

# biblioasia

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Pushing  
Boundaries

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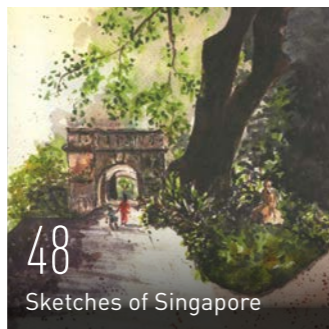
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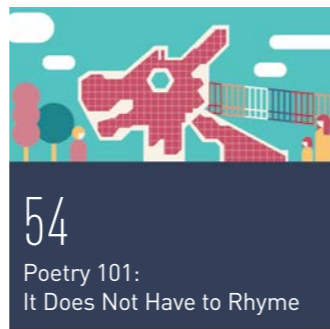
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## Director's Note

Singapore's stellar performance at the 28th Southeast Asia (SEA) Games is proof that our athletes have the guts and gumption to push the boundaries and achieve sporting excellence. Singapore's haul of 259 medals – 84 gold, 73 silver and 102 bronze – which put us in second place at the medal standings behind Thailand – is no mean feat for a tiny nation whose athletes had to compete against the region's elite. Singapore delivered its best showing since the 1993 Games – when it won 164 medals – and in the process broke more than 100 SEA Games as well as many national and personal records.

This issue of *BiblioAsia*, aptly themed "Pushing Boundaries", celebrates the achievements and personal stories of Singaporeans – athletes, entertainers, dancers, civil servants, the ordinary man in the street – especially those who defied the odds and overcame adversity to fulfil their dreams.

Former journalist Chua Chong Jin relives the glory days of some of Singapore's iconic names in sports, such as weightlifter Tan Howe Liang who won a silver at the 1960 Rome Olympics; high-jumper Lloyd Valberg, the first athlete to represent Singapore at the Olympics in 1948; and sprinter C. Kunalan who won five Asian Games and 14 SEA Games medals over the course of his illustrious career. Paralympians Yip Pin Xiu, Laurentia Tan and Theresa Goh are equally recognised for their sporting success.

Similar stories of grit are fleshed out in Han Fook Kwang's feature "Stories We Can Call Our Own". We meet 19-year-old Glenn Phua who has autism, but is an award-winning artist whose works are sold at charity events. We are also introduced to former drug offender Angel Ng who now manages three call centres that hire ex-offenders. These two stories, along with 56 others, are featured in the book entitled *Living the Singapore Story*, commissioned by the National Library Board and launched in May this year.

Performing Arts Librarian Joy Loh writes about the "Mad Chinaman" Dick Lee, who is one of the first entertainers to push the boundaries of popular music by injecting a strong Singaporean identity into his works, while arts reporter Tara Tan profiles five trailblazers of the dance scene who have created a unique Singaporean dance identity.

Long before Bernard Harrison and the Singapore Zoo, Singapore's early zoo pioneers included the likes of Stamford Raffles, who mooted the idea of an animal enclosure within a botanic garden in Singapore; William Lawrence Basapa, whose private zoo in Punggol showcased animals native to the Malay Peninsula and Borneo; and Tong Seng Mun, who started the Singapore Miniature Zoo in Pasir Panjang. Librarian Lim Tin Seng reveals the interesting history of Singapore's early zoos and wildlife parks in his article "All Creatures Great and Small".

Another noted Singaporean from the annals of history is Mohamed Eunos Abdullah. Senior Librarian Mazelan Anuar profiles the man who not only gave his name to the Eunos district in Singapore, but, more importantly, is known as the "Father of Malay Journalism" in the community.

Many Singaporeans are familiar with the Ayam brand of canned sardines but who would have thought that the brand is of French origins? Senior Reference Librarian Timothy Pwee traces the history of the brand from its founding in Singapore in the early 1890s by Frenchman Alfred Clouët.

Our guest columnist in this issue is the best-selling author and noted thinker Parag Khanna, who identifies diplomacy, demography and technology as the three key pillars in achieving the Singapore dream in his op-ed piece "Seizing the Singapore Dream".

While we celebrate Team Singapore's outstanding performance at the SEA Games and the nation's Golden Jubilee, let us not forget the victims of the tragic Sabah earthquake. The National Library Board extends our sincere condolences to the affected families.

**Ms Tay Ai Cheng**  
Deputy Chief Executive  
National Library Board

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**On the cover:**  
Singapore's first woman Olympian Tang Pui Wah (Helsinki, 1952). *Photo courtesy of Sport Singapore.* See story on page 4.

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For generations, people around the world aspired to emulate the "American Dream". This fundamental ethos connotes freedom, equal opportunity and upward mobility. As the post-Cold War world became a geopolitical marketplace, however, others have begun to articulate their own visions for the future.

Soon after the launch of the euro currency, Jeremy Rifkin captured the old world's ambitions for collective resurrection in his book *The European Dream*. In 2013, China's new President Xi Jinping made global headlines by using the phrase "Chinese Dream" in his speech to the National People's Congress. It was an attempt to capture the national drive for sustainable prosperity and national greatness.

But large empires are not the only players entitled to dream. In an age characterised by superpowers and city-states alike, Singapore would benefit greatly from a shared vision for its residents and its role in the world. On the back of the 2012–13 National Conversation sessions, what vision will they offer for Singapore's next decades? How will the insights gained translate into policy? Who will be its ambassadors?

The idea for a China Dream was first developed by the Shanghai-based non-governmental organisation Joint US-China Collaboration on Clean Energy (JUCCCE). This dynamic start-up managed a co-creation process called Dream-in-a-Box involving both officials and citizens. Indeed, even before Xi's speech, the term had spread in China and inspired artists and social entrepreneurs. Beginning with a neutral facilitator, it remains a democratic flowering of ideas and projects.

China's success is not guaranteed, of course. A great many challenges lie ahead as it pursues its global agenda. But that is the point. The dream is something worth striving for. This is a good template for Singapore to follow.

### Political, Economic and Social Glue

At a time when rapid population growth, democratic politics and a slowing economy are fuelling tension, a "Singapore Dream" represents the kind of consensus that will serve as the political, economic and social glue for the future. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has conceded that Singapore is becoming a "normal" country; a new consensus will help maintain the country's extraordinary trajectory.

# SEIZING THE SINGAPORE DREAM

Some of the buzzwords that can bring Singapore to the next level are already widely debated. These include productivity, sustainability, innovation, liveability, diversification and creativity. In terms of infrastructure, a new port is under construction, and a high-speed rail will connect Singapore with Kuala Lumpur in time to come. The MRT network is also expanding, fibre-optic coverage is nearly complete, and Jurong Island is being upgraded. There are also new commercial hubs under development from Jurong to Seletar.

On the softer side, health-care coverage is expanding, while new universities and training institutes have been launched. The housing market is also being refocused on access for the majority, and a reformulated social contract is being devised to bridge inequalities.

All of this is laudable and necessary, yet bold decisions still have to be made: What strategic sectors can generate large-scale employment in the next economic master plan? Should there be a minimum wage? What is the most appropriate immigration policy? Which additional protections and services are immediately necessary for the retired and elderly? What should be the obligations of Singapore's many wealthy foreign residents?

Answering these highly political yet socially fundamental questions is essential to achieving the Singapore Dream.

To my mind, there are at least three fundamental pillars that should be pursued.

### Importance of Diplomacy

The first pillar is diplomatic. Singapore must be seen as the capital of Asia. Switzerland, Singapore's counterpart in Europe, has deftly used neutrality to thrive as a functioning democracy for more than 700 years.

There is no doubt that Singapore is Asean's beacon, but for 30 years it has also been China's. The coming decades will be different. Singapore no longer holds iconic status in China's eyes. China has already studied Singapore thoroughly and now has many friends, investors and mentors. This puts a premium on the diplomacy of multi-alignment in which Singapore must continue to attract and build strong relationships in all directions more cleverly than far larger nations.

Singapore will have ample opportunities to prove itself. These include spearheading commercial strategies across the region, helping to resolve the South China Sea dispute and hosting a potential Asian central bank to coordinate currencies. Nobody will bestow the title "Capital of Asia" on Singapore; it must seize it.

### Demography and Global City

The second pillar is demographic. Being the diplomatic heart for half the world's population is possible only if Singapore embraces the responsibilities of being a global city as well.

New York and London are multinational melting pots in addition to being global

What does it take to achieve the Singapore Dream? **Parag Khanna** identifies three important pillars – diplomacy, demography and technology.

**Parag Khanna** is director of Hybrid Reality, a senior fellow of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs and an adjunct professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. He is author of *The Second World* (2008) and *How To Run The World* (2011), and co-author of *Hybrid Reality* (2012).

At a time when rapid population growth, democratic politics and a slowing economy are fuelling tension, a "Singapore Dream" represents the kind of consensus that will serve as the political, economic and social glue for the future.

financial centres. Singapore in fact has an even higher percentage of foreign-born residents, ranking only behind cities like Dubai and Toronto. Dubai is already a place with far more international residents than domestic citizens, that is, people who have voluntarily moved there and planted roots.

Singapore is undeniably Asia's premier destination for a high quality of life. It also seems certain that it will reach a population of about eight million people in a generation, at least half of whom will be non-Singaporean. Rather than struggle against this trend, Singapore should embrace it and build for it.

Indeed, this means it could pioneer a model of stakeholderism beyond citizenship that confers obligations on all residents irrespective of their national origin. Then Singapore would truly be a leading

global city, a microcosm of global society with a sense of unity despite diversity.

### A Generative City

The third pillar involves Singapore becoming the world's most generative city. This means leveraging on technology to promote innovation, sustainability and inclusiveness. The sensor networks being deployed in Singapore will eventually constitute an "Internet of Things" that manages traffic and buildings to reduce energy use and emissions, potentially even allowing for an island-wide driverless car network.

But there is also the "Internet of People" emerging by which we can geo-locate potential professional partners and tap the expertise of others far more efficiently. Enabling widespread people-centric networks

will become even more critical as rates of telecommuting increase in the coming years. Broadband connectivity is becoming universal and Singapore's towns are becoming larger and more robust full-service, mixed-use communities. In a generative city, citizen-citizen and citizen-government relations are mediated equally by data and democracy.

Singapore is widely praised for being a "living lab". It is using itself as the site for grand experiments still unfolding at the intersection of technology and governance. It is an open economy in a hyper-competitive market and has a delicate balance between domestic and foreign stakeholders. Let us not forget, however, that as evidence is gathered, experiments yield results and conclusions.

Singapore became what it is today through big and risky initiatives but, equally importantly, through bold decisions. Decisiveness is the difference between policy and mere politics, between professionalism and populism. Singapore cannot sacrifice the former for the latter. America has done this, and the result has been an erosion of the American Dream.

The National Conversation in 2012 was a productive start. But it has brought Singapore only to the midpoint. Between then and Singapore's 50th birthday in August 2015, everyone associated with Singapore should deliberate and develop their own Singapore Dream. ♦

This article was first published in *The Straits Times* on 7 August 2013. © Parag Khanna. Reprinted with permission.

# SINGAPORE'S SPORTING GREATS

**Chua Chong Jin** recalls the glory and achievements of some of Singapore's greatest athletes.

**W**ho first put Singapore on the world's swimming map? For most Singaporeans, the obvious answer would be Ang Peng Siong. Ang created a sensation when he became the world's fastest swimmer in 1982 after clocking 22.69 seconds in the men's 50-metre freestyle event at the United States Swimming Championships in Indianapolis that year.

## Olympian Feats

In reality, just as the legendary Ang paved the way for today's stars like Joseph Schooling and Tao Li, he was riding on an earlier wave created by someone almost unheard of today – Singapore's original "Flying Fish" Neo Chwee Kok. Born here in 1931 and raised in Pulau Sambu, Indonesia, Neo started competing for Singapore in 1947.

Neo's big breakthrough was at the 1951 Asian Games in New Delhi where he clinched four gold medals. The "Freestyle King" then competed in the 1952 Helsinki Olympics. By 1953, he was already widely regarded as among the world's best. This was evident in 1954 when he took part in

a 100-metre freestyle race in Singapore, narrowly losing to Australian star Jon Henricks, who later went on to clinch gold at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics.

For sports fans of Neo's generation, his star appeal was evident: in those media-starved days, it was affirmed by an enduring image – a picture of him shaking hands with the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, as the latter paid homage to the Singapore contingent during the Asian Games in New Delhi.

Neo was but one of the pioneers of Singapore sports who left their indelible mark at a time when institutional support was practically non-existent. There were others like him. Leading the way was weightlifter Tan Howe Liang who won a much-coveted silver medal at the 1960 Rome Olympics. It would take another 48 years before Singapore's women's table tennis team clinched a silver medal at the 2008 Beijing Olympics – a telling detail reflecting the rarity and magnitude of Tan's feat, which he achieved under most unfavourable circumstances.

His was a poignant story about how a boy from Swatow, China, and then Chinatown,

Singapore, made good on the international stage. Competing in the lightweight category in Rome, Tan – suffering cramps and writhing in agony – defied doctors' advice to quit. Instead, he persevered and was rewarded with a silver medal – behind Russia's Viktor Bushuyev but ahead of Iraq's Abdul Wahid Aziz. Tan – who had made personal sacrifices without expectations of reward in an era when athletes pursued sports purely out of passion – was a true sports hero of his time.

In track and field, athletes like high-jumper Lloyd Valberg and hurdler Ng Liang Chiang led the way with their pioneering spirit. As the world emerged from the ashes of World War II, Valberg carved his own little history by representing Singapore – not yet a nation and still a crown colony under British rule – at the 1948 London Olympics. The firefighter with his trademark goatee had to make do without a coach or proper equipment but nothing could take away his pride as he competed against the world's best at Wembley Stadium. Although Valberg did not have a podium finish, he holds the distinction of being the first athlete to represent Singapore at the Olympics.

Ng made an impact at the 1951 Asian Games in New Delhi, India, winning gold in the 110-metre hurdles and bronze in the 400-metre hurdles. When he mounted the winners' rostrum, the Indians – who had



earlier rejoiced with him following his success – booed him off the track. Fortunately, it wasn't personal. Apparently, the organisers had played "God Save The Queen", the British national anthem. Clearly this didn't go down well with the patriotic locals who had just gained independence from colonial rule. Such were the rough and tumble ways of the sporting community emerging in this part of the world then.

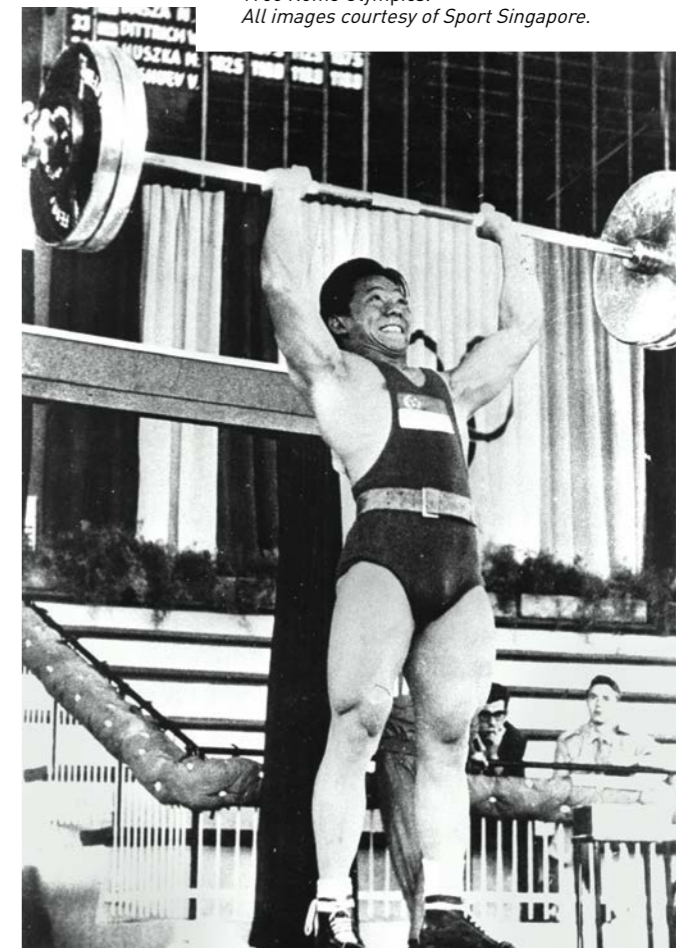
Not to be left out, Tang Pui Wah made a compelling case for female athletes. The daughter of a soya sauce maker and his wife, Tang became Singapore's first woman Olympian when she competed in the 100-metre sprint and 80-metre hurdles at the 1952 games in Helsinki, Finland. The cold weather, huge crowds, unfamiliar track and lack of proper coaching worked against her in this international setting and she did not do as well as she had hoped. Still, competing at a time when most girls stayed away from sports, the Asian Games bronze medallist

**(Left)** High-jumper Lloyd Valberg was the first athlete to represent Singapore at the Olympics – the 1948 London games.

**(Below Left)** Singapore's "Flying Fish" Neo Chwee Kok won four gold medals at the 1951 Asian Games held in New Delhi.

**(Below)** Weightlifter Tan Howe Liang won Singapore's first Olympic medal, a silver, at the 1960 Rome Olympics.

*All images courtesy of Sport Singapore.*



was a pioneer and role model for aspiring sportswomen, alongside sprinters Mary Klass and Janet Jesudason who took part in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics.

