

# biblioasia

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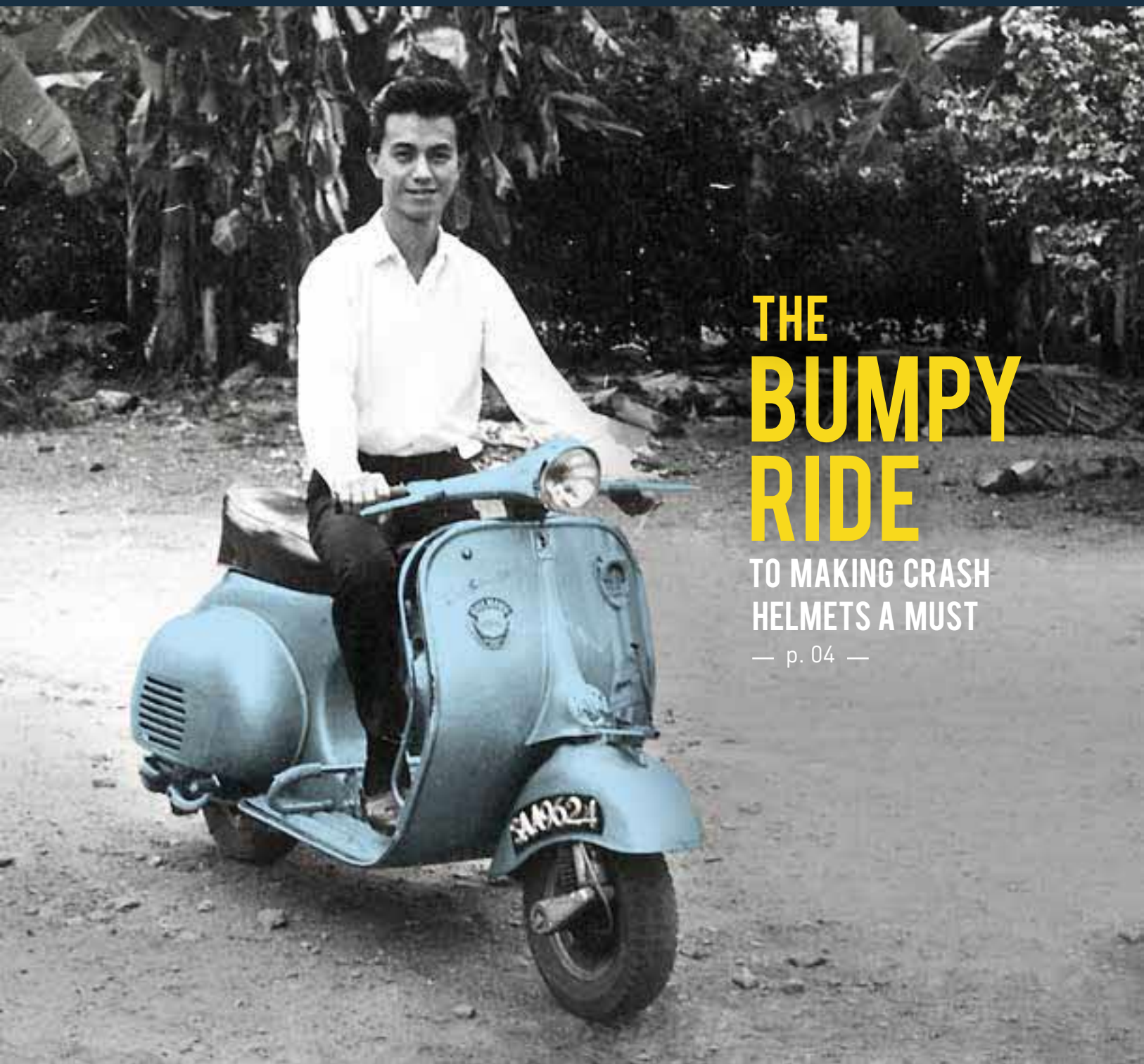
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## THE BUMPY RIDE

TO MAKING CRASH  
HELMETS A MUST

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## Director's Note

Fear of “helmet hair”. Remarkably, this was one of the reasons people gave for not wanting to wear a crash helmet while riding a motorcycle or scooter before the 1970s. In this issue's cover story, Sharad Pandian recounts how a campaign to get people to voluntarily wear helmets failed, and why the government had to turn to legislation instead.

Not all heroes wear capes; sometimes they wear football shorts. Nick Aplin's piece on how Singapore dominated the Malaya Cup before the war will help ensure these men take their rightful place in the annals of local football greats.

One of these men was Choo Seng Quee, also known as Uncle Choo. A skilful player in his younger days, he turned his hand to coaching after the war and was instrumental in Singapore's memorable victory over Penang in the 1977 Malaysia Cup. A. Thiyaga Raju and Gary Koh chronicle the life and career of a beloved football icon.

Around the time that Uncle Choo was making a name for himself as a coach, a grand piano at the Victoria Memorial Hall was gaining a reputation as well, but not in a good way. It was so bad that a renowned pianist compared it to cookware. It may not have been a great musical instrument, but its history makes for a great read in the hands of retired physics professor and composer Bernard Tan.

Speaking of great reads, don't miss the story of the missing ancient gold coins. These two coins were found in the middle of the 19th century but mysteriously vanished a few decades later. Where did they come from and how did they disappear? Through a clever bit of reverse engineering, librarian Foo Shu Tieng has come up with some compelling new theories about their origins.

No need for clever guesswork regarding the origins of printing in Singapore though. This year marks the 200th anniversary of printing here. If you want to discover the early pioneers and see examples of the first material printed on the island, don't miss librarian Gracie Lee's essay.

These are just some of the interesting stories we have for you. There's more of course, from the “Eat More Wheat” campaign to the discovery of a fascinating manuscript of Malay pantuns in a Portuguese archive and the history of the Singapore Ballet (formerly Singapore Dance Theatre). We hope you'll agree that this is yet another well-choreographed issue!

**Alicia Yeo**  
Director  
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**On the cover**  
Chee Beng Hong in the garden of his house on East Coast Road, 1962. *Courtesy of Chee Beng Hong.*

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**04** Crash helmets only became mandatory in 1971



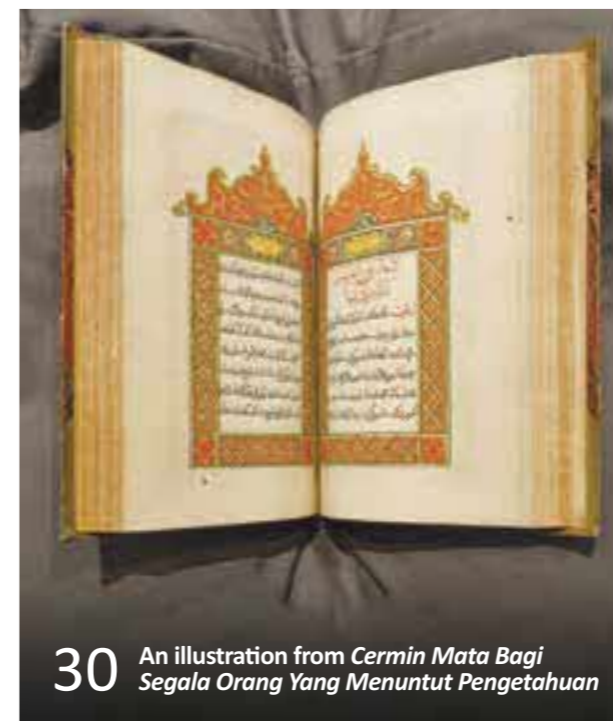
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Image credits, clockwise from top left: Ronni Pinsler Collection, National Archives of Singapore; Zhivko Girginov; Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, National Archives of Singapore; Tan Ngiap Heng, Singapore Ballet; National Library, Singapore; *The Malaysia Cup* by Godfrey Robert.



THE BUMPY RIDE TO MAKING

# CRASH HELMETS MANDATORY

Crash helmets might save lives but getting people to wear them was an uphill task. **By Sharad Pandian**

**T**hese days, everyone on a motorcycle or scooter wears a crash helmet so we don't give it a second thought. It might come as a surprise then to learn that until about 50 years ago, wearing a helmet while riding in Singapore was completely voluntary. As one might guess, this also meant that the vast majority of people did not bother with wearing any protective headgear at all. It was only in 1971 that the government passed a law that made helmets mandatory.

The run-up to this law saw fierce public debate over the need for such legislation. Opponents of the law marshalled a number of arguments for their cause, ranging from the inconvenience of carrying around a helmet to more abstract concerns about individual liberty. Even after the law's passing, many did not easily yield to the new order. "I have been happy riding a scooter without a crash helmet for the past 11 years", wrote a reader to the *Singapore Herald* in January 1971. But now that the law mandating helmets "was forced on us," he declared that he would rather get rid of his motorbike rather than wear a helmet.<sup>1</sup>

The push to have mandatory helmets dates back to the 1950s, when groups in Singapore and Malaya began lobbying for such a law following a heated debate in Britain over this issue. In 1941, British neurosurgeon Hugh Cairns – who dedicated his career to studying head injuries suffered by motorcyclists – convinced the British Army to mandate helmets for its riders. When this policy sharply reduced deaths, Cairns came to the conclusion that the universal adoption of crash helmets would "result in considerable saving of life".<sup>2</sup>

After the war, the matter was taken up in the UK Parliament. During the 1956 parliamentary consideration of its Road Traffic Bill, both sides of the house opposed making helmets compulsory, regarding this as unacceptable interference with people's liberty.<sup>3</sup> (It was not until 1973 that Britain finally passed a national law mandating crash helmets.<sup>4</sup>)

The debate in the UK over helmets inspired groups in Singapore and Malaya. Here, events proceeded

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alongside British developments, remaining distinct and yet informed by them. In 1957, the *Straits Times* reported that the English medical journal *The Lancet* had found that "crash helmets reduced the proportion of deaths and serious head injuries by 40 percent in motorcycle accidents". "With so many young speed maniacs at large, the crash helmet question could well be considered by the Singapore and Federation governments," mused the *Straits Times*.<sup>5</sup>

In 1960, the Automobile Association of Singapore, the Singapore Motor Club, and prominent army personnel came out in favour of compulsory crash helmets for motorcyclists and their pillion riders. It would be for their own safety if these motorcyclists were compelled to wear crash helmets, argued Milton Tan, president of the Automobile Association, in November 1960.<sup>6</sup>

Some members of the public agreed. Writing to the *Straits Times* in March 1962, a reader urged the government to force riders to wear helmets. The reader noted that as wages improved and hire purchase options became increasingly available, more and more motorcycles and scooters would end up on the roads, and more deaths and injuries would result if the riders did not have protective headgear.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from the personal cost to individuals and families, the high number of traffic accidents in Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s exacted an economic cost on the young nation as productive workers died or became severely injured. According to a United Nations safety expert, road accidents alone cost Singapore \$130.8 million in 1970.<sup>8</sup> "[T]he loss or damage to a productive life is not a mere loss to the individual involved but a loss of a factor of production to the nation," noted a reader of the *Eastern Sun* in 1969.<sup>9</sup>

## Your life on two wheels

With a new kind of flair

...By Juliet Ang



(Left) Scooters, which were described as light, manoeuvrable, economical and fashionable, became popular with women in Malaya in the 1960s. Source: *The Straits Times*, 20 May 1962 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

(Facing page) Participants taking part in the crash helmet campaign rally starting from Trade Union House. The rally aimed to create safety awareness among motorcyclists in Singapore, 1968. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission.

### Crash Helmet Woes

However, as in the case of Britain, not everyone here was in favour of the idea. The Vespa Scooter Club in Kuala Lumpur, for example, opposed wearing helmets in town and wanted to confine helmets to the highways where people tended to speed. Club president Jimmy Koh told the *Straits Times* in December 1963 that “scooterists have to ride slowly in town because of the heavy traffic. Our members, therefore, feel that compulsory wearing of crash helmets is unnecessary”. “Furthermore,” he added, “we are against having to wear helmets for riding in town because every time we take them off, we have to comb our hair.”<sup>10</sup>

There was also the hassle of having to deal with a helmet when not riding. “Think of the inconvenience it will cause if you have to carry that extra burden when you go for a show, when you go on a date, or wherever you go,” wrote a reader to the *Straits Times* in January 1964. “I am sure all scooter riders are old enough to look after themselves. Must somebody tell them how to look after their own heads?” she wondered.<sup>11</sup>

Milton Tan (left), chairman of the Automobile Association of Singapore, showing Yang Di-Pertuan Negara Yusof Ishak around the Road Safety Photographic Exhibition at the Victoria Memorial Hall, 1963. *Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Leaving the helmet with the motorcycle or scooter was not an option, said another. “Whereas a motorist can leave his safety belt in his locked car we cannot leave our crash helmets on our machines and expect to find them still there when we return.”<sup>12</sup>

One rider argued that he had been travelling to and from work daily with his wife on a motorcycle for the past eight years without any mishap. His wife refused to wear a crash helmet, so he pleaded with the government to understand “how awful and inconvenient it is for the pillion rider to wear a crash helmet”. He added in jest: “Otherwise, I have to give up my bike – or my wife.”<sup>13</sup>

Finally, there was the argument for individual autonomy. “Scooter girl” argued that riders should be allowed to make up their own minds about the risks involved and whether to bear them, since “though I am by no means enthusiastically looking forward to breaking my neck it still is my neck – and the choice must be left to me”.<sup>14</sup>

### Making Crash Helmets Mandatory

Given the extent of the opposition to making helmets mandatory in Singapore, credit must be given to the man who ceaselessly campaigned for it – Milton Tan, the president of the Automobile Association of Singapore. For Tan, wearing a helmet “was not a blow at individual liberty”. Rather, “It is the minimum discipline we must accept if we want to have a highly motorised society and stay alive”. He began advocating for making helmets compulsory for motorcyclists and their pillion riders as early as 1960.<sup>15</sup>



A view of North Bridge Road, c. 1960s. The crash helmet was made mandatory in January 1971. Before this, motorcyclists and scooterists need not wear helmets. *RAFSA Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Subsequently, when the National Safety First Council of Singapore (NSFC) was formed in 1966 to coordinate road safety efforts, Tan was elected its first chairman.<sup>16</sup> He carried on his campaign to make helmets mandatory, using the council as a platform. In May 1968, the council worked with the government to roll out a three-week-long awareness campaign with the slogan, “A crash helmet can save your life”. The campaign – publicised through television, radio, newspapers, Rediffusion, posters, pamphlets and banners – included an exhibition, a poster competition and a motorcycle procession.<sup>17</sup>

Tan’s education campaign had critics, even among those who backed the idea. People complained that as it was not backed by legislation, it did not have teeth. “A great number of drivers of all kinds in Singapore are fiends who are converting its roads into devils’ highways and you won’t stop them with colourful floats and gentle persuasion,” wrote K.E. Hilborne to the *Straits Times* in March 1968. “They will only respond to two things: money and force – in a word legislation.”<sup>18</sup>

Another letter writer, D.G. Ironside, agreed with Hilborne, highlighting the fact that if airlines did not require their passengers to fasten their seat belts, not all would comply. “Legislation must come,” he wrote, “Why not now? If Mr Milton Tan and his colleagues are not prepared to press for such legislation, how do they justify such an attitude?”<sup>19</sup>

In response to Ironside, Tan explained that the NSFC was not against legislation. “[W]e do not believe that legislation is the complete substitute for publicity and education. Whether or not there is legislation there must be publicity and education,” he argued. “We, in the National Safety First Council, are naturally fully in support of such a campaign. But such support is in line with, and not contradictory to, consideration of legislation should the need be established.”<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, before the end of that year, Tan would ask the government to introduce legislation to mandate helmets for motorcyclists and scooterists. His argument was that even after the campaign, out of the country’s 100,000 motorcyclists and scooterists, only 25 per cent wore helmets. “The remaining 75 per cent must be made to wear helmets by legislation,” he said.<sup>21</sup>

In August 1968, the Singapore government set up the Traffic Advisory Board to carry out “a comprehensive review of all relevant legislation pertaining to road transport”.<sup>22</sup> (Tan had spearheaded the formation of this board: he had both called the initial meeting to discuss its formation in 1965 and served as the chairman of the *pro tem* committee which sought its formation.<sup>23</sup>) Not only was he a member of this board, Tan had also been specifically advised by the government to broach the issue of crash helmets to it.<sup>24</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the board recommended making crash helmets mandatory in its interim report and Communications Minister Yong Nyuk Lin informed Parliament that the government accepted the recommendation.<sup>25</sup>

The crash helmet was made mandatory for “L” licence holders in February 1970 and for all motor-



From January 1971, all motorcyclists and scooterists, including pillion riders, were required to wear crash helmets. In February, the National Safety First Council rolled out a two-week safety campaign aimed at cyclists and motorcyclists. *Source: New Nation, 8 February 1971 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

cyclists and scooterists, including pillion riders, in Singapore in January 1971 through an amendment to the Road Traffic Ordinance.<sup>26</sup> This meant that Singapore ended up mandating helmets more than two years before Britain got around to it.

To ensure that the helmets were of adequate quality, Singapore adopted the existing British Standard’s specifications for helmets, with the Singapore Institute for Standards and Industrial Research (SISIR) appointed the testing agency for all helmets.<sup>27</sup>

### Circumventing the New Law

Of course, the passage of the law did not immediately settle the problem. In the first month of the law taking effect, 220 people were booked by the police for riding without a helmet – and this figure only included those who were caught. What was also not recorded was the number of riders who had given up their vehicles in favour of alternative modes of transport, as some motorcyclists said they would do.<sup>28</sup>

Motorcycle sales fell, indicating that the new law did not simply convince riders to wear a helmet but also changed their usage patterns. “Motorcyclists themselves feel that with parking space restricted and the traffic police becoming increasingly strict with owners of

machines parked on sidewalks, most now prefer to leave them at home and come to work by bus or pirate taxi,” reported the *Singapore Herald* in July 1970.<sup>29</sup>

There was also the question of exemptions and boundaries. In 1970, the Singapore police announced that Sikh motorcyclists would be exempted from the law on religious grounds. As Peshora Singh, a doorman at an Orchard Road restaurant, explained to the *Singapore Herald*, “it’s hardly possible for me to put on a crash helmet unless I take off my turban and have a hair-cut – but that’s against my religion”. A police spokesperson explained their decision to grant the exemption: “We have to respect all religious beliefs in this multi-racial society.”<sup>30</sup>

Sikhs in Malaysia also sought an exemption from this law, and then even exemptions needed clarification. In 1977, a Sikh woman in Ipoh wore a piece of cloth tied around her head and neck instead of a helmet when riding pillion on a motorcycle. She was charged with flouting the crash helmet law, but when the case went to court, the defence counsel argued that since there was no definition of “turban” in the rules, the court

Mailmen on scooters, wearing crash helmets, c. 1972. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



could not rule she was not wearing one. The judge dismissed this line of reasoning, deciding instead that the material she was wearing was more akin to a scarf than a turban. The woman was eventually found guilty and fined \$50.<sup>31</sup>

As the law pressured riders into wearing crash helmets, they came up with ingenious ways to overcome the inconvenience of having to lug them around. One popular practice was to drill a hole in the helmet so that it could be chained to the motorcycle. Although there was no law against wearing helmets with holes drilled through them, safety experts warned against such an act. “[A] hole drilled in a helmet would weaken the shell, and many people drill holes in the crowns of their helmets. The crown is the part which would take the most strain in a head-on crash,” cautioned Winston Lee, secretary of the Singapore Grand Prix and vice-president of the Singapore Motor Sports Club.<sup>32</sup>

Another common practice was for riders to wear helmets that were slightly larger than their heads, which kept them cool in Singapore’s warm climate but offered less protection as the loose fit increased the risk of the helmets falling off.<sup>33</sup>

Then there was the trend of so-called “made-to-measure” crash helmets, which were illegal knock-offs of more expensive brands. A “made-to-measure” helmet would cost about \$45, compared to those tested and approved by SISIR, which sold for between \$90 and \$130.<sup>34</sup>

## The Use and Misuse of Crash Helmets

Very quickly, helmets went from saving lives to also threatening them. In December 1979, a man died from a fractured skull and bleeding in the brain after being beaten by a gang using crash helmets.<sup>35</sup> A spate of robberies committed by people wearing visored helmets between 1974 and 1975 led to the governments of both Singapore and Malaysia banning full-face helmets and those with visors from April 1975 as these concealed the identities of the wearers.<sup>36</sup>

The ban in Singapore stirred up much debate in the press. In February 1975, a group of 30 motorcyclists appealed to the government to reconsider its ban on helmets with visors. They pointed out that the robbers had been wearing inexpensive full-face helmets not approved by SISIR, and so the government could simply stop the supply of these cheaper helmets. They also suggested banning motorcyclists from wearing helmets when not riding and banning only dark visors. After all, they argued, even without helmets, robbers would simply disguise themselves with sunglasses.<sup>37</sup>

“Singapore takes one pace backwards on road safety,” bemoaned Jim Watkins, motoring editor of the *New Nation*. “It seems ironic, after a month-long safety campaign which succeeded in reducing casualties on the roads, that law and order should be cited as a reason for abandoning the pursuit of maximum safety.” He argued that riding without protecting one’s eyes was “stupidity of the first order” since insects, gravel fragments or grit from lorries could easily cause a loss of control and subsequently accidents.<sup>38</sup>

Lee Chiu San, a reporter with the *New Nation* suggested that owners be made to display their vehicle number prominently on their helmets, stripping the wearer of anonymity, while Sam Brownfield, secretary of the Singapore Motor Sports Club, proposed banning tinted visors instead of completely doing away with visors.<sup>39</sup>

Letters to the press that called for lifting the ban on clear visors continued throughout the 1970s.<sup>40</sup> Finally, in November 1980, the Communications Ministry asked the Traffic Police to study the possibility of partially lifting the ban on the use of crash helmets with clear visors. On 1 April 1981, the ban on clear visors was lifted although tinted visors and helmets with chin guards that obscured faces were still not allowed. It was only in April 1993 that the ban on full-face helmets was finally lifted, although the government continued to insist that only SISIR-approved helmets would be allowed.<sup>41</sup>

If you look up the Road Traffic Act today, you will encounter long blocks of legalese with defini-



Despite the ban on crash helmets with visors in effect from April 1975, some motorcyclists continued to wear them. Source: *The Straits Times*, 15 April 1975 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

tions and clarifications, all of which might give the impression of an abstract bureaucratic artefact. A closer look with a historical lens, however, reveals how the law itself was made, moulded, and adapted by a range of actors in distinct and creative ways. Today, it might seem obvious that riders of motorcycles and scooters ought to wear a helmet, but dig a little deeper, and we find a much more complex and fascinating story. ♦

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# FORGOTTEN HEROES OF THE MALAYA CUP (1921-1941)



We remember some legendary players of the interwar years who left an indelible mark on the local football scene.  
By Nick Aplin

What does it take to become recognised as a hero in Singapore soccer? One answer is that you play for a successful team with talented teammates, and an extensive and supportive fan base. Maybe a player turned national coach. To be called a hero is very challenging indeed. Memories can fade. Names forgotten. Injuries intrude. And reputations suffer.

If you ask people today who their football heroes are, they are likely to cite people they have seen in action.

Relying on this approach, however, means that we will miss out players from arguably the most important period in Singapore's football history: the prewar period. Singapore won the Malaya Cup (renamed Malaysia Cup in 1967) 12 times between 1921 (when the competi-

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(Facing page) In the 1933 Malaya Cup final, Singapore defeated Selangor 8-2. Almost 10,000 spectators watched the match held at Anson Road Stadium in Singapore. The *Straits Times* described it as "one of the finest finals that has ever been played in the competition". Source: *The Sunday Times*, 6 August 1933 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

tion began) and 1941. A look at the results – focusing just on the home games played in the southern division of the Malaya Cup competition – shows that in 52 games, Singapore recorded an 82 percent win record, averaging four goals per game. Visiting teams managed less than one goal per game against the home side. Amazingly, throughout that span of 21 years, the Singapore team lost only two games at home. Singapore's prewar record in the Malaya Cup definitely suggests that it was a major soccer powerhouse before the war.

