer team briefly as well as a council member of the Football Association of Singapore.

Early Life

Born in Singapore on 1 January 1925, Chia was the sixth of seven sons. He lived in Pasir Panjang and was educated first at Pasir Panjang English School where he picked up the sport. He then attended Raffles Institution, excelling not only in soccer but also in athletics, hockey and rugby. He was also a founding member of Pasir Panjang Rovers football team, which later became one of the leading clubs in Singapore.⁵

(Facing Page) Chia Boon Leong at the training ground of Hedon Football Club in London, 1954. *Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



(Above) Chia Boon Leong at the former Victoria School premises on Tyrwhitt Road, adjacent to Jalan Besar Stadium, 2004. *Photo by Tuck Loong, Image reproduced from Nick Aplin, David Waters and Leong May Lai, Singapore Olympians, The Complete Who's Who, 1936–2004 (Singapore: SNP Reference, 2005). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 796.09225957 APL).*

(Left) The Pasir Panjang Rovers football team won the Alsagoff Shield in the Syonan Sports Association League in 1943. Chia Boon Leong is in the front row, second from right. *Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Chia Boon Leong (fifth from left) and his Lien Hwa team members prior to their departure for a 42-day tour of Bangkok, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Manila, 1947. Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Even though Chia was short, at 1.6 m, and physically slender, he compensated with his speed, exceptional ball skills and quick brain. He was inspired by the exploits of individuals such as Dolfattah, Mat Noor and Chua Boon Lay, who played for Singapore in the Malaya Cup in the late 1930s.

Chia was just 17 years old when the Japanese captured Singapore in February 1942. He narrowly avoided being killed during Operation Sook Ching, a military operation aimed at weeding out suspected anti-Japanese elements at the start of the Japanese Occupation.⁶ Chia and his family had moved to Tiong Bahru, which they thought was safer, and he was told to report to an open area opposite a police station. “As a schoolboy I just carried on and followed instructions. We lined up, one by one, to face a Japanese soldier and some were told to go to a lorry, I did not know why then,” he recounted to the *Straits Times* in February 2022. “It was only some time later that we were told those on the lorries were taken somewhere else to be executed.”⁷

During the Occupation years, Chia was able to continue playing football when the Japanese formed the Syonan Sports Association.⁸ He also became a member of the Pasir Panjang Rovers football team that in 1943 won the Alsagoff Shield, an eight-game league tournament.⁹

The Postwar Years

Immediately after the war, Chia began establishing himself as one of Singapore’s top footballers. In 1946, he played for Base Ordnance Depot, the Rovers Sports Association and the Singapore Chinese Football Association.

His star rose even further when he was chosen to be one of 18 footballers from Malaya and Singapore to form a Malayan Chinese touring team known as Lien Hwa (United Malayan Chinese).¹⁰ Between November and mid-December 1947, Lien Hwa toured Bangkok, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Manila, playing a total of 22 games against local teams. The final tally was an impressive 15 wins, three losses and four draws.

In an interview with *New Nation* in April 1975, Chia revealed that one of his fondest football memories arose during that tour, though not because of a game, but for the post-match reception given by the crowds.¹¹

On 19 November 1947, Lien Hwa played Shanghai’s first-division champions Tung Hwa, beating them 5–3 in a match in Shanghai’s Canidrome stadium before a crowd of 12,000. Although Chia did not score a goal in the game, his performance caught everyone’s eye. The *China Press* wrote that Chia “won the hearts of the fans and Tung Hwa players with his tireless game. He was almost in every movement, aiding the defence and forward-line and showed beyond doubt that he knew how to play the inside-forward berth more than well”.¹²

The *North-China Daily News* reported that Chia had won the admiration of local fans and described his stamina as amazing. “One minute he is seen helping his defence and the next one sees him rushing through the opposing halves and backs. Although Chia personally did not score a single point, he took part in almost every defence movement of his side”.¹³

Such was his performance that the crowd of presumably Tung Hwa supporters mobbed Chia as he left the stadium to head towards the bus. “They were so natural and spontaneous in their feelings.

The crowds surged towards me in the stadium and I had to go out by another way. The police had to form a circle around me to let me through. I still flush with pride whenever I think of this incident,” he recalled. “It was [a] once-in-a-lifetime feeling.”¹⁴

Playing in the Olympics and the Malaya Cup

Partly as a result of these performances, Chia was selected to represent China at the 1948 London Olympic Games. At the time, although a British subject, under China’s rules, he was still considered a Chinese player by dint of his ethnicity.

Though the China team eventually lost 4–0 to Turkey on 2 August 1948, Chia “created a favourable impression with his speed and methodical play” and “had a grand time in London”. “The game was played at a terrific pace. The Turks were much bigger built than us. They were able to score only once in the first half,” Chia told the *Straits Times* on his return. During the match, centre forward Chu Wing Keung sustained an injury and the team played with just 10 men in the second half. The heavy rain made matters worse for the Chinese.¹⁵ The 4–0 loss was no disgrace.

The *Malaya Tribune* reported that Chia’s photo appeared twice in the London newspapers, and that Chia “came for special mention for his speed, tricky and constructive play”. While in London, Chia also shook hands with the king and queen of England at a royal reception for athletes.¹⁶

After the Olympics, Chia continued to play for Singapore. The Malaya Cup resumed in 1948 with a combination of prewar veterans and new blood. That year, the Singapore team failed to reach the

final, being eclipsed by Negeri Sembilan,¹⁷ but Chia showed his usual mettle.

After suffering from a brief loss of confidence in 1949, Chia bounced back to claim a place in the All-Singapore team – a squad that included British Services players and local players. He then went on to play a pivotal role in Singapore’s successful bid in recapturing the Malaya Cup in 1950. “The first goal by Chia Boon Leong was as unexpected by Singapore supporters as it was by the Penang goalkeeper,” reported the *Singapore Standard*.¹⁸ It was the first time Singapore had won the cup in nine years. Chia also helped Singapore retain the trophy in 1951 and 1952.¹⁹



Chia Boon Leong (left), Yeap Cheng Eng (middle) and Chu Chee Seng, were the three Malayan Chinese footballers who played for China in the 1948 Olympics in London. Photo taken at the Bayan Lepas Airport in Penang on their return from London. Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



The China Olympic football team prior to their game against Turkey in London in 1948. Chia Boon Leong is second from left. Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

In May 1954, Chia was a member of the team representing Singapore at the second Asian Games in Manila.²⁰ In August later that year, he was voted the most popular footballer in Malaya in a nationwide competition sponsored by Fraser and Neave, and won a two-month training stint with the London County Council College of Physical Education and Arsenal Football Club.²¹

Sadly, in February 1956, the *Singapore Standard* reported that Chia will “definitely not play for Singapore in this year’s Malaya Cup soccer matches”. “I have been playing soccer from the age of ten, but now I find it does not hold the same appeal for me as it did before,” Chia said.²² He had just turned 31 at the time.

He then devoted time to his family and his career as a financial executive with Rediffusion.²³ In a 1975 interview, Chia agreed that he could have continued to play for a few more years. “But, somehow, I couldn’t get over the feeling that it was better to beat a graceful exit than to be booed out of Jalan Besar Stadium,” he said. “I realised that I was losing a bit of my touch and I didn’t want to give any occasion for the crowd to get fed up with me,” he added.²⁴

Post-Retirement Career

Chia did not give up football entirely though. In 1974, he was made a council member of the Football Association of Singapore, and in 1978 he was appointed manager of the Singapore soccer team, a role he held briefly.²⁵ In August 1978, Chia participated in a goodwill tour to the Soviet Union under the Cultural Exchange Programme. In the party was a young Fandi Ahmad.

I am honoured to say that I knew Chia personally. I first met him about 20 years ago at a service at Barker Road Methodist Church and I recognised him

from afar. He was his mid-70s by then, and I recall that he was dressed very sharply. I approached him and he cheerfully confirmed his identity.

Once we made the football connection, it did not take long before my wife and I were invited to his home for homemade *kueh* (cake) and to talk about soccer. We would pore over his photo albums and newspaper clippings. He was very proud that he had represented Singapore at the 1954 Asian Games and China at the 1948 London Olympics. At the same time, he was very humble as well. That was one enduring quality of his.

Remarkably, even in the last months before his death at 97, Chia still led an active life. On 31 August 2022, he attended the launch of the book, *Roar: Football Legends of Singapore*, at Jalan Besar Stadium where a plaster cast of his left foot was unveiled.²⁶ Chia died of pneumonia on 20 December that year. He is survived by his wife Lily Lim and their three sons. Writing on Facebook, his second son Tony said: “Despite his failing health, (dad) was very concerned for my mum, telling her he was sad to be leaving her. We will miss him dearly, especially at family gatherings. I will have no expert to watch football games with any more.”²⁷ ♦

Chia Boon Leong, 50, in China’s Olympic football team jersey, 1975. He represented China in the 1948 London Olympics. *Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Chia Boon Leong (right) and Edwin Dutton (left) chatting with Arsenal’s inside left, Jimmy Logie, at the Highbury training ground in 1954. Chia and Dutton were the winner and runner-up respectively of a Fraser and Neave competition to select Malaya’s most popular footballer. *Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Chia Boon Leong (third row, extreme right) on a goodwill tour to the Soviet Union under the Cultural Exchange Programme, 1978. Fandi Ahmad is in the second row, second from left. *Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

NOTES

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21 “E.C Dutton and Boon Leong for England,” *Straits Times*, 1 August 1954, 1; “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star...,” *New Nation*, 18 April 1975, 10–11. (From NewspaperSG)

22 “‘Twinkle Toes’ Says Goodbye,” *Singapore Standard*, 24 February 1956, 14. (From NewspaperSG)

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Singapore's "Golden Girl", swimmer Patricia Chan, being congratulated by her father, Dr Chan Ah Kow, after a prize presentation ceremony at Toa Payoh Swimming Complex, 1973. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The 1973 SEAP GAMES IN SINGAPORE

The 7th Southeast Asian Peninsular Games marked the first time that Singapore hosted an international sporting event since gaining independence in 1965.

By Lim Tin Seng

It was September 1973 and the stakes were high for Singapore, and for Singapore's "Golden Girl" Patricia Chan. It was the 7th Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games, the precursor to today's Southeast Asian Games, and the event was being held in Singapore for the first time.

One of the biggest international sporting events to be hosted by Singapore since becoming independent, it was a matter of pride for the young nation. There was a desire to show, not only that the country was able to host an event like this, but that it would also do well in the medal tally. For the latter, all eyes

were on Singapore's star athletes, and in particular swimming sensation Pat Chan.

Chan's haul of 33 gold medals from the previous four SEAP Games – an average of eight golds per event – meant that much of the nation's hopes would rest on her young shoulders. However, the 1973 games were

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going to be a different kettle of fish for the 19-year-old. To improve her physical fitness ahead of the games, Chan had plunged into her training, determined to work extra hard. However, in this case, working hard turned out to be counterproductive as she ended up tearing "the muscle on my back, my shoulder blade... So it was very difficult. It wasn't a bad tear but it was very, very painful. Every stroke hurts. And this was two weeks before the competition".¹

Fortunately for Chan, and for Singapore, all went well. Chan managed to snag six gold medals and Singapore secured a remarkable second place in the overall medal tally, just behind Thailand.

The nation also acquitted itself well to the watching world. The newly built National Stadium was a fitting venue for the opening and closing ceremonies, while other stadiums around Singapore helped to host some of the events. Interestingly, the games also cleverly leveraged the newly built housing estate of Toa Payoh. The games village used Housing and Development Board (HDB) apartment blocks in Toa Payoh to house officials and athletes, while the nearby Toa Payoh Sports Complex was the venue for swimming events and athletics. Even the building housing the secretariat found a new and important life post-games.

A New Stadium for the Games

Singapore had originally been invited by the SEAP Games Federation Council to host an earlier edition of the games. However, they were turned down as Singapore felt that it did not have the facilities, particularly a national stadium, to embark on such a venture. "Until then, we are not ready for anything," said President of the Singapore Olympic and Sports Council Othman Wok when he announced in 1967 that Singapore would not be able to host the 5th SEAP Games.²

Getting a proper stadium was thus the first job at hand. Located on the grounds of the former Kallang Airport and Kallang Park, the stadium took six years to build, from December 1966 to June 1972. It boasted a distinct Brutalist design, adorned with a stunning array of monumental columns and heroic diagonal beams, complemented by expansive rake-seating terraces. The megastructure also featured four imposing floodlights and a daring 20-metre-high cantilevered roof that gracefully extended over the grandstand.³

The National Stadium was officially declared opened by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on 21 July 1973, just two months before the SEAP games. At the opening, Lee noted that the \$50-million stadium would not be profitable. "In fact, we shall be lucky to get enough receipts to pay for the annual administrative and maintenance costs," he said. "However, as a social investment, fully and properly used, it can be made a great asset... people will be encouraged to watch, and then to personally take part in sporting activities."⁴

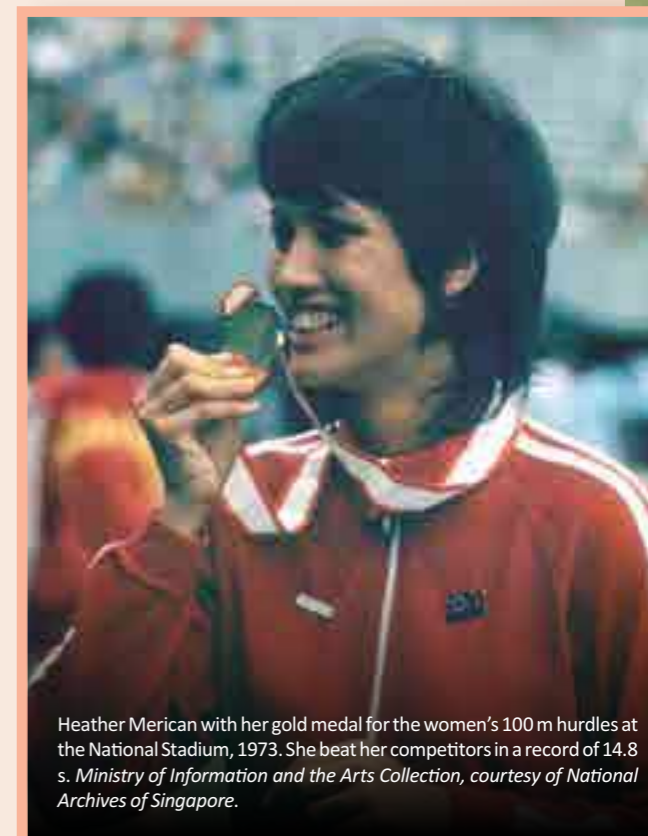
Toa Payoh Games Village

Just as important as the sporting venues were the ancillary facilities such as the games secretariat and the Games Village. Instead of purpose-built housing or student dorms, the 1,500 competitors and officials were housed in four newly completed 25-storey-high HDB apartment blocks in Toa Payoh, each with 96 units.⁵

The housing estate was chosen as the Games Village because the flats were "ideally located and surrounded by all the necessary facilities and amenities" such as a new swimming complex with five pools and a sports complex with a 400-metre running track. Athletes could also avail themselves of the nearby cinemas, an emporium, 180 shops, a supermarket, a post office, a bus terminal, a hawker centre and a medical centre.⁶

"For the first time competitors will be housed in high rise flats and this will be a change for SEAP Games athletes who have lived in makeshift two-storey apartments and students' hostels," said E.W. Barker, president of the Singapore National Olympics Council and Othman Wok.⁷

Each flat – with three bedrooms and a hall – was shared by six athletes and furnished with the "amenities of a luxurious hotel room".⁸ The Games Village received a thumbs-up from athletes. "The organisers have done a wonderful job in providing first class accommodation," said Singapore veteran hurdler Osman Merican. "What surprised me was the gang of women workers marching into our rooms in the



Heather Merican with her gold medal for the women's 100 m hurdles at the National Stadium, 1973. She beat her competitors in a record of 14.8 s. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

mornings and tidying our beds and mopping up the caterers [sic]. This is something I have not experienced in other international games".⁹

The SEAP Games Village was declared open by Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee on 30 August 1973. To mark the occasion, Goh planted a hop tree in the village centre while the heads of the contingents from the other participating countries also planted their own trees. Goh noted: "[A]s you can see for yourself, and as the tree-planting ceremony is intended to symbolise, this satellite town is not really a concrete jungle."¹⁰ (After the games, the flats were sold through a balloting exercise at \$19,000 each, with an additional \$1,700 for furnishings.)

The secretariat for the games was a three-storey building that was also in Toa Payoh. After the games, it became the Toa Payoh Branch Library, which opened on 7 February 1974.¹¹

Let the Games Begin

The opening ceremony of the 7th SEAP Games on 1 September 1973 was described as the "most colourful" ceremony Singapore had ever witnessed at the time. Shown live on television, the ceremony commenced with the arrival of the president of Singapore, Benjamin Sheares, followed by the singing of the National Anthem and the introduction of the athletes from the seven participating nations – Burma (now Myanmar), Khmer Republic (now Cambodia), Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and South Vietnam.¹²

In their striking crimson jackets for male athletes and cream for female, the Singapore contingent emerged onto the running track where they were greeted by the frenzied cheers of an enthusiastic crowd of 50,000 spectators.

The Singapore contingent was 454 athletes strong, and included swimming sensations Pat Chan and Elaine Sng, track stars Heather Merican and Glory Barnabas, high jumper Noor Azhar Abdul Hamid, and judokas Tan Sin Aun, Wong Kin Jong and Kan Kwok Toh.¹³

After Barker's welcome speech, President Sheares officially declared the games open. The blue-and-white SEAP Games flag was unfurled amid the "ringing sound of a trumpet fanfare", and accompanied by the release of some 19,000 multihued balloons and a 21-gun salute.

The theme song was performed by the 2,000-strong Combined Schools Choir as Singaporean sprinter C. Kunalan, dressed in an all-white track suit, carried the SEAP flame into the stadium to light the torch perched at the highest point of the stadium.¹⁴ (David Lim Kim San, a music inspector from the Ministry of Education, composed "The SEAP Games Theme Song", with lyrics by E.W. Jesudason, principal of Raffles Institution.¹⁵)

In a solemn tone, swimmer Pat Chan took the SEAP oath on behalf of all participating athletes, pledging their commitment to "take part in the Games in fair competition, respecting the regulations which govern them, and with the desire to participate in the true spirit of sportsmanship for the honour of our country and the glory of sport".¹⁶



Glory Barnabas, competing in lane 3 in the 200-metre sprint, won gold for Singapore. Courtesy of Singapore Sports Council.