### The 1940s and 1950s: Athletes Par Excellence

These prominent examples aside, the 1940s and 1950s also yielded some of Singapore's most colourful sports personalities. In football, there were goalkeeper Chu Chee Seng – who was renowned for his reflexes and agility – and Chia Boon Leong, a crafty midfielder nicknamed "Twinkle Toes" famous for his dribbling and passing. They were the driving force behind the Singapore team that won the Malaya Cup for three years in succession: in 1950, 1951 and 1952.

Badminton produced the indomitable Wong Peng Soon, arguably Singapore's greatest athlete. In 1950, the fierce competitor known for his court craft and graceful footwork became the first Asian to win the All-England Championships, and repeated the feat in 1951, 1952 and 1955. He was also a member of the victorious Malayan Thomas Cup teams of 1949, 1952 and 1955. Disciplined and meticulous, Wong was an athlete ahead of his time – a professional who did not let success get to his head. During the arduous 28-day steamship journey to the 1949 Thomas Cup tournament in Preston, England, for example, he and his teammates found ways to maintain their fitness by training on board the ship.

In water polo, there were the Tan brothers – Eng Chai, Eng Bock and Eng Liang. Their story began in the 1930s with their father Tan Wee Hong, who lived near Pasir Panjang and joined the now-defunct Tiger Swimming Club where he played water polo. For Eng Bock and Eng Liang, taking part in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics together marked a high point in their sports careers. Eng Liang – who later became Singapore's first Rhodes scholar and earned a doctorate in chemistry from Oxford University – recalls, "From the sweat and tears shed in training, to the glorious moment of marching at the opening ceremony, to the deep friendships made... my memories of Melbourne are truly ones that I will always cherish."

Then there was Singapore's only quadruple athlete Arumugam Vijiaratnam who, between 1946 and 1956, represented the country in football, hockey, cricket and rugby. Guided by a desire to "reach the pinnacle" in whatever he pursued, the former Victoria School boy – who was an early example of someone who balanced sports and studies admirably – also represented Singapore in hockey at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics.

### The 1960s and 1970s: The Golden Age of Sports

The 1960s and 1970s marked the beginning of the nation's fascination with swimming. Much had to do with the phenomenal success of the Chan family. For instance, on 20 April 1965, siblings Alex, Roy and Patricia – the children of legendary swimming coach Chan Ah Kow – made news when they captured 12 out of Singapore's 14 gold medals at the first Malayan Junior Swimming Championships.

Patricia in particular went on to distinguish herself with her amazing exploits in the pool, earning her the nickname "Golden Girl". In all, she won 39 gold medals between 1965 and 1973 over five successive Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games, now known as the SEA Games. Her achievement at the 1965 SEAP Games in Kuala Lumpur as an 11-year-old, where she captured eight gold medals, was especially significant. Her feat, coming only a few months after Singapore's independence, rallied the new citizens together as the national anthem "Majulah Singapura" was sung in the sports arena for the first time.

Patricia also won three silvers and four bronzes at the 1970 Asian Games in Bangkok and swam in two Olympics – Mexico in 1968 and Munich in 1972. Remarkably, she was named Sportswoman of the Year for five consecutive years from 1967 to 1971. The dedication of the Chan family to swimming was legendary – with fascinating stories that captured the imagination of the public, including the playful tale of how the siblings would often climb over the locked gates of the Chinese Swimming Club in Katong for their pre-dawn training.

Following in the footsteps of Patricia were sisters Elaine and Junie Sng, daughters of an artist and a teacher. Junie, a former

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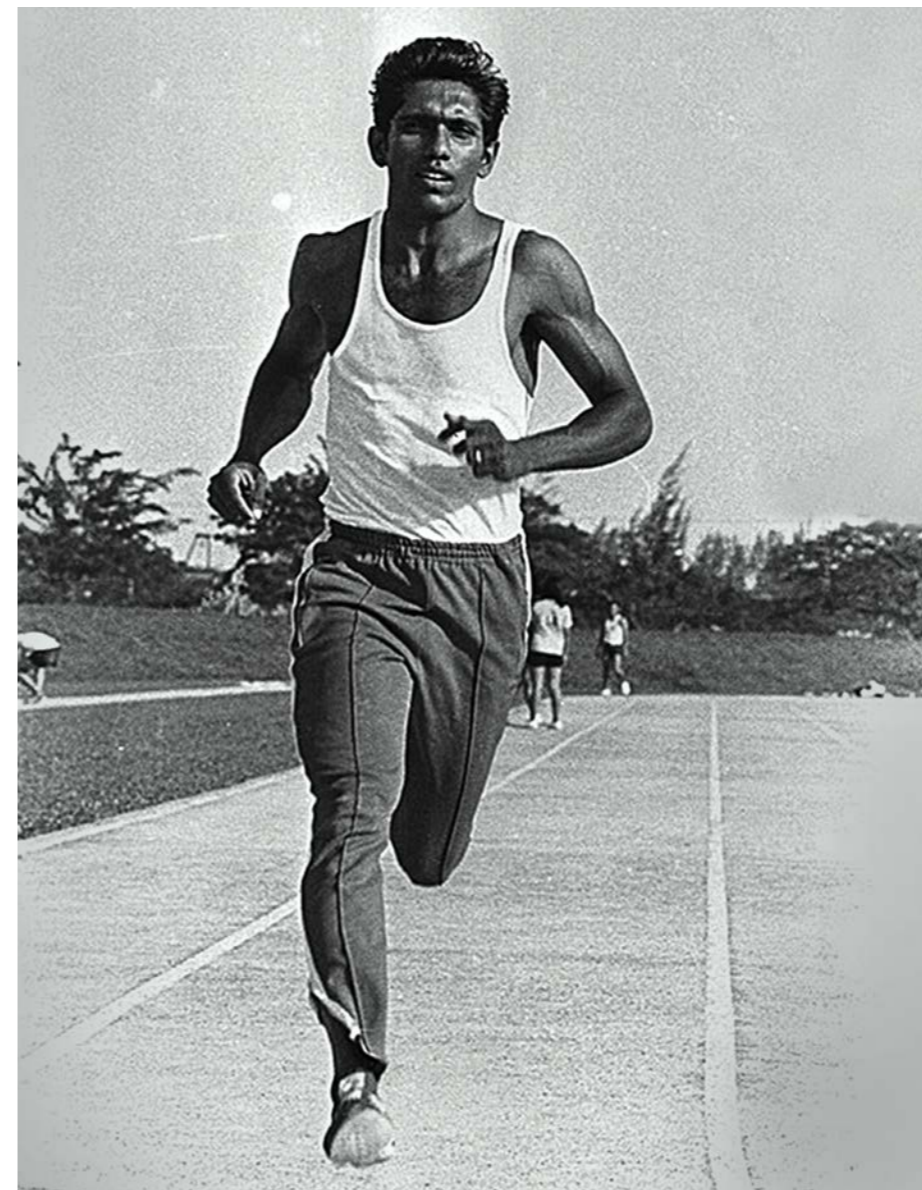
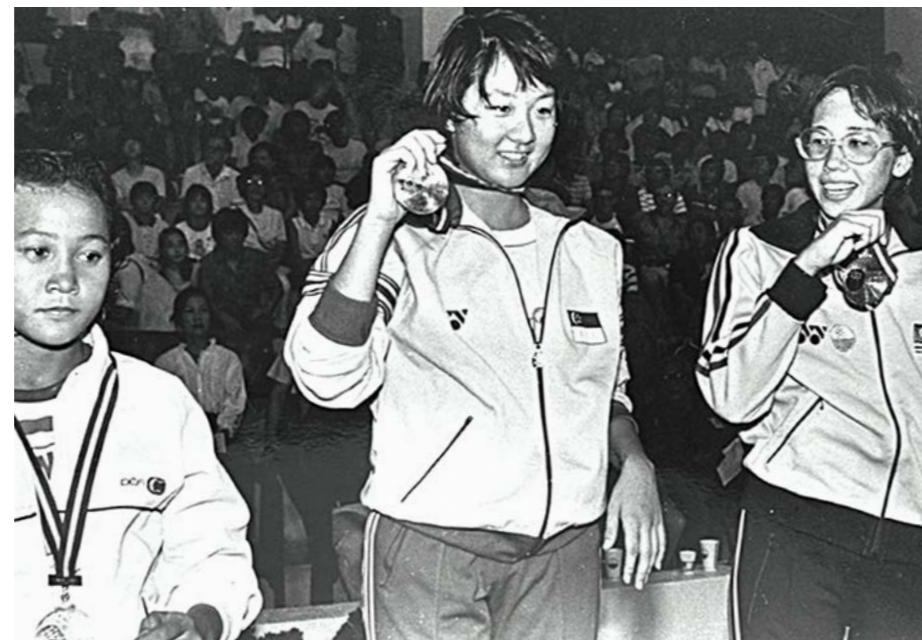
**(Top)** K. Jayamani won gold in the 1983 Southeast Asian Games marathon held in Singapore. *Courtesy of Singapore National Olympic Council, image by Danny Toh from the book 50est: Stirring Stories For The Singapore Soul.*

**(Bottom)** C. Kunalan (1970s). He won five Asian Games and 14 SEA Games medals in a career spanning over a few decades. *Courtesy of Sport Singapore.*

#### (This page)

**(Below)** Shuttler Wong Peng Soon was the first Asian to win the All-England Championships in 1950. *Courtesy of Sport Singapore.*

**(Bottom)** "Golden Girl" Junie Sng won 38 Southeast Asian Games gold medals over the course of her swimming career. *Courtesy of Sport Singapore.*



student of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus at Victoria Street, took the term "Golden Girl" to a whole new level, winning two gold medals at the 1978 Asian Games in Bangkok. In the 400-metre freestyle, she clocked 4:31.50 to edge out Japan's Kano Kamo (4:32.86) and Thailand's Rachaneewan Bulakul (4:34.08). In another blow to the mighty Japanese team, she then took the 800-metre freestyle title, clocking 9:18.33 to beat Kamo (9:22.48) and her teammate Megumi Tochiwara (9:29.43). In total, Junie – adored as much for her girl-next-door appeal as for her success in the pool – won 38 SEA Games golds, leaving her indelible mark as one of Singapore's iconic names in sports.

The 1960s and 1970s were also the age of supremacy in local athletics, with C. Kunalan, Chee Swee Lee and K. Jayamani giving Singapore some of its finest sporting moments. Kunalan just missed winning gold in the men's 100-metre sprint at the 1966 Asian Games in Bangkok as he was edged out by Malaysia's M. Jegathesan in a photo-finish. In all, he won five Asian Games and 14 SEA Games medals in a career spanning over a few decades.

Trained by coach Patrick Zehnder, Chee delivered one of the most spectacular performances in the history of local athletics to win the gold medal in the women's 400-metre race at the 1974 Asian Games in Tehran, Iran. She set a new games record with her time of 55.08 seconds and became the first Singaporean woman to win an athletics gold at the games.

Jayamani achieved SEA Games success in distance running but part of the interest in her story stemmed from the unique, heartwarming relationship she had with her coach Maurice Nicholas and his family. Jayamani recalls, "Maurice often went beyond the duties of a conventional coach to embrace me as family. When I stayed with the family, his wife Elizabeth would treat me as her own daughter. Although she was sometimes strict with me, she showered me with lots of care. She would cook meals like her famous herbal chicken for me to ensure I had the proper nutrition to keep up with the harsh demands of training. I also formed a close bond with their daughters, Michelle and Sharon. They were like family to me." Indeed, this was an era when coaches often went way beyond their roles as coaches to become mentor, friend and even parent to some of their charges.

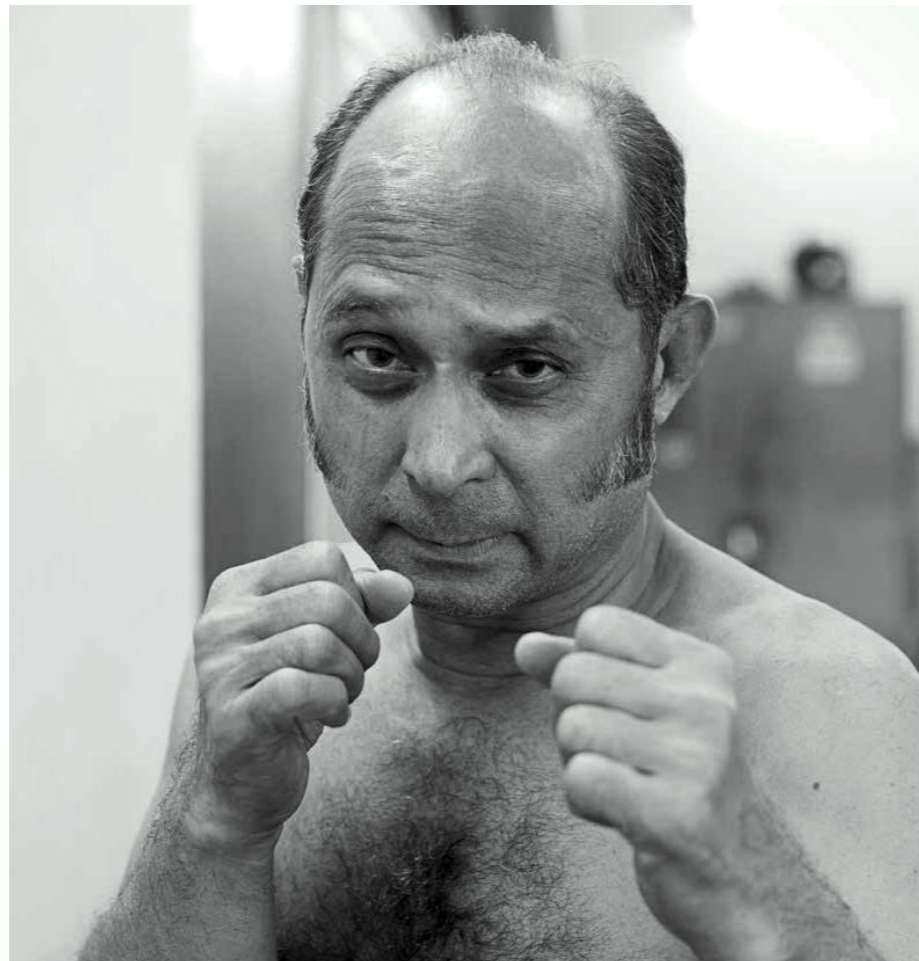
Other athletes who made their mark during this "Golden Era" included distance runner P. C. Suppiah, who famously ran without shoes at the 1972 Munich Olympics; high-jumper Noor Azhar Hamid; sprinters Glory Barnabas and Yeo Kian Chye; and hurdlers Heather Siddons and Osman Merican.

For this entire generation of athletes, sports was a passionate pursuit undertaken without expectation of reward. If there were returns, they were not the monetary kind that today's athletes enjoy. For instance, Osman Merican remembers with immense pride a signed letter he received from former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew when he returned from the 1965 SEAP Games in Kuala Lumpur with three medals. In the letter, Lee, praising the former police constable, wrote, "I would like you to know that your performance brought into focus the qualities of discipline, stamina and talent which will enable the people of Singapore to overcome so many of their present difficulties and secure our future as a nation." Given the uncertainty of the times following Singapore's separation from Malaysia just months earlier that year, this was especially significant. Even then, the role of sports as a unifying force for a disparate people taking modest steps towards true nationhood could be felt.

The 1970s was also a time when other sports started to make their mark. Boxing, for instance, had a worthy ambassador in Syed Abdul Kadir. Growing up watching boxing telecasts on television, the former St Andrew's School student was fascinated with images of American heavyweight boxer Joe Louis raising his arms in victory. A love affair with boxing started and it took Kadir – a gold medallist at the 1971 SEAP Games – all the way to the 1972 Munich Olympics. There, a sensational victory over an Italian boxer was followed by a defeat against a Cuban adversary in a match that left Kadir reeling with a gash on the side of his head. Undeterred, he put the disappointment behind him, kept going and was subsequently rewarded with a bronze medal at the 1974 Commonwealth Games in New Zealand.

Bowling too started to gain popularity, with the likes of Henry Tan and Adeline Wee giving it a boost with their international success. Tan, for instance, won silver medals at the 1970 World Cup in Copenhagen and the 1975 World FIQ Championships in London, where he also set a then-world record high game of 298. These achievements earned him the Sportsman of the Year award twice – in 1971 and 1976. No mean feat for someone who, due to financial constraints, could not afford the fees at the now-defunct Jackie's Bowl at

**(Above Right)** Growing up, Syed Abdul Kadir was inspired by American heavyweight boxer Joe Louis. He won a bronze medal at the 1974 New Zealand Commonwealth Games. *National Library Board.*  
**(Right)** Singapore's most famous footballer Fandi Ahmad scored the winning goal that resulted in Singapore winning the Malaysia Cup in 1980. *Courtesy of Singapore National Olympic Council, image by Danny Toh from the book 50est: Stirring Stories For The Singapore Soul.*



Ang Peng Siong clocked the world's fastest time for the men's 50-metre freestyle event at the United States Swimming Championships at Indianapolis in 1982. *Courtesy of Singapore National Olympic Council, image by Danny Toh from the book 50est: Stirring Stories For The Singapore Soul.*

Orchard and had to improvise and make do with the humble cement factory where he worked as his training ground. Among other things, Tan had made his own ball and drew arrows in an open area of the factory to mimic a bowling lane.