## The Beginnings of the HMS Malaya Cup

The game of association football (or football as it is better known today) was established in Singapore in 1889. Maritime or marine engineers, soldiers from the 58th Northamptonshire Regiment (known as the Steelbacks) and members of the Singapore Cricket Club (SCC) were the first devotees. By 1891, 30 years before the Malaya Cup began, interest in the sport had swelled considerably. There were 24 football teams recorded, including one each from the Straits Chinese Recreation Club (SCRC) and the Singapore Recreation Club (SRC). However, there was no official organising body for the game until the Singapore Football Association was established in 1892 (renamed Singapore Amateur Football Association in 1929 and then Football Association of Singapore in 1966).<sup>1</sup>

The Malaya Cup was formed after Captain H.T. Buller of the HMS *Malaya* donated two silver challenge trophies for football and rugby.<sup>2</sup> The battleship was visiting the region to acknowledge the contributions of Malaysians to the war effort.<sup>3</sup> It arrived in Singapore on 29 January 1921 via Port Swettenham (now Port Klang), and the crew played friendly football matches against the five teams in the Singapore Football Association League: the Staffordshire Regiment (Army), Singapore Chinese Football Association (SCFA), the SCC, the SRC and Sea Defences (troops manning the coastal defences).

Initially, expatriate military personnel in Singapore were permitted to play in the Malaya Cup, but this would last for one season only as it was felt that their inclusion would dominate the competition and limit local participation. After the 1921 competition, there were no representatives from the army or navy until 1932. Members of the SCC were selected in the early competitions, but gradually players from the SCFA, the Malayan Football Association and the SRC formed the backbone of the teams. The Malaya Cup became the preserve of Malay and Chinese players during the interwar period, with rare appearances by Eurasian and European civilian representatives.

## The Soccer Legends

Any list of Singapore's best footballers will be a subjective one of course. One yardstick for judging the best players in the period 1921-41 could be the number of appearances in a Malaya Cup final. For this piece, I've included only local players as heroes. This does not mean that members of the SCC and military personnel did not contribute to Singapore's successes in the Malaya Cup. Based on the criteria above, we have the following names:

NAME	APPEARANCES IN FINAL	YEARS IN FINAL	WINS
ABDUL FATTAH (DOLFATTAH)	9	1927-35	6
CHUA BOON LAY	8	1926-35	6
CHEONG CHEE LIM	7	1921-29	4
FOONG MUN FUN	7	1923-31	4
MOHAMED NOOR KASSIM	7	1928-35	6
ABDUL RAHMAN	7	1933-41	5
ROY FAIRLEY SMITH	6	1922-27	3
LANCELOT PENNEFATHER	6	1922-28	4
LIM YONG LIANG	6	1922-28	3
CHOY KHUN ONN	5	1930-36	1
CHIA KENG HOCK	5	1931-36	2
YEO AH KOW	4	1929-34	4
CHEE AH HUI	2	1930-33	2
CHOO SENG OUEE	2	1937-38	1
TAY KWEE LIANG	0	NIL	NIL

(Note: Because of space constraints in the print magazine, we can only feature some of these men. The online version of the essay has biographical profiles of other legends on this list.)

**ABDUL FATTAH (DOLFATTAH)**

6 appearances in the Malaya Cup final (4 wins)  
Malaya Cup (1927–35)  
Kota Raja Football Club (1926)



Topping our list is Abdul Fattah, usually referred to as Dolfattah. He played for Kota Raja Football Club and was known as Singapore's Dixie Dean, the English footballer regarded by some as the greatest centre-forward of all time.<sup>4</sup> Playing as the attacking inside-left in the replayed Malaya Cup final at Anson Road Stadium in 1930, Dolfattah helped Singapore win 3–0. (That year, the final in Kuala Lumpur had to be aborted because of torrential rain and the game was replayed in Singapore.) Dolfattah was also on the winning side in 1931 (in Kuala Lumpur)

and 1932 (in Singapore). On all three occasions, Singapore defeated traditional rival Selangor.<sup>5</sup>

Dolfattah holds the record for the most appearances in the Malaya Cup final (nine in total). But for a suspension in 1934 for accepting payment for participating in a tour to Java, it would have been a perfect 10. This was the year that no Malay players participated in the Malaya Cup. He was reinstated in August 1935.<sup>6</sup>

One of his most memorable game moments was in August 1929 when he scored all five goals against a hapless Melaka team.<sup>7</sup> In total, Dolfattah scored 35 goals in 23 Malaya Cup games between 1927 and 1933 – a strike rate of approximately 1.5 goals per game.

Abdul Fattah (Dolfattah). Image reproduced from "Singapore's Football Test Team," *Malayan Saturday Post*, 30 July 1927. (From NewspaperSG).

**ABDUL RAHMAN HAJI ALI**

7 appearances in the Malaya Cup final (5 wins)  
Malaya Cup (1933–41)



Playing at full back (a full back does not always receive the credit he deserves), Abdul Rahman Haji Ali was one of the most reliable and steadfast of defenders. He grew up in the same neighbourhood in Kampong Glam as Dolfattah, and the latter was one of his first coaches. Abdul Rahman began his football career at age 15 as captain of the Victoria Bridge School football team, and led the team from 1927 to 1929.<sup>8</sup>

After leaving school, he played for the Malay Football Association second team in 1929 and 1930, and was promoted to the first eleven in 1931. He received his lucky break in 1933 when he was selected to represent Singapore in the Malaya Cup final against Selangor (Singapore won 8–2).<sup>9</sup>

In 1934, along with Dolfattah and Mohamed Noor Kassim (Mat Noor), Abdul Rahman was suspended for receiving payment for participating in a tour to Java. He continued playing in the 1935 Malaya Cup final, but could not play a single game in 1936 due to ill health. One of his career highlights was the visit to Singapore in January 1938 by the Islington Corinthians, an amateur English team based in London that was on a world tour. Abdul Raman was in the team that played against the visitors.<sup>10</sup>

Like Chua Boon Lay, Abdul Rahman was a champion athlete at school and won the individual championship in the All-Muslim Jubilee sports in 1935. He was also an excellent rugby player, representing the Singapore Asiatic team from 1935. After 1938, Abdul Rahman was appointed captain of the Malay Football Association team.<sup>11</sup>

Abdul Rahman delivering one of his powerful clearance shots at a training session. Image reproduced from "He's a Certainty," *Malaya Tribune*, 21 June 1940, 6. (From NewspaperSG).

**CHEE AH HUI**

2 appearances in the Malaya Cup final (2 wins)  
Malaya Cup (1930 and 1933)  
Amicable Athletic Association (1928)  
Bendemeer Athletic Club (1928–31)  
Siong Boo Athletic Association (1929–33)  
Singapore Chinese Football Association (1927–33)  
Shanghai Chinese (1934)



Born in Amoy (present-day Xiamen) in China, Chee Ah Hui came to Singapore in 1924 as a 16-year-old. He represented the Singapore Chinese Football Association in 1928, and one year later, he was in the Malayan Chinese Football Association team lineup. Known for his energetic and aggressive style as a half

back, Chee played in the 1930 Malaya Cup final in Kuala Lumpur, which was aborted due to heavy rain, and was then surprisingly omitted for the replay in Singapore three weeks later.<sup>12</sup>

Chee returned to China in either 1933 or 1934 to attend Chi-nan University in Shanghai, and joined the Canton Air Force in 1934.<sup>13</sup> His greatest achievement was representing China at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, playing against Great Britain. Enroute to Berlin, the Chinese team transited in Singapore where they played a match against the Singapore Amateur Football Association team, winning 4–0. Playing at centre-half, he apparently caught everyone's attention.<sup>14</sup>

Chee Ah Hui. Source: *The Straits Times*, 2 August 1936 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

**CHOO SENG QUEE**

2 appearances in the Malaya Cup final (1 win)  
Malaya Cup (1937–38)  
Singapore Chinese Football Association (1933–39)  
Singapore Chinese Athletic Association (1939–40 and 1945–49)

Choo Seng Quee, best remembered as one of Singapore's most respected coaches, retired in 1981. He represented Singapore before the war, and was part of the team that defeated Selangor 2–1 in the 1937 Malaya Cup final.

Choo retired from playing in 1948 and became a coach at the Singapore Chinese Athletic Association.<sup>15</sup> He promoted the idea of including this association in the Singapore Amateur Football Association League at a time when only Singapore Chinese Football Asso-

ciation players were considered. He later coached the national teams of Indonesia (1951–53) and Malaya/Malaysia (1958–65) before being appointed Singapore's national coach in 1976.<sup>16</sup>

One of Choo's greatest achievements was guiding Singapore to win the Malaysia Cup in 1977, in a thrilling 3–2 defeat against Penang.<sup>17</sup> Popularly known as Uncle Choo, he nurtured a generation of Singaporean footballers.

Choo Seng Quee, 1939. Courtesy of Singapore Sports Council.

**CHUA BOON LAY**

8 appearances in the Malaya Cup final (6 wins)  
Malaya Cup (1926–37)  
Siong Boo Athletic Association  
Bendemeer Athletic Club  
Amateur Sporting Association  
Singapore Chinese Football Association (1923–37 and 1945–49)

Chua Boon Lay was known as "Towkay Ayam" ("chicken boss") because of his association with the poultry business at Lau Pa Sat (Telok Ayer Market).<sup>18</sup> Standing at 1.82 m – one of the tallest players in the Singapore team – the *Straits Times* described him as "a brilliant header and very speedy" and "one of the few full-backs who could out-head and out-pace little Mat Noor [Mohamed Noor Kassim] of the Malays".<sup>19</sup>

Chua also played basketball for Siong Boo Athletic Association and was a top-class track athlete,

clinching gold in the 100-, 400- and 800-metre races at the 1931 Singapore Chinese Sports meet.<sup>20</sup> He represented Singapore in the Malayan Chinese Olympiads in athletics in 1937, and was also a talented billiard player.<sup>21</sup>

During the Japanese Occupation (1942–45), Chua became a committee member of the football section of the Syonan Sports Association established by the Japanese. In 1948, after the war ended, he joined the China football team as a coach for the London Olympic Games.

Chua Boon Lay. Image reproduced from "Singapore's Football Test Team," *Malayan Saturday Post*, 30 July 1927. (From NewspaperSG).

**LIM YONG LIANG**

6 appearances in the Malaya Cup final (3 wins)  
Malaya Cup (1922–30)  
Singapore Chinese Football Association (1916–31)

Lim Yong Liang was a dominant centre forward fondly known as "Pop" and called the "Grand Old Man of Singapore soccer". While a student at St Joseph's Institution, he learned the game of football with the help of a tennis ball in the church compound.<sup>22</sup>

Lim represented Singapore in the Malaya Cup between 1922 and 1930, and he was on the winning side in 1923, 1924 and in 1925, when the final was played at the Anson Road Stadium in Singapore for the first time. Teaming up with Roy Fairley Smith and Foong Un Sun (the brother of Foong Mun Fun), Lim scored what proved to be the winning goal in a classic confrontation.<sup>23</sup>

Lim captained the Sino-Malay team that defeated a touring Australian team 4–2 in 1924. As a veteran, Lim returned to Malaya Cup duty in 1934, scoring two goals. He was the national coach from 1935 to 1941.<sup>24</sup>

After the war, Lim became a major advocate for football as an adviser and mentor. As the honorary secretary of the Football Association of Singapore in 1970, he was asked to provide inputs for the National Sports Promotion Bill.

Lim Yong Liang, 1930. Courtesy of Alex Chua (grandson of Chua Boon Lay).



**MOHAMED NOOR KASSIM (MAT NOOR)**

7 appearances in the Malaya Cup final (4 wins)  
Malaya Cup (1928–35)  
Darul Bahar Football Club



Mohamed Noor Kassim, also known as Mat Noor, started playing for Darul Bahar Football Club in the Malay League at age 14 and later for the Post Office in the Commercial Cup.<sup>25</sup> Renowned as a deadly striker (using both head and foot), Mat Noor claimed he learned his ability to head a ball so well by observing players in the Duke of Wellington's regimental team.

Playing at inside right, Mat Noor was considered one of the most celebrated Malaya Cup players, and was given the nicknames

“Botak” as he always shaved his head bald and “Wizard of Nod” because of his heading ability. Only 1.52 m tall, he learned to outjump taller players by training in the sea off Pulau Brani. “I was short, and I had to find a way to outjump my opponents. Hours of jumping up and down on the shore did the trick,” he said.<sup>26</sup>

Mat Noor played in the 1933 Malaya Cup final that recorded Singapore's most one-sided victory (8–2) against Selangor. Like Dolfattah, he was suspended in 1934 for accepting payment for participating in a tour to Java, but was reinstated in 1935.<sup>27</sup>

Mat Noor heading the ball at the Anson Road Stadium during a match against Johor in the southern section of the Malaya Cup competition. Image reproduced from “Johore Beaten by Eight Goals,” *Malaya Tribune*, 22 June 1935, 15. (From NewspaperSG).

**LANCELOT MAURICE PENNEFATHER**

6 appearances in the Malaya Cup final (4 wins)  
Malaya Cup (1922–28)  
Singapore Recreation Club (1912–30)



Lancelot Maurice Pennefather was known as “the Son of the Devil” because of his ferocious defence work as full back. Despite this nickname, he was a staunch advocate of sportsmanship above all else.<sup>28</sup>

He played in six Malaya Cup finals for Singapore, winning in 1923, 1924 and 1925. In 1928, the trophy was shared after a two-all draw against Selangor. He had speed and a long penetrative kick, and was a crowd favourite with his “end-to-end clearances, his fierce tackles against giant forwards and uncanny coverage of the goal area”.<sup>29</sup>

Pennefather was a certainty to play in the first Malaya Cup final in 1921 but chose to represent his club, the Singapore Recreation Club, in athletics instead. An all-round sportsman, he could also throw a cricket ball well over a distance of 100 yards. Together with his wife Alice and later granddaughter Annabel, the name of Pennefather became firmly embedded in Singapore's sport story. (Alice excelled in badminton, tennis and hockey, and was inducted into the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame posthumously in 2016 for her contributions to women's sports in Singapore. Annabel was a national hockey player and captained the national women's team from 1970 to 1980.)

Lancelot Maurice Pennefather. Image reproduced from “Singapore's Football Test Team,” *Malayan Saturday Post*, 30 July 1927. (From NewspaperSG).

**ROY FAIRLEY SMITH**

6 appearances in the Malaya Cup final (3 wins)  
Malaya Cup (1922–27)  
Singapore Cricket Club (1917–28)



A Eurasian, Roy Fairley Smith, was given the nickname “Thunder Shooter”. Smith also held a record for high jump and was a tennis champion.<sup>30</sup> He became a favourite with the sporting public during the 1920s and 1930s.

As a footballer, he became so highly sought after that the Singapore Cricket Club seized him from the Singapore Recreation

Club and made him their centre forward. Smith would have been selected for the inaugural Malaya Cup tournament in 1921 if not for an injury sustained just two days before the first match.

Smith's Malaya Cup performances over seven seasons (1921–27) were remarkable. He played in 19 games, including six consecutive finals. Out of 68 goals scored by Singapore players, Smith took credit for 28 of them, averaging two per game. He failed to score in only five of the 19 games.<sup>31</sup>

Roy Fairley Smith. Image reproduced from “Singapore's Football Test Team,” *Malayan Saturday Post*, 30 July 1927. (From NewspaperSG).

**TAY KWEE LIANG**

Amicable Athletic Association  
Bendemeer Athletic Club  
Singapore Chinese Football Association

You might wonder why Tay Kwee Liang appears in this table since he did not play in any Malaya Cup final. He may not have been in the Malaya Cup, but he was involved in something even bigger – the Olympics.<sup>32</sup> Born in Singapore in 1910 (his family was originally from Guangdong, China), Tay played for the Amicable Athletic Association, Bendemeer Athletic Club and Singapore Chinese Football Association.

In 1933, he joined the South China Athletic Association team in Hong Kong,<sup>33</sup> and at the 1934 Far Eastern Games, he was a member of the Chinese team that won the championship. Two years later, Tay was selected to represent China at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, along with Chua Boon Lay and Chee Ah Hui (although Tay is rarely mentioned alongside



(Above) Tay Kwee Liang was selected to represent China at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. Courtesy of Alex Tay (son of Tay Kwee Liang).



(Right) Tay Kwee Liang, 1933. Image reproduced from “Choosing Malaya's Best Footballer,” *Malaya Tribune*, 11 November 1933. (From NewspaperSG).

these two men). Besides football, Tay also excelled in table tennis, and was the national table tennis champion of Singapore in 1931.<sup>34</sup>

**The Legends and Their Legacy**

All of these men achieved something special in the world of football in the years between the two world wars. The crowds at many of these games exceeded 5,000 and sometimes reached 10,000, an impressive number that surpasses some local games today. The press coverage of each Malaya Cup games was extensive, so fans could relive the magic moments that they witnessed at the Anson Road Stadium. Many of these legends were also talented in other sports, and they brought their natural skills and abilities to the stage.

Today's talk of the greatest players from Singapore rarely deviates from the players of recent memory,

and even then, many are forgotten or marginalised. These names are presented here to remind people that there were great players who laid the foundation for a lasting football legacy in Singapore. They were indeed trailblazers who paved the way for the football heroes who came after them. ♦



For more player profiles, visit <https://go.gov.sg/malaya-cup-heroes-singapore> or scan this QR code.

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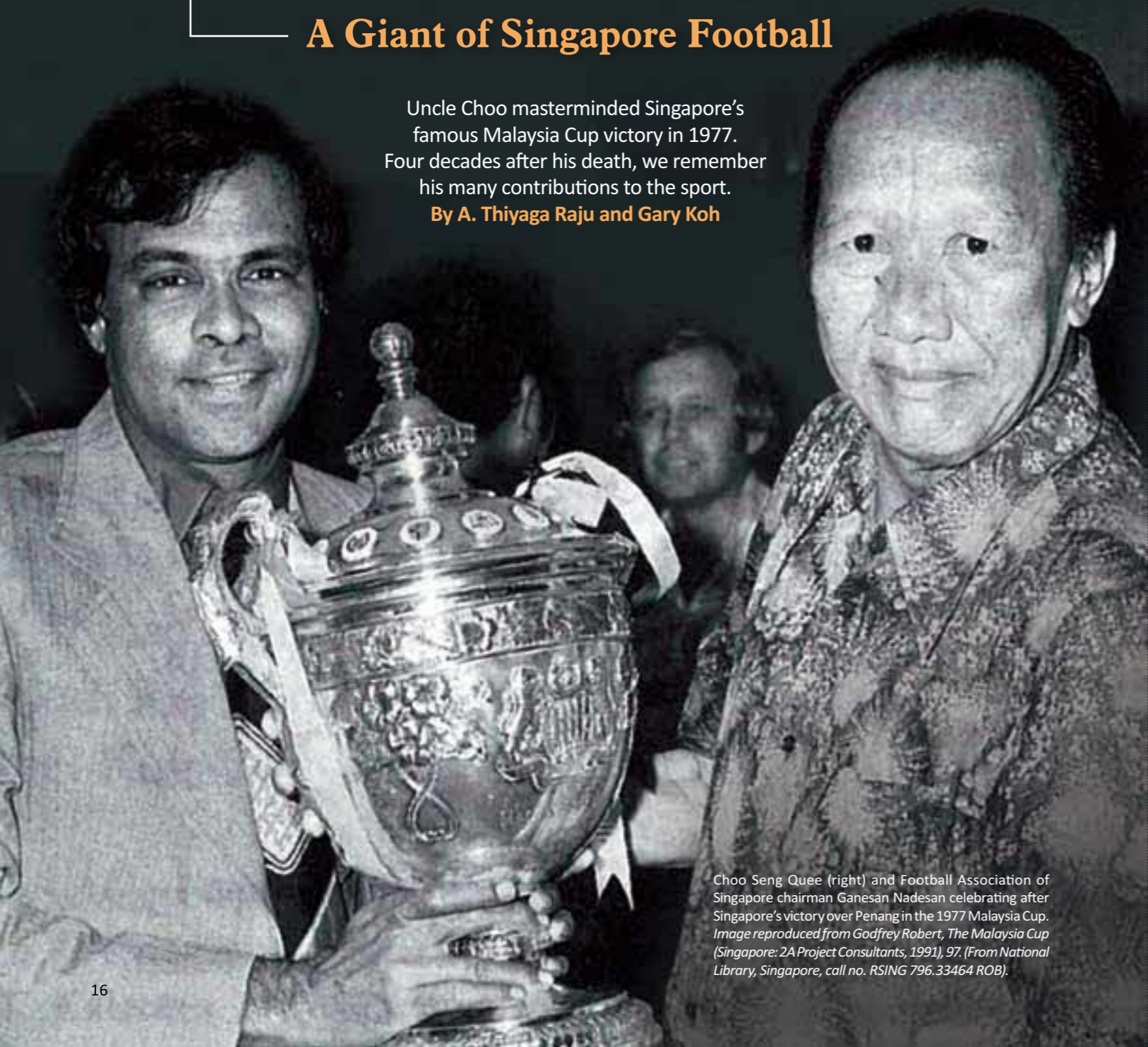
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# Coach Choo Seng Quee

## A Giant of Singapore Football

Uncle Choo masterminded Singapore's famous Malaysia Cup victory in 1977. Four decades after his death, we remember his many contributions to the sport.

By A. Thiyaga Raju and Gary Koh



Choo Seng Quee (right) and Football Association of Singapore chairman Ganesan Nadesan celebrating after Singapore's victory over Penang in the 1977 Malaysia Cup. Image reproduced from Godfrey Robert, *The Malaysia Cup* (Singapore: 2A Project Consultants, 1991), 97. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 796.33464 ROB).

There are many coaches who can guide and mastermind their teams to win matches, but only a select few have what it takes to bring them over the finish line and claim victory.

Choo Seng Quee was a rare breed in the latter category among Singaporean coaches, for he instinctively knew how to lead his players to victories and lay the foundation for future successes.

Having developed a reputation for his coaching ability in Southeast Asia, Choo cemented his legacy among the Singaporeans in the 40,000-strong crowd at Merdeka Stadium in Kuala Lumpur on the evening of 28 May 1977.

Singapore was playing Penang in the finals of the Malaysia Cup and attempting to lift the cup for the first time in 12 years. The hopes of a young nation rested on the shoulders of stalwarts like Samad Allapitchay, S. Rajagopal, Dollah Kassim and Quah Kim Song. However, by the time the half-time whistle was blown, those hopes had dimmed considerably. The Lions had squandered an early lead and were now a goal down.

The second half, though, was a different story as Singapore managed to claw back an equaliser and the game went into extra time. During the first half of extra time, Quah dived in to head home the vital third and winning goal to send the Malaysia Cup back south.<sup>1</sup>

As the *Straits Times* noted: "The manner in which Singapore came back to win the cup just when everyone had given up hope for them made the hair stand on the back of necks."<sup>2</sup>

Credit for that historic win should be laid at the feet of a Singapore team who played their hearts out.

A. Thiyaga Raju's interest in writing was first ignited when he joined the *Straits Times* editorial department in January 1979. He received the Vibrant Culture Award from the Football Association of Singapore in 2019 for his contributions to local football.

Gary Koh is an experienced writer on the football scene in Singapore. His work has been published in football magazine *FourFourTwo* and *AFC Quarterly*, the official magazine of the Asian Football Confederation.

But one other person played just as important a role, even though his name did not appear on the starting 11. Choo (or Uncle Choo as he was fondly termed) had assembled the team, trained and motivated them, and planned and strategised their matches. He did all this in the face of detractors who said he was too old to do the job and who had organised petitions to remove him.

With the win, Choo, in his trademark batik shirt, earned his place in the annals of Singapore football. So it is not surprising then that when he died just six years later, at the age of 68, an outpouring of grief swept over the nation. Four decades on, it is safe to say that no other football coach has occupied the imagination of Singaporeans in quite the same way.