Gunning for Glory

The games featured a total of 16 sporting events: track and field, badminton, basketball, boxing, cycling, football, hockey, judo, sepak takraw, tennis, shooting, swimming, table tennis, volleyball, weightlifting and sailing. These were held at the National Stadium and various other venues, including Chung Cheng High School, Chung Hwa Girls' School, Farrer Park Athletic Centre, Sembawang Circuit, Gay World Stadium, Jalan Besar Stadium, Katong Grange Hotel, National Junior College, Rifle Range at Mount Vernon, People's Theatre, Queenstown Reserve Unit Base, Singapore Badminton Stadium and Toa Payoh Swimming Complex.

There was, of course, tremendous pressure on the local athletes. "Singapore expects you to win as many medals as possible," said Barker at a meeting with the athletes on 27 August 1973. "Never before have we held the SEAP Games in Singapore. We have built a National Stadium, a games village, a new swimming pool and facilities at other venues... The stage is set for the Games and I hope you are ready to do your part."¹⁷

Sprinter Glory Barnabas recalled the demanding training regime of the Singapore track and field team. "We [were] training really very hard, trying to do well for Singapore because this [was] the first time Singapore [was] organising such a big event and [it was] on home ground," said the former schoolteacher.¹⁸

There was a sense of camaraderie though, she said. "[W]e stayed there [at the Toa Payoh Games Village] as a team, we had breakfast together, we had lunch together, and we trained together and had dinner together and we talked shop... I think all these kind of prepared the stage for the games."

In the end, Singapore ended up with an impressive haul of 45 gold medals, 50 silvers and 45 bronzes. A significant portion of the gold medals came from the swimmers, who amassed 23 golds, 16 silvers and nine bronzes. Along the way, they shattered 19 new SEAP Games records and one Asian Games record.¹⁹

Apart from Chan, fellow swimmer Elaine Sng also contributed to the medal haul. She obtained five golds, and set three new SEAP Games records and a new Asian Games record in the 400-metre freestyle.²⁰

Singapore's first gold medal, however, came courtesy of Heather Merican who triumphed in the women's 100-metre hurdles and broke the SEAP Games record at the same time. Another standout performer was Barnabas, who claimed victory in the 200-metre sprint. Noor Azhar Abdul Hamid managed to clear an exceptional 2.12 m in the high jump, also setting new Asian Games, SEAP Games and national records. (In fact, his local record would be unbroken for 22 years.)²¹ The water polo team also contributed to Singapore's medal tally by clinching the gold medal, while the sailors took home three gold medals and the judokas captured four golds.²²



From left: Glory Barnabas, Eng Chiew Guay, Gan Bee Wah and Sheila Fernando won the 4 × 100 m, 1973. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Among the notable winners was table tennis player Chia Choon Boon, who juggled both his training and his work as a *Nanyang Siang Pau* reporter. After training sessions ended, while his teammates were resting, he would rush out a journal entry for the newspaper about life in the Games Village every day. "I could call the newspaper to tell them what was happening in the Games Village, but... it would be more interesting for the reader to read about things from my perspective."²³ Chia's moonlighting did not stop him from winning two gold medals for Singapore in table tennis.

A Glorious Finish

After a gruelling week that saw victories, disappointments as well as new records being broken, the games drew to a close on 8 September 1973. "I feel sure that the contestants, both men and women, will continue to be dedicated and even more determined in the future to raise standards even higher," said Barker in his closing address. "This enthusiasm trend will help SEAP athletes to do well when they compete in other international meets such as the Asian Games."²⁴

Barker also said that it had been a privilege for Singapore "to have been able to host both athletics and officials from the participating countries". "I hope that the friendships generated, not only at the various Games venues but also at the Village, have consolidated during the past week," he said. "I trust that all our guests will take home with them pleasant memories of the cordial ties that they have established in Singapore."²⁵

As President Sheares solemnly declared the games closed, buglers sounded the Last Post and the SEAP Games flag was lowered. A hushed silence descended as the SEAP flame, which had burnt brightly throughout the event, was gently extinguished. Barker handed the flag to the Thai delegation, whose nation was slated to

host the next SEAP Games in 1975.²⁶ Then, breaking the silence, the 1,000-strong choir filled the air with “Auld Lang Syne”, followed by joyous celebrations as the 1,500 athletes let loose in uninhibited delight.

Leaving a Legacy

The 7th SEAP Games held in Singapore left a lasting legacy that went beyond the realm of sports. The games showcased Singapore’s ambition to become a leading sporting nation in the region and demonstrated the nation’s ability to successfully host major international events. Indeed, after the games, the National Stadium continued to be used for various sporting and non-sporting events before it was closed in 2007 and replaced by the current National Stadium.²⁷

While the athletes would always have the memory of participating in the games, for the rest of Singapore, they could own commemorative merchandise such as apparel, pewter medallions and even collectible matchboxes.²⁸

The Board of Commissioners of Currency issued a \$5 silver commemorative coin, sold at \$6 each, while the Singapore Mint released a set of SEAP Games

First Day Cover comprising six stamps – each set costing \$15 – in denominations of 10 cents, 15 cents, 25 cents, 35 cents, 50 cents and \$1.²⁹ These were very well received, both in Singapore and overseas, and were immediately snapped up.³⁰ All these have since become collectors’ items.

Over time, the SEAP Games themselves have changed. In 1977, the SEAP Games were renamed Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games) to mark the inclusion of Brunei, Indonesia and the Philippines.³¹ This has since been expanded further and in the 2023 SEA Games, which were held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 11 countries took part. Singapore has hosted a total of four SEAP/SEA games thus far, in 1973, 1983, 1993 and most recently in 2015. It is next expected to host the event again in 2029. ♦



To see more photos and resources for the 7th SEAP Games, visit <https://go.gov.sg/seventh-seap-games-1973> or scan this QR code.

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Letter writer in Chinatown, c. 1980s.
Singapore Tourism Board Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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KONFRONTASI

SINGAPORE'S EXPERIENCE OF AN UNDECLARED WAR

Opposing the formation of the Federation of Malaysia, Indonesia waged a three-year armed conflict against Malaysia and Singapore.

By Alvin Tan

It was late in the night of 9 December 1963 when the Indonesian Confrontation, or Konfrontasi, claimed its first victims in Singapore. It happened on Jalan Wangi in Sennett Estate, a quiet neighbourhood close to Potong Pasir.

At around 10.45 pm, Mohamed Kassim Ismail and Chadar Mastan Abdul Aziz, operators of a cigarette and sundries stall, had gone to investigate a suspicious blue Ford Consul when an explosion ripped through the night air, instantly killing them both.

The blast left a crater 2 m across and 1 m deep, and blew a brick wall apart. It also threw the car chassis 15 m away and shattered windows about 270 m away.¹

Bomb Blast at Sennett Estate

This was not the first effort by Indonesian saboteurs to target Singapore. It was, in fact, the fourth such attack. There had been three relatively smaller blasts at Katong Park on 24 September, 26 September and 6 October earlier that year, but those explosions did not cause fatalities and the media was mystified as to the motives of the bombers. The deaths of the two men made it clear, however, that the bombings were “part of an organised campaign of terror” involving a “bomber, mad or sane” who “knows a great deal about explosives”.²

Following this blast, security measures at key installations were stepped up and an islandwide manhunt operation commenced.³ On 20 December, 19-year-old Shairy Aman, alias Hitam, was arrested at Queen’s Theatre in Geylang, and 10 days later, Amat Junit, alias Ahmad Toh, 20, was picked up at Kampong Amber.⁴

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The Ford Consul in Sennett Estate was rendered a twisted heap of metal after the bomb planted beneath it exploded on 9 December 1963. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission.



Damage to Housing and Development Board flats after a bomb explosion at Jalan Rebong on 12 April 1964. *Ministry of Culture Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

On 16 April 1964, Shairy and Amat revealed in court that they, together with their handler Nordin Lemon, and another man, had initially intended to bomb more strategic targets. On 8 December 1963, the four set out in a car to plant explosives in two locations: Shairy had gotten off at Bukit Timah to blow up water pipes, while the other three drove on to Bukit Timah Railway Station. “Our intention in going to the station was to blow up the rail tracks,” said Nordin. However, both missions were aborted. Shairy admitted that “he had been afraid to explode the bomb” at the water pipes, while there were police officers at the railway station. The next day, Amat suggested to Shairy to “go and explode the bomb” at Sennett Estate.⁵

Arriving at the targeted site, Amat planted the bomb under the Ford Consul in a lane behind a row of shophouses and lit the fuse with a lighted cigarette. Soon after they had driven off, the bomb exploded. The men had been told that “if they could not achieve their specified objectives they were to leave the explosives where their detonation would create alarm by their indiscriminate damage”. Some 20 to 25 pounds of explosives were used in the Sennett Estate blast.⁶

The two men who died had been watching a TV programme in a radio shop before returning to their nearby cigarette and sundries stall. At some point, they

might have “heard a sizzling noise or [had] seen a short length of burning fuse under a blue Ford Consul” and paid for it dearly. The bodies of the two men, badly mangled, were found in a garage about 6 m away.⁷

Reasons for Konfrontasi

Today, many people in Singapore remember the 1965 MacDonal House bombing when they think of Konfrontasi. However, the MacDonal House bombing was only one of many such incidents during the period of Konfrontasi, which began in 1963 and officially lasted until 1966. The bombings claimed the lives of at least seven people.

Konfrontasi was a policy by Indonesia under President Sukarno (1950–67) to combat what he claimed was neo-imperialism. In January 1963, Indonesian Foreign Minister Subandrio declared that Indonesia could not but “adopt a policy of confrontation against Malaya because at present they represent themselves as accomplices of the neo-colonialists and neo-imperialists pursuing a hostile policy towards Indonesia”.⁸

Sukarno was convinced that the Federation of Malaysia, formed on 16 September 1963,⁹ was a neo-colonial imperialist plot (dubbed “Nekolim”) designed to secure, ensure and perpetuate British dominance in

the region. Seeing the British as both a threat and an obstacle to Indonesia’s regional ambitions and influence, Sukarno used Konfrontasi as a tool to destabilise Malaysia, frustrate its success and to rally Indonesians around him. In the face of real or supposed threats from foreign powers, Konfrontasi united Indonesia’s diverse peoples and established Sukarno as “the most important political force in Indonesia”, to the detriment of his political opponents.¹⁰

After the United Nations released its report in September 1963 on its mission to survey the people in North Borneo (Sabah) and Sarawak over the merger, relations between Malaya and Indonesia reached an inflexion point.¹¹ On 15 September 1963, Indonesia rejected the report’s findings and refused to recognise Malaysia, which was proclaimed the following day. On 17 September, Malaysia broke off diplomatic relations. Four days later, Indonesia retaliated by severing its diplomatic and commercial ties with Malaysia and Singapore. On 25 September, Sukarno declared that he would “gobble Malaysia raw” or “Ganyang Malaysia”.¹²

Sukarno’s low-intensity war, which encompassed both overt and covert warfare, eventually morphed into a campaign of terror and sabotage involving trained Indonesian commandos, saboteurs, agents and local sympathisers.¹³ Fought in the jungles of Borneo along Indonesia’s extensive and porous border with Sabah and Sarawak, and in towns and cities such as Singapore, Penang and Kuala Lumpur, Konfrontasi involved 54,000 British and Commonwealth troops and scores of policemen and volunteers.¹⁴ Though the numbers of civilian

casualties were relatively low, Konfrontasi nonetheless underscored the impact that an asymmetrical campaign of terror could exact in an urban setting like Singapore.

Acts of Terror

The first attacks in Singapore took place at the popular sea-facing Katong Park, frequented by families and courtship couples.¹⁵ On 24 September 1963, a bomb blast in the park shattered the windows of the Ambassador Hotel across the road, about 35 m away. Evidence recovered from the scene indicated that a home-made explosive device was used. Two days later, on 26 September, a second bomb was detonated 20 m from the site of the first blast, “scaring away children from the park”.¹⁶

Konfrontasi was a policy by Indonesia under President Sukarno (1950–67) to combat what he claimed was neo-imperialism.

By the third blast on 6 October, which took place 60 feet from the earlier blasts, the police admitted that they were “baffled”. This time, a black Mayflower car belonging to Low Poh Lin – a 38-year-old lifeguard who worked at the park – was destroyed. Describing the blast, Low said: “I heard an explosion. When I ran out, I saw my car on fire.” He later “told police that he has no enemies, who would want to blow up his car”.¹⁷

By now, jittery Katong residents were anxiously wondering when the “mad bomber” would “strike again and where he would plant his next bomb”. The Criminal Investigation Department took over the investigation and, in the absence of clear leads, a \$3,000 reward was offered.¹⁸

In 1964 alone, 18 explosions swept through Singapore and encompassed targets like the Merdeka Bridge and the iconic Raffles Hotel. On 8 March, a time bomb was planted in a drainpipe along Bras Basah Road outside Raffles Hotel that went off at 11:40 pm. “I first thought it was the firing of crackers. Almost simultaneously, a chair cushion from nearby hit me in the face with a powerful impact. I was unhurt but I knew then that it was some frightful explosion,” said an American tourist who was staying in one of the rooms.¹⁹

On 27 March, a bomb exploded outside the perimeter fence of the Istana, near the Bukit Timah filter works, damaging some 4 m of the fence and shattering window panes within a 350-metre radius. Two people were killed and six were injured when a bomb went off on 12 April at 8:05 pm at a block of Housing and Development Board flats on Jalan Rebong, off Changi Road. The victims – Aishah Bee Abdullah, 50, and her 16-year-old daughter



The bomb explosion at MacDonal House on 10 March 1965 killed two women instantly and injured at least 33 other people. One man died a few days later. *Source: The Straits Times, 11 March 1965 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

Sharifon, a student at Tanjong Katong Girls' School – were watching television in a wooden house 9 m away when the blast killed them.²⁰

On 23 May and 21 July, Indonesian saboteurs attempted to blow up Merdeka Bridge. The bridge suffered only slight damage but police, in response to the second blast, “said that the obvious intention was to blow a hole through the bridge”.²¹

The bombing of MacDonald House, however, was the deadliest and most well-known attack. At 3.07 pm on 10 March 1965, a bomb exploded at the 10-storey building on Orchard Road – then one of the tallest in Singapore and the first fully air-conditioned office building in Singapore and Southeast Asia.²² The bomb, which had been

placed on the mezzanine floor near the lift, injured at least 33 people and claimed three casualties: Suzie Choo, 36, the private secretary to the manager of Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, and Juliet Goh, 32, a filing clerk at the bank, died on the spot. Mohammed Yasin Kesit, 43, a driver for the Malaya Borneo Building Society, died a few days later. “Many others – in the bank and on the road – fell like ninepins, many seriously injured. Every window within a hundred yards was shattered and almost every car outside the building and across the road was damaged,” reported the *Straits Times*.²³

Two Indonesian commandos, Osman Haji Mohamed Ali, 25, and Harun Said, 21, were arrested and charged in court. They were sentenced to death on 20 October 1965, and their execution by hanging on 17 October 1968 would cast a pall over relations between Singapore and Indonesia in the years to come.²⁴

Combating Konfrontasi

Given the scale and nature of the Indonesian threat, the politics of the Cold War and as Malaysia's strongest ally, the United Kingdom rotated its forces through Singapore between 1963 and 1966. It was the UK's greatest show of force since World War II.²⁵ The Royal Air Force also dispatched four to eight nuclear-capable V-Bombers through Tengah and Butterworth airbases in case things escalated.²⁶ Deploying from Singapore, submarines from the Royal Navy's 7th Submarine Division conducted undersea operations.²⁷

This was not overkill. As historians Peter Hennessy and James Jinks described in their book, *The Silent Deep*, “The Indonesians operated vast amounts of Soviet equipment, including a ‘Sverdlov’ class cruiser, several ‘Skory’ destroyers and significant numbers of MIG-15s, -17s, -19s and 21s [aircraft]. The Indonesian Navy also possessed one of the most powerful submarine forces in the Asia-Pacific region, consisting of twelve Soviet-built ‘Whisky’ class submarines, two torpedo retrievers and one submarine tender.”²⁸ In short, the military threat from Indonesia was not something that could be dismissed.

Confronted with the crushing threats in a domestic political environment in which opposition and contestation were the norm, the Singapore government acted quickly to nullify the security threats, cushion the economic fallout, and educate the public about the threats the country was facing.

Security operations were crucial in uncovering Indonesian saboteurs and their munitions caches, and in foiling their plans. In December 1963 alone, 24 subversives were detained in Singapore as part of Operation Mara launched by the Malaysian police. The intelligence gleaned from this operation in turn led to the discovery of munitions caches all over Singapore. Packages containing explosives and fuses were found at Kampong Amber and near the residence of the chief justice on Nassim Road – all primed and ready to be detonated. At Jalan Eunus, an earthen jar containing 25 hand grenades, three Sten guns and six Sten magazines was uncovered. A cache of four Sten guns, two Luger



The scene at MacDonald House after a bomb explosion on 10 March 1965. Ministry of Culture Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

pistols, explosives and demolition equipment were recovered at Wing Loong Estate.²⁹ Such discoveries and seizures became commonplace throughout Konfrontasi as were bomb hoaxes and bomb scares.

As the number of bomb blasts mounted in early 1964, the government enrolled volunteers for the newly mustered Vigilante Corps (VC) on 23 April 1964. The VC was tasked to guard against Indonesian saboteurs and infiltrators, protect vital installations and patrol crowded public areas. In less than a month, 14,022 people had signed up. Having been put through the paces on the intricacies of the law, first aid and unarmed combat, the first 10,000 VC volunteers were deployed on 16 June 1964. Once a week, these volunteers went on three-hour patrol in small teams at night, securing their neighbourhoods. Although lightly armed and equipped with just staves, flashlights and a VC armband, their presence provided a visible deterrent and sense of security.³⁰

Singapore also sent troops to Peninsular Malaysia and Borneo. Its small army – comprising 1st and 2nd Battalions, Singapore Infantry Regiment (1 SIR and 2 SIR) – was fully deployed in combat operations. Eight soldiers from 2 SIR were killed and five injured when they were ambushed by Indonesian infiltrators on 28 February 1965 during a deployment 20 miles inland from the Kota Tinggi coast.³¹ In the aftermath, a large-scale operation was mounted to hunt down and eliminate the infiltrators.