### The 1980s: The "Kallang Roar"

The momentum continued into the 1980s, with Adeline Wee clinching gold in the Ladies' Masters at the 1985 World Games in London. Memorably, she was treated to a grand homecoming when a Rolls Royce chauffeured her from Changi Airport to Kallang Bowl for a rousing reception – a reflection of bowling's increasing appeal as a sport even though there were some who questioned its lack of physical exertion compared to more traditional sports. The warm welcome for this sports heroine and others like her was also a telling, heartening sign of how a nation, long obsessed with just academic and career excellence, was slowly but surely coming to terms with sporting glory.

Another lesser-known sport quick to make its mark on the sporting landscape in Singapore in the 1980s was squash. With

players like Zainal Abidin and Peter Hill, the Republic proved that it was a force to be reckoned with, finishing an impressive sixth at the 1985 World Team Championships in Cairo, Egypt.

Making a revival of sorts was men's swimming, with Ang Peng Siong and David Lim taking the sport to dazzling heights. Famously, Ang clocked the world's fastest time in 1982 for the men's 50-metre freestyle event. That year, he also won gold for the 100-metre freestyle at the Asian Games in New Delhi. This was followed by his win in the consolation final of the 100-metre freestyle at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. "Backstroke King" Lim too was making a name for himself with his gold rush at the SEA Games and his credible 14th placing for the men's 100-metre backstroke at the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

In 1983, Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (now MediaCorp) produced the television drama series 《小飞鱼》 ("The Little Flying Fish") which followed the trials of an aspiring teenage swimmer. It was the beginning of an era when the line between sports and entertainment became more blurred as telegenic athletes such as

Ang and Lim came to be viewed as stars in their own right. "Those were thrilling times for Singapore sport. There was a growing sense that people could be drawn to athletes as stars. But first, we had to produce the results," recalls Ang.

Meanwhile, football in Singapore scaled new heights in terms of fan support, with the likes of Dollah Kassim, S. Rajagopal, Quah Kim Song and Mohammad Noh becoming household names. They were famously associated with the euphoria of the "Kallang Roar" and paved the way for the rise of Singapore football's first superstar Fandi Ahmad, whose illustrious career has been much chronicled.

### The 1990s and Beyond: Striving for Professionalism

The dawn of the 1990s brought to the fore two sports in particular – shooting and sailing – even as the likes of swimming, athletics and football continued to enjoy the limelight. Sailing's status received a big boost when Benedict Tan, combining sports and studies as well as career admirably, clinched gold in the 1994 Asian Games in



Feng Tianwei was part of Singapore's women's table tennis team that won a silver medal at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. She clinched bronze in the women's singles at the 2012 London Olympics. *Courtesy of Sport Singapore.*

Hiroshima, Japan. He became a convincing spokesman for the bold belief that Singapore's athletes, defying the nation's cultural bias towards non-sports pursuits, could compete at the highest level if they were disciplined and meticulous in their approach towards excellence. Indeed, the medical doctor's fine example paved the way for many sailors. As a result, sailing in Singapore now enjoys success at the international level. For instance, at the 2014 Youth Olympic Games in Nanjing, China, Bernie Chin and Samantha Yom clinched gold medals, while Colin Cheng performed commendably at the 2012 London Olympics.

Lee Wung Yew – increasingly a force in the regional scene following his debut at the 1985 SEA Games in Bangkok – became shooting's poster boy (and then man) in a career spanning more than two decades. It was a career that would take him to three Olympics, six Asian Games and 11 SEA Games. More significantly, his success led

#### (Top row)

**(Far Left)** Former national sailor Benedict Tan successfully juggled sports and studies, and clinched gold in the 1994 Hiroshima Asian Games. *Courtesy of Singapore National Olympic Council, image by Danny Toh from the book 50est: Stirring Stories For The Singapore Soul.*  
**(Left)** Retired national shooter Lee Wung Yew competed in three Olympics, six Asian Games and 11 Southeast Asian Games. *Courtesy of Singapore National Olympic Council, image by Danny Toh from the book 50est: Stirring Stories For The Singapore Soul.*

#### (Middle Row)

**(Far Left)** National sailor Colin Cheng came in 15th out of 49 boats in the men's Laser event at the 2012 London Olympics. *Courtesy of Singapore National Olympic Council, image by Danny Toh from the book 50est: Stirring Stories For The Singapore Soul.*  
**(Left)** 2014 Asian Games gold medallist Joseph Schooling is arguably the most successful product among our US-based swimmers. *Courtesy of Singapore National Olympic Council, image by Danny Toh from the book 50est: Stirring Stories For The Singapore Soul.*

the way for a new generation of shooters, including today's stars such as Martina Lindsay Veloso and Jasmine Ser. Lee – alongside discus thrower James Wong and swimmer Joscelin Yeo – also made a compelling case for what it meant to stay in competitive shape for the long haul. Wong won 10 SEA Games gold medals [nine in discus and one in hammer throw] between 1993 and 2013, while Yeo hauled a remarkable 40 gold medals, starting with nine at the 1993 SEA Games held in Singapore.

The 1990s and beyond also witnessed the start of a more professional approach towards sports in Singapore. Swimmers such as Mark Chay and Nicholette Teo headed for further education and training in the US in a bid to strike a better balance between sports and studies. Others followed, including Quah Ting Wen and of course 2014 Asian Games gold medallist Joseph Schooling – arguably the most successful product among our US-based swimmers. Also giving swimming a high profile was Tao Li, who won Asian Games gold medals in 2006 and 2010 and, even more impressively, came in fifth in the final of the women's 100-metre butterfly at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Starting with Jin Junhong in the 1990s, table tennis – boosted by the import of foreign talents – rose to a whole new level. With her fourth placing in the women's singles at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, she created a path for the likes of Li Jiawei and Feng Tianwei who eventually won Olympic medals for Singapore. Today, there is still a gap between the city state and major sporting powers but prospects are bright with the import of foreign athletes to complement local stars, investments in infrastructure and talent, monetary incentives for sport-



### Paralympian Winners

On 15 September 2008, the Singapore national anthem was played inside an Olympic arena for the first time. Paralympian Yip Pin Xiu, afflicted by muscular dystrophy since birth, had battled against the odds to win sporting success. Competing in the Beijing Paralympics, she won gold in the 50-metre backstroke in a time of 58.75 seconds.

Equestrian Laurentia Tan developed cerebral palsy and profound deafness after birth. However, that did not stop the gutsy sportswoman from winning a silver and a bronze at the London Paralympics in 2012. For her achievements, Tan became the first disabled athlete to win The Straits Times Athlete of the Year award in 2013.

Together with swimmer Theresa Goh, who suffers from spina bifida but has been making waves with her consistent performances at swimming championships over the years, Yip and Tan have made a compelling statement for Paralympians in Singapore. Like able-bodied athletes, their quest for sporting success is serious business. It demands no less – or perhaps even more – in terms of hard work, devotion, commitment and sacrifice.

The fact that Singapore has embraced the sporting achievements of its Paralympians with as much pride as those of its able-bodied athletes is perhaps an indication of the society it has become. Significantly, when Tan won The Straits Times Athlete of the Year award, she edged out some big names in Singapore sports, including table tennis star Feng Tianwei and world champion bowler Shayna Ng.

#### (In the Box)

**(Top)** Laurentia Tan won a silver and a bronze at the 2012 London Paralympics. *Photo courtesy of Sport Singapore.*

**(Above)** Yip Pin Xiu won the 50-metre backstroke at the 2008 Beijing Paralympics. *Photo courtesy of Sport Singapore.*

ing success in major competitions, better sponsorships and a growing appreciation among people of the role of sports in society. World beaters in sports are no longer a rarity as the city-state seeks a superior standing among nations in the sporting arena – a standing which it hopes will mirror its glowing reputation in other fields that Singapore has thus far excelled in. ♦

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Han Fook Kwang shares some of his favourite stories from Singaporeans as told in *Living The Singapore Story*, a book commemorating the nation's golden jubilee.

# STORIES WE CAN CALL OUR OWN

Han Fook Kwang joined *The Straits Times* in 1989 and became its political editor in 1995. He served as editor of the paper from 2002 to 2012. He is currently Editor-at-large at the newspaper.

What is the Singapore Story?

The answer is not straightforward because different people will have different views of what story they most identify with this country. For some, it might be founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs. That story though is told from his point of view even if he had the advantage of being at the centre of many of the country's most dramatic political events. What of the many other people who might have seen the story differently or have other stories to tell? Do their accounts matter and have a place in the nation's storytelling?

When a group of us at *The Straits Times* were tasked with writing a book to commemorate Singapore's 50th anniversary, we spent much time debating this point.

How do you capture the story of this nation, its achievements and disappointments, the ups and downs, the personal glories and tragedies that are part of any society's history? How do you make sure the story is not one-dimensional but multi-colour and flavourful?

If we had told it the usual way, starting with the political battles with Malaysia, then separation, and the years of nation-building and economic development, we feared it would be an overly familiar story. It would probably also have to be told from the top down, with the leadership taking the limelight.

We decided instead to do it through the stories of ordinary Singaporeans who, through the lives they led and the things they did, told the Singapore story as much as the historical accounts.

It turned out to be a deeply satisfying project because we found a treasure trove of stories, which is not surprising because Singapore has been a very happening place these past 50 years. It is not a dull place which stays put.

In all, we found 58 storytellers from taxi driver to bus captain, teacher, satay man, doctor, scientist, soldier, policeman, athlete, mountain climber, civil servants and many more.

Here are some of my favourites in the book, *Living The Singapore Story*, which was launched on 15 May 2015.

Kopitiam boss Lim Bee Huat started work cleaning tables at coffee shops for \$1 a night. He was so poor he used to eat the food left by people at roadside offerings during the Hungry Ghost Festival. But he worked his way up, starting his first stall at the old Esplanade ground. Today, he owns more than 80 outlets and his staff get a Rolex watch from him when they have worked for more than 10 years.

There is a veteran unionist, Abdul Rahman Mahbob, who, when he was just

starting work in 1966 at the Pasir Panjang power station, saw his fellow workers going on strike for higher pay. He was not part of the strike then but he was so moved by their dedication and courage, he decided to join the union and rose to become president of the Union of Power and Gas Employees. He has seen grown men cry when told they were being retrenched and he recounted how he saved one worker by going directly to the big boss.

Another veteran – policeman Rahman Khan – was shot by Singapore's most famous cop killer, Botak. But the assignment he remembers most vividly to this day was the gruesome body count he had to do after the Greek tanker *Spyros* exploded at Jurong Shipyard, killing 76 workers.

Angel Ng was an angry young woman who was jailed eight times for various drug offences. When she last left her cell, she got a job at a call centre started by the prison authorities under its Yellow Ribbon project. Today, she manages three call centres.

Adam Maniam is a Tamil-Eurasian-Malay-Pakistani lawyer with a Catholic Tamil grandfather and a Eurasian grandmother. His father married a Muslim woman and converted to Islam. The lawyer married a Chinese girl and they decided on a civil marriage. It is a complicated story but very Singaporean.

There are also some not-so-ordinary people in the book.

Lee Khoon Choy was ambassador to Indonesia from 1970 to 1974. It was a tough assignment as Singapore had, in 1968, hanged two Indonesian marines for planting a bomb at MacDonald House which killed three persons. Lee related how a man came to his house in Jakarta and threatened him over what Singapore did.

When Lee asked for a bodyguard, he was told bluntly by then Foreign Minister

S. Rajaratnam: "We are a small country. We cannot afford that."

When J.Y. Pillay started Singapore Airlines, he was told by the Government: "Make it work and don't come back to us for more money. You either survive on your own or fold up." We know which option he chose.

These stories, whether of ordinary people or well known ones, help us better understand the Singapore we call home. Every nation must have these shared memories which the people can identify with and call their own. They strengthen the sense of belonging and identity, often more powerfully than physical landmarks or buildings.

Sometimes, these stories of the past provide comfort and satisfaction: See how far we've come! At other times, they give us greater confidence in the future: That's how it was done before! Whatever they do to you, they are a precious part of who we are. This

is especially important in Singapore which is changing so rapidly, making one generation so different from the next.

Many Singaporeans get upset when old landmarks and places they remember fondly from their childhood are torn down or replaced by new structures. They feel a deep sense of loss to the emotional connection they have with the past. It's the same with these stories.

If we do not find a way of recording and remembering them, it will be like those forgotten buildings, lost forever.

Adam Maniam (standing, left), with wife Yap Cuixian and their daughter Amelia Ri-En, his elder brother Aaron (seated, top) and younger brother Ashraf, together with his father Sydney (right), mother Bibe Zoolaha and maternal great-grandmother Chan Bibi. Adam is a Tamil-Eurasian-Malay-Pakistani lawyer with a Catholic Tamil grandfather and a Eurasian grandmother.





### From Drug Offender to Call Centre Manager

Angel Ng, 50, was in and out of jail for drug offences between 1982 and 2008. She now manages three call centres which hire ex-offenders.

Being in and out of jail so many times since I was 17 did not scare me off prison life. Being in prison was no big deal; some prisoners wanted to return to prison because they found that better than having to face society.

In 1994, two weeks after I gave birth to my only child, Valerie, I was jailed yet again. I'm aggressive and argumentative by nature and I always had the spirit of *buay sai see* (must not die in Hokkien).

But this time, I had post-natal depression, missed my baby and was worried about how my mother, who'd just been told she had cervical cancer, would cope with bringing up Valerie. I thought: "I've been such a burden to

my mother, and I can't change. It's best to end it all." I took a metal spike from the toilet brush and cut my wrists... The wardens saved me.

But I was still not motivated to change my ways. I just wanted to damage myself completely because I had a deep anger against the world for being unwanted at birth. While in prison, at the age of 33, I studied for the O levels and scored five straight A1s in subjects like English literature and history.

In 2003, when I was 38 and had started serving my longest-ever prison sentence – 8½ years, later reduced to six years – I began reading books on religion and philosophy from the prison library. Age was catching up with me. I thought: "I can't keep living like this."

The following year, I learnt that the prison authorities were starting Southeast Asia's first prison call centre, as part of the Yellow Ribbon Project that had just been set up to help ex-offenders find jobs to re-

integrate into society. I wanted to work there because it was a white-collar job for which I had to use only my voice, and not my appearance. So I'd be able to work till I was very old.

I was released from my last prison term on 11 November 2008. A week later, I began working at call centre Connect Centre's headquarters. It's been a big learning experience and it has taken me to new places.

Most newly released ex-offenders have no money, so Connect gives them \$10 a day for meals until they get their first month's pay of about \$1,000. They need to stay focused by holding a steady job because that disciplines and stabilises them.

Angel Ng oversees more than 50 employees, many of them ex-offenders, at Connect Centre. It trains former inmates at its three call centres so they have a chance at holding down steady jobs and re-integrating into society.



### Made in Singapore: Asia's First Test-tube Baby

Despite his unusual beginnings, Samuel Lee, 32, says he's just an average Singaporean.

My friends used to tease me when we were children: "You're man-made!" I would laugh it off, but when I think about it, they were right.

I was the first test-tube baby born in Asia on 19 May 1983. My father was 21 and my mother 19 when they married in 1976. They tried to conceive, but with no luck until 1982, when they took part in a clinical trial

under Professor S. S. Ratnam and Professor Ng Soon Chye. Although doctors implanted embryos in eight women, I was the only success.

I was born to great media attention, which made my parents uncomfortable. We were ordinary Singaporeans living in a three-room flat in Woodlands. My father was a security supervisor and my mother a secretary. Thankfully, the in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) was subsidised, and thus affordable to them.

My birth might have been considered extraordinary, but I was raised like any ordinary Singaporean. I got my first inkling that I was somehow different

from other kids when I heard other people referring to me as a test-tube baby when I was four or five. I asked my parents about it, and they just gave me a simple explanation of how I came about. I used to ask my parents for a sibling. They'd laugh and tell me it was a very difficult request to fulfil. It was only when I was older – around 13 – that I understood why and realised what my birth really meant.

The late Prof Ratnam gave me the name Samuel. I don't know why. We did not really stay in touch after my birth. But I do e-mail and text Prof Ng occasionally. Without them, there wouldn't have been me.

You could call me an advocate of IVF. I often encourage my friends who are trying to conceive to go for it. I love kids and would definitely want my own. But first, I have to find myself a girlfriend.

Samuel Lee with a projection of a newspaper article marking his birth. He says that, fanfare aside, he grew up an ordinary Singaporean, in a three-room flat in Woodlands, with parents who refused to pamper him with too many toys.



### The Day He Faced a Cop Killer

Abd Rahman Khan Gulap Khan, 65, spent 35 years in the police force – most of them in the Criminal Investigation Department.

The worst pain I ever felt in my life was on the night that I got shot. Not from the bullet, but from the tetanus jab I had to get later in the hospital. I couldn't sleep on my buttocks for three days.

I was shot by this guy we called the "Cop Killer" in 1973. He shot and killed a detective over a minor traffic accident and the whole police force was searching for him. The breakthrough came from a robber who told us that among the most notorious robbers at that time, the one most likely to engage with police was this man known as Botak.