### Early Beginnings with Raffles Institution

As with many coaches, Choo was a footballer first. Born in Singapore on 1 December 1914, Choo played for Raffles Institution, before progressing to the Singapore Chinese Football Association (SCFA).<sup>3</sup>

After obtaining his Senior Cambridge qualifications, Choo joined the SCFA in 1933 where he rose through the ranks to eventually make his first-team



The Singapore Chinese Football Association team at Anson Road Stadium, 1939. Choo Seng Quee is standing fourth from the left. Courtesy of Singapore Sports Council.

debut at the First Division two years later.<sup>4</sup> He later earned a spot in the Singapore team for the Malaya Cup (renamed Malaysia Cup in 1967) in 1936.<sup>5</sup> He was part of the backbone of the squad that managed to reach the Cup final in 1936, 1937 and 1938, and he was part of the team that defeated Selangor in 1937.<sup>6</sup>

In 1939, the All-China Olympic Committee invited Choo to attend the preliminary selection in Hong Kong for the football team that would represent China at the 1940 Olympic Games in Helsinki, Finland. “He displays fine head work while his accurate ball distribution is as good as the best we have seen in Singapore,” wrote the *Malaya Tribune*. Choo said that “he appreciated the honour and that he would give of his very best if finally selected”. Choo never made it to the Olympics though as the games were eventually cancelled because of World War II.<sup>7</sup>

### Forays into Coaching

Choo retired from playing in 1948 and turned his hand to coaching. His first formal coaching job was at the Singapore Chinese Athletic Association (also known as Chung Wah). In 1949, he was named Singapore’s head coach and tasked with guiding the team in the Malaya Cup campaign.<sup>8</sup>

However, it was when he went overseas that he experienced success as a coach. He coached Indonesia between 1951 and 1953<sup>9</sup> and then Malaya/Malaysia from 1 February 1958 to 30 January 1965.

During his three-year stint, Choo laid the foundation for the Indonesian national team, known as the Garuda, that subsequently became one of the best teams in the region. This was during the period when international football was beginning to take root in Asia.

The Garuda made headlines in 1953 when Choo led them to three successive wins in Hong Kong, which was then one of the leading bastions of football as a British colony boasting top Chinese internationals and excellent expatriate players. It was a feat never accomplished before by visiting Asian teams until the

Indonesians came along.<sup>10</sup> With the solid foundations laid by the Singaporean tactician, the Indonesian team managed to finish fourth in the 1954 Asian Games football tournament in Manila. They would subsequently win the bronze in Tokyo four years later.<sup>11</sup>

After this Indonesia stint, Choo was personally appointed by Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaya’s founding prime minister and president of the Football Association of Malaya (FAM), as the national coach on 1 February 1958.<sup>12</sup> It marked the beginning of a seven-year stint during which he would demonstrate his coaching and scouting abilities at their finest.

Choo guided Harimau Malaya to Pestabola Merdeka (Merdeka Cup) successes from 1958 to 1960 and a second-place finish in the same competition in 1961.<sup>13</sup> He also guided the national youth team to a runner-up placing in the inaugural Asian Youth Championship in 1959.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, Choo helped Malaya’s national team clinch gold in the 1961 Southeast Asian Peninsular Games (now South East Asian Games) football tournament in Burma and a bronze a year later at the Asian Games football tournament in Indonesia.<sup>15</sup>

### Coaching Singapore

Despite his successes in Indonesia and Malaya, Choo’s heart lay with Singapore and when asked to guide the Singapore Lions in the Malaya Cup in 1964 and 1965, Choo obliged without hesitation.<sup>16</sup>

On 8 June 1964, Choo was given permission by the FAM to be released to coach Singapore in the Malaya Cup.<sup>17</sup> He would eventually guide the Lions to back-to-back successes in the competition, the second just days before his country of birth exited the Federation of Malaysia and announce its independence.

After leaving the FAM on 30 January 1965 following his failure to return from his months-long leave,<sup>18</sup> Choo opened a sport shop on Owen Road. He later became a caretaker coach with the national team for the Merdeka Cup in 1971 and guided several local teams, notably Burnley United, Marble and Tampines

Rovers, in the local First Division league where several of his proteges came under him at club level.

Choo returned to guide Singapore for the final time in the pre-World Cup qualifiers and the Malaysia Cup in 1977, and coached neighbouring Johor a few years later in 1980. He guided the Johor team to a respectable mid-table finish, ending up seventh in the Malaysia Cup league phase, before retiring in early January 1981.<sup>19</sup>

Although Choo made his name coaching various national sides, it was his work with young players at Farrer Park’s fabled football fields that he cemented his reputation as Singapore’s finest coach.

The earliest evidence of him coaching young talents there dates to 1950 when he had 18 teenage boys between the ages of 13 and 15 under his wing, including future national players Majid Ariff and Charlie Chan. He taught them the fundamentals of the game through individual technique training and theory lessons.<sup>20</sup>

Under his tutelage, some of his proteges would take the local leagues by storm with their team Star Soccerites during which they easily conquered the lower divisions and won the top-flight First Division in that decade.<sup>21</sup>

### “Uncle” Choo, the Legend

This was when the legend of “Uncle” Choo began to take shape in these decades as he personally took care of his young boys’ well-being off the pitch, making sure each had a pair of boots and proper nutrition to aid their adolescent growth.<sup>22</sup>

His dedication was remarkable. R. Suriamurthi, the 1980 Malaysia Cup winner, attested to how Choo helped him. “In those days, money was very hard to come by at home, so I had no sports gear with me. Uncle gave me two complete sets of football jerseys and shorts and two pairs of socks and boots each,” said Suriamurthi.<sup>23</sup>

“He sponsored me tea and soup *kambing* [mutton soup] so that I could beef up my physique. Any equipment we needed, we could get from his Maju Jaya Sports Shop at Owen Road. He had no pay from his scouting or youth training. Nor was he sponsored to do so, not like today where coaches are paid to coach secondary school teams.”<sup>24</sup>

It was also at Farrer Park that Singapore-based British serviceman Peter Corthine, who was once in the books of Tottenham Hotspur as a trainee, managed to revive his professional career in the Football League in England following his training under the great man in 1957.<sup>25</sup>

In an interview with the *Singapore Free Press* in March 1957, the then-19-year-old remarked that Choo would have been a top English football coach on par with the best in his home country. “[I] maintain that Seng Quee is in a class by himself,” he said. “His methods bring fast results, yet they do not tend to change one’s own style in the least.”<sup>26</sup>

“For that matter, I strongly believe if Seng Quee was in England, he would be wanted by many professional clubs as a coach... I don’t think I have ever come across a man more enthusiastic in the game. He trains

hundreds of youths now and gets nothing in return, but the satisfaction of seeing them play good soccer.”<sup>27</sup>

Choo also visited football fields across Singapore to personally scout and select potential footballers for the national team. That was how local football icon Quah Kim Song and his older brothers were recruited. Quah recalled how “Uncle” got him in for personalised training after seeing him play at Deptford Road in Sembawang. “My brothers were all coached by Uncle Choo, so mine was a natural progression,” he recalled. “He spoke to me and said, ‘If you train under me, I can make you a big star.’”<sup>28</sup>

“He said that with confidence and invited me to Farrer Park, which was a hunting ground for football. I was staying in Naval Base and had to take a bus, which was a 45-minute ride to Farrer Park.”

Quah recalled his bewilderment the first time he arrived at Farrer Park. “When I reached at 8 am, I looked around,” he said. “There was no player around, and suddenly a big, tall father figure came.”

“I told him, ‘Uncle, you are only training me?’ He said there was another guy who was supposed to come, [future national player] Jaffar Yacob. He trained us both together and showed us the ropes on how to play football.”

In the absence of coaching certification, which only commenced in Asia in the late 1960s, Choo was a self-taught man. To advance his knowledge, Choo read many books on the latest methods of coaching football.

Aside from football theory, there were rules that Choo insisted his trainees and players abide by for their self-discipline. “Uncle told me that if I am to become an excellent footballer, I have to make huge sacrifices,” said Quah. “That meant sleeping early, eating well, no girlfriend and so on. I followed his mantra and advice to a tee and became one of the best strikers in the national team.”<sup>29</sup>

Other rules included a smoking ban at training premises, no consumption of iced water or soft drinks, and compulsory attendance for flag raising and singing of the national anthem at 6 am in the morning before the commencement of the day’s training. Anyone found infringing these rules would be made to run laps around the training pitch before he was sent packing without further participation in the training session of the day.<sup>30</sup>

### Return to Singapore

In 1976, Football Association of Singapore chairman Ganesan Nadesan brought Choo back into the national coaching hot seat.<sup>31</sup> He was given full rein in the selection and training of players ahead of the World Cup and Malaysia Cup qualifiers taking place in 1977, unlike previous occasions where Choo had to work with teams chosen by selectors such as committee members of the national football association and chairmen of the football clubs, or work with fellow coaches in the coaching committee.

Drama quickly ensued in the aftermath of the appointment. Local football fans were doubtful that Choo, who was then already 62, had the ability to handle the national team. One of his first tasks was to demand the reinstatement of several old stalwarts, whom he had known from their youth training at

Choo Seng Quee at a training session at Jalan Besar Stadium, 1977. Image reproduced from *Asian Soccer July 1977 (Singapore: Asian Soccer News, 1977–), 7. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 796.33405 AS).*



Farrer Park. Among them was Quah who was then serving a suspension. “Uncle Choo told Ganesan that if he was to come back, ‘On my terms,’” said Quah.<sup>32</sup>

“He said, ‘I don’t care about all these. I want my players back because they can contribute.’ He knew what I could do for the team and told Ganesan, ‘I have a plan for Quah Kim Song. I want him back.’”<sup>33</sup>

Gathering his former trainees into the national set-up was the easy part. They already had the skills and physical fitness, but needed a spark to rekindle the fire in their hearts. “I knew they lacked self-conviction. They were afraid that the home crowd would criticise them. But I made them believe in the Singapore flag – that we must first have the country in mind,” said Choo.<sup>34</sup>

Choo reintroduced the coaching fundamentals he had previously taught them in their youth. He also started his early preparations by instilling patriotism in the players. “Each morning at 5.30 am the team had to hoist the national flag and sing the National Anthem as loud as they could,” said Choo. “Now I am happy to say that every player in my squad is prepared to give his leg, hand or head to play for Singapore – and win.”<sup>35</sup>

Quah recalled an incident that showed Choo’s dedication to the game and his players. “One morning

it drizzled quite heavily. After breakfast we were only too glad to jump back into bed. But the coach really shamed us all when, punctual as usual, he stood in the rain waiting for us,” said Quah. “‘If you boys want to do well in this tournament you must be prepared to withstand some things,’ he shouted at us. As he spoke, he was drenched to the skin and tears welled in his eyes.”<sup>36</sup>

Upon hearing this, Quah said they all felt ashamed. “Thoroughly disgraced, we sprung from the cosy warmth of our beds, hopped into our football gear and begun training in earnest. I think it was at this juncture that it suddenly dawned on us what our coach had all along been trying to tell us. From then onwards, we never let him down.”<sup>37</sup>

Choo also arranged for a series of international friendly matches to help the Lions get up to speed with the essentials of the game ahead of their World Cup Asian qualifying debut. However, the final results in the lead-up were far from satisfactory, with many people calling for the veteran tactician’s head to roll.<sup>38</sup>

In December 1976, three months after his appointment as national coach, some local fans started a campaign. They planned to submit two petitions to the Football Association of Singapore, Singapore Sports Council and Minister for Social Affairs Othman Wok – one calling for Choo’s replacement with technical advisor Trevor Hartley, and the other for the reinstatement of several players back to the national team. “Results are pathetic because Seng Quee’s methods are out-moded and because of his poor rapport with players,” read one petition.<sup>39</sup>

“Players like Arshad [Khamis] and Dollah [Kassim] who showed signs of improvement under Mr Hartley are now playing like beginners. Time is running short and Seng Quee must be replaced before it’s too late for even Mr Hartley to do anything,” stated the other petition.<sup>40</sup>

Choo had the final laugh though when the World Cup qualifiers commenced in February 1977. He delivered the results when they mattered, stunning Causeway rivals Malaysia 1-0, defeating Thailand 2-0 and drawing with Hong Kong 2-2.<sup>41</sup>

Finishing second in their qualifying group after a 0-4 drubbing by Indonesia, the Lions eventually finished runner-up in the playoff following a 0-1 defeat to Hong Kong in the group final.<sup>42</sup>

All this, of course, was a lead-up to the historic Malaysia Cup win in May 1977.

## Sacrifices and Accolades

Choo’s dedication to the sport and his players came at a price though. He suffered a fall at the Merdeka Stadium during the Malaysia Cup semi-final second leg between Singapore and Selangor in May 1977, leaving a gash on his right leg. Too engrossed with coaching, Choo neglected to seek treatment for the wound, which worsened and subsequently turned gangrenous, a common problem for people with diabetes.<sup>43</sup>

The leg could not be saved and had to be amputated up to the knee on 14 September 1977. This came just four months after Singapore had won the Malaysia Cup. Unfortunately, this first operation could not stem the gangrene and Choo had more of his leg amputated in a second operation on 20 September.<sup>44</sup>

Choo remained in high spirits throughout his ordeal though. In January 1978, after a four-month stay in hospital, he pledged to be back on the field. “I’m disappointed and hurt by people who think my days with soccer are over,” he said. “I don’t have to have two feet to teach soccer. I can do it from my house. But I’ll be on the field with a soccer team in three months’ time to prove them wrong,” he declared.<sup>45</sup>

Choo kept his word and proved his critics wrong. In January 1979, he returned to coach Tampines Rovers for the League championship, and crossed the Causeway to guide Johor in the 1980 Malaysia Cup campaign where he masterminded a thrilling 2-2 draw with Singapore at Larkin that season.<sup>46</sup>

At the tail end of his career, Choo was awarded a gold medal by the All-Indonesia Soccer Federation on 19 April 1980 for his trailblazing work in making the Garuda a Southeast Asian force. The team under Choo was considered the best in Indonesia’s soccer



Choo Seng Quee holding his trophies at his home after he was named Coach of the Year in March 1978. Photo taken on 21 April 1978. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission.

history. Two years earlier, he had been named Singapore Coach of the Year in March 1978 and awarded the Public Service Medal (Pingat Bakti Masyarakat) by the Singapore government in August 1978 for his “contribution towards the promotion of the game”.<sup>47</sup>

Choo finally retired from coaching in January 1981.<sup>48</sup> When he died on 30 June 1983 at his home on Wolskel Road after a battle with kidney disease, there was an outpouring of grief nationwide.<sup>49</sup>

“‘Uncle’ Choo Seng Quee... was the greatest football coach Singapore has ever produced, the best talent scout in Asia, and the soccer saviour of our two closest neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia,” wrote football journalist Jeffrey Low. “He was respected sometimes beyond logic, sometimes beyond toleration, sometimes even beyond one’s self-respect. But in the end, his ‘sons’ never questioned the biggest lesson he taught them: ‘To die for the country.’”<sup>50</sup> ♦



Choo Seng Quee fights back tears after Singapore’s thrilling 3-2 win against Penang in the Malaysia Cup final held at the Merdeka Stadium in Kuala Lumpur on 28 May 1977. Image reproduced from *Asian Soccer July 1977* (Singapore: *Asian Soccer News*, 1977-), 8. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 796.33405 AS).

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# A GRAND PIANO'S CHEQUERED HISTORY

The Journey of a Chappell  
Grand Piano from the  
Victoria Memorial Hall to the  
National Library Building

A grand piano that was to be the pride of Singapore failed to silence its critics. The odds, however, were always against it.

By **Bernard T.G. Tan**

The Victoria Theatre and Memorial Hall, c. 1910. A 54-metre-high clock tower joins the two buildings. The entire structure is known as Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall today. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*



If you visit the National Library Building on Victoria Street, you might spy a nondescript grand piano. Closer perusal reveals obvious wear and tear on its once glossy black sides and lid. A full-sized concert grand made by the English piano manufacturer Chappell, this stately septuagenarian was formerly the principal concert grand at the Victoria Memorial Hall (now Victoria Concert Hall) where famous pianists like Claudio Arrau and Julius Katchen once performed.

This now retired and largely unused instrument, however, hides a colourful and chequered history, which has mostly been forgotten. When the piano was first installed at the Victoria Memorial Hall in 1952, there were high hopes, at least among some, that the instrument would deliver the same sublime tones which the previous piano had become incapable of doing. Sadly, this was not to be; instead, the instrument became the despair of many internationally renowned pianists who had to struggle with its many deficiencies.

The Chappell grand quickly ended up with a reputation it could not shake off. This was, in hindsight, perhaps not surprising. Meant to replace an ageing Steinway concert grand that had been in use since before the war, the Chappell was not the first choice as a replacement. The original intention was to have a brand new, top-of-the-line Steinway concert grand

replace the old Steinway. Why that didn't happen makes for an interesting tale. But let us start at the very beginning.

## The Memorial Hall's Original Steinway

It is not known whether a piano was acquired when the Victoria Memorial Hall was first built in 1905. Newspaper reports of events such as France's Day Fete in 1919 and the Poppy Day Dance in 1929 record that the well-known British-owned music shop, Moutrie and Co., loaned a piano for both occasions.<sup>1</sup> The type or make of piano is not known, but Moutrie (which was still in business in Singapore after the war) did have their own pianos under the Moutrie brand, in addition to importing a number of piano brands from the United Kingdom – such as Chappell – and Europe.

In 1930, the Municipal Commissioners agreed to purchase a Steinway concert grand piano for the Memorial Hall.<sup>2</sup> A newspaper report of a recital by the Ukrainian-born British pianist Benno Moiseiwitsch in July 1933 does not explicitly mention a Steinway, but makes it clear that the instrument used by the celebrated pianist fulfilled all the demands made of it in an exhausting recital which included Schumann, Chopin and the Liszt transcription of Wagner's *Tannhäuser Overture*.<sup>3</sup>

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**(Facing page)** British pianist Irene Kohler, who played on the Chappell grand piano, photographed before her recital at the Victoria Memorial Hall, 1956. *Marjorie Doggett Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

A news report of a children's concert in November 1934 does mention the Steinway though. It describes seven-year-old Florence Wong being lifted onto the chair of the Steinway grand, who then, "by diligent stretching, managed to touch the loud pedal with the tip of one shoe". The young pianist then gave "a spirited rendering of Christmas Bells (Brinley Richards), for which she was vociferously encored".<sup>4</sup> (She later enjoyed a successful career as an internationally renowned concert pianist better known as Florence Margue-Wong.)

But the vicissitudes of the Second World War and the Japanese Occupation must have taken its toll on the instrument. In September 1950, the *Singapore Standard* reported that there were plans to "acquire a new concert piano (Steinway) for the Memorial Hall, but it has been held up pending the re-opening of the Steinway factory at Hamburg".<sup>5</sup>

Referring to the old Steinway, the *Straits Times* noted a month later that the piano was 25 years old. "Struck by the hand of a pianist, however skilled, its keys and its strings protest their age and past sorrows."<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, the plan to buy a new Steinway did not materialise. "Municipal Commissioners have now decided to shelve the purchase of a new piano – a new Steinway concert grand will cost \$14,000, and the

City Fathers cannot afford that much for the benefit of the musical minority; there are more important matters in dispensing Municipal funds," wrote the *Straits Times*.<sup>7</sup>

### A New Steinway?

Fortunately, there appeared to be a change of heart a year later. In November 1951, the *Straits Times* broke the news that "a new Steinway concert grand piano has been ordered from Hamburg, Germany, for Singapore Victoria Memorial Hall. It will arrive next month". The City Council (the former Municipal Council) had voted a sum of \$17,000 for the piano to replace the existing Steinway, which would be "available for hire" when it was replaced by the new Steinway.<sup>8</sup>

The order had been placed in October 1951 for a "9 foot concert grand, the famous Model 'D' as used and praised by the world's leading pianists". However, the delivery had to be made before the end of 1951, giving just two months for the piano to be assembled, tropicalised and delivered from Hamburg. The City Council had also stipulated that the words, "Property of Singapore City Council", be engraved in gold on the inside of the piano casework.<sup>9</sup>

The Steinway Company, however, informed its Singapore agent that it was not possible to deliver the piano by the end of 1951 due to "shipping difficulties and problems connected with the tropicalisation of the instrument". The company promised that delivery would be in mid-January 1952. The City Council went ahead with the payment of \$16,428 before delivery. Come February of that year though, there was still no sign of the piano.<sup>10</sup>

The City Council subsequently cancelled the order with the Hamburg factory when it received a private quotation from the Steinway London office, which was several thousand dollars lower than the amount paid to the Hamburg factory. When the Singapore agent made enquiries, they were told that the London figure was a mistake and the offer was immediately withdrawn by Steinway. Although the agent offered a five percent reduction in the original amount of \$16,428, the City Council decided to cancel the order, and the model "D" Steinway – built, engraved with the City Council's name and ready for delivery to Singapore – never left Hamburg, according to the *Straits Times*.<sup>11</sup>

### The Chappell Substitute

In January 1952, the City Council decided to purchase a concert grand piano manufactured in England instead, pointing to the fact that the BBC in the Festival Hall in London had used an English-made Chappell concert piano. An order was placed for the same make of piano at a cost of \$9,800, with delivery in about nine months.<sup>12</sup>

By this time, the existing Steinway was showing its age. According to the *Straits Times*, during French pianist Germaine Mounier's recital in February 1952, an official from the Singapore Chamber Ensemble had to announce

that "owing to the deficiencies of the instrument, Mme. Mounier regrets that she will be unable to play Debussy's 'L'isle Joyeuse' as advertised in the programme"<sup>13</sup>

The Chappell eventually arrived by sea on 12 September 1952. Such was the interest in the piano that it was unpacked from its crate in the presence of the press and the superintendent of the Victoria Memorial Hall and Theatre, K.C. Yap. "It's a relief from the constant criticisms held by the public at the City Council for lack of a good piano," he said. "I hope everybody will be happy. After all the public is entitled to insist that the City's public Hall should possess a first class piano."<sup>14</sup>

Was it actually a first class piano though? Charles Thornton Lofthouse, an authority on Bach, had played briefly on the Chappell on the day it arrived. When asked to compare between the old Steinway and the new Chappell, his response was: "I am sorry it is not a Steinway."<sup>15</sup>

### Negative Reviews

The first official use of the new Chappell grand in Singapore appears to have been at a concert for schools organised by the Singapore Chamber Ensemble on 17 September 1952.<sup>16</sup> No mention was made about the quality of the instrument, but it was a school concert after all.

The first real test was to come in January 1953, when it was used in a recital by Mounier, about four months after the piano arrived in Singapore. It was, apparently, not a success. Following the concert, a reader wrote a scathing letter to the *Straits Times*, questioning the wisdom of replacing a Steinway with a Chappell. "During the first half of the programme, it was pitiful to have the pianist demanding a big tone from her instrument and using every resource of her art to obtain it, when only anaemic tinklings were forthcoming."<sup>17</sup>

After the interval, Mounier switched back to the old Steinway and the improvement was "a revelation to all who were present". "[O]ne could begin to hear something like a real piano tone", and as a result of the change, the pianist apparently "responded with a performance which could fairly be called inspired; and the audience, lukewarm before, gave her an enthusiastic and well-deserved acclamation after the interval". Noted the letter writer ruefully: "We have tried to economise and have spent \$9,000 in acquiring a new piano which is not even equal to the old one."<sup>18</sup>

This was just the beginning of a long litany of complaints about the quality of the Chappell. For his series of recitals three months later, the Hungarian pianist Louis Kentner had chosen a repertoire that was designed to "demonstrate his enormous control over the more dynamic tonal resources of the piano". The Chappell, however, did not perform up to standard on the first night, with music critics describing the tone of the piano as "too woolly" for Kentner's majestic touch.<sup>19</sup>

Experienced piano-tuner J.A. Riddell was brought in to improve and brighten up the tone of the Chappell. Unfortunately, it appeared that the brightening went a bit too far. After Kentner's second recital, music critics said that "the 'wool' had been replaced



Charles Thornton Lofthouse, an authority on Bach, played on the Chappell grand piano on the day it arrived at the Victoria Memorial Hall on 12 September 1952. With him is musician and conductor Paul Abisheganaden. Image reproduced from "Lofthouse Christens City Piano," *Singapore Standard*, 13 September 1952, 2. (From NewspaperSG).

by 'tin'".<sup>20</sup> "I was shocked out of my wits the moment I touched [the piano]. It was simply appalling. I really thought that a knife or a nail had been left in it in the way a surgeon might accidentally leave a swab in the patient's abdomen," said Kentner.<sup>21</sup>

A distressed Riddell, who had warned Kentner that the piano was at "a critical point", was awakened by an urgent telephone call during the concert and rushed to the Memorial Hall only to find that the concert was virtually over. He lamented that had he been phoned earlier, he could have "obliterated the problem" in two minutes.<sup>22</sup>

After the concert, Riddell worked on the piano to remove the brightness and then subsequently spent many hours testing the piano again. While seated at the Chappell piano, he declared to the press: "I've done everything that is humanly possible. If it's not right for Prof. Kentner's last concert I'll eat it."<sup>23</sup>

**The Chappell, however, did not perform up to standard on the first night, with music critics describing the tone of the piano as "too woolly" for Kentner's majestic touch.**

Kentner himself "took no chances" for his third and final recital, spending the entire morning testing the Chappell before that night's concert, and making sure that "it was as good as it could be". Declaring that "you can't make a Steinway out of a Chappell", he was satisfied that the piano was back to what it had been at his first recital.<sup>24</sup>

A.A. Roff, the manager of Moutrie and Co., the Singapore agent for Chappell, subsequently defended the instrument on the grounds that the piano had not been played enough beforehand. As Roff explained,

Besides importing a number of piano brands from the United Kingdom – such as Chappell – and Europe, Moutrie and Co. also sold pianos under their own brand. Image reproduced from "Page 7 Advertisements Column 1," *Straits Times*, 11 August 1949, 7. (From NewspaperSG).