When the operation ended six weeks later in April, 37 Indonesian infiltrators had been killed and at least 33 captured, many by the men of 2 SIR who acquitted themselves with distinction.³² On 5 May 1965, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew paid tribute to the soldiers for “excelling” in operations against Indonesian guerril-

las in Sabah and Johor. “You have carried the name of Singapore very high among the States of Malaysia,” he told some 300 men of the regiment at a reception at Sri Temasek to congratulate them on their success. “Your operations in Sabah and Johore proved that city life did not make you less rugged than rural folks,” he added.³³

Disruption to Trade

Konfrontasi also had an adverse effect on trade and economy. Singapore's trade with Indonesia plunged by almost 24 percent in 1964.³⁴ For workers in industries and trades that depended heavily on Indonesia, the prospect of unemployment loomed. On 3 October 1963, Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee announced the establishment of an emergency organisation known as the Department of Economic Defence to “safeguard the livelihood of workers”. “The government has the capacity, determination and adequate financial resources to defend the working people of Singapore against the effects of Indonesian confrontation for any length of time,” said Goh.³⁵

... the Singapore government acted quickly to nullify the security threats, cushion the economic fallout, and educate the public about the threats the country was facing.

Headed by Labour Commissioner Pang Tee Pow, the department aimed to help “some 8,500 workers in various industries” such as “sago, rubber processing, rattan, coffee, coconut oil and pepper”. Of these, 4,700 were expected to be made redundant. Under the scheme, affected workers would still continue to work



Damage from the bomb explosion at MacDonald House on 10 March 1965. The concrete wall separating the stairway and correspondence room of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank was blown apart by the bomb, exposing the car park on the other side. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission.

for their employers even after production had stopped, and both the government and the employer would each pay affected workers one-third of their normal earnings. As a result, the workers would continue to receive two-thirds of their wages.³⁶

Training and reskilling plans were also in place should the economic situation persist for a protracted period. In December 1963, the Economic Defence Ordinance was passed to enact these support measures which were expected to cost the government \$1 million a month.³⁷

Public Education

The government also acted to educate the public about Konfrontasi. On 20 July 1964, Woon Wah Siang, permanent secretary at the Ministry of Culture, sent a missive to the commissioner of police, the director of the Special Branch, and heads of the Housing and Development Board and Public Utilities Board, among others. He asked them to organise an exhibition to “bring home to the people through visual means the challenge of confrontation”. It would show “both Indonesian aggressive intentions towards Malaysia” and the countermeasures deployed.³⁸

Titled the “Challenge of Confrontation”, the exhibition was opened by Culture Minister S. Rajaratnam on 2 October 1964, and showcased captured Indonesian automatic weapons, parachutes and kits, all “under the watchful eyes of police guards”. In total, 337,000 people visited the exhibition at the Victoria Memorial Hall, which then travelled to community centres to allow more people to see it.³⁹

The End of Konfrontasi

Sukarno, already discredited by an abortive coup in October 1965, was finally deposed by General Suharto on 11 March 1966.⁴⁰ Under Suharto, Indonesia changed course in its foreign policy and rejoined the United Nations in April 1966. In the following month,

Suharto signalled his desire to end Konfrontasi and Adam Malik, the new foreign minister, met Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak on 29 May in Tokyo.⁴¹ In June 1966, Jakarta recognised Singapore's independence from Malaysia. On 12 August 1966, Konfrontasi formally ended after Indonesia and Malaysia concluded a peace treaty.⁴²

The peace treaty, however, did not completely reset relations between Singapore and Jakarta. That had to wait until 1973. On 28 May that year, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew visited the Kalibata Heroes Cemetery in South Jakarta as part of his trip to Indonesia. With solemn music playing in the background, Lee “was escorted to sprinkle flowers” on the graves of Indonesian generals who had fallen during the 30 September 1965 coup. Twenty metres away were the graves of two Indonesian marines – Osman Haji Mohamed Ali and Harun Said – who were hanged in Singapore on 17 October 1968 for their part in the MacDonald House bombing. Lee then walked over to their graves and “sprinkled flowers on them”. This action, praised by Indonesian newspapers as a “magnanimous gesture”, touched the Indonesian people deeply and turned the final page on an unhappy episode in the history of both countries.⁴³

Or so it was thought. In February 2014, the Indonesian navy announced that it would name its newly acquired second-hand corvette the *KRI Usman Harun*, after the two marines responsible for the MacDonald House bombing.⁴⁴ In response, Singapore barred the warship from calling at Singapore and announced that the Singapore Armed Forces would not carry out military exercises with this ship.⁴⁵ Indonesia's armed forces commander General Moeldoko later apologised for the naming decision, and Singapore resumed bilateral ties with the Indonesian armed forces.⁴⁶

On 10 March 2015, on the 50th anniversary of the MacDonald House bombing, a memorial to the victims of Konfrontasi was unveiled.⁴⁷ Situated at Dhoby Ghaut Green, a slice of quiet amid busy Orchard Road, the memorial is a reminder of a time when Singapore experienced the fear, terror and anguish of being the urban frontline in a low-intensity war marked by uncertainty, anxiety and randomness. ♦

Men from the 2nd Battalion, Singapore Infantry Regiment, standing guard at their tactical headquarters in Kota Tinggi, Johor, in April 1965 during the follow-up operation to hunt down Indonesian infiltrators. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission.



A memorial to the victims of Konfrontasi was unveiled on 10 March 2015, on the 50th anniversary of the bombing of MacDonald House. The memorial is at Dhoby Ghaut Green, which faces MacDonald House. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

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THE CURIOUS VISIT OF Qing Ambassadors TO SINGAPORE

The visit by Qing officials to Singapore in 1876 led to the establishment of the first Chinese consulate here a year later.

By Benjamin J.Q. Khoo

On 13 December 1876, the P&O steamer *Travancore* docked at Singapore carrying a curious entourage.¹ Stepping off the ship were His Excellency Guo Songtao (郭嵩焘), the first Chinese ambassador to Britain, and other members of the Qing imperial court. It was about 11 on a grey, rainy morning when they arrived with little fanfare. But after four days at sea, it must have been a pleasant relief from the cramped quarters on deck as well as a temporary distraction from the weighty conversations between men and states.

This wet welcome on the island en route to Southampton, England, was brought about by a strange coup of diplomacy.

The British, taking advantage of the murder of their consular official Augustus Raymond Margary by hostile tribesmen in China in 1875, had forced a treaty and apology from the Qing government. Under considerable pressure by the British legation, Beijing caved in and consented to the despatch of an ambassador to the Court of England to “express their regrets” to Queen Victoria herself (带国书前往英国,对滇案表示“惋惜”). This fresh embarrassment, despite the

nebulous style of officious phrasing, added to the series of humiliating reversals and defeats, which shook the dynasty’s confidence as a world power.

Assembling the Embassy

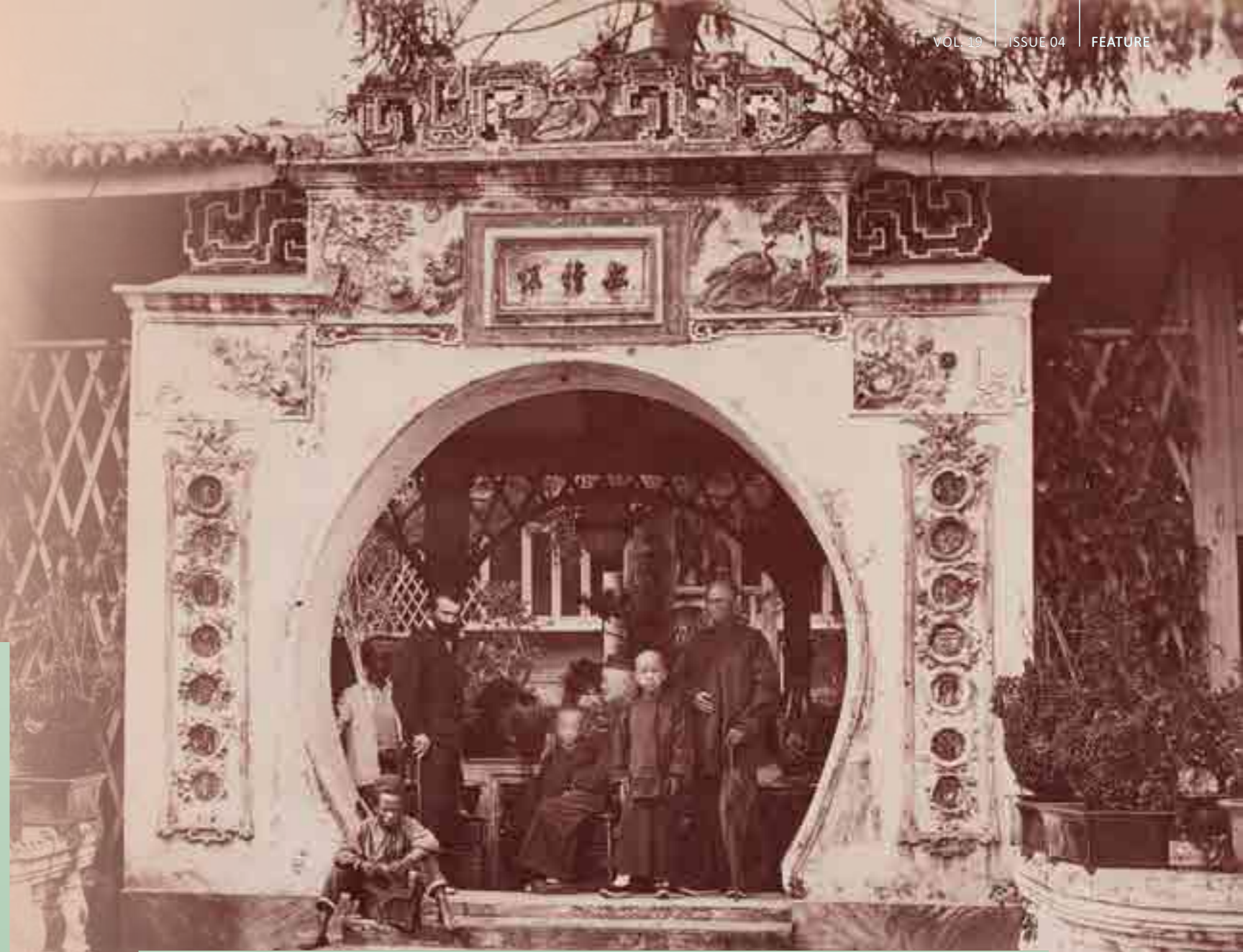
The British were eager to underscore to the watching world the pre-eminence of Great Britain. So it was not more than four months after the signing of the Chefoo Convention on 21 August 1876 (or the Yantai Treaty, 烟台条约) to resolve the “Margary Affair” that the embassy assembled and departed from Shanghai.

Under the direction of Halliday Macartney, one of two Englishmen attached to the visitors, he made it a point that the Chinese delegation would call only at British ports, on the so-called “six great stages of our Imperial track across the Oceans, viz. Hong Kong, Singapore, Ceylon, Aden, Malta and Gibraltar”, where they could be impressed by the luminosity of England’s enlightenment and their undeniable mastery of peoples, land and sea.²

On the Chinese side, spirits were low and there was difficulty finding a suitable ambassador to fill the post. During this period, a despatch overseas was akin to exile rather than a lucrative honour. Eventually, Chinese premier Li Hongzhang appointed Guo for the post. A seasoned statesman, Guo was a strong advocate of liberal reform and favoured negotiation with the “foreign barbarians”. His keen attention to

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Guo Songtao, the first Chinese ambassador to Britain. Image reproduced from *The First Chinese Embassy to the West: The Journals of Kuo Sung-T'ao, Liu Hsi-Hung and Chang Te-Yi*, trans. J.D. Frodsham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL0S 327.20922 FIR).



Hoo Ah Kay (Whampoa) in his home, the famous Nam-sang Fa-un (南生花园), mid-19th century. The Qing officials visited his home and gardens, and were impressed by what they saw. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Western affairs was atypical for his time and invited slander, suspicion and distrust from his enemies.

For this trip, Guo was accompanied by other Chinese bureaucrats who failed to share his outlook, plaguing the voyage with much schism and infighting. Drawing his particular ire was the minor official Liu Xihong (刘锡鸿), who was attached belatedly as assistant envoy to the embassy, likely as a check on Guo’s liberal leanings.³ Liu was a quarrelsome individual with a reputation for xenophobia, stubbornness and ignorance.⁴

It is under this cloud of undue politicking within the Qing court and the outsized influence of the British legation that the embassy called at Singapore in the second regnal year of the Guangxu Emperor (光緒帝; r. 1875–1908).

Arriving in Singapore

The tour of Singapore, intended as an elaborate exercise in imperial pageantry and propaganda,⁵ made a strong impression on the visiting Chinese emissaries, even if its beginnings were slightly unpropitious.

Upon landing, the visitors were met by William A. Pickering, the Chinese interpreter, who was among the first to receive them on the wharf. Macartney described him as “a common-looking person and seemed to feel his inferiority too much” although he conceded that “[Pickering] seemed a good fellow and to have some sterling qualities”.⁶

Liu Xihong, the assistant envoy to the Chinese Embassy in London. Image reproduced from *The First Chinese Embassy to the West: The Journals of Kuo Sung-T'ao, Liu Hsi-Hung and Chang Te-Yi*, trans. J.D. Frodsham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL0S 327.20922 FIR).



Photo of late 19th-century shophouses by G.R. Lambert & Co. The Qing delegation saw shophouses like these when they visited Singapore in 1876. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*



Pickering could only apologise for the delay of the colonial secretary, John Douglas, due to the steamer having arrived earlier than expected. Douglas subsequently came to present his compliments but regretted that a proper reception in the form of a 15-gun salute and a guard of honour had to be prepared. This meant that a meeting with William Jervois, governor of the Straits Settlements, was embarrassingly postponed until four in the afternoon.

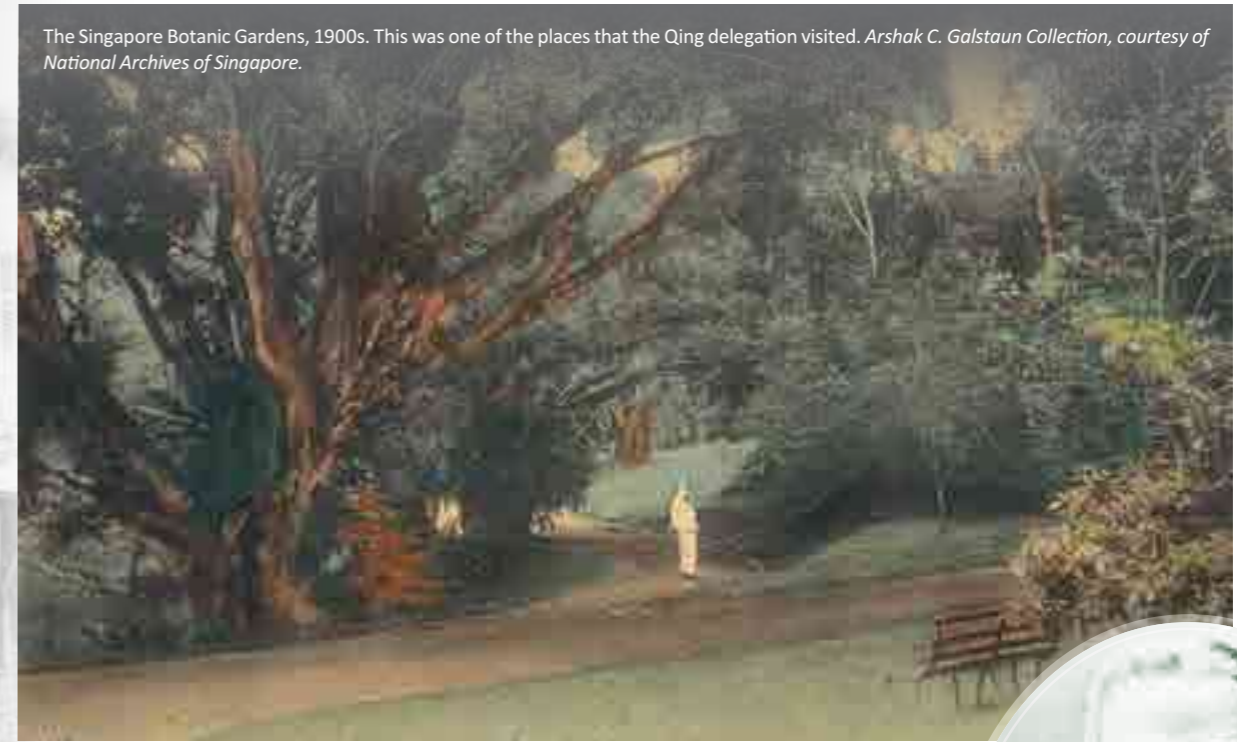
Meanwhile, as the party adjourned for refreshments, they were joined by Cai Guoxiang and Cai Guoxi, officials of the *Yang Wu*, a Qing corvette launched by the Fuzhou Shipyard in 1872.⁷ Accompanying the crew were some Singapore merchants, among them a certain Hoo Ah Kay (Hu Xuanze; 胡璇泽), more popularly known in Singapore as Whampoa (he was born in Whampoa [Huangpu], near Canton [Guangdong], China).

A Cantonese with uncanny business sense and an uncommon mastery of English, Hoo had forged a successful relationship as a ship chandler, supplying provisions to the British Royal Navy while maintaining business liaisons with other European businesses, climbing the ranks to become one of the foremost personalities in the colony. By this time, he was already an extraordinary member of the esteemed Executive Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements



Portrait of Hoo Ah Kay (Whampoa), 1850s. The Qing delegation visited his home and gardens, and were impressed by what they saw. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

The Singapore Botanic Gardens, 1900s. This was one of the places that the Qing delegation visited. *Arshak C. Galstaun Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



ments (the first and only Chinese) and had become the first Chinese to receive the CMG (Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George).⁸ A distinguished, thinly moustached man of 60, Hoo was now paying a visit to the latest dignitaries to appear on Singapore's shores.