We managed to trace him to Cavenagh Road Apartments and used a ruse to get him out. When he came running out, a colleague put him in a

headlock, but Botak had already pulled out a gun. I grabbed hold of the gun, a stolen police revolver, and he fired two rounds which burned my palm. A third shot grazed my stomach. We couldn't subdue him, so my colleague shot him twice in the arm, but Botak still wouldn't drop his weapon. Then other colleagues rushed in, and one fired a shot that I felt go past my ear, which hit Botak in the head.

Then there was the disaster in 1978, when the Greek tanker *Spyros* exploded at Jurong Shipyard. We spent one solid week in the mortuary, which had only a few refrigerated compartments in which to keep bodies. But we had 76 bodies, and had to leave them lying around on the floor to decompose.

I remember we were eating *nasi briyani* at an operating table with bodies on the floor. We had to take our food there as we couldn't leave, as we were waiting for people to come in to identify the bodies, and every hour the body changes because

of decomposition. After that, I had to throw away all the clothes I was wearing, including my undergarments, shoes, everything, because it all stank. Even a few days after we were done, when I sat in the bus, people were still holding their noses, because the smell sticks to your skin. You bathe with Dettol, you wash your hair, the stink is still there.

Veteran police officer Abd Rahman Khan Gulap Khan was at the front line of several major investigations.





Rosie Ang at her company's car showroom at Ngee Ann City Building on Orchard Road in the 1960s. It was one of several showrooms in the area then. *Courtesy of Rosie Ang.*

### I Sold Cars to Presidents

Singapore's first car saleswoman Rosie Ang, 77, took on a man's job and stayed 53 years.

President Benjamin Sheares summoned me to the Istana after my boss sold him a car in the early 1970s. He said: "Rosie, you tell your boss to please rectify the problem because the car keeps stalling." But I didn't mind being scolded because I got to see his office at the Istana – so nice!

Mr Sheares was not the only president I met in my career. Asia Motor, which I joined in 1958, also sold a Peugeot to our first president, Yusof Ishak. I delivered the car to him at the Istana too.

When I left school, I saw an advertisement for a sales representative at Asia Motor. I was 20 then and already into cars. I had passed my driving test the year before. The person who interviewed me asked if I knew about car engines. I said: "If you give me a chance, I can learn. I also love to meet people, I love to talk, I like to move around, and I drive." I got the job.

My colleagues, all men, were sceptical. After all, I was the first

veteran car saleswoman Rosie Ang, 77, started out in the business when she was 20. Her working hours were long, but her hard work paid off, and she had plenty of referrals. She even delivered a car to Singapore's first president, Yusof Ishak.

woman car sales rep in Singapore. They were polite but didn't really teach me how to sell. Since I was new and didn't have my own pool of customers, I couldn't sit in the showroom and wait for people to come. So I went out to canvass for sales in the diesel Peugeot 403 that the company provided. In my high heels – never court shoes – I drove everywhere, even to muddy areas in Jurong.

My basic pay was \$150 a month. It was OK, because back then \$500 could feed a family. My days were long, but my hard work paid off. Being a woman also helped, as some customers may have pitied me. My average (sales) were four new cars and four used cars a month, which compared favourably with my colleagues.

In 1964, we brought in Mazda, but people didn't trust a Japanese make. They would say, "That's just a Milo tin." But the car proved to be reliable and sales soared. I once sold 20 cars at one time to a customer and his friends.

I still love cars and will spend more than an hour washing my daughter's car. The only part I don't clean is the engine – I don't want to dirty my nails!

### A Voice for the Less Advantaged

Dr Kanwaljit Soin, 73, was the first woman Nominated MP and stood out not only for her suggestions but also for asking tough questions in Parliament.

When the papers reported in 1992 that the government was looking for a new batch of Nominated MPs, many people were excited. I was president of the Association of Women for Action and Research at that time, so I rang up a few women and said: "Please apply." They all said no. I then decided I had no moral right to persuade them to do something I wasn't doing myself. So I applied, even though I had no idea what a parliamentarian did.

When I met civil servants, they would tell me: "Do you know, every time you ask a question, it costs the civil service money? We have to do research to answer it." But that meant I got a lot of statistics from the government, because it had to reply to me.

If there's one thing Parliament taught me, it's that if you want to be in any area of policymaking, it's important to get the statistics right.

If the statistics are wrong, you get shot down and the rest of what you're trying to say gets lost.

What I really consider my biggest achievement was moving the Family Violence Bill in 1995. Even though it was defeated then, many of its provisions were subsequently incorporated into the Women's Charter.

Two things I suggested in Parliament have become a reality: I wanted an educational (Edusave) account set up for every adult Singaporean, and a medical savings account set up for every elderly Singaporean. So 20 years down the line, both my dreams have been fulfilled by the SkillsFuture Credit scheme and the Pioneer Generation Package.

When you look at society in general, business, government and civil society are the three legs of the stool, but it's only recently that policymakers in Singapore have realised that it's prudent to include civil society in decision-making. If the stakeholders are just business and government, they sometimes don't see the point of view of the rest of society, especially the disadvantaged.

There are a lot of Singaporeans who haven't done as well as the country's indicators seem to suggest. They still need people to advocate for them, highlight their difficulties, and try to make it such that more people get a share of the pie.

I feel in particular for the elderly. They are poorer in general, and things like the Silver Support Scheme and the Pioneer Generation Package are just the beginning. We can still do better – we need to give them some autonomy and dignity. We retire way too early in Singapore. Even when I was in Parliament, we were talking about moving it up to 67. Why hasn't it changed yet? Why is there even a retirement age at all? Older people have institutional memory, they have built networks and they are loyal to organisations.

People should be allowed to work for as long as they think they can, and as long as their employer finds them producing good work.

Singapore's first woman Nominated MP Kanwaljit Soin says moving the Family Violence Bill in 1995 was her biggest achievement.



### Do You Know the Satay Man? He's Moved

Ngalirdjo Mungin, 94, started hawking satay on the streets. He moved to a stall in a food centre in the early 1970s, which is now operated by one of his sons

The first food I started selling in 1945 was Indonesian *kuih*. That was all I knew how to make. But I wanted to sell satay – the problem was, I didn't know how to make it. I was young and too scared to ask anyone, but I stayed in the Sultan Gate area with many other Javanese who sold satay so I would just stand near these other satay-sellers and memorise the ingredients. At first, I copied them, but after a while, I made changes. Many would use hammers to beat the meat to tenderise it, but I learnt to do everything by hand. It took hours to rub the marinade in, but I felt it was better.

Almost every evening, I would walk to Jalan Besar, where there was a football stadium. There were already four or five people selling satay there,

and we all had our unofficial locations. I would go to the back entrance – everyone knew that belonged to me. Eventually, I also started selling satay near the Padang.

At one point, I tried to set up a stall under the Merdeka Bridge, but the Ministry of Health stopped me. I moved into this stall in Sims Place Food Centre in 1973, when the government started asking hawkers to move off the streets. I knew the man in charge of the Sims Place market, and he asked me to set up shop there. By then, everyone in the area knew me, so he convinced me to move there, to make it easier for people to come to one location. It was actually a blessing, because after I moved, I made a lot more. My earnings doubled, then tripled. I could afford to perform the Haj pilgrimage the first year.

I started selling less satay and more of other Malay food. My stall is named after my wife, Kamisah Dadi, who died in 2010. About 10 years ago, I passed the stall on to one of my sons. I'm willing to hand down



At age 94, Ngalirdjo Mungin still goes to his stall, which his son runs now, to check if the quality of the *mee rebus* and *mee soto* is good.

my stall only to my own blood. This place is not about profit. I could easily have sold my dishes for a lot more, but I just looked at the price of meat and vegetables and priced my dishes according to that.

I still come in every day to my stall and eat a bowl of *mee rebus* or *mee soto*. This way I can ensure my son is doing a decent job, that the quality is still good.

### Sometimes You Need More than Prayers

After two heart attacks and more than 60 years as a nurse and midwife, Sister Thomasina Sewell, 81, still keeps patients company every day at the Assisi Hospital and Mount Alvernia Hospital

The Assisi Hospice used to be a convent housing nuns, but we vacated it and refurbished it as a hospice for the terminally ill in 1992. The idea of nursing terminally ill patients is to give them quality of life. The way we care for them changes from how we do so in an acute hospital. We try to make the hospice home for such patients and their families, to help them come to terms with one another.

You cannot allow the sadness to get to you, otherwise you are of no help to patients. But people shouldn't think they have to be trained before they can be with them. Your presence is important because often, their fear is loneliness and that nobody understands what they are going through. That's why

every room in the hospice has a sofa, to encourage family members of patients to stay overnight.

Once, while praying in the Mount Alvernia Hospital chapel, I saw this strapping man in a wheelchair who sobbed and sobbed. I put my hand on his, to let him know I felt for him. Later, I started talking to him in the hospice. He told me he was 40 years old, cycled to work daily and had never smoked or drunk alcohol. Now he had pancreatic cancer and was given three months to live. You can't rely solely on prayer for patients like him. Life is more than prayer for them; it's about helping them deal with the here and now. He and his wife were estranged, and they had a son and daughter aged 12 and 13.

Once, while I was talking to him, a friend of his came by and told him: "Oh, you're going to get better and we'll go cycling again." I was so angry because that was not reality. But I didn't say anything because it's not for me to say anyone is right or wrong. After his friend left, we talked about reality. He was not bitter at all, but worried about

his children as he and his wife weren't close. I told him: "She's still a good mother." His wife turned up eventually and didn't desert him. I put my arms around her to comfort her as she was very upset. I have not got used to losing a patient; how can you? Sometimes I'll be choking back tears at the service but I try to calm myself so I'll be helpful to the families.

Sister Thomasina Sewell is a nun in the Catholic order known as the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood. In 1961, she and 36 other nuns set up Mount Alvernia Hospital.



### My Son, the Award-winning Pathlight Artist

Sales engineer Kelvin Phua, 55, talks about his son Glenn, 19, who has autism and has been dubbed Singapore's Stephen Wiltshire

During Glenn's school holidays in 2010, we found a note in his schoolbag about some art homework he had to submit. It had to be related to F1, and he drew eight cars coming around a race track. We didn't pay much attention to it, except to say "good job". We were just happy he had finished his homework.

A few months later, his school, Pathlight School, called and said: "Your son has won a big prize." We had no idea what this was about, but took leave to attend the ceremony in Raffles Place. Only when we were there did we realise he had won first prize – a set of four F1 grandstand tickets and an opportunity for Glenn to sit in a real F1 car.

We discovered Glenn was autistic when he was four, when he had trouble making eye contact. He attended a mainstream primary school until halfway through Primary 2. We transferred him to Pathlight, which teaches a mainstream curriculum and life skills to children with autism.

After Glenn started attending Pathlight, I attended an anger management class that the school organised. I started trying some of the strategies, and also swapped notes with his teachers about what works for Glenn. We had

a hard time with him, but children with autism are also the most loving.

We didn't actually realise Glenn had this talent. When he was about eight or nine, he drew a lot of cartoons, copying characters from *Peanuts* or *The Simpsons*, and they were very good, but we didn't think much of this, because all children doodle. But since Glenn won the F1 competition, he has drawn more than 150 pictures. He never sketches – he just puts pen to paper and draws.

Glenn's drawings are extremely detailed. He takes about 20 to 25 hours on average with each one. He doesn't draw from memory or on the spot, but always works from a photograph. Glenn doesn't draw from left to right, but he'll jump around the picture. Sometimes I'll watch him working, and I'll see something random, and I'll ask him – is that a mistake? But he'll say: "Daddy, that's my starting point." When he's done with the picture, you'll have no idea where he started.

Member of Parliament Denise Phua, who helped set up Pathlight, called Glenn "the Stephen Wiltshire of Singapore", referring to the famous British artist who has autism.

When Glenn was younger, we would worry about his future. Now, we're definitely more confident. Pathlight recently set up an art gallery for its artists, which also sells works by students who have graduated. It feels like there's a direction for Glenn now, and he can earn a living. ♦

*Living The Singapore Story: Celebrating Our 50 Years 1965–2015* is on sale in bookshops at \$19.65 (GST included). Commissioned by the National Library Board in celebration of Singapore's Jubilee year, it features 58 Singaporeans describing how their lives evolved as Singapore changed over the past half-century. The stories featured on these pages are excerpts from the book.

The team members behind the book, led by *The Straits Times* Editor-at-large Han Fook Kwang, are journalists Angelina Choy, Cheong Suk-Wai and Jennani Durai, former journalist Cassandra Chew and photographer Bryan van der Beek. A 15-member editorial advisory committee was chaired by Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh and the NLB team was led by Francis Dorai, Assistant Director (Publishing).

This article and selected excerpts were first published in *The Sunday Times* on 17 May 2015. © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.

Glenn Phua, see here with his father Kelvin, was found to be autistic when he was four. His artistic talent was discovered when he won an art competition.



# the Art of Movement

## Dance on the Singapore stage



**(Facing Page)** Dancers from the Singapore Dance Theatre take on contemporary ballet hits such as Finnish choreographer Jorma Elo's *Glow-Stop*. Courtesy of Singapore Dance Theatre.

**Tara Tan** profiles five trailblazers of the Singapore dance scene who have pushed the envelope and created a unique Singaporean dance identity.

*"The strange thing about all these gestures, these angular, sudden, jerky postures, these syncopated inflexions formed at the back of the throat, these musical phrases cut short, the sharded flights, rustling branches, hollow drum sounds, robot creaking, dances of animated puppets, is that: through the maze of gestures, postures, airborne cries, through their gyrations and turns, leaving not even the smallest area of stage space unused, the meaning of a new bodily language no longer based on words but on signs emerges."*

— Antonin Artaud (*The Theatre and its Double: Essays by Antonin Artaud; Translated by Victor Corti, London: Calder Publications, 1970*)

It was in 1931 when influential French director Antonin Artaud sat, enraptured, in a Parisian theatre watching Balinese dancers perform a trance ritual. With their angular postures and purposeful gestures, Artaud described the dancers as "living hieroglyphics". The dance, to him, spoke a language that transcended human speech.

Since the body is its very instrument of expression, dance, by nature, carries with it fluency in cultural and ethnographic affiliations. Just as our psyche is moulded by our environments, our body language is shaped by the socio-political and economic landscapes in which it inhabits. A simple gesture, say, a thumb touching the inside of a middle finger, could carry the same meaning across many diverse Asian cultures – it is often read as a sign for a flower – but not necessarily to Western audiences more accustomed to ballet. Like language,

dance carries its own nuances and symbolism, its own emotional attachments and historical significance.

Singapore, a young nation with layers of multicultural complexity, finds the internal debate manifested in its various art forms. Balancing a duality between Western influence and Asian roots, for instance, is a sociological struggle in post-colonial Singapore, and is a common trope in much of its local art. This is perhaps more evident in a spoken art form like theatre, where even the delivery of lines on stage – whether it be Singlish or "proper English" (typically Anglicised accents peppered with American slang) – can incite debate on nationalism and identity. A similar dialectic, perhaps less publicly discussed, exists within the cultural polemic of dance on the Singapore stage, where the socio-cultural discourse might be silent, but certainly, not invisible.

**Tara Tan** is a writer and designer who works in the intersection between art, design and technology. She was a former arts reporter with *The Straits Times*, where she wrote on dance and culture in Singapore.

### The Language of Dance in Singapore

As a country of immigrants, the roots of dance in Singapore naturally stem from its major ethnic groups – Malay, Chinese, Indian and Eurasian. Dance groups and schools such as Malay folk dance troupe Sriwana and classical Indian dance school Bhaskar Arts Academy were prominent in Singapore's arts and education scene from the 1960s to the 1980s. Some of the most influential dance practitioners at the time included contemporary ballet dancer Goh Lay Kuan, Malay dance doyenne Som Said, classical Indian dancer Santha Bhaskar, and classical ballerina Goh Soo Khim.

The 1990s saw the arrival of an increasingly affluent and cosmopolitan Singapore. At the first annual Festival of Dance (the predecessor to the Singapore Arts Festival) in 1982, arts audiences in Singapore were treated to touring performances by the world's dance greats, including offerings as varied as the Netherlands Dans Theater of the Netherlands, Taiwan's Cloud Gate Dance Theater and the famed Russian ballet troupe, Bolshoi Ballet.

Interest in dance grew, and with it the question: What is the Singaporean dance identity? It likely straddles the canonical halls of Western ballet and centuries-old Asian dance traditions. As an artist living in a diverse and multi-ethnic country such as Singapore, it is only natural to be influenced by the many cultures of its inhabitants. By some sort of osmosis, their culture, inevitably becomes part of yours.

"Watching Chinese dance, Malay dance, has completely influenced my choreography," said classical Indian dancer Santha Bhaskar in an interview in 2010.<sup>1</sup> Drawing inspiration from these traditions, she has woven part of these cultures into her own choreography, while still staying true to Bharatanatyam, the classical South Indian dance form she practises.