#### THE "QUALITY" PIANO NEVER VARIES

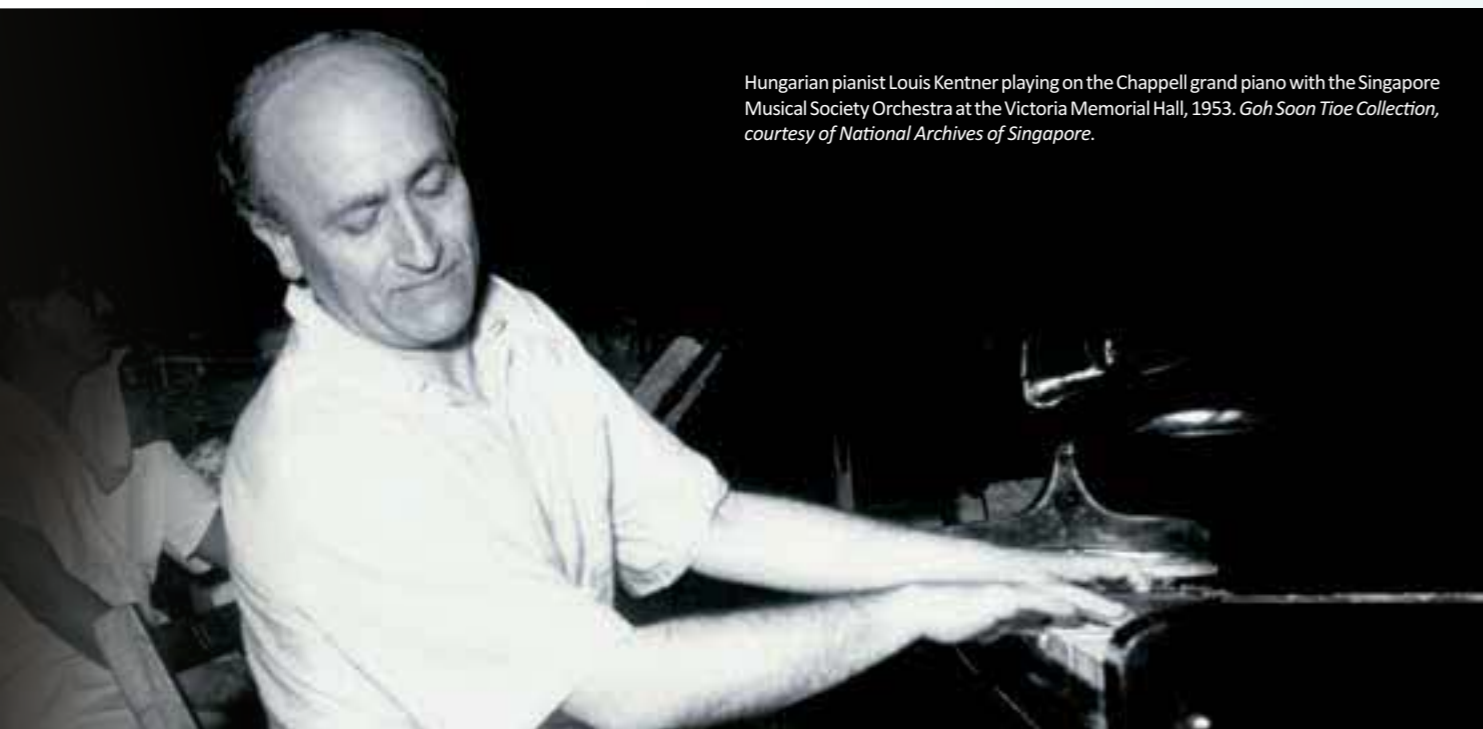
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Hungarian pianist Louis Kentner playing on the Chappell grand piano with the Singapore Musical Society Orchestra at the Victoria Memorial Hall, 1953. Goh Soon Tioe Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Experienced piano-tuner J.A. Riddell, who spent many hours working on the Chappell, said he would "eat the piano" if it was not perfect for Louis Kentner's last concert. Source: *The Straits Times*, 16 April 1953 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

"A piano needs a good deal of use before it acquires the 'right' tone." He did, however, acknowledge that "[t]here is a difference of about \$8,000 in the price of a Chappell and a Steinway, so you can't expect them to be the same".<sup>25</sup>

In subsequent years, a number of internationally renowned pianists performed at the Victoria Memorial Hall. Among them was English pianist Solomon, who was on a Far East tour in November 1953, and celebrated Hungarian virtuoso Bela Siki in November 1954. According to the *Singapore Standard*, the Solomon concert in November 1953, at least, relied on the old Steinway (which appeared to have had an overhaul) rather than the new Chappell. The Steinway was described as a "great asset" and that "apart from the occasional twang in the middle octaves it sounded fine".<sup>26</sup>

American Julius Katchen, one of the world's most celebrated pianists, gave a recital at the Memorial Hall on 16 January 1955, which was partially broadcast live by Radio Malaya.<sup>27</sup> He was here as a judge for the

finals of the Singapore Musical Society's pianoforte competition, whose open section was won by 18-year-old Yu Chun Yee.<sup>28</sup> (Chun Yee later became a professor of piano at the Royal College of Music.) Thankfully, Katchen did not perform on the "much derided" Chappell grand but on the older Steinway that the Chappell was supposed to replace.

"The [Chappell] piano now reposes under a dust-sheet, a silent monument to the proverb 'Penny wise, pound foolish'," a reader wrote to the *Straits Times*. "What an everlasting pity we could not have heard Katchen on a new Steinway, at whatever the cost."<sup>29</sup>

Incidentally, Katchen returned to Singapore in July 1957 and performed at the Anglo-Chinese School's Lee Kuo Chuan Auditorium, a concert I was fortunate enough to have attended.<sup>30</sup> That day, Katchen played on the school's Steinway concert grand, which had been acquired in 1951 and inaugurated by the Shanghai pianist Feng Jia Bei-Tseng.<sup>31</sup> The fact that a mere school hall had a Steinway while the City Council went with a cheaper Chappell spoke volumes.

### A Cross Between a Cooking Pot and a Frying Pan

Things came to a head when the great Chilean pianist Claudio Arrau gave a recital at the Victoria Memorial Hall in November 1956. One would have thought that after the many mishaps with the Chappell, another piano would have been used instead for a pianist of Arrau's stature. Somewhat inexplicably, Arrau performed on the infamous Chappell.

After his concert, Arrau did not mince his words. "I consider it my duty to tell you this. It was outrageous – the piano at the Victoria Memorial Hall.

I hate calling it a piano. It was more a cross between a cooking pot and a frying pan. The keys kept on jamming... sometimes I wished I had a plier, a crowbar or something to jack them up." When asked whether his performance was affected, he declared: "Not at all, I considered it a great challenge... to be able to play on anything." Arrau said he had been impressed with the "brand new piano" in Kuala Lumpur, and was "very, very sad that Singapore could not get a new one too".<sup>32</sup>

It thus came as no surprise that, barely a week after Arrau's concert, the Japanese pianist Yoko Kono was loaned a new Steinway for her recital. Keller Piano made the offer after learning about her disappointment over the old piano (presumably the Chappell).<sup>33</sup>

A few months later, in January 1957, the New Zealander pianist Richard Farrell gave a recital, apparently using the old Steinway. It may have been thoroughly overhauled and refurbished after Kono's comments, for the *Straits Times* mentioned that "[f]or two hours last night, Richard Farrell's audience at the Victoria Memorial Hall forgot all arguments about that 'frying pan' piano. The Steinway was overhauled recently and it could have had no better friend to introduce its new-found life to critical Singapore".<sup>34</sup>

Arrau's biting remarks about the "frying pan" Chappell piano was likely the final straw. In January 1957, the City Council decided to buy two Steinways: a concert grand for around \$18,000 and an upright for more than \$3,000. The former would be placed on the stage and the latter in the orchestra pit.<sup>35</sup>

The plan was for the Chappell to be moved to a new practice theatre being built in the Victoria Theatre, which was undergoing major renovations. The theatre would be equipped with an air-conditioned piano room costing \$3,500. The old Steinway in the Memorial Hall would remain, presumably as a backup to the new concert grand.<sup>36</sup>

Before the new concert grand arrived, there were a number of major recitals at the Victoria Memorial Hall, such as those in March 1957 by the British pianist Irene Kohler. For her second recital, the *Straits Times* reported that she chose to use a small Steinway grand, perhaps loaned by Keller Piano, instead of the dreaded Chappell. Her only complaint was that the Steinway "had not been recently tuned".<sup>37</sup>

### Chappell Bows Out

On 7 January 1958, the *Singapore Standard* reported that two Steinway pianos costing \$22,000 had arrived from Hamburg. The grand piano was to be played for the first time on 10 January by Singapore pianist Gus Stein, the accompanist for the famed American harmonica player Larry Adler (whom I had been fortunate to hear at one of his many concerts in Singapore, possibly this very one).<sup>38</sup>

One important concert that took place at the Memorial Hall soon after the Adler concert was a recital on 31 May 1958 by Benno Moiseiwitsch, who had performed in Singapore in July 1933 on the

old Steinway. Playing on the new Steinway grand, Moiseiwitsch showed what a truly great romantic pianist he was. "With equal facility he was dramatically decisive in the stark staccato passages and as smooth and as soft as a rose petal in the pianissimo passages," wrote the *Straits Times*.<sup>39</sup>

What of the fate of the Chappell after 1958? It can be assumed that the piano was moved as planned to the practice theatre, which was on the second level of the Victoria Memorial Hall, in the space between the Theatre and the Memorial Hall. As its name implies, this was a mini theatre with a stage and a small audience area, used by conductor Choo Hoey and the fledgling Singapore Symphony Orchestra for their initial rehearsals.

In 1983, the Chappell was moved to the Bukit Merah Branch Library (later renamed Bukit Merah Community Library and subsequently Bukit Merah

When the Chilean pianist Claudio Arrau gave a recital at the Victoria Memorial Hall in November 1956, he described the Chappell grand piano as "a cross between a cooking pot and a frying pan". Source: *The Straits Times*, 20 November 1956 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.





The restored Chappell grand piano. Photo by Zhivko Girginov.

Public Library) where it stayed for 35 years and was used for musical programmes. When the library closed in 2018, the piano was transferred to the National Archives of Singapore.<sup>40</sup> In November 2022, the Chappell moved again, this time to the National Library Building on Victoria Street.

Today, the Chappell has been given a new lease of life as a public piano. Anyone may sidle up and play on it, whether the piece is “Chopsticks” or Beethoven’s “Appassionata” sonata. While it may look a little worn out, it has been lovingly repaired

and retuned and it is now a perfectly serviceable musical instrument. As a public piano, the venerable and much-maligned Chappell may have finally found its true calling. ♦



For information about the restoration process, visit <https://go.gov.sg/chappell-piano-repair-zhivko-girginov> or scan this QR code.

#### NOTES

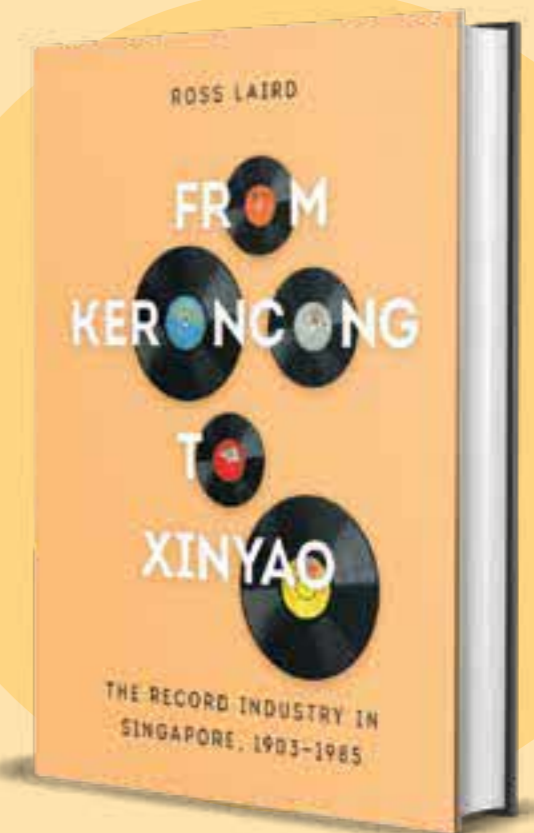
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- 20 “Mr. R. Will ‘Eat That Piano,’” *Straits Times*, 16 April 1953, 7. (From NewspaperSG)

- 21 “Kentner Tries the Piano... and It’s As Good As It Could Be,” *Straits Times*, 17 April 1953, 5. (From NewspaperSG)
- 22 “Mr. R. Will ‘Eat That Piano.’”
- 23 “Mr. R. Will ‘Eat That Piano.’”
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THE  
EARLY HISTORY  
OF

# Printing in SINGAPORE

Printing in Singapore dates back 200 years with the establishment of a press by Christian missionaries. Their efforts to spread the gospel also helped bring the technology here.

By Gracie Lee

The history of printing in Singapore shares similarities with that of many Southeast Asian countries. Christian missionaries were responsible for introducing the technology to the region, with the aim of spreading the gospel in the local languages. However, the presses were not limited to religious literature and were also used for government and commercial purposes. Over time, the technology and expertise required to operate these presses grew, leading to the emergence of secular printing operations.

In Singapore, the start of printing can be traced to the establishment of Mission Press by the London Missionary Society (LMS). The London Missionary Society, which is now part of the Council for World Missions, was a non-denominational Protestant organisation founded in England in 1795. One of its chief aims was to reach out to China's vast population but initial attempts failed due to the Qing government's

Gracie Lee is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. She works with the library's rare materials collections, and enjoys uncovering and sharing the stories behind Singapore's printed heritage.

regulations that forbade open preaching and the publication of foreign literature as measures to deter Western influence. While waiting for Chinese restrictions to loosen, Robert Morrison, the society's first missionary to China, and his co-worker William Milne decided to set up a temporary mission somewhere else, a place where they could learn Chinese and evangelise more freely. They settled on Malacca because of its central location and sizeable Chinese population.

In 1815, Milne arrived in Malacca with Liang A-Fa, one of their first Chinese converts and a printer trained in xylography (woodblock printing), sowing the seeds for a new mission base that would include a school and a printing press. The output of the printing office was prodigious, and they produced a variety of religious and secular works in Chinese, English and Malay. Some of its notable publications include Stamford Raffles's *Formation of the Singapore Institution*, A.D. 1823 (1823) where he outlined his proposal for an educational institution in Singapore, known today as the Raffles Institution. The Malacca station also served the printing needs of the government and merchants of Singapore up until the early 1820s.<sup>1</sup>

(Right) Title page of *A Retrospect of the First Ten Years of the Protestant Mission to China*, published at the Mission Press in Malacca in 1820. Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Call no. RRARE 266.02341051 MIL-[JSB]; Accession no. B29268446H).

(Below) Title page of the *Formation of the Singapore Institution*, A.D. 1823. The Singapore Institution was renamed Raffles Institution around 1868. Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Call no. RRARE 373.5957 FOR; Accession no. B20025196C).



Title page of *Kitab Al-Kudus, Ia-itu, Injil Isa Al-Masihi Atau Segala Surat Testament Bahru* (*The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in Malay*). Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Call no. RRARE 225.59928 BIB; Accession no. B19016274H).



### The First Printing Press in Singapore

The developments in Malacca laid the groundwork for the society's expansion into Singapore. In October 1819, Samuel Milton, who arrived in Malacca in 1818 to work with the Chinese community there, became the first LMS missionary appointed to Singapore. He was joined in May 1822 by Claudius Henry Thomsen, a Danish missionary versed in the Malay language and printing in Malay. When Thomsen departed Malacca for Singapore, he brought with him a small portable press.

Most historians regard this as Singapore's first printing press. Thomsen also brought along with him two unnamed assistants who had been helping him at the Malay and English printing press in Malacca. Although their identities are not known, they were likely Abdullah Abdul Kadir (better known as Munshi Abdullah) – who had worked alongside Thomsen at the Malacca mission as a Malay teacher, translator, transcriber, compositor, printer and typesetter – and a Eurasian printer named Michael.<sup>2</sup>

Although there is a wealth of research on the history of printing in Singapore, the exact date when printing was first introduced here remains unknown. What is certain is that Stamford Raffles officially granted Thomsen permission to operate a printing press in Singapore on 23 January 1823. Six days earlier, on 17 January, Thomsen had submitted a request "to use a printing Press with which I may be able more effectively to pursue my labours as a Christian missionary among the Malays". L.N. Hull, acting secretary to the Lieutenant-Governor, replied that Raffles "gives his full sanction to the measure, and will be happy to assist the undertaking by the patronage and support of government as far as circumstances permit".<sup>3</sup>

While formal approval was only given in January 1823, there is evidence that some form of printing had already taken place before that. Among the earliest dates proposed is May 1822. In Cecil K. Byrd's 1970 study on early printing in the Straits Settlements, he included an illustrated plate on what he believed is the earliest extant sample of printing in Singapore.

The document, titled "Price Current of Goods at Singapore", comprises four pages printed on paper watermarked "1819". It presents a list of commodities categorised under headings such as "Eastern Produce", "China Goods", "Bengal and other Indian Goods" and "Produce of Europe, America &c". The cover sheet bears a handwritten date of 31 May 1822. Byrd observed that the printing was coarse, suggesting that this might be a small government job that was produced on the portable press that Thomsen had brought over from Malacca.<sup>4</sup>

Further evidence of pre-1823 printing in Singapore is supported by a study that references a letter written by Milton to the LMS in September 1822. In the letter, Milton mentions having printed



The beautiful calligraphy on the coloured double frontispiece of *Hikayat Abdullah (Stories of Abdullah)*, lithographed at the Mission Press. Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Call no. RRARE 959.503 ABD; Accession no. B03014389F).

two works in Chinese. He wrote: "I have employed two Chinese type-cutters to carry on a periodical work in Chinese and also to print an Exposition of the Book of Genesis in that language. Three men are cutting Siamese types for printing a pamphlet on the redemption of sinners by Jesus Christ..." However, as no further mention was made of these two Chinese works, it remains doubtful if the printing was ever completed.<sup>5</sup>

Some historians have also suggested that Thomsen and Munshi Abdullah were involved in printing some legislations for Raffles in the months leading up to 1 January 1823.<sup>6</sup> In Munshi Abdullah's autobiography *Hikayat Abdullah (Stories of Abdullah)*, he recounts an urgent printing job that he undertook for Raffles:

The settlement of Singapore had become densely populated and Mr. Raffles drafted laws clarifying the regulations and the procedure for their enforcement which were needed in the Settlement to protect its inhabitants from danger and crime. He drew up several sections in English dealing with penalties for infringing the regulations, which were then translated into Malay. After this he told Mr. Thomsen to print them. Now at that time there were not enough types in Malacca, so he told me to make up the deficiency. For two days I sat making types. Then they were ready, and the printing was done, fifty copies in Malay and fifty copies in English. A friend of mine set up the type, a young Eurasian name Michael. At last at three o'clock in the morning all was finished, for the same morning, which was the first day of the new year, they wanted to publish the laws. Eyes drooped and stomachs felt the

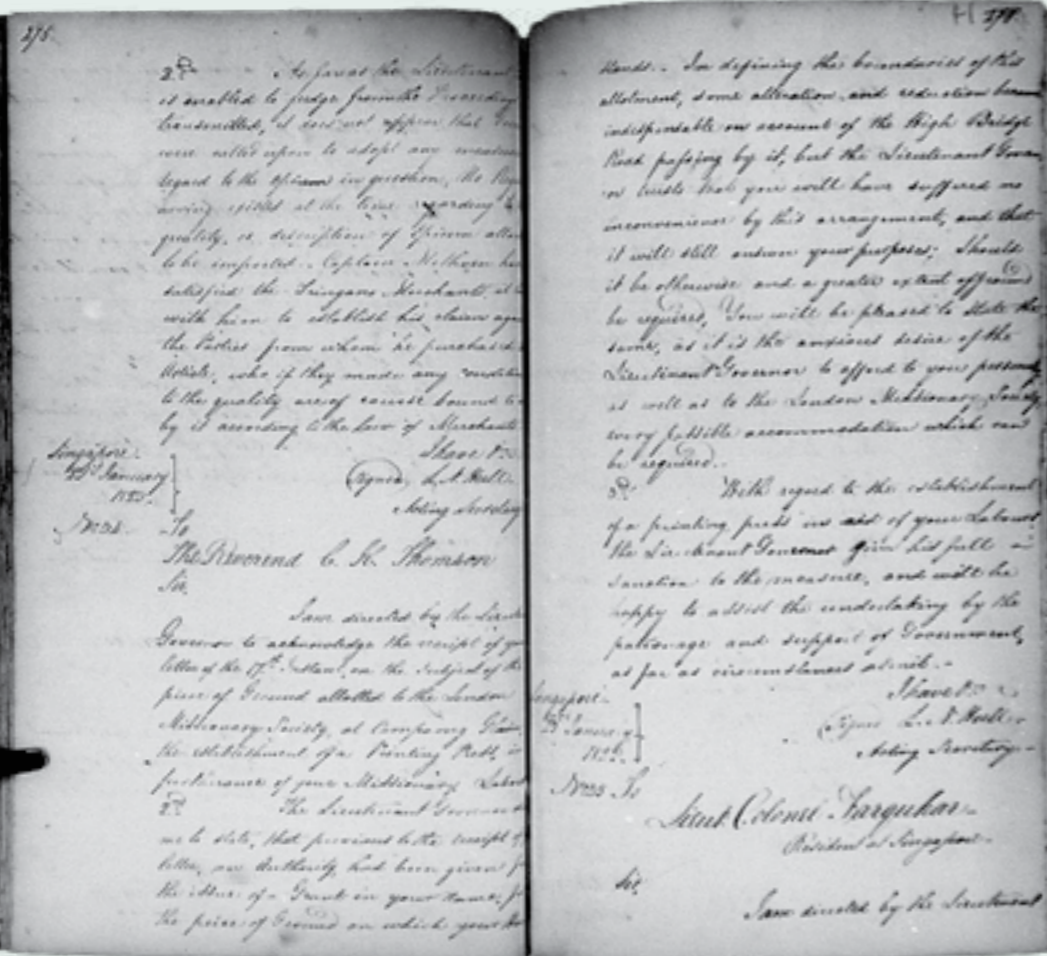
pangs of hunger, all because the task had to be finished that night. For Mr. Raffles had insisted that it be ready by the next morning. And the next morning the notices were posted in every quarter of the town.<sup>7</sup>

Raffles was a passionate advocate for printing and played a key role in introducing the first printing press to Bencoolen (now known as Bengkulu) during his tenure as lieutenant-governor there. On his return to Singapore in October 1822, Raffles asked Milton if the mission had a printing press as he wanted to "print several things". On learning that there was none, Raffles urged Milton to procure some for the LMS.<sup>8</sup>

In December 1822, Milton sailed for Calcutta to obtain the much-needed presses, armed with three letters of introduction from Raffles. While he was away, Raffles allowed Thomsen to operate a printing press. Thomsen took the opportunity to update the LMS on the activities of the mission in Singapore and to appeal for new presses.