Whampoa's House

Perhaps upon the insistence of Hoo, who took advantage of the delay on the governor's part, the Chinese visitors accepted the invitation to see his house and private garden ahead of the meeting with the governor at Government House (known as the Istana today). Today, Hoo's residence and garden, formerly located off Serangoon Road, no longer exist but in its heyday, it was a celebrated paradise of horticulture, famous for its tasteful recreation of rockeries, ponds, bonsais and bamboo, and a rare gathering place for public celebration during the Lunar New Year.

Steeped in the aesthetics of Chinese gardens, the Nam-sang Fa-un (南生花园), as it was known in Cantonese, gave form and elegance to the merchant's wealth.⁹ The Russian novelist Ivan Goncharov, who had visited in July 1853, was amazed by the variety of greenery such as banana trees, water lilies, pepper plants, sago palms, breadfruit trees and bamboos. He also described the pens of birds and animals, towers with latticed turrets for doves, and noted the presence of a beautiful Arabian horse, completely white. The house was even more fabulously adorned, laid with mats and everywhere pieces of furniture "of delicate carvings, gilded lampshades, long covered galleries with all the appurtenances of refined luxury: bronzes, porcelain, on the wall statuettes, arabesques".¹⁰

Very much against the wishes of Macartney, who tried to dissuade them of this undertaking, the party

Halliday Macartney, the British official attached to the visiting Qing delegation in Singapore, 1908. *Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.*



went along, taking the road from New Harbour to Bende-meer after two in the afternoon. The rain having cleared, and the sun now bearing down hotly upon them, they were carried on four carriages, probably ordered by Hoo.

Macartney was eager that no dishonour be seen to impinge upon British governance, but almost true to his fears, as they passed Indian and Chinese shophouses, the visitors, upon reading the signboards on the Chinese shophouses, remarked that the Singapore Chinese "seemed for the most part to be very poor".¹¹

The Chinese visitors accepted the invitation to see Whampoa's house and private garden ahead of the meeting with the governor at Government House.

Flustered by this comment, Macartney rejoined hastily that they "had not yet arrived at the town, and that these houses could not be taken as fair specimens of the shops of their countrymen".¹² It did not help that their coachman drove them to his shop rather than high-roading the way to the luxurious house of Hoo. Chagrined, Macartney leapt out angrily from the carriage and asked one of the shop assistants to "give the necessary directions for our being taken with all possible haste to Mr. W's [Hoo's] house".¹³

Fortunately, things went relatively well at Hoo's house and garden, where the visitors passed an agreeable midday. In his journal, Guo wrote that he was transfixed by Hoo's collection of exotica as "has seldom been seen before" (多未经见).¹⁴ Guo also described the glass case containing an antelope's head with horns attached, the sword of a swordfish seven feet in length, a six-legged tortoise and a domestic, live and bounding kangaroo, the last of which he seemed most surprised to finally see outside of tales and books.¹⁵

This collection of animal parts spoke to a long Chinese tradition of venerating such items for their medicinal and mystical properties, their symbolic associations and as tangible markers of power and wealth.¹⁶

Guo, while dazzled by Hoo's collection, did not let this distract him from serious political discussions. Likely in Hoo's garden, Guo sounded out his thoughts on a potential appointment as Singapore's Qing consul to China.¹⁷

By 4 pm, the envoys were back on track on more officious proceedings. Guo and his suite finally met Governor William Jervois and his family at Government House. The conversation appeared rather superficial, although Guo had only positive things to write. He described the governor as more affable in bearing than the governor of Hong Kong, Arthur E. Kennedy, and his lady as "very intelligent and most sympathetic in her enquiries" (夫人亦贤明, 慰问甚勤).¹⁸

The company was then escorted to Fort Canning where they inspected the fortifications along the hill, and visited the barracks and troops. Here it was defensive bulwarks, the serious firepower of the artillery, the professionalism of armies and the rigid division of labour that were conveyed successfully to the Qing visitors.

The Tour Continues

The second day continued in much the same vein although, as was customary of a December in Singapore, it was accompanied by rain and thunder. With the indefatigable Pickering, Guo and his officials visited the corvette *Yang Wu*. The ship had made a run from Calcutta and onboard, the crew put on a display of guns and drill, as well as firing salutes for the visiting dignitaries.

Pickering then arranged for the Hong Gardens to be next on the list of destinations to visit. Reckoned by Guo to be a public park to be enjoyed by the Chinese inhabitants of the city, this was in fact the reconstituted Botanic Gardens, complete with an in-house zoo; the latter recently opened to the public in 1874.¹⁹

Guo must count as one of the early visitors who were enthralled and delighted by the range of animals on display, and he took great pleasure in describing the tiger and leopard dens, the Tibetan bears, dogs, wolves, weasels, squirrels and beavers set against the lush shade of trees and flowers.

The Botanic Gardens impressed Guo greatly, rivalling his enjoyment of Whampoa's private garden and menagerie. Unaware of the troubles that had plagued the zoological upkeep, Guo was much taken by the variety of wild beasts and strange birds on show, one so tamed and caged, the other so colourful and beautiful in plumage. He was also very much struck by the strange and wonderful plants that he saw: the extraordinary heights of cultivated pines, the flowering wisterias "shutting out the sky like a huge screen", and the wide spreads of palm leaves that seemed like "great fans", found everywhere.²⁰

A watercolour painting titled "Government Hill from the New Harbour Road, Singapore" (1844) by Scotsman Charles Andrew Dyce. The Qing delegation visited Governor William Jervois at Government House on the hill. Collection of NUS Museum, courtesy of National University of Singapore.



Government House, 1900s. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Beyond the anomaly that public gardens were unknown in China at the time, Guo was most struck by nature's estate as "a triumph of human ingenuity" (足见此园魄力之大矣).²¹ Never before had he seen so much labelling and categorisation, so much diversity and individuality of species collected together in a single space. It was the triumph of order, demonstrated here over nature, which was one of the qualities that Guo thought China lacked.

Evidently, Guo counted this garden visit one of his highlights in Singapore, pleasing the ambassador so much that he praised this diversion in his journal. "At that time, I thought I should concentrate on practical administrations and not fritter away my time in sightseeing for entertainment," he wrote. "Yet now, quite unexpectedly, I have come across these strange sights which have filled my heart with intense delight (前至香港,有导游花园者,谓当观览其实政,不以游赏为娱,今无意中得此奇景,亦殊惬意)."²²

A final courtesy call was made to the courthouse, where the visitors attended a hearing presided over by Judge Theodore Ford. It is here that the panoply of the magistrate's court impressed Guo with its order and solemnity, in sharp contradistinction to the noise and wrangle of Chinese proceedings.

Then, with time being short, preventing hence a visit to the local schools, the entourage met with Governor Jervois once again in the late afternoon before departing hurriedly, setting sail again for Penang. So ended the two-day Qing tour of Singapore.

An Unexpected Outcome?

The visit, even though it was of so short a duration, was to have some consequence. Stirred by his own experience and investigations in Singapore, Guo started negotiating with the British Foreign Office once in London on the possibility of setting up a consulate in Singapore.²³ This

was ostensibly with the aim of protecting the Chinese and to develop a similar European-style diplomatic corps in China. But a more crucial reason was the eye towards extending its influence on the overseas Chinese that still maintained ties with their motherland. In particular, the centrality of the Chinese in Singapore, their aspirations and their wealth – as exemplified by Hoo – were seen as potential assets to the Qing court.²⁴

The Botanic Gardens impressed Guo greatly, rivalling his enjoyment of Whampoa's private garden and menagerie.

This was a fortuitous opportunity for Hoo, whose efforts to entertain the Chinese dignitaries were amply rewarded when he was nominated as the first Qing consul of Singapore, thereby substantially enhancing his portfolio and prestige in his adopted land. Indeed, it was considered a great achievement for him, an overseas Chinese migrant, to enter the ranks of the imperial Chinese bureaucracy. Guo had envisioned this to be a first step towards Qing consular expansion, with Singapore potentially acting as the head office for a series of consulate establishments throughout Southeast Asia, but this ambitious plan was set aside due to lack of finances.²⁵

Meanwhile, alarmed by Guo's negotiations in London to set up a consulate in Singapore, the British quickly established the Chinese Protectorate – with Pickering appointed as the first Protector of Chinese – in Singapore in May 1877. The Qing Consulate officially came into being on 5 October, five months later. The quick succession of the two offices would breed much conflict and rivalry in Singapore with regard to the protection of Chinese migrants in the





A Victorian poem in the 10 February 1877 issue of *Punch* satirising the arrival of the Chinese ambassador Guo Songtao in London as a monkey in Chinese dress looking lovingly at the British lion. Courtesy of Heidelberg University Library.

years that followed.²⁶ Nevertheless, the establishment of the consulate counts as perhaps one of the few Qing successes from this pivot to the West.

As for Guo, the embassy he headed eventually made it to London in early 1877, where he passed an eventful two years as the first Chinese ambassador, turning his eyes and mind to international issues of diplomacy and law while grasping at the same time the peculiar contours of Western man and society. Despite seeking answers to China's response to the West and establishing diplomatic relations with Germany and France in subsequent years, he was unable to push his insights to a divisive court in Beijing.²⁷ Most mortifyingly, he was mocked by the jingoistic and vitriolic tabloids in a foreign land while bearing the scorn of his countrymen at home.²⁸

After this diplomatic posting, Guo eventually retired to his estate in his native Hunan to pass his remaining days quietly, teaching and writing his memoirs. Ever the conservative, Liu eventually returned home where he took up a post in the Court of Banqueting.²⁹ (Liu, who left no impression of his time in Singapore, had also sabotaged Guo by sending malicious slanders to Beijing while in London.³⁰)

A Forgotten Encounter

In January 1878, an abbreviated extract from Guo's diary (使西纪程)³¹ talking about his sojourn in Singapore managed to find its way into the *Singapore Daily Times*.³² That aside, the brief sojourn by Guo and Liu has largely been forgotten.

Nonetheless, the entire episode illustrates, then and now, how quickly the face of Asia was changing towards the tail end of the 19th century. In particular, it provided a painful assessment of the gap that had emerged between China and the West. The centrality and superiority of Imperial China were being challenged everywhere.

At the same time, through the visit of the Qing emissaries, we see how Singapore, as a colonial showpiece, was firmly embedded in the pageantry of British power, exerting with its admixture of influences and



oftentimes garish contrasts – of privilege and underclass, of wealth and poverty, of promise and danger, of progress and backwardness, of order and disorder – a strange fascination for visitors near and far.

Much, of course, has changed since – Britain has lost its empire, China is a global power and Singapore is an independent, sovereign state. However, Chinese holidaymakers still descend on Singapore in December each year, visiting many of the same spots that once enthralled the Qing visitors of the 19th century. Occasionally battling inclement weather, the tourists enjoy the sights at the Istana, the Botanic Gardens and Fort Canning. They also visit parks, admire old shophouses and walk on our streets. The same sense of wonder, the same sense of familiarity, the same sense of possibility reverberate like echoes from the past into the present. ♦



(Above) The Chinese Protectorate building at the junction of New Bridge Road and Havelock Road. It was first located in a shophouse on North Canal Road before moving into this building in 1886. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

(Right) Portrait of William A. Pickering, the first Protector of Chinese in Singapore. The Chinese Protectorate was also established in May 1877 after the visit by the Qing delegation. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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KABOOM!

EARLY MALAY COMIC BOOKS MAKE AN IMPACT

The 1950s was the heyday for Malay comic books published in Singapore.

By Mazelan Anuar



Tungga dan Piring Terbang (Tungga and the Flying Saucer) is regarded as one of the earliest Malay science fiction comic books published in Singapore. Image reproduced from Naz Achnas, *Tungga dan Piring Terbang* (Singapore: Malayan-Indonesian Book Store, 1953). (From National Library Online).

Helang Hitam – likely the first Malay comic superhero – is a cross between Robin, Batman’s sidekick, and the legendary outlaw Robin Hood. Image reproduced from Jamaludin, *Helang Hitam* (Singapore: Geliga, 1956). (From PublicationSG).



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When most people think about Malay comic books or comic book artists, the Malaysian artist Lat comes to mind. His distinctive drawings, which capture humorous slices of kampong life and life in the big city, have been tickling funny bones for several decades now.

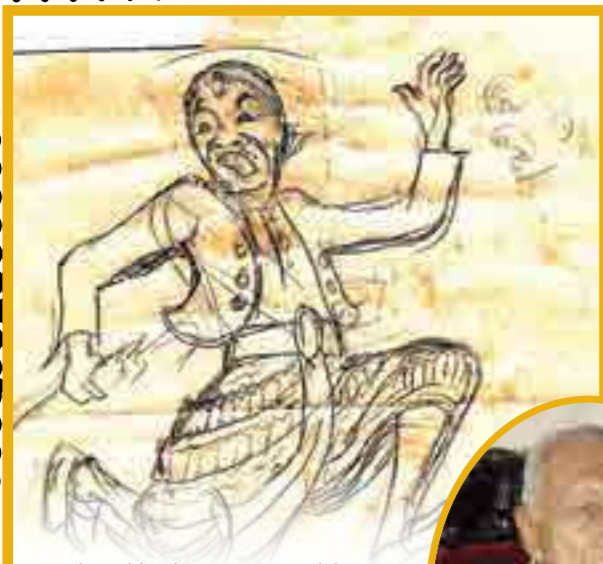
Lat got his big break as an editorial cartoonist in Malaysia’s *New Straits Times* in the mid-1970s. In this way, he is part of a long tradition of Malay cartoonists who got their start in the local papers. In Singapore, some of the earliest editorial cartoons appeared in the 1930s in newspapers such as *Warta Jenaka* and *Utusan Zaman*.

Most of the published cartoons touched on issues of independence and anti-colonialism, in line with the spirit of the times to uplift the Malay community and encourage Malay nationalism. Attitudes and characteristics that were regarded as impeding the progress of the Malays were criticised, along with Western norms and culture. Cartoons and caricatures were effective tools for reaching people as these were presented in a simple and concise manner – often laced with irony, sarcasm and satire – for easier consumption by the masses.¹

Interestingly, talented Malay writers and arts practitioners were drawn to this new art form that combined writing and art. They included writers like Abdul Jalil Haji Nor and the Indonesian artist and filmmaker Nas Achnas.



Pusaka Datuk Moyang, published in 1952, paved the way for the publishing of Malay comic books in Singapore. Images reproduced from Merayu Rawan, *Pusaka Datuk Moyang* (Singapore: Nilam, 1952). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. Malay RCL05 741.5 MER).



Wak Ketok by Ali Sanat is a satirical character known for his comical antics. Collection of Haji Ali Sanat Family.



Ali Sanat's cartoons appeared in *Utusan Zaman* and the entertainment magazine, *Asmara*. Collection of Haji Ali Sanat Family.

Malay Comics in Newspapers

One of the first Malay comics to appear came out in *Warta Jenaka*, which was launched in September 1936 as a weekly companion to *Warta Malaya*. *Warta Malaya* was a daily produced in Jawi that was published by Anglo-Asiatic Press on North Bridge Road. The first full-time cartoonist at *Warta Jenaka* was an artist by the name of S.B. Ally. Apart from Ally's drawings, the newspaper also welcomed contributions from readers.²

Not to be outdone, *Utusan Melayu*, another Jawi daily, also started a weekly supplement. *Utusan Zaman* was launched in November 1939 and the paper's cartoonist was Ali Sanat. One of his popular creations was Wak Ketok – a satirical character known for his comical antics. The character was used to encourage unity in the Malay community and to improve their way of life.³

Ali Sanat was born in 1900 in Kampong Tembaga along Bussorah Street in Singapore. His father was a well-known Haj pilgrimage agent, who served pilgrims during their Singapore stopover en route to Mecca, and Ali Sanat helped his father manage these pilgrims.

In the early 1950s, Ali Sanat created a new character, Wak Raya, when he went to work for another newspaper, *Melayu Raya*. He also contributed his works to the entertainment magazine *Asmara*, but decided to stop drawing after 1956 to focus on his funeral business. He died in 1997, at age 97.⁴

Cartoons and caricatures continued to be featured in the columns of Malay newspapers in the 1940s. After the Japanese surrender in 1945, cartoons started appearing in Malay magazines and this paved the way for full-fledged comic books in Malay.

Hang Tuah for Children

In 1951, Balai Antara published what is believed to be the first Malay comic book in Indonesia. Created by writer and artist Nasjah Djamin, *Hang Tuah (Untuk Anak-Anak)*, a comic for children in Romanised Malay, chronicles the heroics of the legendary Malay warrior Hang Tuah.⁵

Born in Sumatra in 1924, Nasjah Djamin was an artist and a writer. During the Indonesian National Revolution (1945–49), he created posters and slogans with other artists. In 1949, he began working for Balai Pustaka (originally known as Kantoor voor de Volkslectuur), a body that had been established by the Dutch in 1908 to select suitable reading materials for schools and, at the same time, restrict published materials that were critical of Dutch rule

An inside page of *Hang Tuah (Untuk Anak-Anak)*. The book is believed to be the first Malay comic published in Indonesia. Image reproduced from Nasjah Djamin, *Hang Tuah (Untuk Anak-Anak)* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1951). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL05 398.209595 NAS-[Acl]).

and policies.⁶ He then joined the editorial team for the magazine *Budaya* in 1953. Apart from drawing, Nasjah Djamin also wrote plays and short stories, and dabbled in theatre.⁷

First-Ever Malay Story in Pictures

Probably caught unawares that it had been beaten to the punch by *Hang Tuah (Untuk Anak-Anak)*, the comic book *Pusaka Datuk Moyang (Treasure of the Ancestors)*, published in 1952, proudly proclaims on its cover that it was the “First-ever Malay story in pictures” (Julung kali cerita Melayu bergambar).⁸

It was a small comic book, just 32 pages on paper measuring 8.5 cm wide and 13.5 cm long. The handwritten Jawi text had to be squeezed into what little space that was available, which makes reading the comic somewhat difficult. This also makes it hard sometimes to identify the different characters that are drawn. Nonetheless, the comic was a brave effort that pioneered the publishing of Malay comic books in Singapore.

Pusaka Datuk Moyang tells the story of a feud between two noble families lasting several generations. The main character, Datuk Pahlawan Sebilah, fought to take back the rights of his family, and many were sacrificed in battles as both parties launched attacks on one another.

This comic was published by Nilam, which used the office of Royal Press, a publishing company located at 745 North Bridge Road and well known for its magazine, *Hiburan*. Unfortunately, Nilam did not last long and so far, only two publications by Nilam have been found. The other title is also a comic book and published later in the same year featuring two stories – “15 Tahun Dahulu” and “Si Labu Dengan Si Kundur”.