Similarly, Kuik Swee Boon, the Singapore Dance Theatre alumni who founded T.H.E. Dance Company, used his ballet



T.H.E Dance Company's *Bedfellows* (2013) was part of T.H.E's 5th anniversary celebrations, choreographed by Kuik Swee Boon, Lee Mun Wai and Yarra Iletto. Courtesy of Matthew G. Johnson.

background to establish a foundation for a new type of lingua franca. In *As It Fades* (2011), he paid tribute to the fading heritage of Chinese dialects such as Teochew, Hainanese and Cantonese with expressive choreography using "complex floorwork and powerful lunges". In a 2011 review for *The Straits Times*, I described the movements as being "symbiotic and tightly woven, the ebb and flow between steps reminiscent of *taiji*".

The work, while heavy in its balletic stylistics, was infused with flavour that was distinctively and unmistakably Asian. It was a "compact and masterful ode, a poetic homage to traditions and the erosions wrought by time".<sup>2</sup>

How do we forge a dance identity that we can call our own? How do we balance the influences of both Eastern and Western cultures, paying homage to both but subservient to neither? The journeys of these five trailblazers in dance will shed some light on the evolving language of the Singapore stage, and in the process, perhaps reveal some human insight into the struggle of the Singaporean identity.

### "The Red Ballerina"

Goh Lay Kuan, *The Theatre Practice Ltd*

Spirited dance doyenne Goh Lay Kuan pushed boundaries not just in dance, but the politics governing 1970s Singapore. Dubbed "The Red Ballerina" by the press,



Dancer Goh Lay Kuan, dubbed "The Red Ballerina", left her mark on both art and society. Courtesy of The Theatre Practice Ltd.

Goh and her late husband, theatre playwright and director Kuo Pao Kun, were arrested under the Internal Security Act in 1976 and detained without trial on suspicion that they had communist affiliations due to the politically-charged nature of their work. Some of their pieces, like *Gai Si De Cang Ying (Damn the Fly)*, raised sensitive issues about socio-political issues in Singapore.

Born in Sumatra, Indonesia, in 1939, Goh left for Singapore as a child and discovered a love for dance. Inspired by fellow classmates Goh Soo Khim and Goh Choo San, siblings who came from a family of dancers, she enrolled as a classical ballerina at the Victoria Ballet Guild in Melbourne, Australia. In 1964, Goh returned to Singapore to set up the Singapore Performing Arts School in 1965 with her newly-wed husband, Kuo Pao Kun. The school was renamed Practice Theatre

School in 1973 and has undergone several name changes over the years, most recently in 2010 to The Theatre Practice Ltd.

"We did everything ourselves, including the stage set and costumes. I didn't get a salary for 13 years, only money for transport. We took 17 years to pay our debts," Goh revealed in an interview with *The Straits Times* in 2014.<sup>3</sup> With the school set up, Goh hoped to groom a new stable of dancers and artistes. In 1965, she choreographed her first piece, *Flower, Youth, Sea*, a contemporary ballet piece with strong Malay influences.

Singapore's political tensions, however, threw a spanner in the works. Under suspicion of communist leanings, the couple were interrogated and detained under the Internal Security Act. While Goh was released a few months later, Kuo was detained for four-and-a-half years. "We had raised issues about children and their poverty, sometimes in songs, short plays, or on stage... We did not make any direct criticism but they thought we had a communist ideology," said Goh in the same interview.<sup>4</sup>

By the mid-1980s, the couple had been exonerated of any wrongdoing, and the pro-communist allegations against them were dropped. In 1983, Goh studied under famed contemporary dancer and choreographer Martha Graham in New York. In 1988, she created *Nu Wa — Mender of the Heavens* (1988) for the Singapore Festival of Arts, which came to be recognised as Singapore's first full-length modern dance production. Based on Chinese mythology, *Nu Wa* encapsulated Goh's artistic tensions between her Asian roots and Western ballet



(Above) A young Goh Lay Kuan at the first ballet class she taught at the Practice Theatre School. Courtesy of The Theatre Practice Ltd.

(Above Right) A young Santha Bhaskar performing to a Tamil poem for a function organised by *Tamil Murasu* held at the Victoria Theatre in 1957. Courtesy of Santha Bhaskar. (Right) Santha Bhaskar with her late husband K. P. Bhaskar. Courtesy of Santha Bhaskar.

training. For her significant contributions to Singapore's dance scene, Goh was conferred the Cultural Medallion for dance in 1995.

"She so successfully blended contemporary, East Asian, and Southeast Asian dance forms and themes such that, even if one may discern traces of ballet, and Indian, Malay and Chinese dances, her final form was none of those: it was, simply, a dance choreographed by Goh," said Venka Purushothaman in his 2002 book on Cultural Medallion recipients.<sup>5</sup>

### Three Generations of Dance

Santha Bhaskar, *Bhaskar's Arts Academy*

Arriving in Singapore in 1959 from Kerala, India, the then 15 year-old-dancer had no idea what to expect from her arranged marriage to K. P. Bhaskar, a man she had never met. All she knew was that he ran a small dance school in Singapore, Bhaskar's Arts Academy. "As soon as my plane touched down the runway, I saw the smiling faces of Mr Bhaskar, students and friends. I didn't feel homesick. Not even for a second," said Santha Bhaskar.<sup>6</sup> As a wide-eyed ingénue to bustling Singapore, she started learning more about Malay and Chinese cultures. She recalled, "When I first came, I didn't know how Chinese faces looked like, or Malay faces looked like. I'd never seen people eat with chopsticks before!" The learning evolved

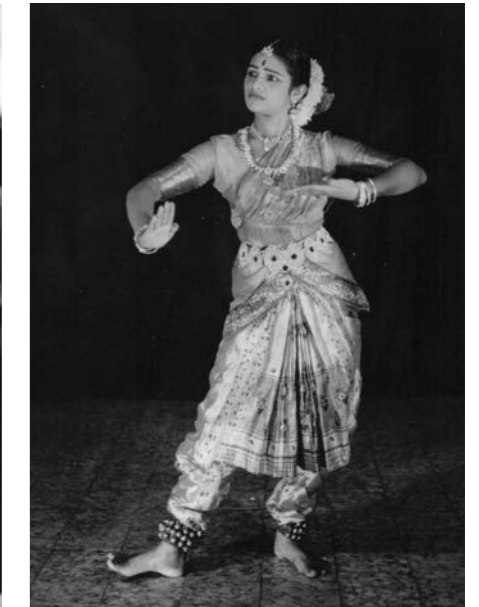


from food – arguably the heart and soul of Singapore – to her passion for dance.

As artistic director of Bhaskar's Arts Academy, where she teaches Bharatnatyam dance, Bhaskar began exploring her newfound insights. Weaving Chinese, Malay and even Thai dance influences into her dance choreography, Bhaskar has staged key Asian works such as the classic Chinese folktale *Butterfly Lovers* (1958), as well as the Thai mythology *Manohra* (1996).

From the 100 students the academy had in the 1950s, the dance school has more than 2,000 today. Bhaskar is also artistic director and resident choreographer of NUS Indian Dance at the Centre for the Arts at the National University of Singapore, where she taught for over 20 years since the late 1970s.

At the Centre for the Arts, Bhaskar also dabbled in dance forms such as hip-hop and contemporary dance as well as literary arts



like poetry. For instance, the light-hearted dance drama *Pappadum* featuring hip-hop dance group NUS Dance Blast! was staged in 2006, while *Vibrations*, an experimental meld of Indian dance with light and video, was performed at Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay the following year. In 2012, *Chakra*, which combined Indian dance movements with sand art, was staged.

"My artistic inspirations grew with Singapore. Watching Chinese dance, Malay dance and international dance forms has influenced my choreography," said Bhaskar.<sup>7</sup>

Even with the new influences, there still remains a strong sense of tradition, especially in this household of dance with three generations of dancers. "What I learnt from my mother, my teacher, I taught to my daughter, who taught it to her daughter. In a way, that becomes tradition," Bhaskar said.<sup>8</sup> She was awarded the Cultural Medallion for her work in dance in 1990.



(Above) Spot the multicultural influences in the costumes and props of Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts. Courtesy of Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts.

(Left) Som Mohamed Said is a pivotal force in the Malay dance scene. Courtesy of Tribute.sg, an initiative of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay.



### A Family Affair

Som Mohamed Said, Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts

Dancer and entrepreneur Som Mohamed Said is one of the most recognisable names in Malay dance in Singapore today. Starting her dance career at Sriwana, one of Singapore's pioneer dance troupes, she spent three decades there, eventually rising to the position of artistic director. At the same time, she also ran a thriving Malay wedding business. In 1997, with funds saved from her bridal company, Som Said founded Singapore's first fully professional Malay dance company, Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts.

A pivotal force in the Malay dance scene, Som Said has spoken out about the need for Singapore to develop its own

approach to Malay dance and an identity it can call its own, instead of blindly following classical Indonesian traditions. With her performing arts troupe, she began to create and choreograph works that weave traditional Malay dance routines with contemporary moves and multicultural elements. Some of her most frequent collaborators are Indian dancer Neila Sathyalingam and Chinese dancer Yan Choong Lian, who co-created pieces like *The Dance Harmony* and *Singapore City Lights*.

"I am a traditional person but my tradition is not static – you can create and still hold on to tradition," said Som Said in an interview with *The Straits Times*.<sup>9</sup>

Her peer Osman Abdu Hamid, artistic director at Era Dance Theatre, commented that Som Said pushed boundaries in traditional Malay dance. "Not much of Malay dance used floor-level movement, such as rolling on the floor,"<sup>10</sup> he pointed out.

Som Said's works often revolve around stories, legends and folk tales from the Malay Peninsula, such as *Tun Fatimah* (1989) and *Bangsawan in Dance* (1998).

Today, Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts is one of the most prolific Malay dance companies in Singapore, having performed in over 40 international events and 30 local productions in the past 18 years. The troupe has 25 performing artistes and is currently managed by Som Said's son, Adel Ahmad. Som Said received the Cultural Medallion for dance in 1987.



Kuik Swee Boon, who leads the contemporary dance group T.H.E. Dance Company, takes the leap in *Within, Without*. Courtesy of Tan Ngiap Heng.

### Chasing Dreams

Kuik Swee Boon, T.H.E. Dance Company

One of the youngest, but most high-profile dance companies on the Singapore scene today is T.H.E. Dance Company, which stands for The Human Expression Dance Company. Started by Singapore Dance Theatre's former principal dancer Kuik Swee Boon in 2008, the troupe is known for fusing Asian and local identities with ballet techniques in high-impact and contemporary dance performances.

After a five-year stint as principal dancer at the world-renowned Spanish dance company Compania Nacional de Danza in Madrid, Kuik returned to Singapore in 2007 and started T.H.E. Dance Company a year later. Gathering a stable of young dancers, he began to forge a new identity in the Singapore dance scene by staging ambitious and emotionally charged works that drew inspiration from societal issues and human emotions.

Kuik's first full-length work, *Old Sounds*, was commissioned by the National Heritage Board in 2008. It was a meditative piece about the slow eradication of Chinese dialects in contemporary city life. Featuring folk songs and snippets of conversations in dialect, the dancers moved in sweeping

curves and fleet-footed steps against a multimedia backdrop of music and film.

*As It Fades* (2011) was another seminal work in T.H.E.'s repertoire. In an ambitious move, Kuik chose to stage it at Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, a grand venue that no other dance company apart from the Singapore Dance Theatre, had performed at before. Paying homage to Asian traditions and culture, the piece juxtaposed contemporary dance movements with Hainanese folk songs.

To groom new talents in dance, Kuik set up T.H.E. Second Company to nurture the next generation of dancers. He also started *Contact*, an annual dance festival to showcase budding Asian dancers and choreographers. Kuik was conferred the Young Artist Award by the National Arts Council in 2007.

### The Grand Dame of Dance

Singapore Dance Theatre

The Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT) is Singapore's first and most established classical ballet troupe. Founded in 1988 by Goh Soo Khim and the late Anthony Then, the illustrious dance company rose from humble beginnings. At its first official performance in 1988 at the Singapore Festival of Arts, the SDT had only seven dancers – three Singaporeans, three Filipinos and one Malaysian. Today, the dance company has more than 30 full-time dancers and apprentices in its fold.

Best known for its classical ballet repertoire, which includes classics such as *Anna Karenina*, *The Nutcracker* and *Cinderella*, the SDT has also staged works by acclaimed choreographers such as André Prokovsky, George Balanchine, Jorma Elo, Xing Liang and Edwaard Liang. The SDT is also closely affiliated with the work of the late virtuoso Singaporean choreographer Goh Choo San. Goh, who was the brother of Goh Soo Khim, was the choreographer for the Washington Ballet in the 1980s.

In 2008, Janek Schergen was appointed artistic director of the SDT, taking over from Goh Soo Khim, who stepped down after 20 years at the helm. Janek, who was previously the dance company's assistant artistic director, also oversees the Choo-San Goh & H. Robert Magee Foundation, which licenses and produces Goh Choo San's ballets as well as administers the annual Choo-San Goh Awards for Choreography.

A number of notable dancers and choreographers in the Singapore dance scene have passed through the hallowed halls of the SDT, including choreographer Jeffrey Tan and dancer Kuik Swee Boon.



Artistic Director Janek Schergen of the SDT teaching a class. Courtesy of Singapore Dance Theatre.

While the SDT is primarily a classical ballet company, it has taken on a few landmark contemporary productions, such as *Reminiscing the Moon* (2002) by Indonesian choreographer Boi Sakti for the inauguration of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. One of its most popular events is *Ballet Under the Stars*, an annual outdoor ballet performance that takes place at Fort Canning Park and draws large crowds every year.

In 2013, the SDT moved to bigger premises at the Bugis+ shopping mall on Victoria Street, after more than 20 years at the Fort Canning Centre.

### Finding Voice Through Art

Balancing tradition and modernity, Eastern and Western styles, the Singaporean dancer often treads between worlds. From the modern dance styles of Lim Fei Shen, to the experimental site-specific performances of Arts Fission Dance Company, to the contemporary dance styles of ECNAD and Frontier Danceland, dance in Singapore takes shape in many forms – but they all come together to form an inkling of the socio-cultural tensions that exist in our multicultural island-nation.

As a relatively young country, with a relatively young arts scene, the artistic voices of our dance pioneers are surprisingly strong and diverse. Be it the classical ballet repertoire of the SDT or the light-footed movements of Santha Bhaskar's take on Bharatanatyam dance, these dance pioneers collectively paint a complex and intriguing picture of post-colonial identity in contemporary Singapore.

For what is art but a lens through which to examine society, and in turn,

ourselves? Artists speak of the cultural inflections that influence their works, that weave paths through classical arts, gestures and rituals, that stir the desire for a truer, more unique expression of identity that Singapore can truly call its own. Singapore's history, from its time as a British trading port under colonial rule to a first-world metropolis, presents us in an unusual, liminal space. Perhaps there lies the meaning of evolving tradition to reflect relevance in modern times. To understand who we are, we should perhaps turn to the most primitive of communication – the body – to decipher and find meaning in the gestures, signs and signifiers created by the Singaporean dancer. ♦

### Notes

- 1 Source: From the film "Mrs Santha Bhaskar (2010)" by Tara Tan
- 2 Tan, T. (2011, May 23). Moving ode to loss. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.
- 3 Goh, C. L. (2014, May 3). The Pioneer Club: Goh Lay Kuan; the ballerina who overturned tables. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.
- 4 Goh, C. L. (2014, May 3). The Pioneer Club: Goh Lay Kuan; the ballerina who overturned tables. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.
- 5 Purushothaman, V. (Ed.). (2002). *Narratives: Notes on a cultural journey: Cultural medallion recipients 1979-2001*. Singapore: National Arts Council, p. 32. Call no.: RSING 700.95957 NAR
- 6 Source: From the film "Mrs Santha Bhaskar (2010)" by Tara Tan
- 7 Source: From the film "Mrs Santha Bhaskar (2010)" by Tara Tan
- 8 Source: From the film "Mrs Santha Bhaskar (2010)" by Tara Tan
- 9 Lee, V. (2015, February 23). Malay dancing queen Som Mohamed Said. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.
- 10 Lee, V. (2015, February 23). Malay dancing queen Som Mohamed Said. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.



# THE MUSIC, MADNESS AND MAGIC OF DICK LEE

The “Mad Chinaman” was probably the first to push the boundaries of popular music in Singapore. **Joy Loh** profiles the enfant terrible of entertainment.

**Joy Loh** is a Performing Arts Librarian with the National Library of Singapore. Apart from managing the National Library’s digital music archive, MusicSG, she enjoys reading as well as learning new musical instruments and languages.

*“What drove me to do what I did – it was to find myself and to make my statement as a Peranakan Chinese Singapore citizen of Asia and of the world”.*

— Dick Lee

**W**riter, composer, singer, director, producer, clothing designer, talent agency owner and restaurateur. The multi-hyphenated Dick Lee has done it all, and there is precious little in the creative industry that he has not had a hand in. Lee bears the distinction of being one of the first entertainers to push the accepted boundaries of popular music and propel Singapore and Singapore music into the international arena. More importantly, he has helped nurture in Singaporeans a greater appreciation for locally produced music. Today, his significant body of work has become part of the cultural fabric of our history.

Dick Lee was born on 24 August 1956, the eldest of five children of Lee Kip Lee, a sixth-generation Peranakan (Straits Chinese) businessman and former president of the Peranakan Association, and his wife Elizabeth. He was named Lee Peng Boon Richard, but is known to most people as Dick Lee.