On 20 February 1823, Thomsen wrote that they had started printing in both English and Malay. They had a small type-foundry and were also engaged in bookbinding. However, he noted that the press was a small travelling one and they only had a limited quantity of Malay and old English type. Consequently, they were restricted in the number of pages they could print. He also cautioned that the type would be almost worn out after 12 months, and that regular book printing would have to be postponed until the LMS directors supplied their needs.<sup>9</sup>

Separately, Raffles wrote to the LMS directors to assure them that "the government will engage to do all their work at the missionary press" and that



(Top) Portrait of Danish missionary Claudius Henry Thomsen (1816), copied from a drawing in the archives of the Council for World Missions at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. Image reproduced from A.C. Milner, "A Missionary Source for a Biography of Munshi Abdullah," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 53, no. 1 (237): 111–119. (Retrieved from JSTOR via NLB's eResources website).

(Above) Letter to Claudius Henry Thomsen from Acting Secretary L.N. Hull on 23 January 1823, granting Thomsen permission to operate a printing press in Singapore. L17: Raffles: Letters to Singapore (Farquhar), Straits Settlements Records. (From National Archives of Singapore).

there was “reason to believe that when once it is in activity there will be various demands upon it by the community”.<sup>10</sup>

Milton returned to Singapore in April 1823 with “three printing presses and their furniture, one fount of English types, one fount of Chinese types (this is the first fount of these types that was ever cast), one fount of Malay types, with a quantity of English printing paper, printing ink, English compositor also a quantity of type metal, metal furnace and ladles, one set of Siamese, one set of Malay, & one set of Arabic Matrices and everything necessary for casting types in the above mentioned languages”, as well as “a complete set of European tools, figures, letters, presses for binding books”.<sup>11</sup>

However, as the presses were procured without the knowledge of the LMS and Milton lacked the funds to pay for them, the equipment was transferred to the Singapore Institution which covered the purchase using public subscription funds. Milton remained in charge of the printing press and used it to print religious literature and Singapore’s first newspaper, the *Singapore Chronicle*. The first issue was published on 1 January 1824.

After Milton retired from the LMS in 1825, Thomsen took over the press and continued its dual function of printing religious publications as well as secular works received through government and commercial jobs.<sup>12</sup> These include missionary Walter Henry Medhurst’s *Journal of a Tour Along the Coast of Java and Bali* (1830) where he recounts his travels to the two places with Reverend Jacob Tomlin in 1829,<sup>13</sup> and *Kitab Al-Kudus, Ia-itu, Injil Isa Al-Masihi Atau Segala Surat Testament Bahru (The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in Malay)* (1831). This is a revised translation of the New Testament in Malay by Thomsen and Robert Burn, the Chaplain of the Anglican Church in Singapore.<sup>14</sup>

### Printing by the American Mission

Because of his failing health, Thomsen left Singapore in 1834. However, before leaving, he made the questionable move of selling the LMS’s printing equipment and land to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). Uncertainty over the ownership of the property lingered until the board exited Singapore in 1843 and its assets were transferred to the LMS at no cost.<sup>15</sup>

The ABCFM had been looking for a base in Southeast Asia to print and distribute Christian literature in Chinese and the indigenous languages of Southeast Asia. Singapore was chosen because of its favourable climate, safe conditions and thriving port that saw native vessels calling from China and the region.<sup>16</sup>

Ira Tracy, the board’s first missionary to Singapore, arrived

Title page of *Journal of a Tour Along the Coast of Java and Bali*. This is the earliest extant English publication printed in Singapore that is held in the National Library’s collection. Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Call no. RRARE 992.2 JOU; Accession no. B03013533G).

in 1834 and was joined by printer Alfred North two years later. Tracy oversaw Chinese printing while North supervised the printing, proofreading, distribution and binding of all other books.<sup>17</sup> They were helped by Achang, the foreman for Chinese printing who was also the former assistant to Liang A-Fa.<sup>18</sup> They also received assistance from Munshi Abdullah, who was employed as a Malay teacher and who also aided North in editing and printing Malay literature. Notably, North printed Munshi Abdullah’s *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah (The Story of Abdullah’s Voyage)* in 1837, which chronicles the Munshi’s travels up the east coast of Malaya.<sup>19</sup>

By 1841, the Mission Press of the ABCFM had printed over 14 million pages of works, with Chinese forming the bulk, and the rest in Malay, Bugis, Siamese, Japanese and English.<sup>20</sup> One significant publication that they produced was the *Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals)*, published in 1840. This is the first printed edition of the *Sulalat al-Salatin (Genealogy of Kings)*. Written in Jawi and edited by Munshi Abdullah, this 17th-century court text is one of the most important sources on the history of early Singapore.<sup>21</sup>

The Mission Press of the ABCFM also produced the earliest extant Chinese publication printed in Singapore in the National Library’s collection: *全人矩矱 (Quan Ren Ju Yue)*, translated as *The Perfect Man’s Model or The Complete Duty of Man*. It was written by German Protestant missionary Karl Friedrich August Gützlaff under the pen name 爱汉者 (“Lover of the Chinese”) and printed in 1836 in 3,000 copies by 坚夏书院 (Jian Xia Shuyuan), the printing arm of the American mission in Singapore. The book presents Jesus as the “perfect man” through the tenets of Confucianism.<sup>22</sup>

### Lithography in Malay Printing

The ABCFM began winding down operations in Singapore from 1841 and completed their withdrawal by 1843.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, the printing activities of the LMS, which had been at a standstill since the departure of Thomsen, was revived with the arrival of Protestant missionary Benjamin Keasberry. In 1839, Keasberry joined the local LMS mission out of a desire to evangelise to the Malay-speaking population. He set up the Malay Mission Chapel (today’s Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church) and schools, as well as published and translated many works into Malay.

Keasberry was able to make considerable headway owing to his fluency in the language and the printing skills that he had acquired from



(Top right) Pages from *Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals)* edited by Munshi Abdullah. Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Call no. RRARE 959.503 SEJ; Accession no. B31655050C).

(Above right) Cover and pages from *全人矩矱 (Quan Ren Ju Yue)*, translated as *The Perfect Man’s Model or The Complete Duty of Man*. Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Call no. RRARE 243 AHZ; Accession no. B29240187K).



(Above) In *Cermin Mata*, the lithography technique was used to print Jawi text that closely resembled the natural flow of the handwritten script. Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Call no. RRARE 059.9923 CER; Accession no. B03057034K).



(Above right) British Protestant missionary Benjamin Keasberry is known for using lithography in Malay printing that resembled the flow of the handwritten script found in Malay manuscripts. Image reproduced from *Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church 1843–2013: Celebrating 170 Years of God's Faithfulness* (Singapore: Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church, 2013). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. 285.25957 PRI).

Walter Henry Medhurst in Batavia (present-day Jakarta). The students in Keasberry's school were also taught printing as part of their vocational education and some were hired as apprentices at the Mission Press. In particular, Keasberry is known for advancing the use of lithography, the process of printing from a smooth surface, for example, a limestone slab that has been specially prepared so that ink only sticks to the design to be printed. This allowed the printing of text that resembled the flow of the handwritten script found in Malay manuscripts.

Among his finest lithographic works is the journal *Cermin Mata Bagi Segala Orang Yang Menuntut Pengetahuan* (*Eye Glass for All Who Seek Knowledge*), one of the earliest Malay periodicals published in Singapore.<sup>24</sup> Keasberry's success paved the way for the wide acceptance of the technology among local Malay commercial presses, as it presented a gradual transition from manuscript copying to printing that was less costly than typography.<sup>25</sup>

### Development of a Metallic Chinese Type

Progress was not limited to Malay printing alone. Samuel Dyer, an LMS missionary stationed in Singapore from 1842 to 1843, has been widely credited for his pioneering work on the development of a fount of movable Chinese metallic types that was accurate, aesthetically pleasing, less costly and durable.

Dyer's movable types received high praise from missionary Walter Henry Medhurst who wrote: "The types are such as to afford entire satisfaction. The complete Chinese air they assume so as not to be distinguishable from the best style of native artists,

together with the clearness and durability of the letter, would recommend them to universal adoption."<sup>26</sup> The types subsequently became the standard for Chinese printing in the 1850s, replacing the woodblocks that were traditionally used.<sup>27</sup>

Dyer first arrived in Penang in 1827 and stayed on as a missionary to the Chinese. Not long after, he began exploring ways to improve the process of Chinese printing. Up until then, Chinese printing was mainly carried out using the xylographic (wood-block) method. The vast number and sheer variety of characters in the Chinese corpus posed significant challenges to the development of a Chinese type. Dyer spent months studying the composition of Chinese characters and identifying commonly used ones. He experimented with stereotyping before settling on creating a movable metallic type through steel punch cutting.

Dyer continued his development work in his later postings to Malacca (1835–39) and Singapore (1842–43). At the time of his death in 1843, Dyer had completed about half of the over 3,000 characters planned for the fount. His work was continued by LMS missionary and printer Alexander Stronach, who took the foundry with him when he was transferred to Hong Kong in 1846.<sup>28</sup>

Early missionaries like Milton, Thomsen, Tracy, North, Keasberry and Dyer, and their assistants such as Munshi Abdullah, occupy an important place in the early history of printing in Singapore. They were pioneers in religious printing and also in vernacular, government and commercial printing. Their efforts paved the way for the development of European commercial printing in the 1830s, vernacular commercial printing in the 1860s and 1870s, and the establishment of the Government Printing Office in 1867.<sup>29</sup> ♦

(Right) British Protestant missionary Samuel Dyer pioneered the use of movable Chinese metallic types that were accurate, aesthetically pleasing, less costly and durable. Image reproduced from Evan Davies, *The Memoir of Samuel Dyer: Sixteen Years Missionary to the Chinese* (London: Snow, 1846). Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.



(Below) Specimen of Samuel Dyer's Chinese type. Image reproduced from *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle 1840* (London: Thomas Ward and Co., 1840), 97. (Retrieved from HathiTrust).



For a select list of publications by the Mission Press of the London Missionary Society, the Mission Press of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and Benjamin

Keasberry, visit <https://go.gov.sg/early-printing-singapore> or scan this QR code.

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## REVISITING THE MYSTERY OF THE

# Missing Gold Coins

Two ancient gold coins, probably from Aceh, were discovered in Singapore in the middle of the 19th century. Unfortunately, they disappeared a few decades later.

By Foo Shu Tieng

Around 1840, some convict labourers made a startling discovery while building a road to New Harbour (present-day Keppel Harbour) – now Telok Blangah Road and Kampong Bahru Road. While clearing land belonging to Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim near the village of Telok Blangah, they uncovered two ancient gold coins with Jawi inscriptions on them.<sup>1</sup>

In 1849, these two coins were presented to the Singapore Library – predecessor of the current National Library and National Museum of Singapore – by Straits Settlements Governor William J. Butterworth on behalf of the Temenggong, who had purchased the coins from the convicts.<sup>2</sup>

In the Singapore Library report of 1849, the lawyer and scholar James Richardson Logan (who founded the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* in 1847<sup>3</sup>) believed that the two coins were probably from Aceh Darussalam on the island of Sumatra.<sup>4</sup> The kingdoms of Aceh and Johor had long vied for economic and political hegemony in the Malay world, with Aceh invading Johor at least six times between 1564 and 1623.<sup>5</sup>

Gold coins in the collection of the National Museum of Singapore. Clockwise from left: From 17th-century Johor (accession no. N-3717); from 18th- to 19th-century Terengganu (accession no. N-3716); and from 15th-century Kelantan (accession no. N-3090). Similar to Aceh in North Sumatra, the coins from Johor and Terengganu have Jawi inscriptions that identify the ruler, while the coin from Kelantan has a deer motif. The coins are 11 mm in diameter. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*



Map of New Harbour (1840–43) prepared at the request of W.H. Read, Office of the Surveyor General, Federated Malay States and Straits Settlements, 23 July 1886. The map shows the “Tumangong’s Ground”, which was allotted to Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim of Johor in 1823. *Singapore Land Authority Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Acehnese coins may have been a widely accepted foreign currency in Johor from the mid to late 16th century after its conquest by Aceh in 1564.<sup>6</sup> During this period, the island of Singapore was under Johor’s jurisdiction and gold coins were most likely used for high value trade or as a marker of status.

The 1849 Singapore Library Report published Logan’s transliteration of the Jawi text inscribed on the coins into Rumi (Romanised Malay). However, the text in the published report does not match any of the recent studies on Acehnese gold, which suggests that the initial reading of the text could be inaccurate.<sup>7</sup> At this point, one would need to examine the original artefacts to confirm if the original transliteration was accurate. This, however, is a problem, because the two Singapore Library coins have vanished.

By 1884, the coins were no longer listed in an exhibition catalogue of the Raffles Museum.<sup>8</sup> Karl Richard Hanitsch, the first director of the Raffles Library and Museum, wrote an article on the history of the museum published in 1921 where he mentioned that there was a list of artefacts initially associated with the Singapore Library that could no longer be found.<sup>9</sup> The coins may have been included in this list.

Based on this information, it appears likely that the coins were lost when the Singapore Library experienced a period of financial difficulties (1861–74).<sup>10</sup> (The Crown Colony government subsequently took control of the Singapore Library and established the Raffles Library and Museum in 1874, which eventually became the current National Library and National Museum of Singapore.<sup>11</sup>)

A check with the National Museum of Singapore in December 2022 confirmed that the two coins are not in their collection.<sup>12</sup> The coins are not with the National Library either.



Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim of Johor donated the two gold Acehnese coins found on his land to the Singapore Library in 1849. *Image retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.*

## Identifying the Gold Coins

To establish if the coins were really from Aceh, new readings of the inscriptions on the coins should be made and, more importantly, tested to see if these are reasonable alternatives. To do this, I sought help from colleagues, Librarian Toffa Abdul

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Wahed and Senior Librarian Mazelan Anuar, who transliterated Logan’s Rumi text back into Jawi and then compared the Jawi text with those from other Acehese coins. In doing this, we tried to see if we could find a plausible alternative reading for the Singapore Library coins, based on the assumption that the original transliteration in the report was an inaccurate but still a best-guess effort that relied on the shape of the words.

### Sultan Iskandar Muda was the first ruler from Aceh Darussalam to bear the title of Johan Berdaulat, which is inscribed on coins minted during his reign.

Using this method, Toffa suggested that the obverse side (the side with the principal design) of one of the coins could have been inscribed with the words “Sri Sultan Iskandar Muda” (سري سلطان اسكندر مودا), which means “Auspicious Sultan Iskandar the Young”.<sup>13</sup> The Singapore Library’s original transliteration was “Sultan Sri Sikandar Mahbud”. The reverse side possibly had the text “Johan Berdaulat bin Ali” (جوهن برداولت بن علي), which means “Sovereign Champion son of Ali”.<sup>14</sup> (In the Singapore Library report, it was “Tuhan Nardubah bin Ali”). If our alternative transliteration is correct, this would suggest that the coin, which we will call Coin A, was minted during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (r. 1607–36) of Aceh.

During Sultan Iskandar Muda’s reign, Aceh’s empire was at its peak – extending as far as Padang along the west coast and Siak along the east coast of Sumatra, and stretching all the way to Kedah, Perak, Pahang and Johor on the Malay Peninsula.<sup>15</sup>

The coins could have ended up in Singapore at some point after Aceh invaded Johor in June 1613 and November 1615.<sup>16</sup>

As for the second coin (Coin B), according to Mazelan, a plausible alternative transliteration for the text on the obverse side is “Sri Sultan Perkasa Alam” (سري سلطان فرکاس عالم), which means “Auspicious Sultan Courage of the World”. The Singapore Library report had the text as “Sri Sultan Sha Alam Mirsab”. The inscription on the reverse side also bears an inscription that could again be “Johan Berdaulat bin Ali” instead of “Tuhan Nardubah bin Ali”. One of the names that Sultan Iskandar Muda used during the earlier years of his reign was Sri Sultan Perkasa Alam.<sup>17</sup> This alternative transliteration suggests that the second coin was also minted during Iskandar Muda’s reign.

However, it should be noted that there are also several other coins that are similar to Coin B, inscribed with “Alam” on the obverse and variations of “Johan Berdaulat” on the reverse.<sup>18</sup> Further research is required before we can ascertain the identity of the sultan whose name has been inscribed on Coin B. In order to narrow down the time period of Coin B, researchers may be required to study the primary sources of the lineage of Acehese rulers which are often complex and contested, while keeping in mind the gaps between the written word and material evidence for early Islamic kingdoms in the region.<sup>19</sup>

Studies do suggest that Sultan Iskandar Muda was the first ruler from Aceh Darussalam to bear the title of Johan Berdaulat, which is inscribed on coins minted during his reign. If Coin B was indeed Acehese, his reign would present the upper time limit for when the coin would have been minted.<sup>20</sup>

Transliterations of Coin A

Coin A	Original Rumi transliteration by James Richardson Logan (published in the 1849 Library Report)	Transliteration of the Rumi text into Jawi	Possible alternative Jawi text (based on text on Acehese coins)	Transliteration of alternative Jawi text into Rumi
Obverse	Sultan	سلطان	سري سلطان	Sri Sultan
	Sri Sikandar	سري سيکندر	اسکندر	Iskandar
	Mahbud	محبوب	مودا	Muda
Reverse	Tuhan	توهن	جوهن	Johan
	Nardubah	نردويه	برداولت	Berdaulat
	bin Ali	بن علي	بن علي	bin Ali

Note: The transliterations of the original Rumi text back into Jawi and the alternative transliterations were provided by Toffa Abdul Wahed with inputs from the writer. These were reviewed by Mazelan Anuar. In the Acehese context, “Iskandar” is the more likely transliteration instead of “Sikandar”.

Transliterations of Coin B

Coin B	Original Rumi transliteration by James Richardson Logan (published in the 1849 Library Report)	Transliteration of the Rumi text into Jawi	Possible alternative Jawi text (based on text on Acehese coins)	Transliteration of alternative Jawi text into Rumi
Obverse	Sri Sultan	سري سلطان	سري سلطان	Sri Sultan
	Sha Alam	شاه عالم	فرکاس عالم	Perkasa Alam
	Mirsab	مرسب		
Reverse	Tuhan	توهن	جوهن	Johan
	Nardubah	نردويه	برداولت	Berdaulat
	bin Ali	بن علي	بن علي	bin Ali

Note: Transliterations of the original Rumi text back into Jawi were provided by Toffa Abdul Wahed. Alternative transliterations were provided by the writer with the assistance of Toffa and Mazelan Anuar.

### Acehese Gold Coins

In 17th-century Aceh, gold coins were known as *mas*, with one gold coin being equivalent to one *mas*.<sup>21</sup> During Sultan Iskandar Muda’s reign, four *mas* were the equivalent of one Spanish dollar (a silver coin; also known as a “Piece of Eight”).<sup>22</sup> The sultan was known to have issued a decree recalling older gold coins so that they could be minted into new coins bearing his name. The new coins were issued at a debased rate, meaning that the amount of precious metal in the coin was decreased by adding base metals even though the coin was meant to be worth the same amount. As a result, traders in Aceh were initially reluctant to use them.<sup>23</sup>

During the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda’s daughter, Sultanah Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah (r. 1641–75), there were further orders for the gold coins of preceding sultans to be collected and reissued at a further debased rate.<sup>24</sup> Debasing coins was a common practice meant to control production costs, particularly if the price of the precious metal that the coin was made of had increased dramatically. It was also done to increase the amount of currency in the market when there was a shortage of such coins for transactions. The cumulative effect of collecting old coins, minting and reissuing coins over time means that coins from Sultan Iskandar Muda’s reign are likely to be rarer than those from later rulers.

In addition, imitations of Acehese gold coins that were underweight and irregular were also circulating at one point. Unfortunately, without being able to examine the two gold coins found in Singapore, we cannot establish if they were originals or imitations.<sup>25</sup>

XV. SOELTAN PERKASA ALAM en dien later verwisseld VOOR Soeltan ISKANDAR MOEDA (1607—1636).



Seventeenth-century Acehese coins bearing the words “Sri Sultan Perkasa Alam” and “Sri Sultan Iskandar Muda”. Image reproduced from J. Hulshoff Pol, “De gouden munten (mas) van Noord-Sumatra,” *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Nederlandsch Genootschap voor Munt-en Penningkunde XVI* (1929), 18.

But whether or not they were original, the gold coins unearthed in Telok Blangah are significant. For a long time, these gold coins were the only known Islamic gold coins reported to have been found in Singapore until the discovery of a Johor gold coin recovered during a 2015 excavation at Empress Place.<sup>26</sup>

One-, two- and 10-*qian* coins dating to the reign of Emperor Huizong of the Northern Song dynasty (Daguan period, 1107–10). Images reproduced from Patricia Buckley Ebrej, *Emperor Huizong* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 334. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. R 951.024092 EBR).



### Chinese Coins in Singapore

As exciting as they are, the two Acehnese gold coins are not the oldest coins to have been found in Singapore. Chinese coins that date as far back as the Tang dynasty (7th to 10th centuries) have been discovered here, such as at the Parliament House Complex excavation conducted in 1994–95.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, Chinese coins were among the first ancient coins to be uncovered. In 1819, Acting Engineer Henry Ralfe stumbled upon a cache of ancient Chinese coins while clearing an elevated spot of a wall surrounding the ancient city of Singapura, thought to be along present-day Stamford Road.<sup>28</sup> Reverend Samuel Milton of the London Missionary Society in Singapore identified one of the coins to have come from the reign of Emperor Huizong (宋徽宗, r. 1101–25) of the Northern Song dynasty.<sup>29</sup> The other coins had crumbled to dust, likely due to severe metal oxidation and corrosion. Coinage dating to Emperor Huizong's reign was notable for the increased production of higher denominated (the three-*qian* and ten-*qian* coins) and increasingly debased coins, a sign of worsening inflation during his reign.<sup>30</sup>

Ralfe's coin find was presented to the Asiatic Society in Calcutta on 10 March 1820. According to an 1822 publication, Ralfe subsequently donated the coins to the Museum of Asiatic Society in Calcutta. Unfortunately, the Huizong coin may have been stolen from the museum in 1844.<sup>31</sup>

In 1822, John Crawford, the second British Resident of Singapore, discovered three more ancient Chinese coins on Fort Canning Hill, all from the Song dynasty: one dating to the reign of Emperor Taizu (宋太祖, r. 960–76), another to Emperor Yinzong (宋英宗, r. 1063–67), and the final coin to Emperor Shenzong (宋神宗, r. 1067–85).<sup>32</sup> These coins were deposited in the Royal Asiatic Society.<sup>33</sup>

Studies of coins recovered from archaeological excavations at the civic district – specifically, the Parliament House Complex (1994–95), Singapore Cricket Club (2003) and St Andrew's Cathedral (2003–04) sites – have identified at least 30 more coins dating to the reign of Emperor Huizong, and they complement other coin finds reported in the colonial period.<sup>34</sup> The research into these archaeological finds suggests that the majority of coins used in Singapore in the 14th century appear to be of Chinese origin, largely from the Northern Song period. However, artefacts from other excavations in Singapore are still being processed, and the small sample size from the three excavation sites may be quite different from the eventual larger data set.

### Ancient Coins in Southeast Asia

Coins can be important primary sources of history. They can provide information on the people living in Singapore at the time, its trade relations and distribution networks, the economic climate and even power structures within society. The presence of gold coins in Telok Blangah, for instance, adds to the evidence of human activity in the area in the 17th century.