Pusaka Datuk Moyang was written by Abdul Jalil Haji Nor, using the pen name Merayu Rawan. Abdul Jalil was a founding member of Angkatan Sasterawan '50 (Asas '50), an important Malay literary organisation based in Singapore. He was born in Johor in 1922 but grew up in Singapore. In the 1940s, he joined Annie's Printing Works in Johor where he produced several novelettes, before working in Singapore for Royal Press and Army Press.

The prolific writer and editor Harun Aminurrashid played a major role in the publication of *Pusaka Datuk Moyang*. In the foreword of the book, the Malay literary pioneer wrote that *Pusaka Datuk Moyang* was initially published as a series in *Hiburan*. As the story was well received by the magazine's readers, Harun encouraged the creator to compile it into a book. He opined that comic books are useful in teaching the young to be loyal, strong, well behaved and progressive.⁹

Majalah Comics Melayu

Over in Johor Bahru, publisher and printer Sabirin Haji Mohd. Annie initiated the series *Majalah*



The prolific writer and editor Harun Aminurrashid was instrumental in the publication of *Pusaka Datuk Moyang*. Courtesy of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Comics Melayu (Malay Comics Magazine) in 1952 to compete with Nilam. The series, comprising 11 comic books, was published by Zawiyah Publishing House and printed by his company, Annie's Printing Works. Seven out of the 11 books were drawn by Razak Ahmad.

According to Razak, Harun Aminurrashid's call for the production of Malay comic books moved him to take up the challenge. The comic books were based on stories relating to Malay history and legends and to make the books more accessible to the public, Zawiyah used Romanised Malay instead of Jawi script.¹⁰

The Works of Nas Achnas

One interesting work that emerged during those early years was *Tungga dan Piring Terbang (Tungga and the Flying Saucer)*. This comic book was published in 1953 by Malayan-Indonesian Book Store (MIBS) and was the creation of Indonesian filmmaker and comic artist Nas (also known as Naz) Achnas.¹¹ This comic book was a groundbreaking effort because at the time, Malay comic books typically depicted tales from ancient Malay *hikayat* (meaning “stories” in Arabic). Written in Romanised Malay, *Tungga dan Piring Terbang* is regarded as one of the earliest Malay science fiction comic books published in Singapore. Interestingly, *Tungga* and the other human characters resemble Malay warriors and nobility of the past.

Tungga protects the crown prince, Lewangsa, after a revolt that results in the king's death. While escaping, *Tungga* and Lewangsa encounter aliens who help them. Eventually, *Tungga* and Lewangsa manage



An inside page of *Tungga dan Piring Terbang*. Image reproduced from Naz Achnas, *Tungga dan Piring Terbang* (Singapore: Malayan-Indonesian Book Store, 1953). (From National Library Online).

Geliga Press

Another publishing company in Singapore that waded into the business of publishing Malay comic books was Geliga Press established by Syed Omar Abdul Rahman Alsagoff in 1954. Beside publishing novels for adults and storybooks for children, it also produced magazines such as *Remaja*, *Asmara* and *Suara Merdeka* that were popular with the Malay community.¹⁴

In 1956, Geliga decided to publish its first comic book – *Husni Dengan Perompak* (*Husni and the Robbers*).¹⁵ It then went on to produce other comic books, collaborating with artists and writers such as Raja Hamzah, K. Bali and Nora Abdullah.

Raja Hamzah was a prolific comic artist in Malay newspapers. Lat credited Raja Hamzah as an inspiration and influence. Raja Hamzah's series of cartoons and comics appeared in *Utusan Melayu* and, later, *Berita Harian*. *Dol Keropok*, *Wak Tempoh* and *Keluarga Mat Jambol* were the early cartoon series that made him popular. His works continued to be published in *Berita Harian* and *Berita Minggu* until his death in 1981.¹⁶



(Above left) Nora Abdullah was Geliga's first female cartoonist, and also the first female Malay comic artist in Singapore and Malaya. She produced her first comic book, *Cik Siti Wan Kembang*, at the age of 15. Courtesy of Malay Heritage Centre.

(Above right) Siti Wan Kembang is the legendary queen who ruled Kelantan in the 17th century. Image reproduced from Nora Abdullah, *Cik Siti Wan Kembang* (London: The British Library, 2010–2013). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. Malay RCL05 899.28 NOR).

to claim back the throne. Later, the aliens become disillusioned and disappointed by human greed and their penchant for fighting.

However, Nas Achnas was more notable as a film-maker and his involvement in publishing received scant attention. The films he directed include *Pelangi* (1951), *Dosa Remaja* (1973) and *Bunga Mas* (1973).¹² After meeting Harun Aminurrashid sometime after the Japanese Occupation, Nas Achnas assisted Harun to establish *Kenchana*, a monthly news magazine published by MIBS, in 1947.

Nas Achnas created a comic series, *Tunggadewa*, that was featured in *Kenchana*. It is believed that this comic series was subsequently compiled and republished as a graphic novel although no copy of the book has ever been found, unfortunately. The cartoons by Nas Achnas, which were often a social commentary on Indonesian politics, were also featured in the entertainment magazine *Hiburan*.¹³

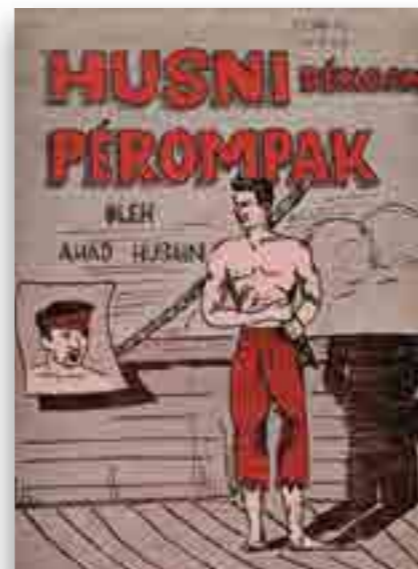
K. Bali was the pen name of the multi-talented Abdul Rahim Abdullah. Born in Kelantan in 1933, he was a Malay and Thai language teacher as well as chief editor for the newspaper, *Utusan Rakyat*. Apart from drawing cartoons and comics, K. Bali also wrote poems, short stories, drama, novels, essays and articles that were published in newspapers and magazines such as *Juita Filem*, *Hiburan*, *Mutiara* and *Mastika*. He was conferred the Ahli Mangku Negara (Member of the Order of the Defender of the Realm) in 1984 and Ahli Darjah Kinabalu (Member of the Order of Kinabalu) in 1986.¹⁷

Geliga's first female cartoonist was Nora Abdullah, whose real name was Che Nor Zaharah Abdullah.¹⁸ She was also the first female Malay comic artist in Singapore and Malaya. Born in Kelantan, Nora Abdullah published her first comic book, *Cik Siti Wan Kembang*, in 1955 at the age of 15.¹⁹ Siti Wan Kembang, known for her wisdom and mystical powers, is the name of the legendary queen who ruled Kelantan in the 17th century. Nora Abdullah published at least 12 comic books with Geliga but stopped drawing comics in 1960 and turned to painting portraits instead.²⁰

Geliga also published the popular *Geliga Komik Series* (*Geliga's Comic Series*) comprising more than 300 comic books. The second book in the series is titled *Helang Hitam*, published in 1956. *Helang Hitam* – meaning “Black Eagle” – is the alter ego of Harun and a cross between Robin, Batman's sidekick, and the legendary outlaw Robin Hood. The villain in the story is Keris Mas, who robs a bank with his gang and escapes to a hideout on a deserted island. *Helang Hitam* manages to defeat and arrest Keris Mas, who is then put behind bars.²¹

Geliga was a major publisher of comic books, and when it closed in the early 1960s, the production of comic books in Singapore declined. Comic artists

Husni Dengan Perompak (*Husni and the Robbers*) is the first Malay comic book published by Geliga Press. Image reproduced from Ahad Husain, *Husni Dengan Perompak* (Singapore: Geliga Limited, 1956). (From PublicationSG).



also stayed away due to issues relating to payment of royalty fees.²² Nora Abdullah's comic book *Armina*, published in 1961 (number 309 under the *Geliga Komik Series*), was likely Geliga's last comic book.²³

In the 1960s, the Malay comic book publishing trade began shifting its centre from Singapore to Penang where Sinaran Brothers became the most prolific publisher of Malay comic books. Penang eventually supplanted Singapore as a centre for publishing Malay comic books. ♦

Scan to read this article in Malay.

<https://go.gov.sg/early-malay-comics>

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THE SALVATION ARMY IN SINGAPORE

The history of the Salvation Army in Singapore goes back to at least 1935.

By Lee Geok Boi

Today the Salvation Army is a well-known institution in Singapore. Its thrift stores are popular with bargain hunters and those on a budget. During the Christmas season, its bell ringers, with their bright red kettles, are a common sight outside shopping mall entrances as they seek donations from passers-by.

However, back in March 1935 when Lieutenant-Colonel Herbert A. Lord of the Salvation Army in Korea first came on a reconnaissance mission to see if colonial Singapore needed its help, the Army was not particularly well known. Lord told the *Straits Times* that he was here to “investigate the possibilities of his organisation undertaking religious and social work in this city”.¹

Salvationists, as members of the Army are called, had been doing work in Southeast Asia as early as 1898 at the invitation of the Dutch government in the Dutch East Indies.² In Java, the Army had taken charge of the leper, criminal and pauper populations. Like the British colonial administration in Singapore, the Dutch East Indies government did not have a social work agency.

There were apparently early attempts by the Army to proselytise in Singapore at the beginning of the 20th century. According to the *Straits Budget* in 1936, the “uniform of the Salvation Army was

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first seen in Singapore about 30 years ago, when one of its representatives was booed on the Esplanade”.³ The news report added that the Army was “facing prejudice and hostility all over the world owing to the novelty of its methods”.

One reason could be that the Army evangelised through open-air meetings where men, as well as women, preached and sang accompanied by musicians, good and bad. Could the Salvationist who was booed at the Esplanade have been no less than the founder of the Army himself, General William Booth?⁴ The *Eastern Daily Mail and Straits Morning Advertiser* had reported in November 1906 that Booth was heading to Japan to inspect the Army’s mission that had started there in 1895.⁵

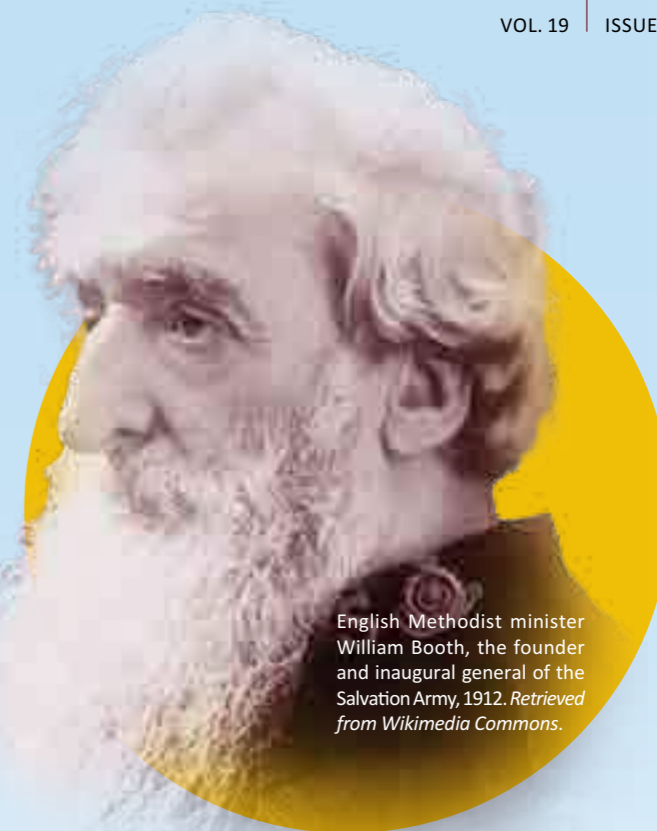
In the days of steamship travel, Singapore would have been a likely stopover enroute. In 1926, General Bramwell Booth, son of William Booth, on his way to Japan, had stayed long enough in Singapore to give a talk at the Victoria Theatre on the work of the Army in December that year.⁶ Organised by the Dutch Indies Salvationists, the talk could have also been intended as a fundraiser, for it was by invitation only and “Eurasians and Asiatics” who turned up uninvited were kept out until all the invitees were seated. Even with uninvited guests though, the Victoria Theatre had empty seats.⁷

Two days later, the *Malayan Saturday Post* commented somewhat snarkily that “the arrangements for the public lecture by General Booth on Thursday [2 December] at the Victoria Theatre were the most stupid imaginable”. “It is to be hoped that if the Salvation Army is to start work here arrangements would be left in the hands of more capable officers to carry out the work in the spirit of the founder and that there would be no hankering after the high and mighty.”⁸ However, a reporter from the *Malaya Tribune* who had attended the same talk reported that a “packed house greet[ed] General Bramwell Booth”.⁹

First HQ at 47 Killiney Road

It took Herbert Lord a month to write up his report, get approval from London and set up the Army’s modest base in a shophouse at 47 Killiney Road, where the Lord family lived on the floor above. It also had a post office box number.¹⁰

Lord found 10 Salvationists among the British troops stationed in Singapore whom he expected to form the core of the movement. “[The Salvation Army] will be on evangelical lines first and foremost, and social work will also be important particularly when additional funds are available,” Lord told the *Straits Budget* in April 1935. Funds did become available almost immediately. In June 1935 the Army was roped in to handle the Rotary Club’s unemployment relief fund project.¹¹



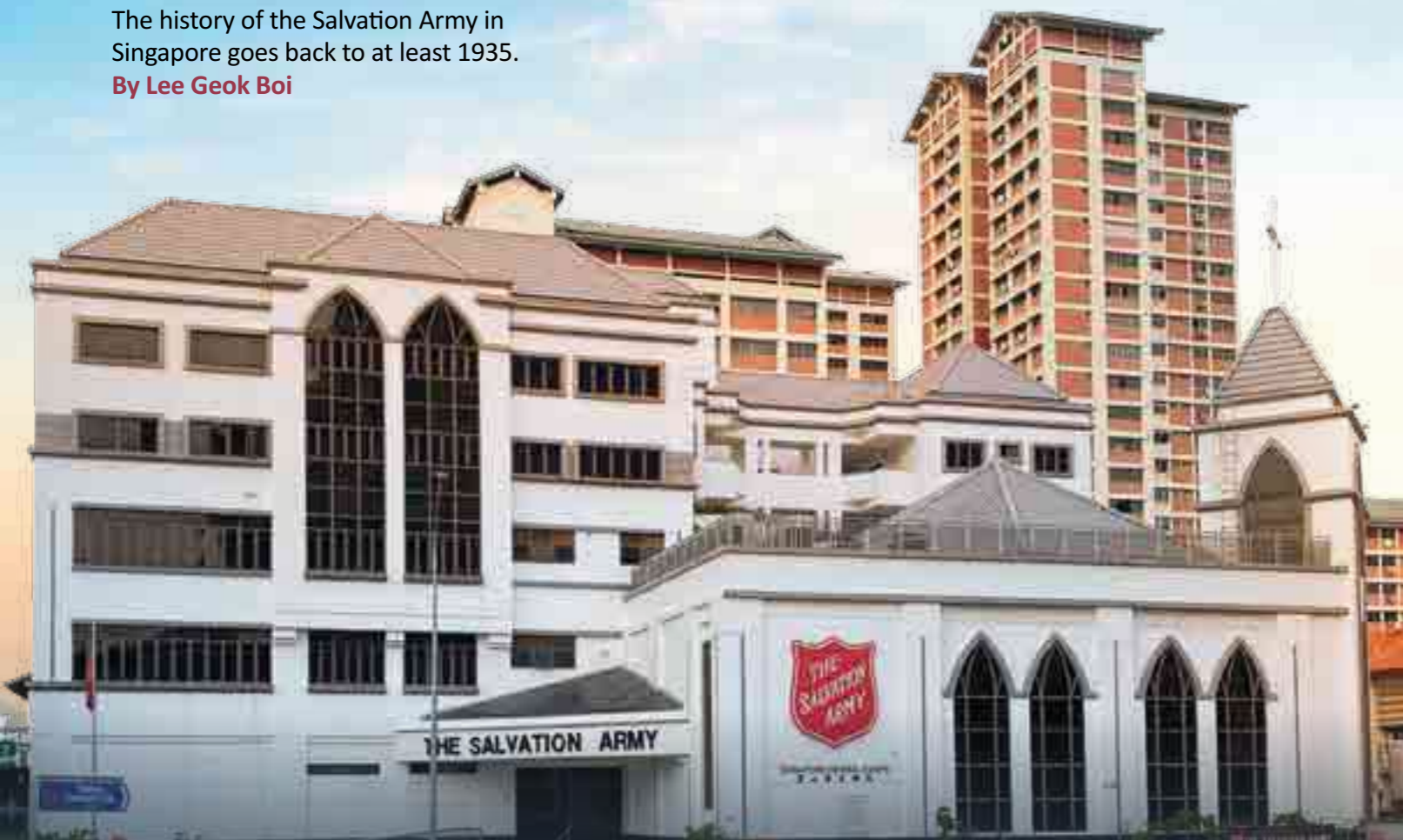
English Methodist minister William Booth, the founder and inaugural general of the Salvation Army, 1912. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.

During the Great Depression in the early 1930s, unemployment was high in Singapore. Formed in 1930, the Rotary Club had, in 1935, begun fundraising among its professional and wealthy membership to disburse cash to the unemployed. Soon afterwards, the colonial government started the Silver Jubilee Relief Fund as an endowment fund to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of King George V.¹²

Before long, the government was also calling on the Army to help with the distribution of relief money from the Silver Jubilee Fund. Captain Frank Bainbridge, who had been the Relieving Officer for the Rotary Club Relief Fund, was made the Relieving Officer for the Silver Jubilee Fund, which began distributing money in April 1936.¹³ Bainbridge was put in charge of all aspects of this cash distribution. The Army was also represented on the Silver Jubilee Fund committee on which Lord, now a Brigadier, sat as a member.¹⁴

The Army’s open-air services were held initially at the Esplanade, but it also had the use of the hall of the Young Men’s Christian Association in their Orchard Road premises during the rainy season.¹⁵ One popular location was the Municipal bandstand on Waterloo Street. In a town with few entertainment options at the time, such singing and loud music, albeit laced with preaching and calls to repent, would have attracted attention. The Army also took the opportunity to solicit donations at these services.