Music featured prominently in the younger Lee’s life. Growing up in a home where his father would play jazz and Indonesian *keroncong*<sup>1</sup> and his mother’s favourite pop melodies on the record player, it was natural that music would come to inspire many of his creative pursuits. In his book *Adventures of the Mad Chinaman*, Lee recalls, “My earliest influence was the music of the 1960s... Dad loved big band, jazz, crooners, and *keroncong*, while my mother, in her 20s at that time, loved contemporary Western and Chinese pop music.”

Since an early age, Lee had shown a natural talent for creating music. By the time he was 11, Lee had “produced” his first musical starring his siblings and cousins. Among

his early creations was an adaptation of the classic Chinese play *Lady Precious Stream*, which tells the story of a feisty daughter who defies her parents’ wishes that she enter into an arranged marriage. Lee gave the story a new spin by setting it in a Peranakan household with *baba* and *nonya* stereotypes. The production marked Lee’s first attempt at connecting with his Singaporean roots.

## The Rebel with a Cause

In his own way, Lee was a rebel. Being the only pianist in his secondary school cohort at St Joseph’s Institution, he was often asked to play the rock organ and perform hits from heavy metal rock bands such as Black Sabbath and Grand Funk Railroad at school concerts. Like the other rockers of his time, Lee wore his hair long, yet was ever vigilant of the authorities who sometimes mistakenly nabbed hapless misfits whose only crime was that of trying to look cool. This was because in 1959, the government had launched a campaign to clamp down on negative aspects of Western popular culture that were perceived as decadent. The ban against the so-called “yellow culture”<sup>2</sup> included pornographic publications and films, drugs, gambling, and even rock ‘n’ roll music and men with long hair; this policy did not ease until the early 1980s.

Against the backdrop of this campaign, Lee once had a close shave with the police. One evening while loitering in town, Lee and his friends spotted a police patrol car and decided to make a run for it because they thought they would be picked up for sporting long hair. While making his getaway in his red and black four-inch platform shoes, Lee lost his balance and tumbled into a ditch, fortuitously removing himself from view as his friends were caught by the police and sent to “haircut hell”.

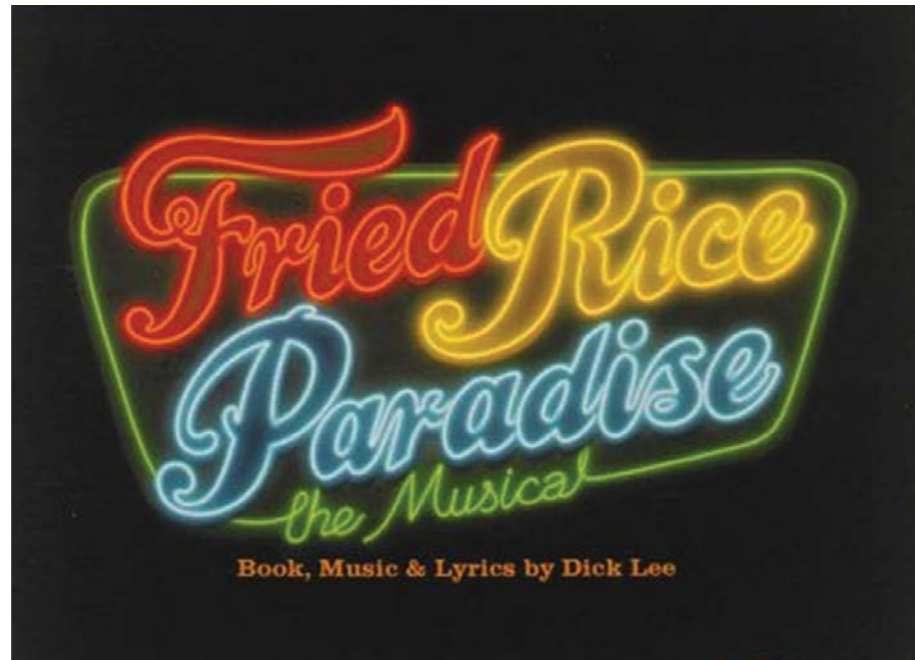


Dick Lee performing at Rediffusion’s singing contest *Ready, Steady, Folk* in 1973. Courtesy of Dick Lee.



(Left) Dick Lee modelling his designs for his mother's boutique Midteen located in Tanglin Shopping Centre, with Tina Tan (left) and Sabrina Fernando, 1974. Courtesy of Dick Lee.

(Right) Album cover of music from *Fried Rice Paradise*, staged by Singapore Repertory Theatre in 2010. © Singapore Repertory Theatre, Singapore, 2010.



## The Beginning

Lee's music career took off while he was still a student at St Joseph's Institution in the 1970s. He shot to mini stardom, thanks to his many stage appearances on talent shows and television programmes with the groups Harmony, and Dick and the Gang, the latter a musical group formed with his siblings.

In 1972, Lee auditioned for *Ready Steady Folk*, a talent show on television that was produced by cable radio station Rediffusion Singapore,<sup>3</sup> and helmed by the legendary Vernon Cornelius of the band The Quests. During the audition, Lee performed "Life Story", a song about a young man's reflection on his life. This pivotal song helped to launch Lee's music career, and became a familiar tune to many Singaporeans when it was used in a commercial years later.

"Wake up," she said, "Look, it's a beautiful day"  
Downstairs to the kitchen door  
and then away  
Into the light  
Morning feeling lives on  
Come the clouds the moon,  
and morning is gone

Just my life story  
Minute by second a story  
That goes on forever with each  
breath that I take  
This is my life story  
Uneventfullest story  
That ages with each year and  
birthday cake

Lee was immediately offered a position on the show as a guest artiste instead of a contestant, giving him the chance to sing his original songs on live television every week. During the finals of *Ready Steady Folk*, he sang his now iconic "Fried Rice Paradise", which so impressed one of the judges that Lee was offered a recording deal immediately. Lee's first album, *Life Story*, was released in mid-1974 by the music label Philips.

## His First Album

Not unexpectedly, record sales of *Life Story* were poor. The album only managed to sell a few hundred copies in Singapore and a much lower number in Australia, where his then manager had gone in an attempt to further Lee's career. Poor reviews did not help the situation. One needs to keep in mind the context of the local music industry back then. The anti-yellow culture clamp-down in Singapore had left in its wake a moribund music scene. The recording industry in the 1970s was no longer as vibrant as it was in the roaring 60s, which saw local bands like The Quests and The Crescendos holding concerts and releasing records with the vociferous support of legions of fans. By 1973, what little interest that remained in local acts soon dwindled to a mere trickle.

On top of the unsupportive environment, a track on the album, "Fried Rice Paradise", was banned from the airwaves by the government-controlled Radio Television Singapore (RTS) because of its flagrant use

of Singlish. It is believed to be the first local pop song to be banned. To add further insult, the ban was not reported in the news as the media was not supportive of local music at the time. "I remember seeing a copy in their [RTS] library later. A couple of tracks were visibly scratched to prevent rebellious deejays from playing them," Lee recalls.

Nonetheless, the song "Fried Rice Paradise" received substantial airtime on Rediffusion and became an instant hit. The endearing song is one of Lee's most well-known, and was made into a musical in 1991.

## Finally Making Tracks

Throughout the 1970s and 80s, Lee championed the use of Asian influences in local pop music and worked tirelessly to inject a strong Singaporean identity into his works. It was not until the mid-1980s when Singapore's music scene was finally making some headway that Lee launched what has been deemed as his breakout pioneering album.

Ever the die-hard local boy, he says, "The term 'Singaporean' had no meaning at the time, so who was I – Chinese, Singaporean, Asian, English-educated, Peranakan? – and what did I have to say? I wanted not to be shallow, I wanted to be taken seriously. How could I introduce a Singapore element into a form that was basically Western? I wanted to do it with honesty, tapping on the things I knew."

Wanting to write a song with commercial appeal that would also express how he felt about being a Singaporean, Lee penned



"Life in the Lion City", which became the title track of his album, released by WEA Records in 1984. The song described his life and its ups and downs in a light-hearted and upbeat manner.

The scene that he faces  
each morning  
A tableau of buses and cars.  
Then it suddenly rains  
without warning.  
Then every destination  
becomes very far.  
On some lucky days there are taxis.  
But of course he'll be stuck in a jam  
Well, he can't complain  
cause the fact is  
He's got the situation firmly by hand.  
Driving past all the cinemas  
and shopping  
centres lining the boulevards,  
he contemplates then decides it's  
great here in Singapore, Singapore  
So convenient tropical some more  
Singapore, Singapore  
Full of tourists and  
department stores.  
He works very hard for a living.  
Rewards are a holiday or two.  
But he has to be calm and forgiving  
Because his work environment  
is not very good.

The track "Culture" was also another attempt to instil a sense of the Singaporean identity into the nation's collective consciousness. It was partly inspired by his reaction towards the government for trying to force-feed culture to the masses in its bid to achieve developed city status. Lee believed these efforts were futile because "suddenly having lots of 'cultural' events would not a cultured Singaporean make".

One of the more significant tracks on *Life in the Lion City* is "Flower Drum Song". Lee used the refrain from the popular Chinese folk song of the same name and incorporated it with his original melodies. It was his first attempt at fusion, way before the word became fashionable and meant an amalgamation of East and West. The song was a breath of fresh air in an era where singing Top 40 Western covers were de rigeur in the Singapore recording scene.

Even the album cover is distinctly local. It shows Lee surrounded by an eclectic mix of familiar Singapore symbols such as the Merlion, the national flower Vanda Miss Joaquim and the lower edge of what appears to be portraits of the president and first lady of Singapore of the time.

Although *Life in the Lion City* was released in 1984 with little fanfare, one individual who appreciated Lee's music enough to turn it into a television show was

Album cover of *The Mad Chinaman*, Dick Lee's ultimate Singaporean album of ethnic pop. © Warner Music, Singapore, 1989.

the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation's (SBC) producer, Lim Sek. He later became Lee's business partner when they set up Music & Movement to manage the latter's career when he went fulltime.

## Hitting the Home Run

Lee's tenacity in pushing for a Singaporean identity finally paid off in 1989 with the release of *The Mad Chinaman* album by Warner Music. One of the reasons for the success of this album was that it dovetailed with the national songs campaign that had been launched by the government in the 1980s. Community singing was advocated as a means for Singaporeans to develop a sense of belonging to the nation and foster solidarity among citizens.

Many of the catchy songs commissioned for the campaign and timed to be released for National Day – including "Stand Up for Singapore" (1984), "Count on Me, Singapore" (1986) and "We are Singapore" (1987) – struck a chord with people. The ground was receptive when *The Mad Chinaman* was released and Lee found a new audience that happily embraced his work. *The Mad Chinaman* featured songs that were inspired by Lee's environment and his musical roots, and critics regard this as the ultimate Singaporean album of ethnic pop.

While the title track, "The Mad Chinaman", was inspired by the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, Lee was moved to explore his Singaporean roots, acknowledging his confused identity in the lyrics of the song.

The Mad Chinaman relies  
On the east and west sides of his life  
The Mad Chinaman will try  
To find out which is right  
I know you can get confused  
I get that way a little too  
When the legacy of old surfaces as new  
Traditional, International  
Western feelings from my oriental heart  
How am I to know, how should I react?  
Defend with Asian pride? Or attack!

Lee also put humour to good use in his music. He chose the most popular Malay folk song he knew, "Rasa Sayang", and added contemporary rap lyrics that told the story of Singapore in tongue-in-cheek fashion.

Not one to fear controversy, Lee included another satirical song in the album, bravely taking an open dig at the ongoing Speak Mandarin Campaign. The song described a Chinese "lesson" which



had Lee repeating some Mandarin phrases after the teacher as well as children reciting Mandarin verses in the background.

*The Mad Chinaman* record became such a hit that it went platinum within four months of its release, and won awards in Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan. Lee achieved regional prominence following the album's phenomenal success, and he toured Japan, Hong Kong, Seoul and Taipei to adoring crowds. The "Mad Chinaman" moniker has been synonymous with Lee ever since.

However, it was not all smooth sailing. In Singapore, "Rasa Sayang" was initially banned from the radio as the government had deemed the use of Singlish in the rap as undesirable. After several public debates on the differences between bad English and Singlish, the authorities finally softened their stand and accepted the value of the average Singaporean's "natural way of speaking English" as Lee describes in his biography. After a few weeks, the SBC relented and the song received massive airtime over the radio.

Lee was proud of who he was: "Singlish was part of who we were. It made us unique. Singaporeans who spoke perfect English all spoke Singlish to each other. Even foreigners living in Singapore said 'lah'."

In 1990, Lee relocated to Japan to further his music career. He continued to develop the Asian identity through his works, and through collaborations with famous Asian artistes such as Sandy Lam, Anita Mui, Andy Lau, Aaron Kwok and Miyazawa Kazufumi. For his efforts, Lee was rewarded with two Hong Kong Film Academy Awards – a feat no other Singaporean has ever achieved. The first, awarded in 1995, was for Best Original Movie Theme Song for *She's a Man, He's a Woman*. Four years later in 1999, he bagged the same award for the film *City of Glass*.

Lee's work in the Land of the Rising Sun proved instrumental in opening Japanese eyes to Southeast Asia. Soon, magazines were featuring stories on Singapore, and Lee's name was always mentioned alongside. The publicity and attention lavished on Lee indirectly brought fame to his homeland, and Singapore became more than just a little red dot famous for its *sarong kebaya*-clad "Singapore Girl". Singapore suddenly became an exciting new travel destination for the Japanese – one that had produced the enigmatic "Mad Chinaman".

### Beauty World Cha-Cha-Cha

Lee's passion for musicals led him along a different yet complementary path. He has written several groundbreaking musicals, including *Fried Rice Paradise* (1991) *Kampung Amber* (1994), *Sing to the Dawn* (1996)



A TheatreWorks production of *Beauty World* directed by Ong Keng Sen. It was first staged by TheatreWorks in 1988 and toured Japan in 1992, followed by a re-staging for the President's Star Charity in 1998. Courtesy of TheatreWorks (S) Ltd.

and *Hotpants* (1997). The epic *Nagaland* toured Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong in a 2002 sold-out tour, and *Snow Wolf Lake*, which starred Hong Kong pop star Jacky Cheung, toured several Asian cities in 2005. Among his famed musicals, the most well-known was the first one he produced in 1988, the all-time favourite *Beauty World*.

An iconic musical well-loved by many Singaporeans, *Beauty World* was named after a covered market at the junction of Upper Bukit Timah Road and Jalan Jurong Kechil. Among the hodgepodge cluster of textile and household shops were a couple of music shops selling cassettes and records. This was where Lee had his first taste of music heaven and discovered that local musicians also cut records. Before long Rita Chao, Sakura Teng, and Naomi and the Boys had all become part of Lee's collection of singles at the tender age of 11. Little did he know at the time that this discovery would eventually come full circle and give birth to the psychedelic musical called *Beauty World*.

Several years later, as Lee grew increasingly successful in his career in the fashion industry, he met and collaborated with Linda Teo, who eventually became his business partner at Runway Productions, a fashion show production company. Linda's humble beginnings as a factory worker and her success story as the owner of top modelling agency Carrie Models, bore similarities to Lee's own mother's life. Lee was inspired to write a musical based on both women. The prodigious talent that he is, Lee playfully tinkled on the piano one evening in 1986 and wrote "Beauty World (Cha-Cha-Cha)" in just five minutes. "I certainly achieved my goal in creating a happy song, as I could not stop singing it," he remembers.

Thus began the journey of Singapore's very first homegrown musical, *Beauty World*. The musical tells the story of Ivy Chan Poh Choo, a young and guileless small-town girl from Batu Pahat who enters the seedy cabaret world in search of her long-lost father. It was first staged by TheatreWorks in 1988 to critical acclaim. *Beauty World's* week-long opening run was sold out and prompted the production team to bring it back two months later, where it enjoyed another sold-out run. This was unprecedented in Singapore theatre history. The musical has since been performed several times: in 1992 when it toured Japan; in 1998 when it was produced by MediaCorp for the President's Star Charity show; and in 2008 when it was staged by theatre company Wild Rice, which added new scenes and songs to the musical.

Lee says of the musical: "These days, I feel a flush of pride when young actors come up to me and say that *Beauty World* inspired them to do theatre, or that it was the first musical they had ever seen."

### Forbidden City: Portrait of an Empress

Not one to sit idle, in the new millennium, Lee again pushed the boundaries, this time taking a leaf out of Chinese history by challenging commonly held notions of Cixi, the last empress dowager of China.

Lee was intrigued by the story of Cixi and rabidly researched into her life and history, especially the challenges she must have faced as the ruler of China in the final years of the Qing Dynasty in the early 1900s. Not content to believe the popular accounts of Cixi as the infamous power-crazed despot, Lee wanted to explore a different side of her – as a woman, mother, wife and lover.

In 2002, Lee travelled to London with lyricist Stephen Clark and director Steven



A scene from the musical *Forbidden City: Portrait of an Empress*, with Kit Chan (centre, in red costume) playing the lead role. Dick Lee wrote the music for this Singapore Repertory Theatre (SRT) production that was first staged in 2002. Courtesy of Singapore Repertory Theatre.