This material evidence complements an account by Jacques de Coutre, a Flemish gem trader, who mentioned seeing vessels used by the *orang laut* (“sea people”; an indigenous people who fish and collect sea products) at the entrance of the straits near Isla de Arena (now the island of Sentosa) in 1595. He also talked about the activities of the Shahbandar, an official who supervised the collection of customs duties, the warehousing of imports, and who looked after the ruler's investments in the area.<sup>35</sup>

The academic study of coins and other forms of money is conducted mainly by anthropologists, archaeologists, monetary historians and numismatists, who approach the materials in different ways to make

sense of the artefacts and their history. While coins are generally used as a method of payment, they have also been used as tokens, commodities and even for magic purposes and/or as part of rituals.<sup>36</sup>

While coinage is a well-studied subject in South Asia and East Asia, the situation is different in South-east Asia. In this region, many questions still remain regarding the supply, time period and distribution of coinage. According to Zhou Daguan (周达观), a Yuan-dynasty diplomat who visited the capital city of Angkor in 1296–97, the Khmer Empire (9th to 15th centuries) did not use coinage. Instead, items such as rice, grain and Chinese goods were used for small transactions, cloth for medium-sized transactions, and silver and gold for large transactions.<sup>37</sup>

One theory why coinage was not popular in Angkor during that period is that surplus wealth may have been redistributed through religious rather than political networks. Another probable reason was the high cost of production and the cost of maintaining mints.<sup>38</sup>

The Kingdom of Srivijaya (7th to 14th centuries) based in South Sumatra, however, may have used coins with a sandalwood flower design and “chopped off lumps of silver” for business transactions during certain periods.<sup>39</sup> Since the founder of Singapura, Sang Nila Utama, was said to be a prince from Palembang, the capital city of Srivijaya, it is possible that ancient Singapore also used coins for transactions in the 13th and 14th centuries.

Interestingly, the Chinese trade sources that describe ancient Singapore did not mention the use of coins for trade. One of the commodities mentioned instead was “red gold” (紫金), which may refer to gold treated with a liquid called *sepuh* (a mixture of “alum, saltpetre, blue stone, and other materials that can turn gold into a darker colour”).<sup>40</sup> Other commodity items used for trade included blue satin, cotton prints, porcelain, and iron items such as cauldrons or pieces of iron.<sup>41</sup>

**Coins provide information on the people living in Singapore at the time, its trade relations and distribution networks, the economic climate and even power structures within society.**

This trading arrangement, however, could have been different for merchants who traded in Javanese goods, or for merchants after the Majapahit invasion of the island in the mid-14th century. The Majapahit Empire (1293–1478/1519) based in East Java was known to have used imported Chinese coins and most likely introduced these coins to Singapore for official use and trade.<sup>42</sup>

Chinese coins were exported to island Southeast Asia in small quantities during the reign of Emperor



Telok Blangah Village, 1870s. Land belonging to Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim is located near the village. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

## The East and Southeast Asian demand for Chinese coinage became so great that commodities were sold at “one-tenth of their value” in order to obtain the coins.

Renzong (宋仁宗, r. 1020–63) of the Song dynasty. After an export embargo was lifted in 1074, Chinese copper coins began circulating in ports along the Strait of Malacca in larger quantities.<sup>43</sup> The Song government had first priority on the purchase of foreign goods and paid foreign merchants with Chinese coins through

a system called *bomai* (博买). Once the coins found their way to Southeast Asia, they were often used to trade for Javanese products.<sup>44</sup>

At one point, the East and Southeast Asian demand for Chinese coinage became so great that commodities were apparently sold at “one-tenth of their value” in order to obtain the coins.<sup>45</sup> This eventually caused a severe shortage of copper and copper coins in China. An edict by Emperor Ningzong (宋寧宗, r. 1195–1224) in the 13th century, for example, banned the use of metal currencies for government purchases, and goods such as silk, porcelain and lacquer were used as substitutes.<sup>46</sup> (This ban was subsequently lifted.)

## The Missing Gold Coins

While Chinese bronze alloy coins were used as small denomination currency in the 14th century, 17th-century Islamic gold coins in Singapore were probably used as a high-denomination currency for large trades. Alternatively, these Islamic gold coins could also have functioned as status symbols or even as grave markers.

Unfortunately, many vital questions still remain regarding the gold coins of Telok Blangah. Were they indeed Acehnese coins? How did they disappear and where are they now? These coins could be in a dusty drawer or forgotten safety deposit box somewhere in

Singapore, waiting to be rediscovered. Or they may have already left our shores like the Chinese coins from the discoveries by Ralfe and Crawford. We do not know the answers to these questions, but with further research, maybe someday, we will be able to find out more. ♦

The author is grateful to Toffa Abdul Wahed, Mazelan Anuar, Gracie Lee, Iskander Mydin, Iain Sinclair, David Flegg and many others who facilitated the writing of this essay. The names of places and rulers have been modernised to facilitate ease of reading.

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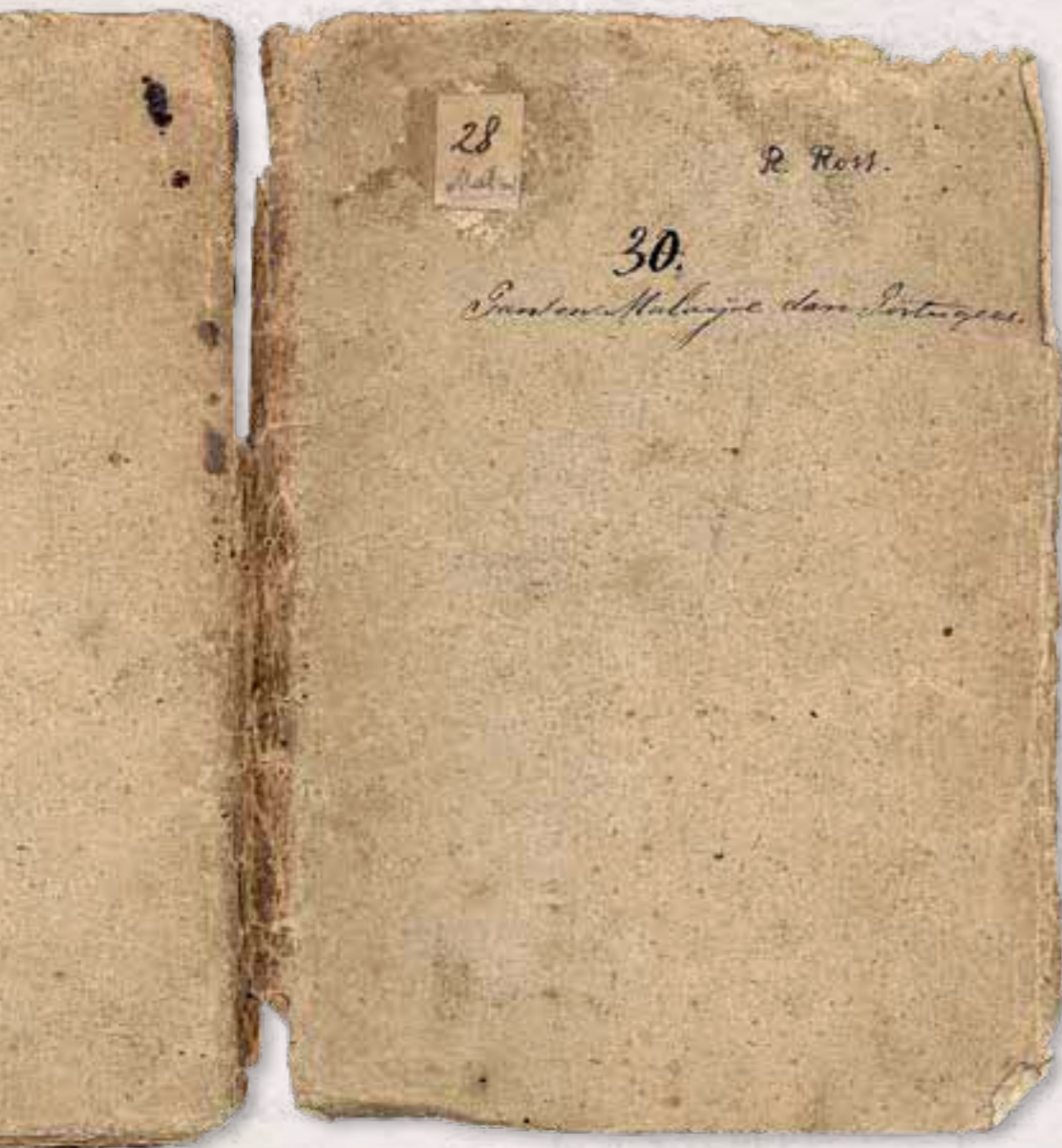
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# Panton Malaijoe dan Portugees

A Rediscovered Manuscript Sheds Light on the Languages and Traditions of Colonial Batavia



A forgotten manuscript found in the archive of a Portuguese museum offers insights into the languages and traditions of a unique community in the Dutch East Indies.

By Hugo C. Cardoso

The front cover of *Panton Malaijoe dan Portugees*. Courtesy of Museu Nacional de Arqueologia and Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda.

**Hugo C. Cardoso** is an Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Lisbon (Portugal) and a researcher of language contact involving Portuguese in Asia, with a particular focus on the Portuguese-lexified creoles of India and Sri Lanka.

Some time around 1865, in the storeroom of Bernard Quaritch's antique bookshop in London, an employee rummages through stacks of documents in search of a manuscript to be delivered to Ernst Reinhold Rost, the secretary to the Royal Asiatic Society and a regular client. When the manuscript finally emerges, it does not look particularly distinctive. It is comparatively small in size (21 × 14.5 cm) and length (39 folios), and is encased in rough, undecorated paper bearing an intriguing handwritten title in Malay: *Panton Malaijoe dan Portugees* (Malay and Portuguese Pantun).

The employee takes a moment to leaf through the item and notices it contains a number of texts resembling poems, organised in quatrains. Some are written in what appears to be a variety of Malay and identified by their titles as "Pantoons", while others are called "Cantigas" and rendered in a language that looks decidedly Romance, at least as far as words are concerned. So, judging from the manuscript's title, perhaps Portuguese? There is even one text that mixes both, with each alternating verse in a different language. Whatever it may be, the manuscript is due to be picked up fairly soon, so the employee packs it carefully and places it on the despatch desk.

This episode may be slightly fictionalised here, but its essential components are factual and correspond to the moment in which the trajectory of this manuscript, *Panton Malaijoe dan Portugees*, first becomes traceable on the basis of the documentary evidence available so far.

After the manuscript was acquired by Rost, it went on to have a number of different owners until it finally wound up in the vaults of Portugal's Museu Nacional de Arqueologia (National Museum of Archaeology) in Lisbon, where it languished for a number of decades before resurfacing in 2018. The significance of this discovery would eventually lead to the 2022 publication of *Livro de Pantuns* (*Book of Pantuns*). This bilingual book, edited by a team of five of which I was a member, provides contextual studies on the history of the manuscript as well as the verses inside, with explanations and annotations, and the Portuguese and English translations of the verses.<sup>1</sup>

The journey of the manuscript from a London bookshop to the Lisbon archive was marked by stops and starts. After its acquisition by Rost, the manuscript ended up circulating within a network of European philologists who realised its importance as a linguistic record, especially with respect to the sections identified as "Portuguese", which they



José Leite de Vasconcelos was a doctor, philologist, ethnographer and archaeologist, c. 1900s. He established the Museu Etnológico Português (Portuguese Ethnological Museum), the predecessor of the modern Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, in 1893. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

recognised as a rare sample of a Portuguese-lexified creole (a language resulting from substantial contact between Portuguese and other languages) from Insular Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup>

## The Manuscript Changes Hands

Interestingly, the initial protagonists of the manuscript's recorded history were all Germans. The antique bookseller Quaritch was German, as was Rost, an orientalist specialising in Asian languages (such as Sinhala and Malay) and literature. Rost spent most of his career in England, where in addition to his position with the Royal Asiatic Society, he was also a librarian at the India Office.

## The journey of the manuscript from a London bookshop to the Lisbon archive was marked by stops and starts.

The other important German who played a central role was the eminent linguist Hugo Schuchardt, a prominent figure in the history of linguistics. He spent most of his career at the University of Graz in Austria and had an extraordinarily vast range of scientific interests encompassing Romance languages, the Basque language, and the dynamics and effects of language contact. To pursue all of these, Schuchardt developed a vast global network of correspondents from whom he obtained linguistic data and relevant sources. Rost was one of them.

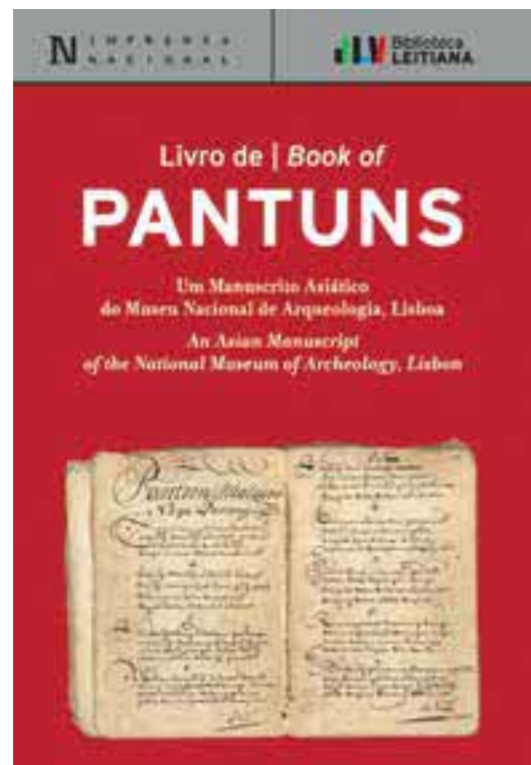
The correspondence between the two men reveals that Rost sent the manuscript to Schuchardt in 1885 as a loan and 10 years later, shortly before his death, turned that loan into a gift.<sup>3</sup> Schuchardt, who was particularly interested in Portuguese-lexified cre-

oles, realised the manuscript must have represented the variety spoken in and around colonial Batavia (present-day Jakarta), a language for which he had amassed other relevant sources.

In 1890, Schuchardt published a lengthy article about this particular Portuguese Creole language, titled *Über das Malaioportugiesische von Batavia und Tugu* (*On the Malayo-Portuguese of Batavia and Tugu*), in which he transcribed and analysed all the linguistic data he had collected *except* for that contained in *Panton Malaijoe dan Portugees*. The omission of the manuscript was not an oversight nor a belittlement of its relevance. Quite the opposite, in fact. In his published text, while discussing a dialogue transcribed in a 1692 work by George Meister, Schuchardt remarked:

*Etwa aus derselben Zeit als die Meisterische Probe stammt eine handschriftliche Sammlung malaioportugiesischer und malaiischer Pantuns, die ich schon wegen ihres Umfanges für eine besondere Veröffentlichung aufsparen muss.*<sup>4</sup>

[From approximately the same period as Meister's text, there exists a manuscript collection of Malayo-Portuguese and Malay *Pantuns* which, in view of its size, I am reserving for a separate publication.]



Ivo Castro, Hugo C. Cardoso, Alan Baxter, Alexander Adelaar and Gijs Koster, eds., *Livro de Pantuns: Um Manuscrito Asiático do Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, Lisboa | Book of Pantuns: An Asian Manuscript of the National Museum of Archeology, Lisbon* (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, 2022). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSEA 899.281 CAS).

Sadly, this follow-up study never materialised. In the meantime, the manuscript caught the attention of another prominent scholar: the Portuguese doctor, philologist, ethnographer and archaeologist José Leite de Vasconcelos. He was another of Schuchardt's regular correspondents and the two actually met in 1900 in Graz, where Vasconcelos was given the opportunity to consult the manuscript. He was intrigued by it and, a few years later, asked Schuchardt for a copy of its contents.

As we gather from their correspondence, this request was not well received by Schuchardt since he was still planning to publish a substantial study of *Panton Malaijoe dan Portugees*.<sup>5</sup> However, he eventually decided to bequeath the document to Vasconcelos. After Schuchardt died in 1927, the manuscript was despatched to Lisbon. Even though Vasconcelos clearly intended to work on it, he never published a study on the document either. As a result, despite various references to the manuscript and the clear interest shown by some of the leading early scholars of language contact, its contents remained a mystery until very recently.

### Panton Malaijoe dan Portugees Resurfaces

Vasconcelos was a leading figure in Portugal's academic scene of the early 20th century, developing fundamental research and many initiatives that still resonate in the country to this day. One of these was the establishment in 1893 of the Museu Etnológico Português (Portuguese Ethnological Museum), the predecessor of the modern Museu Nacional de Arqueologia (MNA). Vasconcelos was the director of the museum for many decades, which explains why the MNA's archive now holds part of his personal archive – a large collection of publications, letters, fieldwork documents and manuscripts.

One of those manuscripts is *Panton Malaijoe dan Portugees*, but this was not confirmed until 2018 when Ivo Castro, a fellow professor at the University of Lisbon, and the MNA's librarian, Livia Coito, stumbled across it while rifling through a number of boxes in the archive.<sup>6</sup> Aware of the history of the manuscript and of its scientific value, Castro shared the news with me and we invited three other specialists – Alan Baxter, Alexander Adelaar and Gijs Koster – to collaborate in a comprehensive study of the manuscript. Over the following three to four years, the team worked jointly and finally published *Livro de Pantuns | Book of Pantuns*, a bilingual (Portuguese and English) book dedicated to the manuscript.

The core of *Livro de Pantuns* consists of an edition of the manuscript with a transcription of its contents (plus, in the case of the Malay texts, a proposed textual reconstruction and a version in modern Bahasa Indonesia). It also has proposed translations into Portuguese and English, with comprehensive footnotes containing commentaries about the manuscript and the authors' analyses. The book also includes a full facsimile reproduction of the manuscript and four chapters in which the five authors explore various aspects of the

document – namely the history and materiality of the manuscript, as well as the linguistic and literary characteristics of the Malay pantun and the Portuguese Creole *cantigas* (a Portuguese term for “song”).

### Tracing the Genesis of the Manuscript

Since *Panton Malaijoe dan Portugees* is undated and makes no reference to a place of production, determining who may have been responsible for compiling the manuscript is a challenge. Schuchardt was convinced that it had been produced in Batavia sometime in the late 17th century, and he was probably right. Various hints point to Batavia, which was the epicentre of the Dutch East Indies between the 17th and 20th centuries. The use of northern European-produced paper, European-style calligraphy and some Dutch-like orthographic solutions all suggest a European-influenced environment that would have been found in Batavia at the time.

In principle, a collection of Malay and Portuguese Creole pantuns could also have been produced in other Dutch-controlled locations of Southeast Asia (such as Melaka), but Batavia emerges as the most likely source. This is evidenced by the abundance of references in the texts to Java, in the form of toponyms (such as Banten, Tangerang and Batavia itself), fruit, plant and food names, and even historical events.

The language in the texts also has links with Java's linguistic ecology. In the Malay-language texts, a few forms are more readily recognisable as reflections of Javanese words than Malay/Indonesian words, while the language of the Portuguese Creole texts is especially reminiscent of the Batavia and Tugu samples published by Schuchardt and recorded in a few other complementary sources.<sup>7</sup>

Having established (with a fair amount of certainty) that colonial Java was the most likely setting for the production of the manuscript, we are still left with the issue of dating the document. In this respect, all we can say for sure is that the manuscript could not have been completed before 1690.

This insight is based on two historical episodes referenced in the pantun. The Portuguese Creole text, *Cantiga de Tangerang mais Bantam* (*Song of Tangerang and Banten*), narrates the conflict between Sultan Abu'l-Fath 'abdu'l-Fattah (Ageng Tirtayasa) of Banten and his son, Abu Nasr Abdul Kahhar (Sultan Haji), which saw the involvement of the Dutch East Indies Company in 1682.<sup>8</sup> Another pantun, the Malay-language *Panton Joncker* (*Jonker Pantun*), describes events relating to the presumed rebellion of Captain Jonker, an Ambonese serving in the Dutch colonial army, which took place in 1689, culminating in his death that year and the deportation of his children to Ceylon in 1690.<sup>9</sup>

While it is impossible to tell how long after these events the texts were written, the amount of detail suggests their memory may have been fairly fresh. Therefore, it is quite possible that the manuscript

was completed in the late 17th century or the early 18th century.

It is also unclear whether the people who produced the manuscript were the ones who transcribed these originally oral texts or whether they worked on the basis of earlier written records. Either way, we do know the process must have been collaborative as an analysis of the calligraphy reveals that different sections were produced by different writers. That said, they certainly obeyed a masterplan because despite the multiple copyists, the result is a cohesive document in terms of form and content.

**Since *Panton Malaijoe dan Portugees* is undated and makes no reference to a place of production, determining who may have been responsible for compiling the manuscript is a challenge.**

### The Collection of Pantun

*Panton Malaijoe dan Portugees* contains 11 discrete and different-sized sequences of quatrains (identified in our publication with letters A through K for ease of reference), most with their own title and an explicit indication of their endpoint:

A - *Panton Malayo* (*Malay Pantun*): 43 stanzas in Malay;

B - *Pantoon Malaijoo Naga Patanij* (*Malay Pantun from Naga Patani*): 72 stanzas in Malay;

C - *Cantiga de Amooris de Minha Manhonha* (*Love Song About My Wicked Lady*): 76 stanzas in Portuguese Creole;

D - *Cantiga de Tangerang mais Bantam* (*Song of Tangerang and Banten*): 29 stanzas in Portuguese Creole;

E - *Cantiga di Vooi Cada Noijto Majinadoo* (*Song of [I] Went Every Night, Pondering*): 22 stanzas in Portuguese Creole;

F - [untitled]: Eight stanzas in Portuguese Creole;

G - *Cantiga Malaijoo Mussurado Portigies* (*Malay Song Mixed With Portuguese*): 19 stanzas combining Malay and Portuguese Creole;

H - *Cantiga de Portugees Mais Mojeers os Omis Casadoe* (*Portuguese Song About Married Women and Men*): 30 stanzas in Portuguese Creole;

I - *Pantoon Malayo Panhiboeran Hati Doeka Dan Piloò* (*Malay Pantun to Cheer Up the Sad and Melancholic Heart*): 18 stanzas in Malay;

J - *Panton Dari Sitie Lela Maijan* (*Pantun About Siti Lela Mayang*): 29 stanzas in Malay; and

K - *Panton Joncker* (*Jonker Pantun*): 30 stanzas in Malay.

Thematically, these texts are not dissimilar to the wider Southeast Asian genre of the pantun, while simultaneously establishing links with European literary traditions, including chivalric literature and medieval Portuguese love poetry.<sup>10</sup>

Love (whether licit or illicit, consummated or aspirational, joyous or painful) is the theme of several of them, as exemplified by the following excerpt from the opening sequence of *Panton Malayo*:<sup>11</sup>



[...]  
*Lihat anack tsina  
 Toehan kie tsilmoele  
 rindo pada dieha  
 makan tida boole.*

Behold the Chinese maiden,  
 The dainty little lady.  
 I long for her,  
 Unable to eat.

*Lihat hanack tsina  
 bagú wida darie  
 roepa bage boenga  
 bangoen la camarie.*

Behold the Chinese maiden,  
 Beautiful like a heavenly nymph.  
 Pretty like a flower  
 Get up and come here.

*Soeda amba casie  
 djúwa dengan badangh  
 boehat la canda tie  
 bagi sooka toehan.*

Your servant has given  
 Body and soul  
 To fulfill his wish  
 To please you, my lady.

[...]

*Panton Malayo (Malay Pantun) has 43 stanzas in Malay. Image reproduced from Panton Malajoe dan Portugees. Courtesy of Museu Nacional de Arqueologia and Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda.*

Other texts have a moral undertone, using various rhetoric strategies to reflect on society and human behaviour. The untitled sequence F is one such case. As seen in the excerpt below, the text is both metaphorical and explicit in denouncing the inescapability of social inequalities:<sup>12</sup>

[...]  
*Neem: waka wincha chawalo  
 neem: kawalo wieka waka  
 neem: parang: winca ispada  
 neem: matsado fúka waacha.*

Neither will the cow turn into a horse  
 Nor will the horse turn into a cow;  
 Neither will the machete turn into a sword,  
 Nor will the axe turn into a knife.