However, in 1954 when the Army tried to resume its open-air services at the Esplanade, its application to the City Council was turned down. “The committee’s decision was a firm ‘no’ having regard to the number of religious sects in Singapore and the character of the Esplanade Walk,” reported the *Straits Budget*.¹⁶ The council was afraid that the Esplanade would turn into a “Hyde Park Corner”.¹⁷



The headquarters of the Salvation Army in Bishan, 2023. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

Homes for Boys and Girls

By 1936, the Army had two homes in operation. One was the Boys' Industrial Home on Kim Keat Road, whose aim was to rehabilitate delinquent youths by teaching them employable skills such as woodwork and carpentry, giving them a basic command of English and guiding them on how to lead a good Christian life. In his opening speech, Lord said that by "taking boys off the streets, they were reducing the number of potential criminals and creating useful men of the future".¹⁸

In March 1937, the home moved to new premises at 151 Thomson Road to accommodate more boys.¹⁹ A separate remand home subsequently opened in the same building to house boys convicted of juvenile offences.²⁰

... that was a very precious piece of writing... it was with the stamp of the General [Yamashita]. So nobody dared to come and molest us or do any harm to us.

The other was the Women's Industrial Home at 36 Paterson Road, which took in troubled or delinquent girls in their late teens.²¹ Speaking at the official opening of the home in February 1936, Lord said: "[T]his home would become a refuge that would provide freedom from the influence of evil temptation and companions; provide instruction in the consequences of an evil life and the possibility of a virtuous one; give an opportunity to create new habits and nurture these habits in helpful surroundings; train girls in those things that would enable them to work; and create a centre from which those women could be sent out to useful positions in life and from which loving and watchful care could be exercised over them until they become permanently re-established."²²

Some of the girls were rescued from a life on the streets by Salvationists who, dressed in their iconic white uniforms, hung out in red-light districts talking

to the girls and offering them an opportunity for a different way of life. Mrs Herbert Lord, wife of the head of the Army in Singapore, speaking at a Rotary Club meeting in February 1941, said: "During 1940, 200 hours were spent on the streets, meeting the girls both in the streets and in the cafes; more than 100 cafes and cabarets were visited by Salvation Army women officers in uniform for the sole purpose of meeting and offering assistance to any girls who were willing to be helped."²³

Tan Beng Neo, a resident of the Women's Industrial Home, who later became a social worker, also acted as a translator for the European Salvationists on these night patrols. In her oral history interview, she said: "If they don't like us they would walk away... Well, we don't chase after them. But some of them greeted us... when they start to know that we were not doing any harm to them except trying to help."²⁴

The Women's Industrial Home moved to 319 River Valley Road in 1937, where it began taking in orphans and young children whose families were unable to care for them. The numbers grew to such an extent that a Children's Home was set up, first in a house on Upper Wilkie Road and subsequently a mansion on Pasir Panjang Road to accommodate the larger numbers.²⁵

During the Japanese Occupation, one of the temporary premises occupied by the Women's Industrial Home was 30 Oxley Road, which was next to a Japanese military brothel at 26 Oxley Road.²⁶ The home found a more permanent location at 381 Pasir Panjang Road in 1959. The Army, with help from the Rotary Club, had bought two adjoining houses in 1957 and converted them into a new girls' home.²⁷

Not all the girls in the Women's Home were rescued from prostitution or prison. The aforementioned Tan Beng Neo was a young probationary nurse who had run away from home after a violent disagreement with her parents. Seeking help, she went to the Mount Sophia home of the principal of Methodist Girls' School, Tan's former school. The principal took Tan to the Women's Home on Paterson Road.

Tan, a self-taught seamstress, made herself useful at the home by teaching the other residents how



Minister for Culture and Social Affairs Othman Wok (second from left) visiting the Girls' Industrial Home in Pasir Panjang, 1966. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

to sew. The Army took over the sponsorship of her nurse's training and paid the \$25 for her midwife's certificate when she completed the course.²⁸

The young women were taught basic English, domestic work, sewing and needlework. And like the boys, jobs were found for them once they became employable as well as marriage partners. To ensure that the young women were not exploited once they left the home, potential employers and marriage partners were thoroughly screened.

Although the colonial government gave the Army subsidies for the homes it ran, the money was never enough and there were regular appeals for donations. The residents in the homes were engaged in making a variety of handicrafts for sale to raise more funds for expenses. However, the iconic Salvation Army Christmas kettle complete with bell ringers, seen in front of malls all over the world to raise money during the Christmas season, was only introduced to Singapore in December 1988.²⁹

Helping Former Prisoners

In 1936, the Army also started working with the Singapore Aftercare Association in the rehabilitation of discharged prisoners and to help them find employment.³⁰ Army officers made prison visits to evangelise. They also identified prisoners in need of a helping hand to reintegrate into society once out of prison and even gave them temporary shelter.

According to the report by Lord, in the first year, "571 interviews had been given to 144 men and women before and after discharge. Of this number, 115 desired the help of the Association, and out of that number eight were repatriated; seven were restored to friends who would look after them, as for various reasons it was not possible to offer them work; 54 were helped to get jobs; and in one case it was made possible for a man to have his previous source of income, which had been forfeited on account of crime, restored to him".³¹

In 1938, the Army opened the Discharged Prisoners' Home on Race Course Road to provide a temporary hostel for those recently released from prison and to tide them over while employment was being found. "The Home will not be a final stopping place for them," said Lord. "It would fulfil an urgent need, however, as many men coming out did want some place to which they could go for a few days." The Singapore Aftercare Association bore the rent for the home.³²

The War

When the British surrendered Singapore on 15 February 1942, Japanese troops swept through the island, eventually entering the Army's headquarters at Temple House (now the House of Tan Yeok Nee) at the junction of then Tank Road (now Clemenceau Avenue) and Penang Road.

Tan recalled: "And they [Japanese troops] came into the Salvation Army Headquarters... and Yamashita [Tomoyuki], the General, wanted that place... We were fortunate because... Brigadier Lord and... Major [Chas. F.] Davidson... were able to speak Japanese... So they were able to ask... for certain things: 'Can we take our things? We need our food and stuff...' And we managed to get a piece of paper, all written in Japanese."³³

That piece of paper proved invaluable. Tan said: "[W]e pasted it under a glass on the front door [of 30 Oxley Road, its then location of the Women's Industrial Home] and put a piece of wood behind it and nailed it. So that nobody could tear it or take it away. You know, that was a very precious piece of writing whatever it was... And... it was with the stamp of the General [Yamashita]. So nobody dared to come and molest us or do any harm to us... Because whenever the soldiers came in afterwards, we... bowed to them and tried to smile but pointed to the piece of paper on the door... We were very grateful for that piece of paper."³⁴



The Girls' Industrial Home on Pasir Panjang Road, 1966. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The Army headquarters was stacked floor to ceiling with cartons of tinned food and bags of rice that British soldiers and civilians had helped Salvationists salvage from bombed-out warehouses, according to Tan.³⁵ In addition to the paper guaranteeing safe passage, the Salvationists were also given one day to move as much of the food as they could haul to 30 Oxley Road.

During the Japanese Occupation, while male European Salvationists were interned, two European women officers were able to continue their work outside the internment camp for several months before they were taken in.³⁶ Together with the Asian Salvationists like Tan, they were dressed in their white Army uniforms and identified with arm bands issued by the Japanese.

Postwar Recovery

Although lasting less than four years, the Japanese Occupation left Singapore with scores of social issues: poverty, homelessness, hunger, crime, broken families, juvenile delinquency, gambling, opium addiction, and displaced and missing persons.

The organisation of the War Relief Fund brought the interned Army officers quickly back to active duty. They took charge of the entire operation “including investigation and relief distribution, from a relief centre set up in the Victoria Memorial Hall”. The fund was set up when the British Military Administration (BMA) demonetised the currency used during the Japanese Occupation.³⁷

So quickly did the Army work that by October 1945, Colonel Bertha Grey, the first matron of the girls’ home on River Valley Road and the social secretary of the Army, had gotten the homes going again and Salvationists were staffing the People’s Restaurants.³⁸ These “restaurants” scattered in town

provided cheap meals for workers amid rising food prices. They had been started by the newly set-up Social Welfare Department established in April 1946 when the BMA ended.

On top of training to be Salvationists, many were also taught to undertake the social work tasks that were part and parcel of their evangelical work. In fact, the Army had been the only agency training social workers until the Department of Social Work was set up in the University of Malaya in 1952. Because Salvationists were among the earliest to receive social work training as part of their evangelical mission, some became the pioneer staff at the new Social Welfare Department.

“Usually, most of the staff that helped the Social Welfare came from the Salvation Army,” said Tan. “You see, there was nothing, nobody was trained. Nobody was able to do the work... The practical part of it [running the homes and providing social services] was all run by most of the Salvation Army officers.”³⁹

In the immediate postwar years, the Army also undertook the arduous process of restoring their war-damaged Temple House headquarters. So named because of its Chinese-style architecture (known today as the House of Tan Yeok Nee), the property had been leased in January 1938 as the Army’s headquarters. A property then of the Church of England, it had once been a residence for girls called St Mary’s Home.⁴⁰

In 1940, the Army had acquired the place for \$50,000 with a loan of \$25,000 from the Straits Settlements government and a grant of \$25,000 from its London headquarters. The building also became a training centre and accommodation for married officers.⁴¹ Restoration took six years, and in 1951, Governor of Singapore Franklin Gimson officially opened the building as The Salvation Army Command Headquarters.⁴²

House of Tan Yeok Nee at the junction of Clemenceau Avenue and Penang Road, 1955. It served as the Salvation Army’s headquarters from 1938 to 1991. *Marjorie Doggett Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

In 1959, Lord, the officer who had gotten the Salvation Army to such an excellent start in 1935, returned to Singapore for a last visit.⁴³ (After his release from internment at the end of the Japanese Occupation, Lord had returned to duty in Seoul in 1946. Unfortunately, he was captured by the North Koreans at the outbreak of the Korean War (1950–53) and interned until 1953.⁴⁴) Lord was reported to have been amazed at Singapore’s political development. “I sincerely hope that the building of a new Asia is done on sound principles of democracy, righteousness and political integrity,” he said.⁴⁵

Lord would have been even more amazed to find out that the Salvation Army headquarters he had purchased in 1940 for \$50,000 was sold in 1991 for \$20 million.⁴⁶ That sum was used to finance its new and larger headquarters in Bishan, which opened in 1994.⁴⁷

Today, the Salvation Army in Singapore runs a host of programmes for children and youth, the elderly, migrant workers, former prisoners and the general community. It runs Gracehaven, a children’s home; the Peacehaven Nursing Home; Carehaven, a shelter for foreign domestic workers; and a few thrift stores around Singapore. ♦



The People’s Restaurants sold affordable and nutritious lunches to the masses, 1947. *Courtesy of Ministry of Communication and Information.*

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RESTORING CLASSIC FILMS FROM ASIA

Besides restoring made-in-Singapore films, the Asian Film Archive is also involved in the preservation of other seminal Asian works.

By Chew Tee Pao

Since it was established about two decades ago, the Asian Film Archive (AFA) has restored many films connected to Singapore. These include classic titles from the golden age of Malay cinema such as K.M. Basker's *Patah Hati* (1952) and Hussein Haniff's *Dang Anom* (1962) to more recent Singapore movies like *Mee Pok Man* (1995) and *Money No Enough* (1998). However, as the name of the organisation implies, the AFA has also been active in restoring films from around the region. In

2005, when the archive was founded, director Mike De Leon became the first Filipino filmmaker to donate his works to the AFA for preservation.

An eminent filmmaker of the second golden age of Philippine cinema from the 1970s to early 1980s, De Leon sent his films to the AFA in a variety of film formats that included 35 mm original picture and sound negatives, and his own collection of surviving 35 mm exhibition prints.

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Mike De Leon's Batch '81

In 2014, ABS-CBN Corporation, the largest media conglomerate of the Philippines, embarked on the first restorations of De Leon's filmography beginning with *Hindi Nahahati ang Langit* (*An Indivisible Heaven*, 1985) – about two stepsiblings who fall in love – using the negative it acquired. In 2015, ABS-CBN loaned from the AFA the 35 mm original camera and sound negatives of De Leon's 1980 musical comedy *Kakabakaba Ka Ba?* (*Will Your Heart Beat Faster?*) and subsequently the surviving 35 mm release prints of the 1979 *Kung Mangarap Ka't Magising* (*Moments in a Stolen Dream*), a coming-of-age romantic drama, for digitisation and restoration.

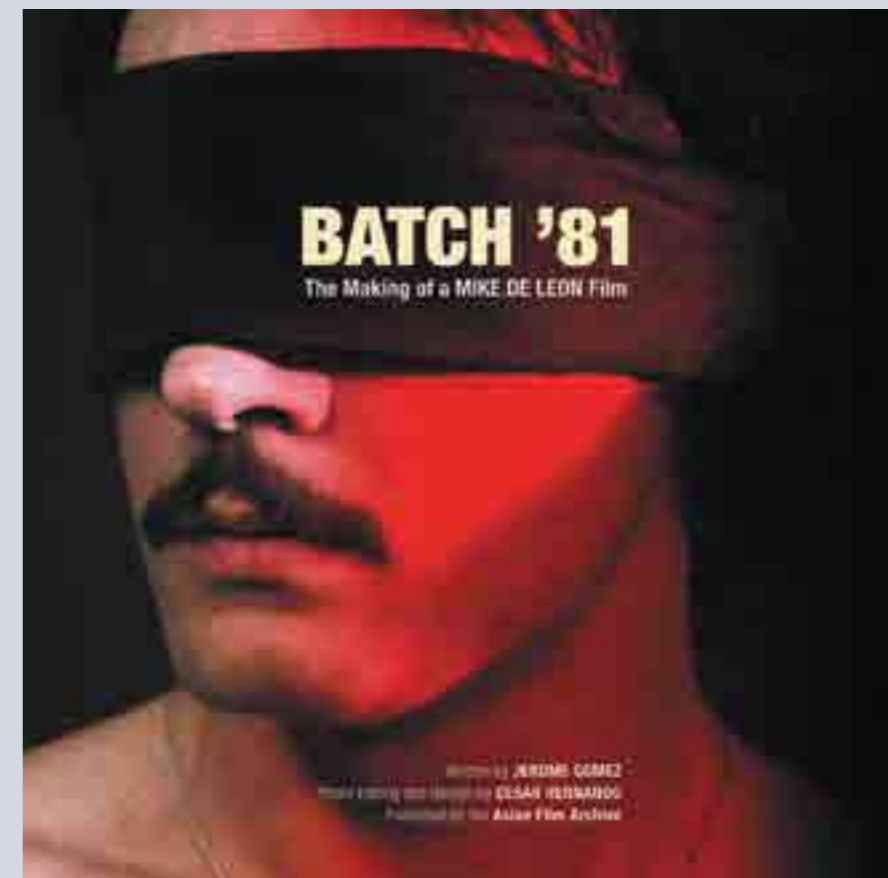
Both films were produced by LVN Pictures, one of the biggest film studios of Philippine cinema since its inception in 1938. The LVN studio ceased operations in 2005, and ABS-CBN Corporation acquired the assets to maintain the legacy of LVN Pictures and the films it made. The rights to De Leon's other works belonged to either the director or multiple parties.

Considering and navigating the legal and copyright issues are essential in preparing for any film restoration. With the approval and support from the film's executive producer Marichu Vera-Perez Maceda in 2016, the AFA assessed and determined the urgency to digitise and restore De Leon's 1982 critically acclaimed *Alpha Kappa Omega Batch '81* (also known as *Batch '81* or *AKΩ 81*).

Produced at a time of great political unrest and turmoil during the period of martial law in the Philippines (1972–86) under then President Ferdinand Marcos, the psychological film chronicles fraternity Alpha Kappa Omega's brutal initiation of new members as seen through the eyes of university student Sid Lucero. The film has been often referred to as one of the greatest Filipino films of all time and a metaphor for the Philippines under the Marcos regime.¹

With the original camera and sound negatives and a surviving positive print that had been preserved by the AFA since 2005, the film became the archive's first restoration of a Filipino title. The original camera and sound negatives of *Batch '81* exhibited critical signs of "vinegar syndrome", where films become brittle, shrink and emit an acidic odour. It had developed haloes and mould, with major green-hued defects on the emulsion. As a result, parts of the picture negative were unusable and the laboratory – L'Immagine Ritrovata in Bologna, Italy – overseeing the restoration had to integrate shots from the positive print during the process of digital restoration.

(Facing Page) Still from Mike De Leon's *Batch '81*. The film was made more than three decades ago during martial law of the Philippines (23 September 1972 – 25 February 1986), a time of great political unrest and turmoil. The original film premiered at the 1982 Cannes Film Festival during the Directors' Fortnight. Courtesy of MVP Pictures.



Launched in conjunction with the film's restoration, the Asian Film Archive published *Batch '81: The Making of a Mike De Leon Film* to document the making of the film. Written by Jerome Gomez, the book is available to order at the archive's online shop. Image reproduced from Jerome Gomez, *Batch '81: The Making of a Mike De Leon Film* (Singapore: Asian Film Archive, 2017). (From PublicationSG).

With the assistance of a post-production company in Manila, De Leon and the film's original cinematographer, Rody Lacap, supervised the colour grading using the restored scans. The colour-corrected restored scans were then returned to L'Immagine Ritrovata to produce new negatives of the film. The entire restoration, including generating new 35 mm negatives and print, took nearly a year.

In September 2017, the restored *Batch '81* premiered at the Venice Classics section of the 74th Venice International Film Festival. I had the privilege of attending the festival for the first time and read an opening statement from Mike De Leon to the audience. After Venice, the film screened in Manila in October 2017 as the closing film of the QCinema Film Festival.² In Singapore, the film was shown at the AFA's annual restored film series, "Asian Restored Classics", on 30 August 2018.³

Launched in conjunction with the film's restoration, the AFA published *Batch '81: The Making of a Mike De Leon Film* to document the history behind the making of the film.⁴ The publication was made possible with De Leon's collection of related materials such as photographs and memorabilia, recollections from the director, his creative team, and the actors who played both pivotal and minor roles in the film.