Dexter to work on an outline for a musical on Cixi's life. The trio visited the British Library to study out-of-print books on Cixi and stumbled upon an important work on the empress dowager by American artist Katherine Carl, who painted Cixi in her first Western-style portrait.

Carl had been sent to the Forbidden City in 1903 to paint the empress dowager in just three days, but was so well-liked by the empress that she stayed for more than six months. Her account, *With the Empress Dowager*, published in 1905, had been written partly in defence of the scandalous books that were being published on the empress at the time, some of these attributing fictitious quotes to Carl herself.

Thus, the musical *Forbidden City: Portrait of an Empress* was born, starring Singapore singer Kit Chan in the titular role. *Forbidden City* was one of the highlights of the opening festival of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay in October 2002. Owing to its immense popularity, the production returned for two re-runs in 2003 and 2006. Lee's compositions for the musical subsequently went on to win the Life! Theatre Awards for Best Music in 2004.

### The Consummate Performer

"Dick Lee's talents defy categorisation. If you think that his life is as colourful as the characters in his musicals and songs, then you are wrong! It is ten times more exciting and dramatic."

— Lim Sek, Dick Lee's business partner at Music & Movement

A stalwart in the popular cultural history of Singapore, Lee continues to be a mover and shaker as he continues his "mad" adventures

in music and theatre, embracing life as few people do.

In 2014, Lee celebrated his 40th anniversary in show business with a concert titled *DL40*; it was a sold-out ride down memory lane. Lee performed many of his earlier hits, including "Internationalland", "Follow Your Heart", "Thanksgiving", "Singapore Nights" and more recent ones like "Treasure Every Moment". At the end of the show, Lee paid a special tribute to Vernon Cornelius, the man who gave him his first break back in 1972.

As Singapore celebrates her golden jubilee this year, Singaporeans can look forward to more of the "Mad Chinaman" and his works. Lee will be performing a medley of his songs at the mega Sing50 concert at the Singapore Sports Hub on 7 August in celebration of Singapore music. He is the creative director for this year's National Day parade, and has also composed the parade's theme song "Our Singapore", which he will sing at the event with Mandopop star JJ Lin. This is not Lee's first attempt at penning a National Day song. In 1998, his song "Home" composed for the Sing Singapore festival was selected as the theme song for the National Day parade that year. The heartwarming song became popular with Singaporeans and a remixed version was used as the theme song for the 2004 edition of the parade.

Ever the consummate performer and entertainer, Lee will not be resting on his laurels anytime soon and likely has more ideas up his sleeves. We say bring on more of the music, madness and magic. ♦

### Notes

- 1 Also spelled *keroncong* and *kroncong*, *keroncong* refers to a type of ukulele-like instrument as well as to the Indonesian musical style that makes use of

this instrument. The music has its origins in the 16th-century music of the Portuguese colonies in Batavia and the Moluccas.

- 2 On 8 June 1959, the government led by the newly elected People's Action Party (PAP) launched a campaign against yellow culture. The term "yellow culture" is a direct translation of the Chinese phrase *huangse wenhua*, which refers to decadent behaviour such as gambling, opium-smoking, pornography, prostitution, corruption and nepotism that plagued much of China in the 19th century.
- 3 Rediffusion was Singapore's first cable-transmitted, commercial radio station. It started broadcasting in Singapore in 1949.

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# MOHAMED EUNOS ABDULLAH

## The Father of Malay Journalism

The Eunos area in the east of Singapore is named after the pioneer, Mohamed Eunos Abdullah. Mazelan Anuar traces his legacy.

There is a popular Malay proverb that says: When a tiger dies, it leaves behind its stripes. When a man dies, he leaves behind his name.

Have you ever wondered about the origin of the name Eunos while travelling in the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) train between Kembangan and Paya Lebar stations along the East West line?

Heritage buffs may be interested to know that Jalan Eunos, Eunos Avenue, Eunos Crescent, Eunos Link, Eunos Road and Eunos Terrace are all named after the prominent Malay pioneer, Mohamed Eunos bin Abdullah.<sup>1</sup>

Regarded as the “Father of Malay journalism” by the community, Eunos Abdullah was the first Malay representative on the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, and was also the co-founder and first president of Kesatuan Melayu Singapura (Singapore Malay Union), the first Malay political party in Singapore.

Not much is known about Eunos Abdullah’s early life. The popular narrative suggests that he was born to a well-to-do family in 1876. It cannot be ascertained if he was born in Singapore or Sumatra in Indonesia.<sup>2</sup> In any case, his father was a wealthy Minangkabau merchant from Sumatra who could afford to send him to school in Singapore. Eunos Abdullah grew

up in Kampong Glam and received his early education at a Malay school there. He then attended the elite Raffles Institution along Bras Basah Road, which had opened in 1837, where the medium of instruction was English. Schooled in both languages and effectively bilingual, this later served him well in his journalistic and political careers.

Eunos Abdullah completed his education between 1893 and 1894 and joined the office of the Master Attendant of Singapore Harbour. He was later appointed as harbour master at Muar by the Johor government. He held this appointment for five years before returning to Singapore.<sup>3</sup>

In 1907, Eunos Abdullah was invited to be the editor of the *Utusan Melayu* (“Malay Herald”), the Malay edition of the *Singapore Free Press* (the predecessor of *The Straits Times*) by its British owner, Walter Makepeace. The *Utusan Melayu* was the only Malay newspaper in circulation at the time and it soon became Eunos Abdullah’s main vehicle to champion the Malay cause and to highlight pertinent issues important to the community. In 1914, he left *Utusan Melayu* to assume editorship of the *Lembaga Melayu* (“Malay Institution”), the Malay edition of the newly launched English newspaper *Malaya Tribune*. Like the *Utusan Melayu*, *Lembaga Melayu* became the voice of moderate, progressive Malay opinion.<sup>4</sup>

### “Father of Malay Journalism”

Eunos Abdullah began his career in newspapers at a time when the prestigious *Jawi Peranakkan*, the first Malay newspaper in Singapore, ceased publication in 1896. Its successor, the *Chahaya Pulau Pinang*, had also lapsed after a successful run from 1900 to 1906. The *Utusan Melayu* became the first major national Malay newspaper to be circulated throughout the Straits Settlements and the Malay States. It was first published on 7 November 1907 with the objective of providing the Malay community with an intelligent and impartial view of the world’s news, as well as news and current affairs of Malaya.<sup>5</sup> The paper’s strong didactic tone reflected Eunos Abdullah’s desire to reform the Malays and his concern for them to catch up with the other races. The newspaper was also used as a teaching tool in Malay vernacular schools.

When Eunos Abdullah was appointed editor of the *Lembaga Melayu* in 1914, he did not sway from his goal of improving the socio-economic position of the Malay community. The *Lembaga Melayu*’s policy and tone mirrored that of the *Utusan Melayu*’s; it toed the official line, but could be openly critical when Malay interests were not addressed by the colonial government.

Through his editorials in both newspapers, Eunos Abdullah espoused nationalist ideals; he frequently discussed the idea of Malay *bangsa* (race), defined “Malayness” and Malay identity, invoked the concept of *bumiputra* (original “sons of the soil”) and hinted at the need for self-government.<sup>6</sup> These ideals later became part of the Malay political vocabulary and influenced Malaya’s political development as it fought for independence after World War II.

The Malay press in Singapore flourished for a quarter of a century under the tutelage of Eunos Abdullah and as a testimony of his contributions, he has been aptly recognised as the “Father of Malay journalism”.<sup>7</sup>

### Kesatuan Melayu Singapura (KMS)

Through his writings in the newspapers and service to the Mohamedhan Advisory Board – established in 1915 to advise the colonial government on Muslim religious matters and customs – Eunos Abdullah gained considerable influence within the Malay community.

As recognition of his exalted position among the Malays, Eunos Abdullah was first appointed as a justice of peace, and subsequently in 1922, became the first Malay to be appointed as a member of the Municipal Commission in Singapore – the governing body overseeing local urban affairs at the time. In 1924, the



Possibly the only extant image of Mohamed Eunos Abdullah. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

### Rise and Fall of Utusan Melayu

The *Utusan Melayu* which Eunos Abdullah edited was initially published three times a week on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, but was converted into a daily in 1915 to meet the demand for news of World War I. In 1921, the newspaper was sued by Raja Shariman and Che Tak, assistant commissioners of police of the Federated Malay States, for damages over an alleged libel. At the time of the libel, the newspaper’s circulation had dipped below 280 copies.<sup>8</sup> The heavy damages awarded against *Utusan Melayu* turned out to be financially crippling and it ceased operations as a result.

Perhaps as a tribute to Eunos Abdullah, his successor, Ambo Sooloh, along with other Kesatuan Melayu Singapura (KMS) leaders and members such as Yusof Ishak (later the first president of Singapore) and Abdul Rahim Kajai, started another newspaper in 1939. They called it *Utusan Melayu* but unlike the first version of *Utusan Melayu*, this reincarnation was fully owned, financed and managed by Malays.<sup>9</sup> In 1958, the newspaper relocated its operations to Kuala Lumpur.

colonial government decided to increase the Asian representation in the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, and appointed Eunos Abdullah as its first Malay legislative councillor.<sup>10</sup>

Initially, Eunos Abdullah tried to push for reforms to elevate the socio-economic position of the Malay community through the Persekutuan Islam Singapura (PIS) or Singapore Islamic Association. However, he and other like-minded educated Malay elites grew frustrated with the leaders of the non-Malay Muslims of PIS for their inability to elevate the socio-economic conditions of the Malays. In 1921, they formed the breakaway Muslim Institute to compete with the PIS.

When the British government appointed Eunos Abdullah as its first Malay legislative councillor in 1924 instead of a representative from the PIS, his supporters realised that strong organisational support was required to bolster Eunos Abdullah's position and that the Muslim Institute was inadequate in meeting this need.

Against this backdrop, the Singapore Malay Union, or Kesatuan Melayu Singapura (KMS), emerged in 1926 in a contest between an older Muslim elite of Arab and Indian descent and a newer emerging group of Malay elites. Apart from Eunos Abdullah, these English-educated Malay elites included Abdul Samad, the first Malay doctor, and Tengku Kadir, a lineal descendant of Sultan Ali of Johor. They were critical of the PIS – which were dominated by Muslims of Arab descent – for being elitist and called it “a rich man's club”.<sup>11</sup>

The KMS was in effect the first quasi-political Malay organisation in Singapore, and Eunos Abdullah served as its first president. The organisation established Kampong Melayu in the eastern part of Singapore, a Malay settlement that was later renamed Kampong Eunos. More importantly, the KMS was a forerunner of the various Malay political parties that later emerged in the post-war period, including the now dominant United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in Malaysia.<sup>12</sup>

Formally established on 14 May 1926 at Istana Kampong Glam, Eunos Abdullah became the first president of the KMS. Its objectives were: to encourage its members to play a greater role in public and government affairs; to sponsor Malay progress and interest in politics and education; to represent the Malay community in all matters concerning the rights and freedom of the Malays; and to foster higher and technical education for Malay children.<sup>13</sup>

Members of the KMS were mostly made up of English-educated Malay journalists, government officials, merchants, and people of traditional, secular and religious

standing who advocated and strived for the socio-economic progress of the Malays. They recognised the importance of education and, through Eunos Abdullah in the Legislative Council, were successful in lobbying for the opening of a trade school for Malays in 1929.<sup>14</sup>

The birth of KMS marked a turning point in the political attitudes of the Malays. It signalled the beginning of efforts by the community to actively promote their rights and interests. Soon, other Malay unions modelled on the KMS were established in other parts of Malaya, with the similar expressed aim of representing Malay socio-economic and political interests.

As the community's attention shifted from self-help to self-governance, Malay political organisations, including the KMS, evolved into political parties. However, the KMS did not push for independence during its initial years. In fact, it pledged to obey the laws of the colony and, in return, received support from the colonial government. Its earliest success of establishing Kampong Melayu was achieved with a government grant of \$700,000.

### Kampong Melayu

Inspired by the Malay settlement of Kampong Bahru in Kuala Lumpur, the KMS put

#### KMS and the UMNO Connection

After World War II, the Kesatuan Melayu Singapura (KMS), together with more than 40 other Malay unions from different Malay states, presented a united front to protest against the Malayan Union proposal by the British to reduce the status and role of Malay kings and leaders, and to separate Singapore from Malaya. The Malayan Union was eventually replaced by the Federation of Malaya in 1948.<sup>15</sup> Under the leadership of Dato' Onn Ja'afar, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) had emerged as the leading political party in Malaya. In 1953, the KMS merged with UMNO to form the Singapore branch of UMNO. Following Singapore's independence in 1965, the Singapore branch was officially renamed Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Singapura (PKMS) in 1967 to comply with government regulations that prohibited local parties from affiliating with foreign organisations.

up a proposal to the colonial government to set aside land for exclusive and undisturbed use as a Malay *kampong* (“village” in Malay).

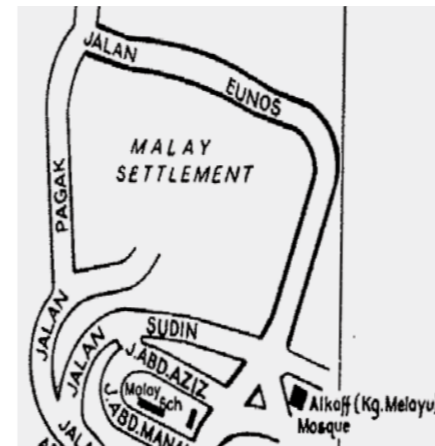
Public opinion among the Malay community and various Malay clubs and societies towards the proposal was favourable.<sup>16</sup> In early 1927, Eunos Abdullah, as president of the KMS and Malay member of the Legislative Council, lobbied successfully for government support. With the grant received, a 240-hectare plot of land was acquired in 1928 in the eastern part of Singapore. The site was given the name Kampong Melayu, and was later renamed Kampong Eunos.

The Kampong Melayu Malay Settlement faced many teething problems in its fledgling years. The residents of the settlement had to clear the land themselves in order to construct their new homes. The high land rental rates coupled with the high construction costs of houses deterred many eligible Malays from applying for allotments in Kampong Melayu. By 1931, only 50 to 60 houses had been built and occupied.<sup>17</sup>

In 1933, then chairman of the Rural Board W. S. Ebdon commented that the Malay settlement was a failure because its inland location was inconvenient for Malays whose livelihoods depended on fishing and required easy access to the sea. The settlement's remote location away from bus centres also posed problems for its residents.<sup>18</sup>

The Malay leaders closely associated with the Malay settlement project rejected Ebdon's view, but appealed to the government to reduce land rent so that more Malays could afford to move to Kampong Melayu. The development of the Malay settlement intensified when the residents from Kallang village were resettled there in order to make way for the construction of Kallang Airport. In 1960, the Malay settlement was extended to include the Kaki Bukit area. The register of settlers was closed in 1965 when it had some 1,300 houses.<sup>19</sup>

Eunos Abdullah and his peers believed that an authentic Malay life was best experienced in an exclusively Malay community. Kampong Melayu was imagined as a privileged site of a yet to be fulfilled “Malay nation” (*bangsa Melayu*), the material expression of KMS' vision of the Malay *bangsa* and creation of a Malay identity. Only applicants who could demonstrate their “Malayness” were given temporary occupation licences for house plots in the settlement. Among other criteria, applicants had to be male, of Malay parentage, habitually spoke the Malay language, professed the Muslim religion and conformed to Malay customs. Provision of its own mosques, schools, a youth club and a village cooperative ensured that Kampong Melayu was self-sufficient.<sup>20</sup> This ideal as



(Top) Bungalow-type dwellings made of wood and zinc in Kampong Melayu. *All rights reserved, Singapore Ministry of Culture. [1963].* Democratic socialism in action, June 1959 to April 1963 (p. 21). *Singapore: Ministry of Culture.*

(Above) 1956 street directory indicating the location of Jalan Eunos and the Malay Settlement. *All rights reserved, Singapore Survey Department. [1950–75].* Singapore street directory and sectional maps (Map no. 60). *Singapore: Survey Department.*

envisioned by Eunos Abdullah remained until the Malay settlement was de-gazetted in 1981 to make way for the construction of the Pan Island Expressway.

Following his retirement in 1931 Eunos Abdullah suffered from poor health and passed away at the age of 57 on 12 December 1933 at his home on Desker Road. His body was laid to rest at the Bidadari Cemetery.<sup>21</sup> ♦

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# THE FRENCH CAN

## Pineapples, Sardines and the Gallic Connection

The Ayam brand of canned sardines was the brainchild of Frenchman Alfred Clouët. Timothy Pwee reveals its history and that of the pineapple canning industry in Singapore.



Timothy Pwee is a Senior Reference Librarian who handles the National Library's Singapore collection. In a previous incarnation, he worked in a small business education outfit that gave him passing familiarity with the business world and the travails of small start-ups.

The French are linked to Singapore in many curious ways. Few people are aware that the French Revolution (1787-99) and the subsequent Napoleonic Wars (1803-15) were responsible for setting off the chain of events that not only led to Stamford Raffles founding an East India Company outpost in Singapore, but also the establishment of the canning industry on the island.

The introduction of tinned foods in Singapore is a French legacy that dates back to 1875, starting first with pineapples and then sardines. The pineapple industry has since shifted base to other Southeast Asian countries but one trademark, the Ayam brand of canned sardines, has endured over the years.