*Neem: coobrie fúeka werro,  
 neem: verro wúka coobrie,  
 ásie sauõ: os: riecoos  
 perra kom õ: homie poobrie.*

Neither will copper turn into iron,  
 Nor will iron turn into copper.  
 So are the rich  
 Towards the poor man.

*Õnde ã: õ somos: Riko,  
 alie nanõ: bale õs: pobrie  
 por isso: pode noos: veer  
 que õ: ferro nanõ: fuka coobrie.*

Where the rich are,  
 There the poor do not go.  
 Hence we can see  
 That iron does not turn into copper.

[...]



*Cantiga Malajoo Mussurado Portigies (Malay Song Mixed With Portuguese) contains 19 stanzas combining Malay and Portuguese Creole. Image reproduced from Panton Malajoe dan Portugees. Courtesy of Museu Nacional de Arqueologia and Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda.*

Some sequences have a narrative structure. In addition to the ones that recount historical events, others are (or appear to be) fictional. The sequence titled *Panton Dari Sitie Lela Maijan* – which, as Gijs Koster notes, shows similarities with other pantuns recorded elsewhere – tells

the story of a married woman’s extramarital relationship with a young man identified by the name of Kosta, set in a place that may be recognised as the city of Batavia.<sup>13</sup> The following section narrates Siti Lela Mayang’s escape to join Kosta.<sup>14</sup>

[...]  
*ada satoe anack òrangh  
 nama sitie lela maijangh  
 anak pego baroe datang  
 goendik tjanko china quíjtangh*

There was a young maiden  
 Whose name was Siti Lela Mayang.  
 She was a girl from Pegu who had just arrived,  
 The concubine of a Cantonese trader in jewelry.

*Poera poera pangeel kaka  
 ambeel gamparang pigie kalie  
 poera poera tjoetjie kakie  
 darie tanga Soeda Larie.*

Pretending she went to call her older sister,  
 She took her wooden clogs and went to the river.  
 Pretending she went to wash her feet,  
 She already started running on the stairs.

*Lakie china datang tjarie  
 banting tangan banting kakie  
 mana nonja bida darie  
 nonja lari godong padrie*

When her Chinese husband came looking for her,  
 He slapped his arms and slapped his legs:  
 “Where is my wife, that heavenly nymph?  
 Has she run off to the stone building of the fathers?”

[...]

This very short tour of the contents of *Panton Malaijoe dan Portugees* reveals a poetic tradition of some thematic and rhetorical complexity. But whose tradition was it? The multilingual nature of this collection gives us some clues. In theory, different sequences could have been associated with different communities, and it can even be hypothesised that the Malay texts and the Portuguese Creole texts represent distinct traditional repertoires. However, the bilingual sequence G, *Cantiga Malaijoo Mussurado Portigies*, calls these possibilities into question. Consider the following excerpt:<sup>15</sup>

Fos: amor: tanõ: dosu  
*tieda bole loepa*  
jateem nôâ maradoe  
*carna sama soeka.*

Your love is so sweet  
I cannot forget it,  
It has tied us together  
Because we like each other.

*Jika sama soeka*  
vazu joeramento  
*jngaet nonjha Ingaet*  
de algoúm tromento.

If we like each other,  
You must swear an oath,  
Be mindful, my lady, be mindful  
Of the suffering [it may bring].

*Jngaet nonjha Ingaet*  
coza de ackel tempo  
*Jangan nonjha takoet*  
de algoúm troemento.  
[...]

Be mindful, my lady, be mindful  
Of the things [we did] at that time.  
My lady, don't be afraid  
Of the suffering [it may bring].

Here, each quatrain is made up of alternating verses in Malay (transcribed here in italics) and verses in Portuguese Creole, interwoven in such a way that individual sentences, which often extend across several verses, combine both languages. Such a text would only have made sense to a group of people with command of both Malay and Portuguese Creole. In 17th- and 18th-century Batavia, only one community fitted the bill.

## The Mardijkers of Batavia

Due to its centrality within the Dutch-controlled networks in Asia, early colonial Batavia had a highly

composite population. One of the most prominent groups residing in and around it in the 17th century was given different names, but consistently described in terms that highlighted its connection with the Portuguese. The Portuguese had preceded the Dutch as colonialists in Asia, and competition between the two throughout the 17th century saw several Portuguese strongholds in different parts of the continent (such as Melaka, Cochin and Ceylon) pass into Dutch hands. As a result, many inhabitants of those conquered locations converged onto Batavia, often in a condition of servitude.

While associated with the Portuguese, these individuals were most likely Eurasian or Asian converts to Catholicism (as suggested by the Dutch moniker *Zwarte Portugesen*, translated as “Black Portuguese”).<sup>16</sup> They carried along with them different previously formed Portuguese-lexified creole languages, out of which developed Java's very own variety recorded in six of the pantuns in the manuscript.<sup>17</sup>

As this group of people attained autonomy within the Dutch colonial society, they eventually came to be classified as Mardijkers – an ethnonym derived from the Sanskrit-derived Malay term *merdeka*, which means “free men” – and made up a big portion of the Batavian population. According to accounts from the 1670s, Mardijkers were the largest group within the city.

Throughout the 17th and part of the 18th centuries, “Portuguese” was often described as one of the main languages used in Batavia but, more often than not, the term actually referred to the Portuguese-based creole developed by and associated with the Mardijkers.<sup>18</sup> According to most accounts, the Portuguese Creole variety of Java lasted the longest in Tugu (previously a discrete village near Batavia and currently integrated in Greater Jakarta), but is no longer used as a vital spoken language, despite being preserved in certain oral traditions.<sup>19</sup> As such, virtually all the linguistic evidence available for this language is archival. *Panton Malaijoe dan Portugees* is thus particularly important as it considerably expands the set of data available for this language.

This particular Portuguese Creole is not the only language that *Panton Malaijoe dan Portugees* sheds light on. Assuming that the Malay-language texts of the manuscript stem from the same oral repertoire as the Portuguese Creole ones, this document provides a rare glimpse into the type of Malay – or, at any rate, a type of Malay – used by the Mardijker community of Batavia.

In his study, Alexander Adelaar interprets the manuscript's Malay-language pantun as a sample of Mardijker Malay and identifies a number of commonalities with contact varieties of Malay (known by many different names, including Bazaar Malay [Melayu Pasar], Low Malay or, in the linguistic literature, Vehicular Malay). These include, for instance, a possessive construction with *punya* (as in *kieta poenha nanje*, or “our song”) or a preposition *pigi* indicating the goal of movement (as in *Sieti jalang pigie pasaer*, or “Siti went to the market”).<sup>20</sup>

In addition, Adelaar also notes that certain phonetic characteristics of the manuscript's Malay (such as the loss of the final *-h*, as in *roema* for *rumah*, meaning “house”, and of some final consonants, as in *banja* for *banyak*, meaning “much” or “many”) are especially reminiscent of forms of Vehicular Malay from eastern Indonesia, including in areas such as Maluku and Sulawesi. This observation underscores the relevance of eastern Indonesian communities and their varieties of Malay in colonial Batavia and their impact on the resident Mardijkers.

## An Open Book

*Panton Malaijoe dan Portugees* has travelled a long way, from Batavia in Asia to Lisbon in Europe, where it is a material reflection of the not-always-obvious historical links connecting Indonesia and Portugal. Its diverse, multilingual texts speak of certain undercurrents that carried people, languages and traditions across coastal Asia but remain poorly understood, as they are only very faintly recorded in primary sources.



A Mardijker couple in Batavia. Mardijkers were the descendants of freed slaves of the Portuguese in India, Africa and the Malay Peninsula. They spoke a Portuguese-based creole. Courtesy of Ian Burnet.

The sudden discovery of this manuscript promised to shed some light on the Mardijkers of Batavia and answer some pertinent questions: What was the exact composition of the community and how was it formed? How did the Mardijkers contribute to the cultural and linguistic mix of colonial Batavia? What were their daily lives like and who did they contact within the city? What were their takes on the prevailing social and political structures?

The research leading up to the publication of *Livro de Pantuns* was an initial effort by the editors to tap into the manuscript's ability to clarify these and other questions – in particular, from a linguistic and literary perspective. However, aware that its lessons were far from exhausted, the team worked towards making the manuscript available to the public in a format that would allow further exploration. Hopefully, its 39 folios will still teach us a great deal. ♦

## NOTES

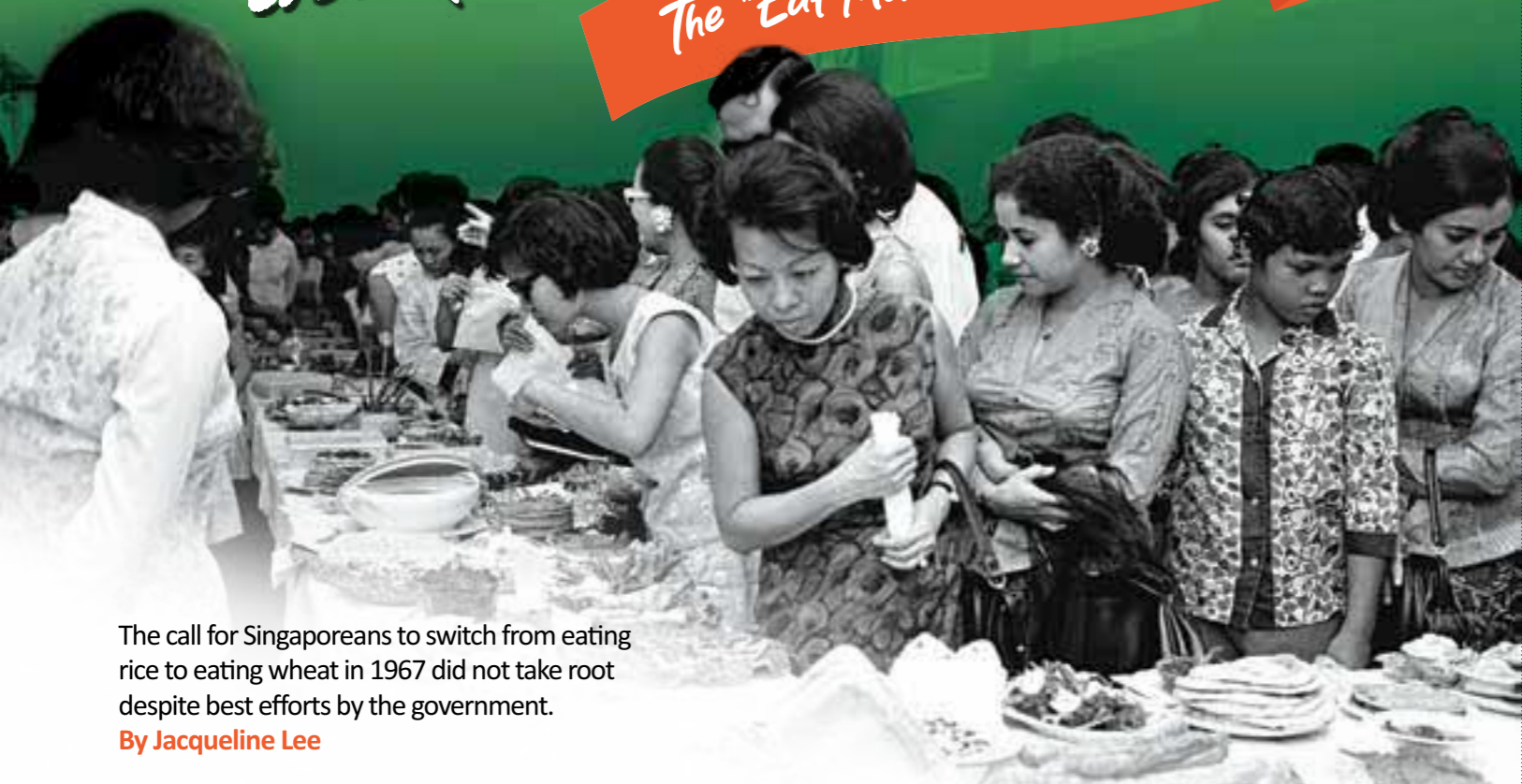
- The data conveyed in this text is based on collaborative research conducted by Ivo Castro, Hugo Cardoso, Alan Baxter, Alexander Adelaar and Gijs Koster leading up to the publication of an edition and study of the manuscript. See Ivo Castro, Hugo C. Cardoso, Alan Baxter, Alexander Adelaar and Gijs Koster, eds., *Livro de Pantuns: Um Manuscrito Asiático do Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, Lisboa* | *Book of Pantuns: An Asian Manuscript of the National Museum of Archeology, Lisbon* (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, 2022). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSEA 899.281 CAS)
- For a fuller account of the manuscript's history and characteristics, see Ivo Castro and Hugo C. Cardoso, “O Manuscrito de Lisboa,” in *Livro de Pantuns: Um Manuscrito Asiático do Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, Lisboa*, ed. Ivo Castro et al. (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, 2022), 95–114.
- Hugo Schuchardt's epistolary corpus is preserved at the University of Graz, and has been studied and digitised as part of a project led by Prof Bernhard Hurch. See “Hugo Schuchardt Archiv,” last accessed 2 June 2023, <https://gams.uni-graz.at/context:hsa>.
- Hugo Schuchardt, “Kreolische Studien IX. Über das Malaioportugiesische von Batavia und Tugu,” *Sitzungsberichte der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, Philosophisch-historische Classe* 122 (1890): 17.
- The correspondence between Schuchardt and Vasconcelos is published in Ivo Castro and Enrique Rodrigues-Moura, eds., *Hugo Schuchardt / José Leite*

- de Vasconcellos. Correspondência* (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2015), <https://fis.uni-bamberg.de/handle/uniiba/39832>.
- The discovery was first reported in Ivo Castro, Hugo C. Cardoso, Gijs Koster, Alexander Adelaar and Alan Baxter, “The Lisbon Book of Pantuns,” *O Arqueólogo Português series V, 6/7* (2016–2017): 315–17, <https://www.museunacionalarqueologia.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/Book-of-Pantuns.pdf>.
- An edition and study of these sources can be found in Philippe Maurer, *The Former Portuguese Creole of Batavia and Tugu (Indonesia)* (London/Colombo: Battlebridge, 2011). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSEA 469.79968 MAU). For a linguistic analysis of the Portuguese Creole texts in the manuscript, see Alan Baxter and Hugo C. Cardoso, “The ‘Panton Portugees’ of the Lisbon Manuscript,” in *Livro de Pantuns: Um Manuscrito Asiático do Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, Lisboa*, ed. Ivo Castro et al. (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, 2022), 115–29.
- See Baxter and Cardoso, “The ‘Panton Portugees’ of the Lisbon Manuscript,” 119.
- For a more detailed account, see Gijs Koster, “The Poems in Malay in the *Livro de Pantuns*: Some Social, Historical and Literary Contexts,” in *Livro de Pantuns: Um Manuscrito Asiático do Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, Lisboa*, ed. Ivo Castro et al. (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, 2022), 141–46.
- For a description of the Portuguese Creole sequences, see Baxter and Cardoso, “The ‘Panton Portugees’ of the Lisbon Manuscript,” 115–29. For

- a study of the Malay-language sequences, see Gijs Koster, “The Poems in Malay in the *Livro de Pantuns*: Some Social, Historical and Literary Contexts,” 131–47.
- Transcription and proposed translation reproduced from Castro et al., *Livro de Pantuns*, 248–49.
- Transcription and proposed translation reproduced from Castro et al., *Livro de Pantuns*, 310–11.
- In his chapter in *Livro de Pantuns* (p. 139), Gijs Koster identifies similarities between this text and *Syair Sinyor Kosta*, a poem that circulated widely in the Malay World in the early 19th century, four versions of which have been collated and studied. See A. Teeuw, R. Dumas, Muhammad Haji Salleh, R. Tol and M.J. van Yperen, eds., *A Merry Senhor in the Malay world: Four Texts of the Syair Sinyor Kosta* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2004). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSEA 899.281009 MER). As Koster notes, the manuscript's version may actually be a much earlier attestation of this poem.
- Transcription and proposed translation reproduced from Castro et al., *Livro de Pantuns*, 334–35.
- Transcription and proposed translation reproduced from Castro et al., *Livro de Pantuns*, 314–15.
- For a fuller description of the Mardijker community, see Koster, “The Poems in Malay in the *Livro de Pantuns*: Some Social, Historical and Literary Contexts,” 131–32; Maria Isabel Tomás, “The Role of Women in the Cross-

- pollination Process in the Asian-Portuguese Varieties,” *Journal of Portuguese Linguistics* 8, no. 2 (December 2009): 49–64, <https://jpl.ietras.ulisboa.pt/article/id/5575/>.
- For an overview of the Portuguese-lexified creoles of Asia and the Pacific, see Alan Baxter, “Portuguese in the Pacific and Pacific Rim,” in *Atlas of Languages of Intercultural Communication in the Pacific, Asia, and the Americas*, vol. 2, ed. Stephen A. Wurm, P. Mühlhäusler and Darrell Tryon (Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1996), 299–338. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RUR 402.23 ATL); Hugo C. Cardoso, “Contact and Portuguese-lexified Creoles,” in *The Handbook of Language Contact*, 2nd ed., ed. Raymond Hickey (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), 469–88; João Oliveira, “Portugal's Linguistic Legacy in Southeast Asia,” *BiblioAsia* 19, no. 1 (April–June 2023): 40–47.
- That is not to say that Portuguese was absent from colonial Batavia. In fact, the first Portuguese-language translation of the Bible, undertaken by João Ferreira de Almeida, was completed in Batavia in the late 17th century.
- See for example Raan-Hann Tan, *Por-Tugu-Ese?: The Protestant Tugu Community of Jakarta, Indonesia* (PhD diss., Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, 2016).
- Examples and analysis from Alexander Adelaar, “Spelling and Language of the Malay Used in the *Livro de Pantuns*,” in *Livro de Pantuns: Um Manuscrito Asiático do Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, Lisboa*, ed. Ivo Castro et al. (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, 2022), 149–59.

# Going Against the (Rice) Grain: The “Eat More Wheat” Campaign



The call for Singaporeans to switch from eating rice to eating wheat in 1967 did not take root despite best efforts by the government.

By Jacqueline Lee

Walk into any suburban shopping mall in Singapore today and you’ll find burger joints, a pizza restaurant or two, shops selling wraps and sandwiches, and numerous Japanese restaurants specialising in udon or ramen. These places are invariably full during lunch or dinner time, a testimony to their popularity with regular folks.

However, it’s only been relatively recently that people here have gotten used to eating these foods. A little over 50 years ago, few people would be seen wolfing down a juicy cheeseburger or a tuna mayo sandwich for lunch. Slurping down a bowl of ramen, twirling al dente spaghetti around a fork or holding up a pizza slice would have been viewed as exotic and alien. Back then, most people were used to eating their lunch and dinner with rice. An effort by the Singapore government to get people to consume more of their

daily dose of carbs from wheat rather than rice flopped because people vastly preferred eating white rice over bread or wheat-based noodles.

The “Eat More Wheat” campaign began in 1967 during a time when there was a global rice shortage. The campaign promoted wheat products in place of rice in the daily diet of Singaporeans.<sup>1</sup> However, many people found it difficult to make the switch. As a reporter with the *Eastern Sun* newspaper noted, rice-eating was a “centuries old habit” and “we have been rice eaters since as far back as we can remember.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite a big push by the government, and support from organisations such as the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) and Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the “Eat More Wheat” campaign was, by most accounts, unsuccessful, and eventually fizzled out by around 1970.<sup>3</sup>

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## Germination of the Campaign

In the mid-1960s, worldwide rice production dipped at the same time when demand was surging, which led to rice shortages and price increases. The price of rice rose sharply, from 35 cents per kati (about 600g) in early 1966 to around 49 cents to 51 cents per kati in 1967. During the same period though, the price of flour remained constant at 25 cents per kati.<sup>4</sup>

The price increase had a significant impact on the state’s finances. The government calculated that if people ate more wheat in place of rice, it would be able to save on “foreign exchange”. Speaking in Parliament, Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee noted that Singaporeans consumed around 4,000 tons of wheat compared to 12,000 tons of rice monthly. If they ate 4,000 more tons of locally milled wheat instead of imported rice every month, Singapore “could save about \$22 million in foreign exchange a year”.<sup>5</sup>

The seeds of the campaign were sown in June 1967 when Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye urged Singaporeans to change their eating habits by consuming more wheat products instead of rice due to

the global rice shortage.<sup>6</sup> A few days later, the NTUC pledged support for an “eat more wheat and less rice” campaign. “Wheat is more nutritious than rice and only at half the price,” said Seah Mui Kok, secretary-general of the NTUC.<sup>7</sup>

The Singapore Medical Association agreed that wheat was a superior alternative to rice. “A man eating six slices of bread a day obtains in his way a quarter of his daily requirements of proteins. Wheat also contains twice the amount of calcium present in rice and appreciably more iron and the water-soluble B vitamins,” explained W.O. Phoon, secretary of the association.<sup>8</sup>

Kitchens in government institutions like prisons, hospitals and welfare homes began substituting some of the weekly rice meals with wheat products. Interestingly, in addition to items like bread and noodles, the government began trying out an Australian product called Rycena, which supposedly “looks, cooks, and eats like rice”.<sup>9</sup> Rycena’s main draw was that it could be cooked and prepared like rice, as it was a wheat derivative that would separate into soft grains.<sup>10</sup>

Rycena was introduced at the Singapore General Hospital in September and October 1967 and in several welfare homes in January 1968. The staff found that Rycena was not suitable as a rice substitute as its flavour was “akin to barley” and in the end, it was not adopted for use in government institutions.<sup>11</sup>

Using more wheat in prisons and welfare homes would not make much of a dent in rice imports though. To achieve its goal, the government would have to get Singapore’s population to change their diets. To do this, the government began the large-scale promotion of wheat products through radio and TV advertisements.

## Publicity and Promotion

The message to the public – targeted mainly at housewives as most people ate at home – was that wheat was a better choice than rice due to its nutritional benefits and lower cost. The public promotion comprised exhibitions, cooking competitions and pop-up booths at events.



(Above) To reach out to the masses, advertisements with catchy slogans depict different races enjoying wheat products. Image reproduced from “Page 5 Advertisements Column 2,” *Eastern Sun*, 11 November 1967, 5. (From NewspaperSG).

(Right) Minister for Culture and Social Affairs Othman Wok (far left) at the opening of the wheat food exhibition organised by the Siglap Women’s Association at Siglap Community Centre, 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Facing page) Residents at the wheat food exhibition organised by the Siglap Women’s Association at Siglap Community Centre, 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Among the biggest events were two nationwide wheat cooking competitions organised by Radio and Television Singapura, which attracted more than 2,000 participants. The competitions encouraged contestants to submit quick and economical recipes (with ingredients costing no more than \$3 for the first competition and \$2 for the second) using wheat flour as the main ingredient for breakfast, lunch and dinner. The recipes could be for Chinese, Malay, Indian or Western cuisine.<sup>12</sup>

For the finals of the first competition held at the Singapore Conference Hall on 17 October 1967, 10 contestants were chosen from each category and made to cook their dishes for the judges who would then determine the winners. The first prize winners were

domestic science teacher Mrs Theresa Teow for Malayan savoury pancakes (Malay), Mr G.P. Ponnusamy, a cook, for wheat *uppumaa* (Indian), Mrs Rita Fernando, also a domestic science teacher, for stuffed fried dough balls (Chinese) and housewife Mrs Clara Anciano for basic hot cakes (Western).<sup>13</sup>

The finals of the second competition took place at the Singapore Badminton Hall on 25 February 1968.<sup>14</sup> When interviewed for a radio programme, first prize winner of the Malay section Fatimah Wahab, a pre-university student, said: “Cooking is my favourite so after following last year’s cooking competition, I decided to participate in this year’s.” The reporter who tasted her *roti udang* described it as “nice, rich, golden brown” and “delicious”.<sup>15</sup>

The first prize winner of the Western section was domestic science teacher Mary Robinson, co-author of two textbooks on cooking and a dietician who relocated to Singapore more than a decade earlier. Her chilli pizza dish cost \$1.68 to feed five to six people and was described as very economical. Interestingly, she noted that the eating habits of Singaporeans had changed during the time she had been in Singapore. “When I first came, when I asked a class who would eat cheese, maybe one girl would like it. Now when I ask the same question, usually I would find that the whole class, 20 girls, say, oh yes, they eat and like it, and eat it regularly. So you see, in 15 years there’s been a tremendous change in that one aspect.”<sup>16</sup>

Subsequently, 120 winning entries from the two cooking competitions were compiled into a cookbook titled “*The Proof Is in the Eating*” *Recipe Book*, which was sold to the public at \$1.<sup>17</sup> The recipes were printed in English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil.