Image comparisons showing the before-and-after restoration of *Batch '81*.
Courtesy of Asian Film Archive.



Garin Nugroho's Surat Untuk Bidadari

In 2019, as the work to restore *They Call Her... Cleopatra Wong* got underway,⁵ the AFA was tackling another challenging restoration of an Indonesian film, *Surat Untuk Bidadari* (*Letter to an Angel*, 1994). This is the second feature film of director Garin Nugroho, who is considered a pioneer for a new generation of Indonesian filmmakers of the 1990s.

The film is about Lewa, a boy who believes in an angel that looks after the earth. Having lost his mother early, Lewa writes to the angel for answers, but is frustrated by the lack of reply. The film is notable for being the first to be shot on Sumba, one of the islands in the Nusa Tenggara, stretching from Bali to Timor. It was one of the last bastions of pre-Hindu animism. Adapting a story banned under the administration of Suharto during the New Order (1966–98), the film depicts a traditional Indonesian society at odds with modernity.⁶

The original film was never commercially released within the country but won critical acclaim overseas, including the Gold Prize at the Young Cinema Competition of the 1994 Tokyo International Film Festival and the Golden Charybdis (Best Feature Film) at the 1994 Taormina International Film Festival. It was screened at the Oldham Theatre on 8 September 2019 as part of the 2019 edition of “Asian Restored Classics.”⁷

A landmark work in Indonesian cinema, *Surat Untuk Bidadari* has been an inspiration to newer generations of Indonesian filmmakers. Most notably, its screenplay provided Mouly Surya, another Indonesian director, with the premise for her widely acclaimed

hit, *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* (2017), which premiered in the Directors' Fortnight section of the 2017 Cannes Film Festival.⁸

In July 2016, I attended the 9th Biennial Association for Southeast Asian Cinemas Conference in Kuala Lumpur and had the opportunity to meet Garin Nugroho, who was a panellist at the conference. He shared with me that after the fall of the Suharto administration in 1998, the film laboratories that were associated with the administration closed and most of the original negatives and prints, including those of his early works, were either destroyed or lost.

There was only a single 35 mm print of *Surat Untuk Bidadari* residing at the Sinematek Indonesia, a film archive based in Jakarta, but it was a censored version. From the book, *Indonesian Cinema After the New Order: Going Mainstream*, I learnt that since the 1970s, the Suharto administration “[had taken] an active role in controlling film production and content through new laws and regulations”, and “film producers were known to submit a version of the film to the censors to be cut, but then played the uncut version in cinemas.”⁹ It was deduced that the film was such a case, but never got its release.



(Top) A still from Garin Nugroho's *Surat Untuk Bidadari*. Made with extensive cooperation from the local population, the rituals and ceremonies performed by the villagers in the film were real. Courtesy of Garin Nugroho.

(Above) A still from the print of *Surat Untuk Bidadari* from The Japan Foundation. The Japanese print is a complete version of the film and used as a secondary source to the Indonesian print as it contained burnt-in English and Japanese subtitles. Courtesy of Garin Nugroho.



A total of 14 shots and 4,500 frames (approximately 3 minutes, 7 seconds) were missing from the print from Sinematek Indonesia, and had to be reconstructed using the Japanese print as a reference. For example, this still showing the lead character burning the letters he had seized from the postman was missing. Courtesy of Garin Nugroho.

Before every restoration, it is essential to take stock of all available film elements that can be used. After weeks of investigations, the AFA located a second 35 mm print of *Surat Untuk Bidadari* residing with the Film and Broadcast media section of The Japan Foundation. It was subsequently ascertained that the print was the very same one screened at the Tokyo International Film Festival in 1994.

It was fortuitous that the second print was sent via a diplomatic bag through the Japan Embassy in Jakarta in 1994. If Garin had the print exported on his own, it would have needed prior clearance from the Indonesian government or would have been confiscated at customs.

“The film was made in 1994 in the era of Suharto, [an] era full of control and censor. The filmmaker cannot send their film by themselves to the foreign country [international film festival]. If the filmmaker [sends it himself], it needs permission from the government with many requirements and [would be] complicated. So this film was sent with a diplomatic bag from the embassy,” said Garin.¹⁰

Garin decided not to bring the film back to Indonesia for fear of interrogation by the Indonesian government. This was in line with the account in *Indonesian Cinema After the New Order* of how during the New Order, “titles exported overseas often riled bureaucrats because they did not pass domestic censorship beforehand, thus risking a negative impression of Indonesia overseas.”¹¹

Both the 35 mm prints from Sinematek Indonesia and The Japan Foundation were sent to Éclair Cinema

(now Éclair Classics), a film restoration laboratory in France, for comparison, and it was confirmed that the one from The Japan Foundation was a complete version of the film. The latter was therefore used as a secondary source to the Indonesian print as it contained burnt-in English and Japanese subtitles.

***Surat Untuk Bidadari* was screened at the Oldham Theatre on 8 September 2019 as part of the 2019 edition of “Asian Restored Classics”.**

The print from Sinematek Indonesia was affected by dirt and shrinkage and had numerous thick scratches on the emulsion and base of the material. Damage from folds, torn frames and broken perforations were uncovered during inspection. Many of the splices made with tape had deteriorated and had to be repaired to smoothen the process of digitisation. A total of 14 shots and 4,500 frames (approximately 3 minutes and 7 seconds) were also missing from the Indonesian print and had to be reconstructed using the Japanese print as a reference. Numerous scenes and shots on the Indonesian print that were either shortened or removed from the original suggest that images depicting discord and insubordination were deliberately removed.

The restoration of *Surat Untuk Bidadari* took about six months. Fortunately, Garin was available to



Most of the film base of Dharmasena Pathiraja's *Bambaru Avith* had softened and the emulsion had become sticky. Warpage and shrinkage were observed in every reel with numerous adhesive stains and perforation tears. Courtesy of Asian Film Archive.

catch a work-in-progress preview of the restoration at the Oldham Theatre at the National Archives of Singapore, where the AFA holds its regular screenings. Having not seen the film play on a big screen in over 20 years, he reminisced about the making of the film and shared anecdotes as we watched the film.

Garin told me the film serves as capsule for a time that cannot be revisited and re-experienced since Sumba has become a hotspot for local tourists in the last decade. He was appreciative that the film can now be seen as close to its original form by new audiences.¹²

Dharmasena Pathiraja's *Bambaru Avith*

Nearly two decades before Garin Nugroho began his film career in Indonesia, there was Dharmasena Pathiraja (1943–2018), a pioneer of Sri Lankan cinema's "second revolution" in the 1970s. Having made a total of nine feature films, Pathiraja is often referred to as the "rebel with a cause" for his films that served as social commentaries on the prevailing socio-economic and political realities in Sri Lanka. The director passed away at the age of 74 on 28 January 2018.

The AFA's first encounter with the works of Pathiraja was serendipitous. In 2017, the AFA was alerted to the existence of the 35 mm reels of three films: *Ponmani* (*Younger Sister*, 1977), *Bambaru Avith* (*The Wasps Are Here*, 1978) and *Soldadu Unnahe* (*Old Soldier*, 1981) that were found languishing below a stairwell of a local institution, which had collected the films years ago but was unable to care for them. These films, which have severely deteriorated, turned out to be among Pathiraja's seminal works as these are among the filmmaker's earliest films that were screened and won awards outside of Sri Lanka.¹³

Set in the northern city of Jaffna, Pathiraja's only Tamil-language film, *Ponmani*, traces the fortunes and

concerns of an economically depleted upper caste, lower middle-class family. Ponmani, the youngest daughter in the family has to wait until the marriage of the middle daughter, Saraoja, before she can escape from her life in the home. She falls in love with a boy from a lower fisherman caste but learns that her family has no money to pay for Saraoja's dowry.

Bambaru Avith tells the story of the clash between local fishermen in Kalpitiya, a fishing village in Sri Lanka, and a group of urban entrepreneurs who arrived at the village. The city folk, headed by Victor, bring a business ethic of their own: capitalistic tendencies that anger Anton, the patriarch of the village. When Victor gets involved with a local village girl, tensions arise culminating in a series of violent events.

In *Soldadu Unnahe*, a World War II veteran, a prostitute, her thieving pimp and an alcoholic, who are distinctly marginalised in society, take refuge at the base of a tree as their asylum from the rousing celebrations and spectacle of Sri Lanka's Independence Day.

Over the next few months, my team members and I took turns inspecting every reel of the three films by carefully unwinding each reel by hand. All the reels were found to be suffering from varying degrees of "vinegar syndrome" and mould infection. Physically, the reels seemed as though they had been dunked or lathered in heavy black grease. Among the film elements, there were many reels that we had to halt inspection as the emulsion of each film reel was stuck together. Unwind-



Image comparisons showing the before-and-after restoration of *Bambaru Avith*. Courtesy of Asian Film Archive.



A section of the 35 mm reel of *Ponmani* shows the loss of images, leaving only a part of a face visible. Courtesy of Asian Film Archive.

ing it any further without the right equipment and chemical intervention could cause additional damage or smear the images. Of the three rescued titles, we could only unwind the reels of *Bambaru Avith*, and it became clear that this film was the most complete and in a sufficiently stable condition.

With the support of Pathiraja's family, the AFA decided to embark on the restoration of the film and spent several months trying to locate any other film elements that might have been kept by other archives and institutions. Unfortunately, the search came to naught. It was subsequently verified by the National Film Corporation of Sri Lanka that the 35 mm release print with the AFA is likely the sole surviving copy of the film.

In mid-2019, L'Immagine Ritrovata was appointed to restore the film. The laboratory applied an intensive desiccant over the reels to reduce the stickiness and to improve the print condition so that repair work could be conducted to ensure that the film could mechanically withstand the digitisation process. After weeks of treatment, the film could finally be unwound and repair work could proceed.

Since there were no other film elements and good image information for comparison, automatic digital restoration tools could not be utilised. This meant that each frame had to be manually processed to remove dust and scratches. Additionally, each image had to be stabilised, de-flickered and colour-corrected. Audio restorers also had to eliminate and reduce clicks, crackles and bumps within the soundtrack to smoothen excessive noise and balance the overall tone. The restoration of the film took almost an entire year.

As part of the AFA's preservation workflow, the raw and restored digital scans, a new 35 mm picture and sound negatives as well as a new positive print of the restored version of *Bambaru Avith* were produced. The film was selected for the Classics section at the 73rd Cannes Film Festival in 2020, a testament to the masterpiece waiting to be rediscovered, made possible through the successful restoration of the film.¹⁴



A frame from *Ponmani* showing the mould infection. Courtesy of Asian Film Archive.

In 2021, the AFA embarked on the digitisation of the prints of *Soldadu Unnahe* and *Ponmani* but sadly the deterioration was so advanced that there was complete loss of images and sound in many parts of the prints. The AFA continues to be in search of surviving film elements of these two films.

With film restoration being an expensive and laborious process, there may not always be funding to restore a film. In the meantime, there is a greater number of films that are lost when they are not being preserved. My hope is that more filmmakers will realise the importance of entrusting and preserving their films with a film archive as soon as possible, and not wait until the films have deteriorated to a point that only restoration can help salvage them, if these are even salvageable at all. This is how we have lost many valuable classic films. ♦

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William Lim, c. mid-2010s. Courtesy of Lim Family.

Remembering

William Lim

The late architect William Lim did more than shape Singapore's skyline. He was also deeply passionate about urban planning, culture, the arts and engaging the next generation.

By **Stephanie Pee**

Pioneer architect William Lim died in January 2023 at the age of 90 after a long career in Singapore. He had helped shape the cityscape with a number of iconic buildings that he had been involved in designing. These include the Singapore Conference Hall and Trade Union House (1965), People's Park Complex (1973), Golden Mile Complex (1974) and Marine Parade Community Building (1999). In addition to being an architect, he was also active in urban conservation as well as the local arts scene.

Born in Hong Kong in 1932, Lim was a graduate of the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London where he was influenced by the Modernist movement, including Brutalism, an architectural style that is minimalist and emphasises materials, textures and construction. After graduating in 1955, he received a Fulbright scholarship to study in the Department of City and Regional Planning at Harvard University. He returned to Singapore and joined James Ferrie & Partners in 1957.¹

In 1960, Lim left the firm and started Malayan Architects Co-Partnership (MAC) with architects Lim Chong Keat and Chen Voon Fee whom he had met while studying in the UK. Together, they introduced the Brutalist style to Singapore's architecture through their work on the Singapore Conference Hall and Trade Union House (today's Singapore Conference Hall, gazetted as a national monument in 2010) in 1965.²

Following the dissolution of MAC in 1967, Lim co-founded Design Partnership (renamed DP Architects in 1975) with fellow pioneer architects Tay Kheng Soon and Koh Seow Chuan. The trio shaped Singapore's skyline with more Brutalist pieces like People's Park Complex (1973) and Woh Hup Complex (today's Golden Mile Complex, gazetted in 2021).³

In 1981, Lim left DP Architects and established William Lim Associates (WLA) with architects Mok Wei Wei, Richard Ho and Carl Larson. This period saw Lim embrace Postmodernism, an architectural style that appeared in the late 1970s in response to the philosophy and style of Modernism, which rejected ornamentation and emphasised minimalism.

People's Park Complex, 2023. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

Stephanie Pee is a Manager with the Publishing team at the National Library, Singapore.

Postmodernism is notable for features such as curved forms, decorative elements and bright colours. This shift was reflected in projects such as Church of Our Saviour (1985), Yeo Hiap Seng Factory (1986), Tampines North Community Centre (1989) and Marine Parade Community Building (1999).

In 2003, the firm was renamed WArchitects following Lim's retirement from practice. It is now helmed by Mok and Ng Weng Pan.⁴



Lim was also the author of numerous books such as *Alternative (Post)modernity* (2003), *Asian Alterity* (2008), *Incomplete Urbanism* (2012) and *Public Space in Urban Asia* (2014). He also edited architectural journals where he delved into diverse subjects, ranging from urban planning and architecture to broader topics like modernity, social justice and cultural identity.⁵ He was also deeply concerned about the conservation of Singapore's architectural heritage.

Labelled by Mok as “an ‘enabler’ who brought talented people together to collaborate on meaningful projects”,⁶ Lim, together with other architects such as Mok and Richard Ho,⁷ restored several shophouses on Emerald Hill.

In 1982, Lim worked with Singaporean poet Goh Poh Seng on Bu Ye Tian (不夜天), a \$52-million concept to rejuvenate, adapt and reuse the Boat Quay area. Bu Ye Tian, which means “a place of ceaseless activity” in Mandarin, called for the rejuvenation of the entire area into a cultural and recreation destination. Although it was not ultimately adopted by the Urban Redevelopment Authority, this initiative played a major role in accelerating the conservation movement in Singapore and later inspired the planning authorities' conservation programme at Boat Quay in the 1990s.⁸

In the local arts scene, Lim was a “thought leader and advocate of creativity and heritage”, a regular presence at arts events and a generous patron of various arts groups.⁹ In 2007, he helped establish the Cultural Studies in Asia PhD programme at the National University of Singapore with a S\$1 million endowment.¹⁰ For his 80th birthday in 2012, Lim

donated an undisclosed six-figure sum to various arts organisations. Beneficiaries included the Singapore Art Museum, Wild Rice, Arts Fission and two independent artists.¹¹

Lim's legacy lives on through his works as well as the next generation whose lives he touched and inspired. ♦

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Singapore Conference Hall, 2023. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

TO DRAW AN IDEA: RETRACING THE DESIGNS OF WILLIAM LIM ASSOCIATES – W ARCHITECTS

The Urban Redevelopment Authority and National Library Board are organising the exhibition “To Draw an Idea” at the URA Centre (Level 1 Atrium) from 28 November 2023 to 8 June 2024. It examines the inspiration, motivation, conceptual design and thought processes behind the works of Singapore architectural firms, William Lim Associates and W Architects, through their creations that shape the designs of many local, well-known buildings over the past four decades – from the 1980s to today.

The exhibition is based on materials that have been donated to the Singapore Architecture Collection, managed by the URA, NLB and the National Heritage Board, in close partnership with

the Singapore Institute of Architects, the National University of Singapore and the Singapore University of Technology and Design. Stakeholders from the industry and academia have also contributed their ideas on the direction and focus of this new collection.

In the exhibition, one of the projects featured is the renovation of the Victoria Theatre and Victoria Concert Hall in 2010. The project saw the renovation of key spaces and features, including a double-volume foyer within the theatre and the concert hall's main lobby.

Section from Empress Place

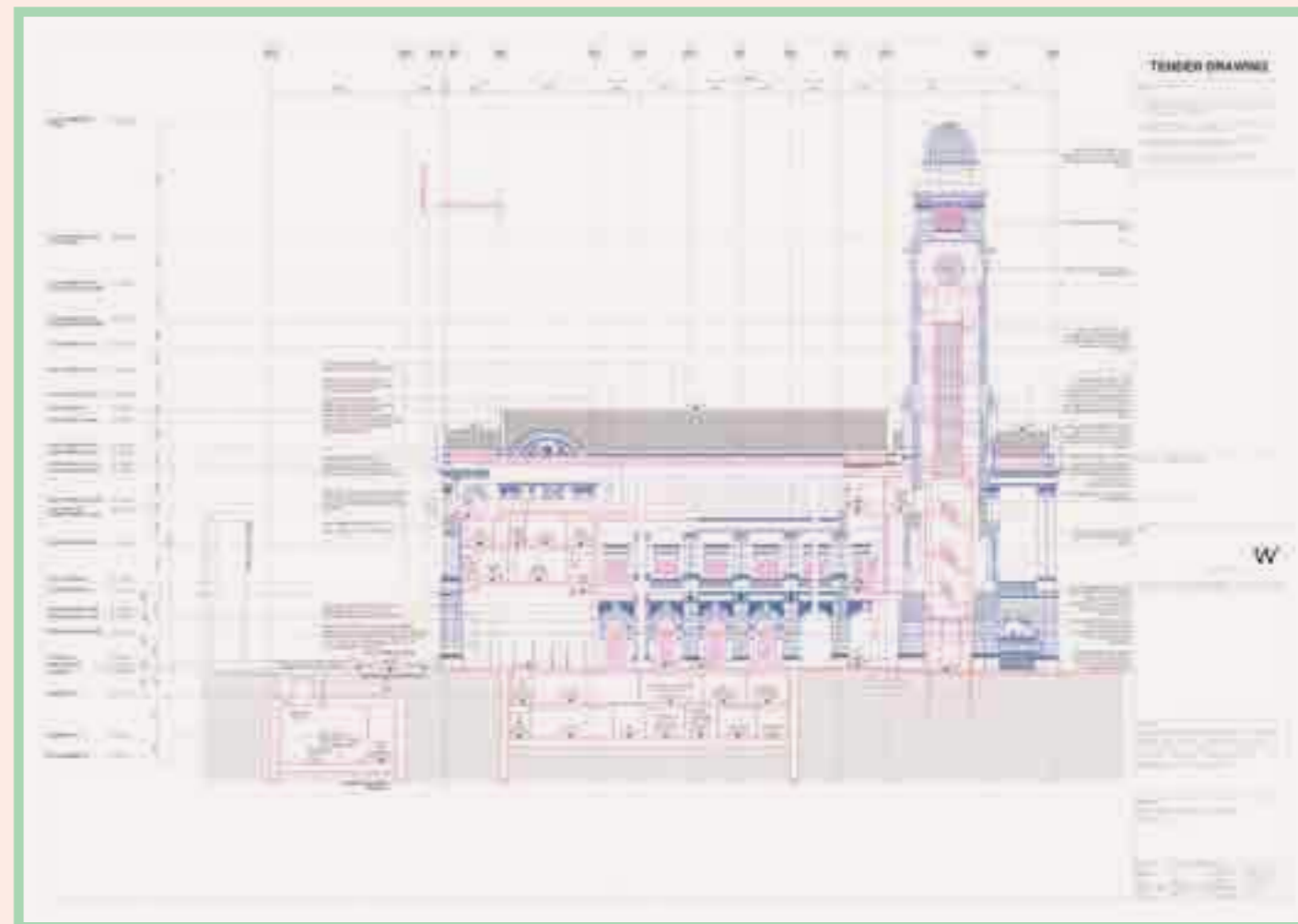
2011

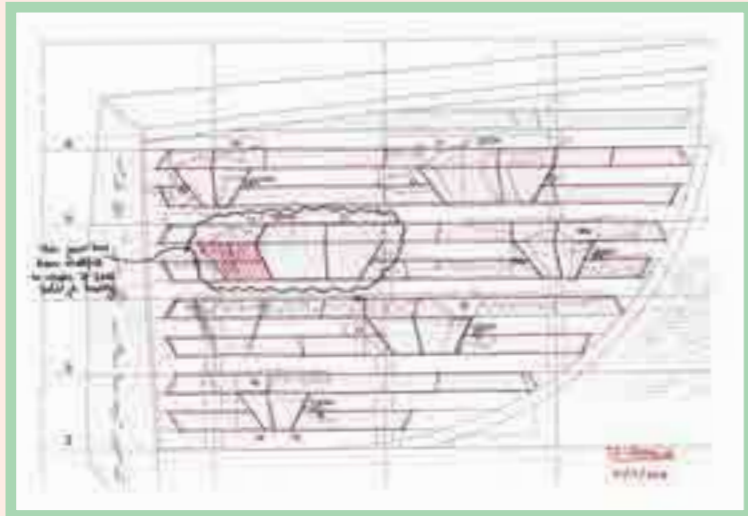
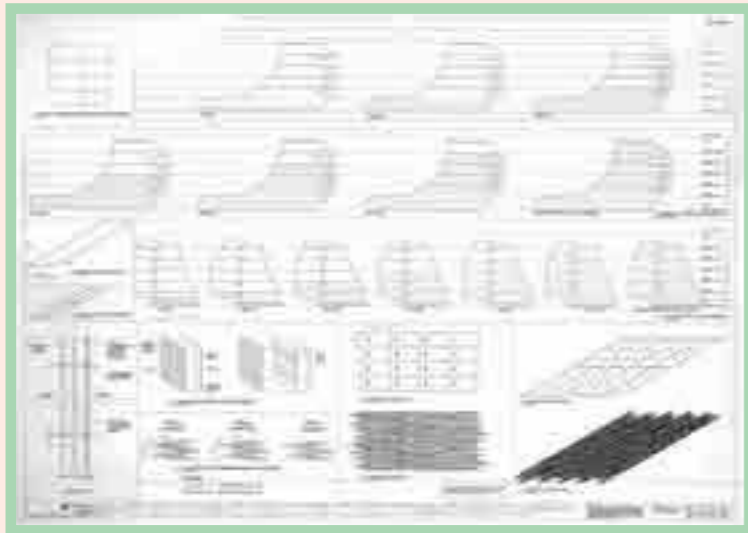
Digital print on paper

594x841mm

B29493274G_0005

William Lim Associates and W Architects Pte Ltd Collection. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.





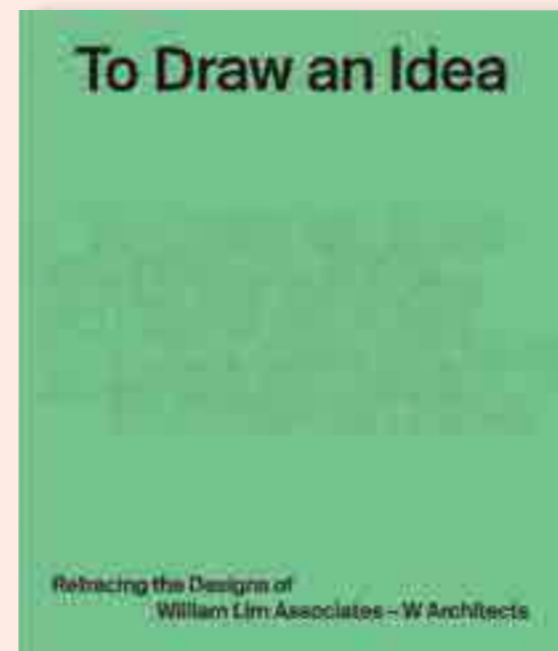
(Top) Rock facade concrete detail
2013
Digital print on paper
841 x 1189 mm
B29493498D_0002
William Lim Associates and W Architects Pte Ltd Collection. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.

(Above) Green facade elevation
2013
Digital print on paper with ink annotations
297x420mm
B29488115E_0001
William Lim Associates and W Architects Pte Ltd Collection. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.

The exhibition also features the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum that opened in 2015. The museum uses off-form concrete, which involves a casting process that is difficult to control. Shown here is the formwork pattern and casting sequence for each building floor (left). The structure also has a distinctive facade featuring vegetation native to Singapore (bottom left).

An accompanying book of the same name has been published. It charts the last four decades of the evolution of the work of William Lim Associates and W Architects over 220 conceptual sketches, architectural drawings and historical artefacts from their archives, along with behind-the-scenes stories of how the firm realised its creative visions. It is available for reference and for loan at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and selected public libraries, as well as online via the NLB Mobile app.

A satellite exhibition, "Dare to Design: Singapore Architecture 1960s-2000s", will take place at the lobby of the National Library Building. It will run from 28 November 2023 to 9 June 2024 and will showcase eight iconic buildings – from the National Theatre to Pinnacle@Duxton – that pushed the envelope of architecture in Singapore. A roving exhibition will also travel to Bishan Public Library (28 November 2023-31 January 2024), Jurong Regional Library (1 February 2024-31 March 2024) and Tampines Regional Library (1 April 2024-9 June 2024).



Published by the National Library Board and Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2023.

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THE GREAT SINGAPORE NOVEL?

An interview with Rachel Heng, Author of *The Great Reclamation*.
By Soh Gek Han

Photo by Jimmy Yap.

The *Great Reclamation* is a historical novel set in Singapore that has been named a *New York Times* Editor's Choice, and a "Best Book of 2023 So Far" by the *New Yorker* and Amazon Books. The novel is a love story, a look at Singapore's turbulent postwar years and involves land reclamation.

In a BiblioAsia+ podcast, Engagement Editor Soh Gek Han interviews Rachel Heng about her novel, *The Great Reclamation*. Born and raised in Singapore, Heng received her Bachelor of Arts in Comparative Literature and Society from Columbia University and her Master of Fine Arts in Fiction and Playwriting from the University of Texas at Austin's Michener Center for Writers. She is currently an Assistant Professor of English at Wesleyan University, Connecticut. *The Great Reclamation* is her second novel.

Thank you so much for taking the time to do this podcast with us. It's really thrilling to see a book set in Singapore by a local writer getting such rave reviews worldwide and at home. How has it been like for you?

It's been wonderful. I never dared expect it. When I first started writing the book, maybe five or six years ago, a part of me worried that no one would want to publish, let alone read a book about land reclamation in 1960s Singapore. It's quite a departure from my first book [*Suicide Club*], which was speculative fiction with sci-fi concepts. *The Great Reclamation* is a deep historical fiction with a unique Singaporean setting.

But thankfully, it did get published and has received a pretty great response, both in Singapore as well as abroad. And the story seems to be universal in some ways and has spoken to a wide cross-section of people across the world.

You've really made history come alive. And you've made it personal. We've read about land reclamation and people resettling. But with these characters, you can really feel the emotions. What gave you the idea to write about this topic?

I've always been interested in land reclamation. I went to Ngee Ann Primary in Marine Parade, which is built on reclaimed land. And I remember being in probably Primary One, and the teacher saying, "This floor that we're on right now – this used to be the sea." This idea that the land didn't used to be there until quite recently, or that you could make land where there wasn't land seemed really exhilarating, but also a frightening thing for a child to hear. And I think that feeling kind of persisted throughout my life in Singapore, because you do see the landscape shift so much when you grow up here, and probably less so in my generation, much more so in the past.

***The Great Reclamation* is your second novel and your first historical fiction work. What do you find challenging or interesting about writing historical fiction?**

I really loved writing it because I was interested in the topic. And you should probably only write novels on things you're interested in, because they take a very

long time and involve a lot of ups and downs – many downs. And so having the pigheaded persistence to continue even when you feel like your project is going nowhere and you will never be able to figure it out. I loved doing the research for this book. I had to force myself to stop researching. I read transcripts of many oral history interviews, a lot of amazing resources on the *BiblioAsia* website and history books, and I looked at old photographs. But then when it came to writing the book, the challenge was putting aside the facts and the data I had collected – which was quite overwhelming because there was so much of it – and to try and construct a coherent narrative that felt intimate and personal, and filtered through the characters' perspectives. Because fiction is about inhabiting someone's consciousness. And that's the beauty of fiction: you can live this reality that's been created through the eyes of the characters. So, including enough but not too much was definitely challenging.

In your long research process, is there anything that surprised you about Singapore history?

I don't know that it's anything that surprised me so much as there were many striking details. One detail that made it into the book was the conveyor belt. During the early phases of the land reclamation project, a conveyor belt moved the sand dug out to the coasts. Someone asked me if writing historical fiction is a big leap from speculative fiction. Not really, because the history is almost science fictional – the way in which the transformation was so audacious and involved technology to that extent – at that time. When you look at the photos, it looks like something out of [the movie] *Blade Runner* or something. It's really fascinating.

One of the many things I appreciate about your book is that you showed the nuances of moving into Housing and Development Board (HDB) apartments. It's not black and white – some characters like it; some don't. In your research, do you get a sense that it was a generational divide?

I think it was something that didn't come up in my research, but from speaking to family members. I definitely heard about the excitement. My mom grew up in one of the crowded wooden [shop]houses on the five-footway. And she said whenever someone on the street got an HDB flat, the whole street would go and look at the flat when they moved in. And she knew all these details, like [the flooring] comes with linoleum, but if you can, you should put tiles. Or like the windows were a certain way, but you could change them. And then people would put tarps on the kitchen window.

All these tidbits of that experience. That must have been in the '70s or '80s, versus the '60s in the book. I read about and also know older relatives who are afraid of lifts. They don't want to be high up because they're not used to it. And then from the oral history interviews, I got the sense of excitement and also a kind of ambivalence or fear. And then just extrapolating as a



A conveyor belt moving earth from Bedok to the sea, 1960s. Marine Parade Community Centre Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Land digging at the Bedok reclamation site, 1966. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

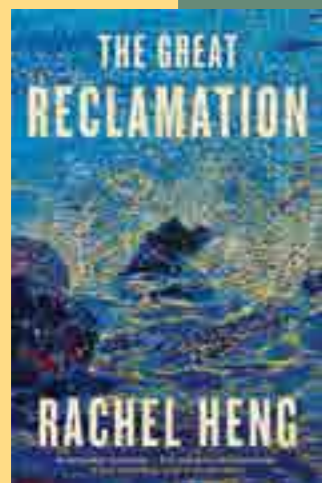
fiction writer, thinking about what it must have felt like when this is your reality, your entire life. Your family has lived this way for so long, and now suddenly, you're plunged into a completely different reality, which arguably is the best setup for fiction, because that is what fiction is about. It's about characters being pushed out of their comfort zone, and how they deal with that. So I tried to represent a range of experiences in the book. Some of the characters are totally for it. They're like, "This is the way forward. We're really excited." And then other characters are deeply against it: they see it as a destruction of their way of life, they feel it as almost a violence, and they feel betrayed because everyone is going along with it. And then you have characters who can't decide how they feel, but either go along or don't, for whatever personal reasons. And I wrote it that way because I believe that politics are deeply personal.

As much as we like to believe we are fully objective human beings capable of coming to intellectual abstract conclusions in a vacuum, it's just not true. When you talk

to people, when you exist in the world, where you come from, what your family background is, the path of your life, where you find acceptance, where you don't – all these things shape our political beliefs, what we believe a society should look like, what we believe it means to live in a society with other people. And much of that is so deeply rooted and almost inextricable that the characters aren't even aware of the ways in which they are shaped by this. And so I want the book to have a wide range of voices from people who came from different places. They either agree or couldn't agree, either compromise or don't, and what that does to them as individuals. ♦



This is a condensed version of the full interview. To listen to the entire interview, visit <https://go.gov.sg/great-reclamation> or scan the QR code.



About The Great Reclamation

Ah Boon is born into a fishing village in 20th-century coastal Singapore in the waning years of British rule. He is a gentle boy who is not much interested in fishing, preferring to spend his days playing with his neighbour Siok Mei. But when he discovers he has the unique ability to locate bountiful, movable islands that no one else can find, he feels a new sense of obligation and possibility – something to offer the community and impress the spirited girl he has come to love.

By the time they are teens, Ah Boon and Siok Mei are caught in the tragic sweep of history. As the nation hurtles toward rebirth, the two friends, newly empowered, must decide who they want to be, and what they are willing to give up.

The Great Reclamation (Riverhead Books, 2023) is a love story and coming-of-age novel that reckons with the legacy of British colonialism, the Japanese Occupation, Singapore's postwar years, and the pursuit of modernity.

The book is available for reference and for loan at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and selected public libraries (call nos. S823 HEN and HEN), and on NLB OverDrive as an ebook and audiobook.

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ON SINGAPORE HISTORY

Chapters on Asia: Selected Papers from the Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship (2022)

By Faris Joraimi, Liew Kai Khiun, Abhishek Mehrotra and Jesse O'Neill

National Library Board, Singapore (2023), ebook
go.gov.sg/coa22



Chapters on Asia (2022) features papers by the National Library's Lee Kong Chian Research Fellows. With research based on the collections of the National Library and the National Archives of Singapore, this edition features essays on 19th-century Malay travellers, women's participation in computerisation in Malaya (1930–65), representation of race in Singapore's 19th-century English newspapers, and public bathing in Singapore before World War II.

For Arts' Sake: Memoirs of a Singapore Arts Manager

By Juliana Lim

Talisman Publishing (2023), 264 pages
Call no.: RSING 700.92 LIM



Retired arts manager Juliana Lim provides a behind-the-scenes look at Singapore's arts scene between the 1970s and the 2000s. Lim joined the Administrative Service in 1973 and was involved in overseeing major arts and cultural policies and initiatives such as the Cultural Vision 1999 and the building of the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. Her book looks at the ideas, policies and people behind this important period in the history of Singapore's cultural development.

Sing Musicals: A History of Singapore Musical Theatre

By Kenneth Lyen,
foreword by Tommy Koh

World Scientific (2023), 184 pages
Call no.: RSING 782.14095957 LYE



Initially influenced by Broadway and West End musicals, Singapore musicals have evolved into their own unique style. This book dives into the history and development of Singapore musicals since the 1980s, including original Singapore stage musicals, Chinese-language musicals, pantomimes, operas, movies and college musicals.

Sir Charles Bullen Hugh Mitchell G.C.M.G.: 1836 to 1899, The Forgotten Colonial Governor

By Michael Gray

World Scientific (2023), 330 pages
Call no.: RSING 959.5703092 GRA-[HIS]



This is the first known biography of Sir Charles Bullen Hugh Mitchell. As Governor of the Straits Settlements (1894–99), Mitchell steered Singapore to a strong financial position and was instrumental in the implementation of the Federation of Malay States. He was also District Grand Master of the Freemasons in the Eastern Archipelago, and this book contains a rare public account of freemasonry in Singapore during the 19th century.

Sport in Singapore: The Rocky Road to Kallang Park

By Nick Aplin

Sport Singapore (2023), 340 pages
Call no.: RSING 796.095957 APL



The second in a trilogy, this volume contains accounts by Singapore's pioneer athletes and chronicles the country's sporting transformation from the late 1940s to 1973, when the old National Stadium officially opened.

新加坡九皇文化: 社群、信仰与传统 The Nine Emperor Gods Festival in Singapore: Heritage, Culture, and Community

Edited by Koh Keng We et al.

National Heritage Board; Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (2023), 639 pages (vol 1.), 479 pages (vol. 2A), 397 pages (vol. 2B)
Call no.: RSING Chinese 299.514095957 NIN



Written in English and Chinese, these three volumes are the first nationwide study of the Nine Emperor Gods Festival – the largest Chinese religious festival in Singapore and Southeast Asia. Based on field research conducted at 15 major festival sites and temples in Singapore, the publication covers the 200-year-old history of the festival in Singapore, Southeast Asia and China, including the local temples and communities dedicated to the festival.

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TO DRAW AN IDEA
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TO DRAW AN IDEA

RETRACING THE DESIGNS OF
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The URA Centre Atrium
28 November 2023 – 8 June 2024



An accompanying book has also been published that charts the last four decades of the work of William Lim Associates and W Architects. The book, *To Draw an Idea*, is available for reference and for loan at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and selected public libraries.

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