There were also cooking competitions in schools organised by the Ministry of Education,<sup>18</sup> a wheat food exhibition by the Siglap Women’s Association,<sup>19</sup> an “Eat More Flour” week by the Singapore Food Manufacturers’ Association,<sup>20</sup> a cake-making competition and exhibition by the People’s Association,<sup>21</sup> and a Christmas Fair where wheat products were sold.<sup>22</sup>

At the wheat food exhibition, an array of Chinese, Indian, Pakistani and European dishes made from wheat flour and other ingredients were on display and for tasting. Speaking at its opening in August 1967, Culture and Social Affairs Minister Othman Wok stressed that the worldwide shortage of rice was not the only reason the government was encouraging the switch to wheat. “It is common knowledge that wheat and wheat products are more health-giving than rice, although not all realise that wheat and wheat products are also cheaper than rice,” he said.<sup>23</sup>

Three men literally “took the cake” at the cake-making competition on 30 March 1969 and swept the top three prizes. Petty Officer Chang Heng Wan, who won the first prize, had worked as a cook in the Admiralty House at the Naval Base for 19 years.<sup>24</sup> (Sadly, the newspaper report did not mention the type of cake he had baked.)



A contestant preparing the ingredients to cook at the finals of the nationwide cooking competition held at the Singapore Conference Hall, 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The “Eat More Wheat” campaign included a partnership with two local flour mills – Prima Limited and Khong Guan Flour Milling Limited – which footed the bill for the radio and TV advertisements.<sup>25</sup> These advertisements focused on the versatility of wheat flour that could be used to make “the right food at any time for any occasion” and “healthy food good for young and old alike”.<sup>26</sup>

The media also threw in their support. Marianne Pereira of the *Eastern Sun* hatched a cunning plan for a housewife to get her husband and family interested in wheat-based meals. “It is up to us women to see that more wheat is eaten,” she wrote. “At the dining table serve your husband with rice but serve yourself with something out of wheat and eat it with smacking relish. Curiosity it is said is the start of all adventure. And your husband’s curiosity will lead him to ask, ‘What is that, can I have some?’”<sup>27</sup> According to Pereira, this was likely to lead to the husband asking for that dish the next night.

She said women should also highlight the advantages of eating wheat. “Subtly also point out that wheat is more economical than rice. Point out to the family paunches (subtly too) and announce that wheat is slimming. Point out that wheat is beneficial to health.”<sup>28</sup>

### The Campaign Fizzles Out

Unfortunately, despite these efforts, the campaign appeared to make little headway. The *Straits Times* described the campaign as “a direct assault on basic habits” that would “almost certainly fail while a more subtle approach would well speed up the trend to flour which is already noticeably under way”, adding that “people to whom ‘rice’ and ‘food’ are synonymous will not be easily persuaded to abandon ‘rice’”.<sup>29</sup>

The paper questioned if wheat was truly cheaper than rice, as wheat products were less palatable and had to be supplemented with other ingredients. Furthermore, the paper noted, wheat products required more time and preparation than rice, which could simply be boiled.<sup>30</sup>

Members of the public interviewed in March 1968 by Radio Singapura expressed difficulty in substituting rice for wheat. A man said: “It’s just like

asking us to give up smoking. It just isn’t possible.” Another man said: “In preparing wheat for food, it will take the housewife a much longer time. And in rice, it has been the eating of the people for generations. So as to say that wheat can take the position of rice, I am quite doubtful unless the eating habit of the people can change, which I do agree, but it will take time.”<sup>31</sup>

The Singapore Medical Association criticised the government for not involving doctors who could have helped explain why wheat was better for health. “The campaign would have been a greater success if the medical profession had been alerted to the need for their participation,” said the association. “It is impossible to expect a few jingles over the air with one’s morning coffee to bring about a social revolution in the eating habits of the majority of the people in Singapore.”<sup>32</sup>

In Parliament in December 1967, Member of Parliament for Aljunied S.V. Lingam questioned the campaign’s target audience. “To whom are we to beam this campaign to? To the rich or to the poor?” he demanded to know. “[T]he campaign seems to me to be directed at the rich who ironically are already consumers of wheat and who could afford to pay for rice at ten times its present price.”<sup>33</sup>

**“It is impossible to expect a few jingles over the air with one’s morning coffee to bring about a social revolution in the eating habits of the majority of the people in Singapore.”**

He said the campaign was misguided in telling poor people to save money by eating wheat, as they would spend more money on meat, eggs and supplementary ingredients. He also commented that the cooking competition’s limit of \$3 of ingredients for one meal was too generous, as poor families budgeted \$3 for an entire day of meals. “Does the Minister [of State for Culture Lee Khoo Choy] sincerely believe that the poor can afford this?” he asked.<sup>34</sup>



(Above) The recipe for “Wheat Burger Ring” by Mrs Mariana Munir. Image reproduced from RTS Enterprises (Singapore), “*The Proof Is in the Eating*” *Recipe Book* (Singapore: Printed by the Govt. Print. Off., 1969), 123. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL05 641.6311 RTS).

(Left) After the nationwide wheat cooking competitions in 1967 and 1968, 120 winning recipes were compiled into a cookbook titled “*The Proof Is in the Eating*” *Recipe Book*. Image reproduced from RTS Enterprises (Singapore), “*The Proof Is in the Eating*” *Recipe Book* (Singapore: Printed by the Govt. Print. Off., 1969). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL05 641.6311 RTS).

*Straits Budget* reporter Henry L. Pau described the campaign as “pretty futile”. “The wheat foods advocated are neither new nor particularly cheap, and the people are already eating as much of them as they can afford or can stomach.” He added that it was “more costly to the housewife – 48 cents a kati of rice, 80 cents the equivalent quantity of bread”.<sup>35</sup>

## Rice Reigns

In 1968, a survey on the wheat-eating habits of Singaporeans found that “rice eaters won’t desert the bowl”. Of the 900 Chinese, Malay and Indian households interviewed, only 16 households had started consuming wheat during the past six months of the campaign. Less than 2 percent of those surveyed had heeded the call. “This rate of switching appears to be low considering the heavy publicity campaign to eat more wheat products,” noted the report. According to the survey, the food consumed for breakfast and tea had a satisfactory amount of wheat, while lunch and dinner meals did not see an increase in wheat products. To get a third of the population consuming a wheat-based meal for lunch and dinner in 10 years would require a much higher increase in the rate of change.<sup>36</sup>

By the early 1970s, the “Eat More Wheat” campaign dropped off the radar. In response to a letter to the *Straits Times* in August 1971 asking what had happened to the campaign, the Health Ministry said that there was no

longer a need for the campaign because of the green revolution and the consequent increase in rice yields.<sup>37</sup> As rice production increased, rice prices dropped and matched the price of wheat.

Even though the campaign failed to change diets in the three years or so that it ran, in the subsequent decades, the habits and tastebuds of Singaporeans did indeed change. Today, although rice has not been dethroned, people eat wheat-based foods regularly, whether in the shape of a hamburger, a bowl of instant noodles, a plate of pasta or a slice of pizza.

During the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, the shortage of flour was certainly felt as evidenced by the queues at baking supply shops. The subsequent pandemic baking trend for making sourdough bread also had its adherents here as well. Thanks to the forces of globalisation, while rice is still nice in Singapore, wheat is definitely also neat. ♦



Scan the QR code to join cookbook author and culinary instructor Christopher Tan as he makes a unique milk noodle soup dish from “*The Proof Is in the Eating*”

*Recipe Book*. This video is part of “From Book to Cook”, a cooking show on Singapore’s old recipes found in the National Library collection.

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# A WELL-CHOREOGRAPHED MOVE

## FROM SINGAPORE DANCE THEATRE TO SINGAPORE BALLET

As the history of the company shows, its new name is less about breaking away from the past as it is about leaping confidently into the future.  
By **Thammika Songkaeo**

One of Singapore's oldest professional dance companies has become one of its newest. On 10 December 2021, Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT) announced that a little over 30 years after it was first unveiled to the public, it was jettisoning its old name and embracing a new one – Singapore Ballet.

The new name is perhaps the most potent symbol of how much the company has changed and grown since its public debut at the Singapore Festival of the Arts in 1988. At the time, the company was unknown; it had just seven dancers and its future looked uncertain. Today, the company has grown to 35 dancers and apprentices of various nationalities, with a loyal following locally and an international profile as well. Janek Schergen, its artistic director, receives applications from aspiring dancers daily.<sup>1</sup>

The company has made a name for itself in numerous festivals and events such as *Le Temps d'aimer la Danse* in Biarritz, France; Mexico's Festival Internacional Cervantino; Chang Mu Arts Festival in Korea; and the Philippines Festival of Dance.

### From the Get-Goh

While many individuals have played an important role in the company's journey, no retelling of its history would be complete without considering the contributions of the Goh siblings – Goh Soo Nee (who also went by Goh Soonee and Soonee Goh), Goh Soo Khim and Goh Choo San. The three siblings played vital roles, though in very different ways: Soo Nee prepared the ground by starting an important predecessor institution to SDT; Soo Khim, on the other hand, led the company

The Singapore Dance Theatre's performance of *Fearful Symmetries* choreographed by Nils Christie, 2011. Photo by Tan Ngiap Heng. Courtesy of Singapore Ballet.

during its fledgling years; and although Choo San died prematurely, he was, and continues to be, spiritually influential, as can be seen by the fact that the company continues to restage his ballets, even till today.

Although the company was founded in the late 1980s, the seeds of the company were planted four decades earlier when Soo Nee followed her ballet teacher to Australia to train at the Francis Scully Ballet School, before moving to London where she auditioned for the highly competitive Royal Ballet School. In her oral history interview with the Oral History Centre, she recalled strongly the exhilaration then. "It was very exciting for me because the training is very intensive," she said, "and I like[d] it very much."<sup>2</sup>

When Soo Nee returned to Singapore in 1958, she founded the Singapore Ballet Academy (SBA) with local dance aficionados Vernon Martinez and Frances Poh. It soon became the home for Singapore's aspiring dancers, including Soo Nee's younger siblings.

The SBA soon gained a reputation as an excellent dance school, but its dancers faced a dilemma: as Singapore did not have a local professional dance company, any student who developed a deeper interest in dance had to go abroad for further studies or to pursue a career in dance, as Soo Nee herself had done.

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That was also what her younger sister Soo Khim did, or at least tried to do. Soo Khim trained at the SBA from 1958 and then at the Australian Ballet School in Melbourne from 1964.<sup>3</sup> Like Soo Nee at the Francis Scully Ballet School, Soo Khim was the only Asian student at the all-white Australian Ballet School.<sup>4</sup> She had dreamt of a professional dance career in Australia, but faced discrimination there due to her ethnicity.<sup>5</sup> Ballet, as a professional industry, had always favoured homogeneity, with a penchant for Caucasian dancers.<sup>6</sup>

After graduating in 1966, Soo Khim returned to Singapore and joined her sister Soo Nee as a principal trainer at the SBA. When Soo Nee emigrated to Canada, Soo Khim took over the reins as director and principal in 1971.<sup>7</sup>



(Above) From left: Goh Choo San, Goh Soo Khim, their mother, Goh Choo Chiat and Goh Soo Nee. Courtesy of Goh Soo Khim.

(Below) *Beginnings*, choreographed by Goh Choo San, is the first ballet ever performed by the Singapore Dance Theatre, 1988. It is an intimate quartet exploring the relationship between two couples. Courtesy of Singapore Ballet.

At one point, the third Goh sibling, Choo San, had been hailed by the *New York Times* as “the most sought after choreographer in America”. Beyond being a successful dancer himself, he was also a renowned choreographer to the point that Mikhail Baryshnikov, one of the leading male dancers in the United States and a noted dance director, commissioned Choo San to create a work for him, which premiered in 1981.<sup>8</sup> “From my point of view, he’s one of the few young choreographers who has musical instinct,” recalled Baryshnikov. “He works... with such happiness. He never suffers. He’s very sure.”<sup>9</sup>

Choo San went on to create works for Joffrey Ballet, Houston Ballet, Pennsylvania Ballet, Boston Ballet and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater,<sup>10</sup> before eventually becoming the associate artistic director of the Washington Ballet in 1984.<sup>11</sup>

That same year, Francis Yeoh, founding artistic director of the Singapore National Dance Company, approached Soo Khim and Anthony Then, a dancer and choreographer, to helm the ballet section of the National Dance Company.<sup>12</sup> Inspired by the Washington Ballet – which had performed Choo San’s *In the Glow of the Night* and the internationally acclaimed<sup>13</sup> *Fives* at the 1982 Singapore Festival of Arts – Soo Khim and Then decided to form a company of approximately the same size and artistic vision.<sup>14</sup>

Originally, the plan was that Choo San’s works would provide the foundation of this new company’s repertoire. Fate, however, intervened. On 28 November 1987, Choo San died from an illness. He was only 39.<sup>15</sup>

### Pas De Deux: It Takes Two

In 1987, Soo Khim and Then registered the new company as Singapore Dance Theatre, a name they chose to reflect a wider repertoire for the company, which would range from modern works to classical ballets, and which would include an Asian sensibility. (Soo Khim continued in her role as director of



Janeek Schergen rehearsing with the dancers for *Peter & Blue’s School Holiday*, a ballet for children, 2022. Courtesy of Singapore Ballet.

SBA even after the dance company was set up.) They wanted to develop Singaporean dancers and interest audiences in works with an Asian influence. Goh also felt that the label of “Dance Theatre” provided the freedom to explore and experiment with more diverse works.<sup>16</sup> Choo San’s death had been a severe blow, but the founders decided to go ahead.

Speaking at the official launch of SDT in 1988, Second Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong described the founding of the company as “timely” and said that it was “in line with the Government’s vision to transform Singapore into a cultured society by 1999, and in promoting excellence in the arts. It therefore deserves the support of every citizen”.<sup>17</sup>

### Warming Up to Challenges

The fledgling SDT struggled financially in its initial years. Fortunately, Then and Soo Khim had friends who would help form SDT’s board (though none were particularly familiar with the professional world of dance), and together they were able to secure financial support from fundraisers and government bodies, such as the Ministry of Culture, which disbursed \$70,000.<sup>18</sup>

This amount, however, was not sufficient to secure all their needs, a primary one being a suitable rehearsal space. In the beginning, SDT had to share space with the SBA and schedule its rehearsals only when SBA classes were not in session. The SBA studio was also not properly equipped for rehearsals. *Business Times* journalist Lisa Lee described the scene she had witnessed there in 1988:

“Hey your foot almost hit my face,” says one dancer.

“I’m sorry,” croons her male neighbour in a distinct Filipino accent.

“Well, you can kick him back when we turn around to the other side,” quips another. They laugh.<sup>19</sup>



(Above) Goh Soo Khim (back row, fourth from the left), Anthony Then (back row, fifth from the right) and the dancers of the Singapore Dance Theatre, 1988. Courtesy of Singapore Ballet.

(Top) Janeek Schergen and Goh Choo San at the premiere of *Unknown Territory* by the Washington Ballet, 1986. Courtesy of Singapore Ballet.





Singapore Ballet's performance of Edwaard Liang's *Opus 25* for "Ballet Under the Stars", 2022. Courtesy of Singapore Ballet.

SDT needed a place of its own – and fast. To work, the studio had to be column-free with changing and bathroom facilities. But finding a suitable space was not easy, especially as limited budgets “produced some duds like an old disused warehouse” with columns.<sup>20</sup>

Refurbished barracks at Fort Canning were finally chosen in 1990, although Schergen recalls that the premises were “a bit shabby”.<sup>21</sup> The facilities included three dance studios, a props store and workshop, a wardrobe room and a cafeteria. While the Public Works Department spent \$4.62 million on renovations, SDT paid for the “fitting out of the interior of its part of the building”, which was estimated at \$500,000.<sup>22</sup>

### One of Schergen's initial tasks as a consultant was to help the dancers learn Choo San's ballets, including *Beginnings*, *Momentum* and *Birds of Paradise*.

SDT's new premises paved the way for “Ballet Under the Stars”, first staged at Fort Canning Green in April 1995. Immediately, the inaugural event helped the company reach out to people who had never attended ballet performances and who might have been intimidated by formal theatre settings. Ticket holders were encouraged to bring picnic baskets and mats, and enjoy the ice-cream and popcorn sold at the venue. “Ballet Under the Stars” has been held almost every year since 1995, and is today a well-loved and iconic outdoor dance event enjoyed by all.

Unfortunately, in December that year, the company suffered another major blow when co-founder Then died following an illness. His death, at 51, created another void, which Soo Khim felt profoundly. “I have not only lost a great friend but also a confidant,” she said.<sup>23</sup> With only Soo Khim left at the helm, the company needed assistance.

For help, the company looked abroad, and a number of renowned dancers, teachers and choreographers such as Timothy Gordon, David Peden, Andrea Pell, Maiqui Manosa, Paul de Masson and Edmund Stripe stepped in. They taught the company's daily classes, ran rehearsals and took the repertoire onto the stage.

Although Then and Soo Khim had been able to contribute their own original works – such as *Concerto for VII* (Then), *Schumann Impressions* (Then), *Brahm's Sentiments* (Soo Khim) and *Environmental Phrases* (Soo Khim) – shaping the SDT to be an internationally recognised name required more, not only in terms of the number of dancers and works performed, but also in how the works would shape and create an identity for the company.

In the beginning, SDT did not focus on works that would help define its identity, according to Schergen. Instead, engaging choreographers was more a matter of convenience and availability. At the

time, the pertinent questions asked when appointing a choreographer were “Who was available? Who could they get who was not busy”, rather than “Who could really develop the company?” said Schergen. “The identity of the company is so valuable and so important that you have to know who you are first and then plan to be that,” he said. “The problem with SDT in its early years was that there wasn't a clear idea of where the company was heading.”<sup>24</sup>

It was only after seeing the positive response to a staging of its first full-length classical ballet, *The Nutcracker*, in 1992 and “Ballet Under the Stars” in 1995 that the SDT decided to do more full-length ballets while keeping to an eclectic repertoire. However, this was easier said than done. “None of those things sit comfortably together,” Schergen said. “Are we a classical ballet company that does contemporary work, or are we a contemporary company that does classical work *badly*? What are we? And we're called Singapore Dance Theatre, which isn't a ballet company.”<sup>25</sup>

### Growing by Leaps and Bounds

Although Schergen only officially joined SDT as its assistant artistic director in 2007 (and assumed the role of artistic director one year later), his influence dates to the very founding of the company itself.

Schergen had been involved with the company as a consultant at its inception, training its dancers for their debut performances in 1988. This involvement came as a result of a personal connection; Schergen, a Swedish American, had been a close friend and collaborator of Choo San. “What he said to me...,” Schergen recalled “was ‘Help [Soo Khim] get it started’ so that was my directive.”<sup>26</sup>

Schergen had more than the necessary qualifications: he had been the ballet master for companies such as the Washington Ballet, Royal Swedish Ballet, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre and Norwegian National



Goh Soo Khim registered the Singapore Dance Theatre with Anthony Then in 1987. She trained at the Australian Ballet School in Melbourne, graduating in 1966. Courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay.

Ballet. Schergen had also staged Choo San's works for the SDT between 1988 and 2005, flying in while being based abroad. (Schergen is also the artistic director of the Choo-San Goh & H. Robert Magee Foundation, which oversees the licensing and production of Choo San's ballets.)

One of Schergen's initial tasks as a consultant was to help the dancers learn Choo San's ballets, including *Beginnings*, *Momentum* and *Birds of Paradise*. This was no easy task as his ballets are “marked by a first-rate command of structure and fluency”, as Choo San's obituary in the *New York Times* noted.<sup>27</sup>

To push the dancers, Schergen gave them marginally difficult challenges each time. “[It] was a little bit like you [push] them a little bit harder, they'd meet that, a little bit harder, they'd meet that,” he explained.<sup>28</sup>

It was particularly challenging as some of the dancers in the company in the early years did not have the requisite training. Founding dancer Jamaludin

“Ballet Under the Stars” in 2019 took place over two weekends in July. In the first weekend, three works – *Evening Voices*, *Linea Adora* and *SYNC* – were staged. The second weekend featured highlights from ballets such as *Giselle*, *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker*. Courtesy of Singapore Ballet.





Singapore Ballet's performance of Timothy Rushton's *Evening Voices*, 2023. Photo by Bernie Ng. Courtesy of Singapore Ballet.

Jalil, for instance, had taken up dance as a hobby; he was actually trained as a lawyer. Speaking to the *Straits Times* in 1988, he said: "Before we embarked on this, most of us danced about 12 hours a week. Now we're doing 12 hours in two days."<sup>29</sup>

Flying in regularly as a consultant and guest choreographer allowed Schergen to become familiar with the company and the dancers as he helped them prepare for their performances. But there is only so much that one person can do for a dance company on a part-time basis. Although Choo San had hoped for Schergen to be more involved with the company right from the beginning, enticing Schergen to move to Singapore was a challenge.<sup>30</sup> Schergen's career was soaring abroad, and just before he became the SDT's assistant artistic director in 2007, he had been the ballet master of the Norwegian National Ballet.<sup>31</sup> But when Schergen finally agreed to relocate to Singapore to take up the mantle at SDT, he made sure to run the company right.

Schergen brought with him a wealth of experience in running a ballet company sustainably, from hiring choreographers to fundraising and staging performances. As artistic director, Schergen was (and still is) responsible for daily classes at the company, teaching and rehearsing the company's repertoire. By end 2020, he had commissioned 31 world premieres and launched 19 company premieres. He also developed a suite of outreach and capacity development programmes, including the Ballet Associates Course, The Ambassadors Circle, Scholars Programme, One @ the Ballet, Celebration in Dance, The SDT Choreographic Workshop and The Intensive Ballet Programme.<sup>32</sup>

In 2013, Schergen oversaw SDT's move into spanking new premises at the Bugis+ mall on Victoria Street. Its location within the Bugis arts and cultural district allows the company to further engage the public through its education and outreach programmes.<sup>33</sup>

Most importantly, under Schergen, the company began to address the critical question of whether it

is a classical ballet company that does contemporary works, or a contemporary company that does classical works. Over time, the company began adding more and more full-length classical ballets such as *Giselle* and *Coppélia* to its repertoire. While these were well received by audiences, Schergen knew that the burgeoning emphasis on classical ballet meant that the company's name – Singapore Dance Theatre – was looking increasingly ill-fitting.

The name change in December 2021 was thus long overdue, according to Schergen. "By the time three decades had passed, a confident maturity to SDT was now in place and the company had its own unique identity," he said. "To reflect this and show this confident maturity of the nature of our organisation, a decision has been made to rename ourselves as Singapore Ballet."<sup>34</sup>

## Always En Pointe

In 2023, Singapore Ballet celebrates its 35th anniversary. Among the highlights of its season for the year are "Masterpiece in Motion" in July, which includes Goh Choo San's *Configurations* originally created for Baryshnikov that premiered in 1981, "Ballet Under the Stars" in September and the world premiere of Schergen's *Cinderella* in December.<sup>35</sup> Back in May, the company performed at Our Tampines Hub's Festive Arts Theatre for the first time, stepping not only into the hearts of Singaporeans, but also into the heartlands.

After three and a half decades, Singapore Ballet has become a part of the nation's artistic and cultural spirit. Today, as the company continues to carve out a path for itself, it can look towards its future with hope. Armed with a new-found confidence in its identity, Singapore Ballet is poised to soar to greater heights. ♦



Rehearsing for Timothy Rushton's *Quiver*, 2022. Photo by Chang Zi Min. Courtesy of Singapore Ballet.

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