The history of the Ayam brand is intriguing because it was founded in Singapore around 1892. A. Clouët & Co (which was bought by the Denis Frères Company in 1954) is now an international business still based in Singapore with production centres in Asia and distribution centres the world over. The product range today includes canned sardines and tuna, baked beans, coconut milk and a variety of Asian sauces and condiments.



Alfred Clouët, the Frenchman who introduced the Ayam brand of canned sardines to Singapore in 1892. Courtesy of Denis Frères Company.

### The Allure of Pineapples

The plant species *Ananas comosus*, commonly known as the pineapple, is a fruit of the New World. It was discovered in Guadeloupe by Christopher Columbus on 4 November 1493<sup>1</sup> and brought back to Europe. The fruit proved popular and was transplanted by the Portuguese and the Spanish in their explorations around the globe. Isaac Henry Burkill<sup>2</sup> noted that the Portuguese learnt to call the pineapple "nana" from the Tupí natives of Brazil, and the word eventually evolved into "nanas" in the lands where the plant was introduced by the Portuguese. The Spanish, however, called it "piña" due to its resemblance to the pine cone, and the communities whom they introduced it to also used the Spanish name. The English name "pineapple" is in fact derived from the Spanish word "piña". The Malays also call the pineapple "nanas", while the Bugis refer to it as "pandang" because it resembles the fruit of the pandan plant (*Pandanus amaryllifolius* and related species).<sup>3</sup>

By the mid-1800s, the pineapple fruit was commonly available in Singapore. A pineapple market located by the Singapore River (likely in the Boat Quay area) had become a problem as early as 1844 when a letter in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* complained about the failure to remove "the Pine Apple Mart from the Riverside".<sup>4</sup> In 1848, a jury reporting to the court on Singapore's affairs gave a very eloquent description of the market's condition: "Indeed so great is the pineapple

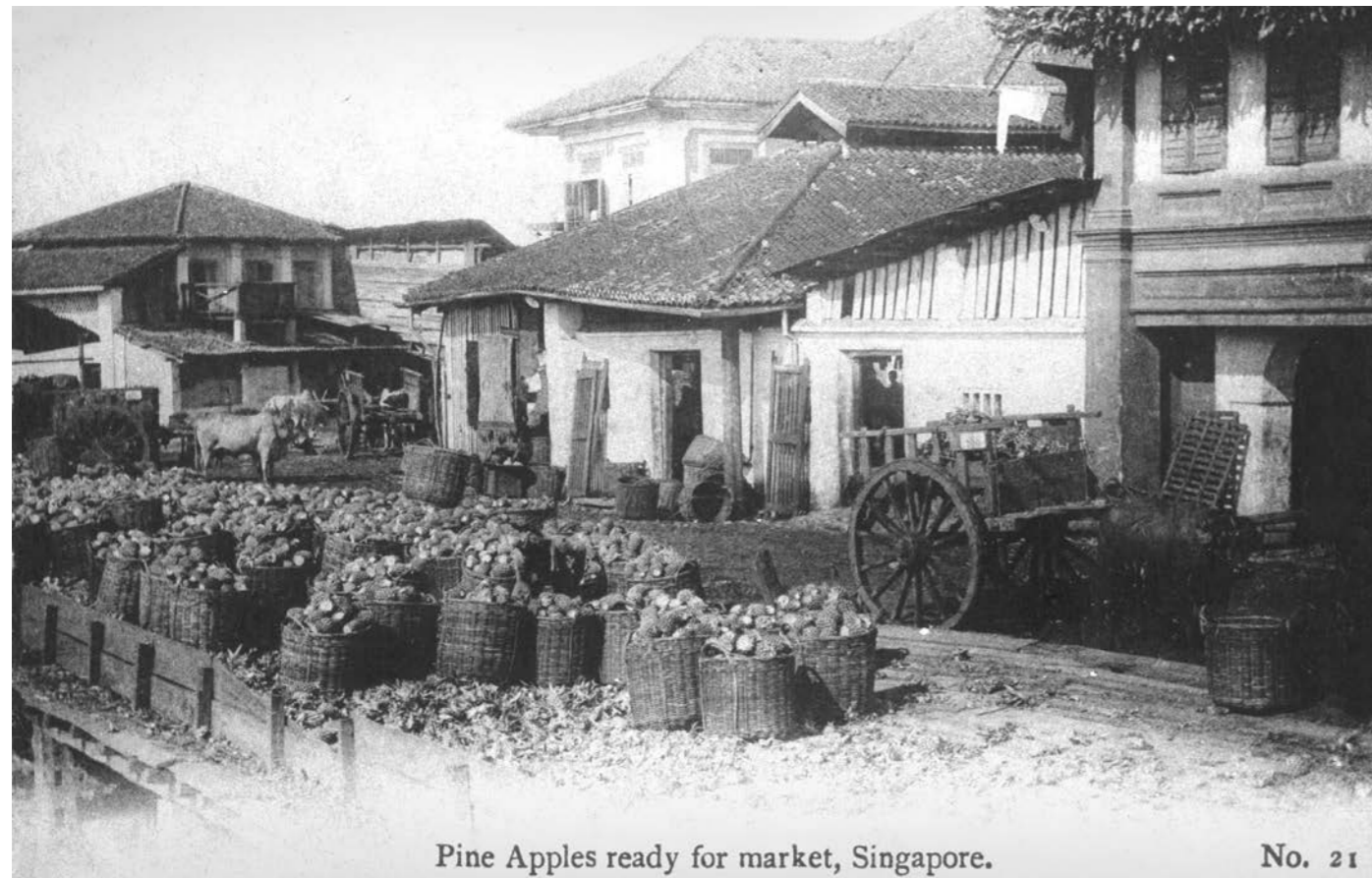
portion of the nuisance that the Jurors found one of the landing places so obstructed that to have descended the stairs would have been attended with the risk of a fractured Limb".<sup>5</sup> A letter written two years later called it a place where "obnoxious miasms are in constant process of manufacture".<sup>6</sup>

Where did the pineapples come from? An 1861 article in *The Straits Times* describes pineapples that were sold for one cent each in Raffles Place: "Originally purchased from the Bugis planter at the rate of 16 for a cent, it was sold by the Chinese who bought it from the Bugis at the rate of 12 for a cent, sold again to the fruiter in the bazaar at the rate of six for a cent; it is now sold by the street hawker at 16 times more than its cost price".<sup>7</sup>

In the mid-19th century, before the discoveries of Frenchman Louis Pasteur, diseases like malaria were thought to be caused by miasmatic vapours, or bad air, giving a more sinister tone to the 1850 letter of complaint about "obnoxious miasms". This theory of miasmas had existed since the time of the ancient Greeks. In order to identify which miasmas were poisonous, a

Drawing of two pineapples from the 1598 book, *John Hvgighen van Linschoten, His Discours of Voyages into ye Easte & West Indies: Devided into foure books. All Rights Reserved, National Library Board Singapore, 2008.*





Pine Apples ready for market, Singapore.

No. 21

Pineapples ready for the market in Singapore, early 1900s. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

British doctor in Singapore, Robert Little Esquire, observed the population, their state of health and the surroundings. In 1848, Little reported his findings in Singapore's first scholarly journal, *The Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*, often referred to as Logan's Journal after its editor James Richardson Logan.<sup>8</sup> As Blákán Mátí (now known as Sentosa) was notorious for malarial fevers, Little and Logan surveyed Blákán Mátí and the surrounding islands. He described the hills on these islands as covered in pineapples, with Blákán Mátí having at least 200 acres of the fruit, mainly cultivated by the Bugis community.

### The First Attempts at Canning

*The Singapore Directory for the Straits Settlements 1879*<sup>9</sup> reports that a Frenchman named Laurent was the first in Singapore to produce preserved pineapples "some four years ago" (i.e. around 1875), but "his undertaking collapsed after a brief period." Exactly why Laurent's venture collapsed is unknown but financial difficulties are likely to have figured in his failure: an indignant letter published in 1877 by Victor Charles Valtriny, partner of C. Poisson & Co., complained against a court ruling favouring Laurent. The dispute was over money owed to Valtriny

for a consignment of Laurent's tinned pineapples that the former had shipped to Paris for sale.<sup>10</sup> This Laurent is believed to be the same Jules Antoine Laurent who took over the Clarendon Hotel on Beach Road from the owner Charles Emmerson in 1874.<sup>11</sup>

It was another Frenchman who had some measure of success in the canning business. Joseph Pierre Bastiani was a seaman with French shipping company Messageries Maritimes, who arrived in Singapore in 1874.<sup>12</sup> His 1925 obituary described him as a veteran of "the disastrous [sic] war... between France and Germany", referring to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. Although Bastiani was not significant enough to be listed as a merchant in the 1879 Straits Settlements directory, there is, nonetheless, mention of Bastiani's manufacture and export of canned pineapple "to the great marts of France and Italy", calling it "an industry yet but in a partial state of development, but... one that may be looked forward as likely to provide a large amount of employment for the industrial and agricultural classes of the colony".<sup>13</sup>

Besides Europe, Bastiani also looked to Australia as another market for his canned pineapples. The following year in 1880, Bastiani exhibited four products at the Melbourne International Exhibition:<sup>14</sup> "preserved mango-

steens, pine apples in own juice, pine apples preserved in syrup [and] pine apple syrup".

In the 1881 edition of the Straits Settlements directory, Bastiani advertised himself as "Fruit Preserver, No. 8, 9, High Street, Singapore, and also at Sydney, Who was the first to introduce [about 7 years ago] the Manufacture of Preserves from Fruits grown in this Colony, obtained Medals at the Paris and Sydney Exhibitions for the excellence of quality, &c., of his goods".<sup>15</sup> The fact that he first called himself a pioneer in fruit preserves around 1875 strongly suggests that he may have been involved in the aforementioned Laurent's venture. However, no evidence has been found to prove this.

Bastiani did not depend on just preserving fruit. In 1883, he started advertising his imported French products – cheeses, pâté, sardines, tomatoes, etc – in *The Straits Times*.<sup>16</sup> By 1900, he had thought of returning home to Nice and apparently did so in 1902 when his residence and pineapple machinery at High Street were advertised for rent and sale respectively.<sup>17</sup> At the time of his retirement, Singapore's pineapple canning industry looked rosy, with demand outstripping supply. Bastiani's cannery was then one of five major factories in Singapore – the others being Landau, Ghin Giap, Tan Twa Hee and Tan Lian Swee.

### Canning and the French Connection

The canning industry can be traced to the French Revolution of 1789–99 when France conscripted hundreds of thousands of men as soldiers. As it was impossible to feed that many men in the field – imagine the amount of fresh meat and vegetables to be sourced and transported daily – in 1795, a prize was put up by the Société d'Encouragement pour l'Industrie Nationale (Society for the Encouragement of National Industry) in Paris for anyone who could find a new and economical way to preserve food that was more nutritious than traditional salting, smoking and pickling.

The man who claimed that prize 15 years later in January 1810 was Nicolas Appert, a chef who had set up a confectionery in Paris.<sup>18</sup> Appert's rudimentary method involved glass bottles sealed with cork and wire but the basic process he designed to seal food in containers and then heating the containers to kill bacteria and spores is still used today.

It was another patent registered in London by the British inventor Peter Durand that introduced the idea of using handmade wrought iron canisters, the

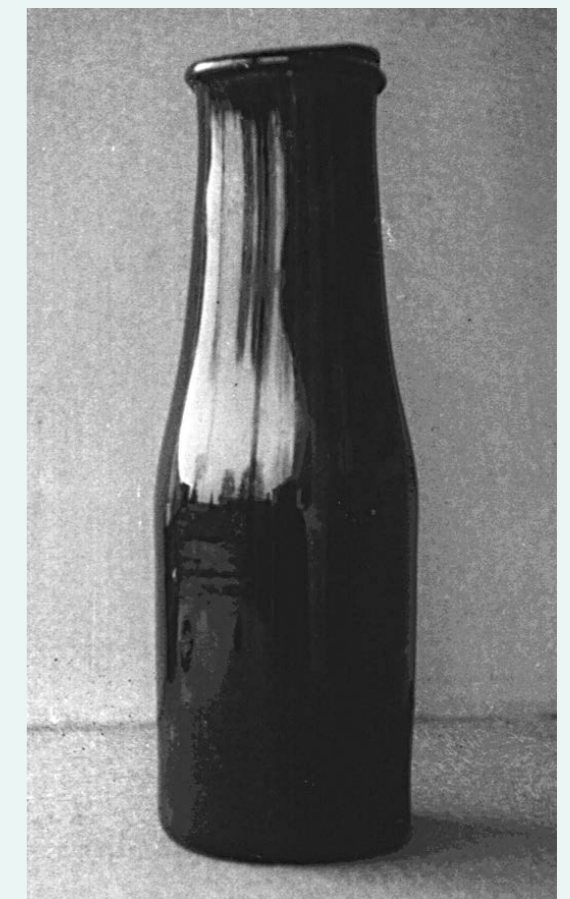
precursor to the can as we know it. Intriguingly, Durand, who was of French origin, filed his patent in August 1810, just three months after Appert published the details of his process in Paris.<sup>19</sup> This has led some to suggest that Durand stole Appert's idea. However, retired Reading University food science lecturer Norman Cowell's research has found evidence in a diary that names a Frenchman, Philippe de Girard, as having communicated the idea to Durand.<sup>20</sup> That Girard's name does not appear in the patent and only exists in an eyewitness account is not surprising given that Britain had been fighting with France since 1793, and hostilities would continue until Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo in 1815. Canning was an important advance in military logistics and it would have been ill-advised for a Frenchman like de Girard to openly advertise this transfer of technology to the British. Indeed, Durand later sold the patent to the British food company Donkin, Hall and Gamble who set up a canning factory and by 1812, the firm had begun to supply tinned food to the British army.<sup>21</sup>



**(Above)** Portrait of Nicolas Appert, inventor of food canning in 1795, tiré de *Les Artisans illustres de Foucaud*, anonymous woodcut, circa 1841. *Les Artisans illustres 1841*, collection Jean-Paul Barbier, Musée des Beaux Arts Châlons en Champagne. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

**(Below Left)** Tin can used at the first canning factory in England, Bryan Donkin and Co., London, England, 1812. *Bryan Donkin Archive Trust.*

**(Below)** Appert's rudimentary method of preserving food using glass bottles sealed with cork and wire, collection Jean-Paul Barbier, Musée Châlons en Champagne salle Appert. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*



(Right) The logo of A. Clouët & Co Ltd bears the trademark cockerel, an unofficial symbol of France, 1892. Courtesy of Denis Frères Company. (Bottom) The combined Ayam-Triomphe brand of sardines was first advertised in *The Straits Times* on 23 March 1917 (p. 6). © *The Straits Times*.



A 1915 US Department of Commerce report found that although pineapple production was concentrated in Singapore, it was planted as a catch crop<sup>22</sup> by rubber plantations while waiting for rubber trees to mature. This meant that Singapore's pineapple canneries did not have an assured supply of pineapple. Even so, Singapore was then still the leading exporter of canned pineapple in the world with 580,065 cases shipped in 1912. The bulk went to the United Kingdom (345,771 cases) and its colonies (105,141 cases). Included in the statistics is the output from Siam's few pineapple factories; these were largely Singapore offshoots that sent their goods to Singapore for re-export.<sup>23</sup>

Why did Bastiani succeed where Laurent failed? It is of course only too easy to point to Laurent's financial difficulties and his mounting debts. Like many other entrepreneurs, he was ambitious and experienced cash flow problems that swamped him. But there was one thing Bastiani did which Laurent failed to do: he exhibited his products at potential markets like Paris, Sydney and Melbourne, and even had an office in Sydney. This allowed him to make direct contact with the retailers in these foreign cities and take orders for his goods. Laurent on the other hand only sold his products to an agent in Singapore, who then exported them to Paris on consignment. This left Laurent dependent on a middleman who had no real stake in the success of his venture.

With Singapore's expansion as a trading centre, agriculture and other low-value manufacturing was pushed out to the surrounding countries. A 2005 report by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations stated that Thailand, Philippines and Indonesia account for "nearly 80 percent of the canned pineapple supply in the world market".<sup>24</sup>

#### Alfred Clouët's Ayam Brand

In 1892, Frenchman Alfred Clouët was already importing French wine (including Bordeaux and Claret), brandy and chocolates<sup>25</sup> into Singapore. He also imported a French perfume that was branded with his trademark cockerel, which is an unofficial symbol of France. The cockerel belongs to the genus *Gallus* which in Latin means rooster as well as Gaul, the people of France. As Malay was the language of the marketplace at the time, the trademark became known as Chop Ayam (Chicken Brand).<sup>26</sup> So while most Singaporeans think of the Ayam brand as being something very local, it is in reality a very foreign and colonial symbol.

Clouët's fragrance "Ayer Wangi, Chop Ayam" (literally Ayam Brand Perfumed Water) had been selling for five years and became

so well known that M. A. Gaffoor imitated Clouët's packaging and adopted a similar trademark of two fighting cockerels (Chop Dua Ayam). Clouët was so incensed that he applied to the Supreme Court for an injunction against Gaffoor in February 1904 and won. Interestingly, Clouët published in *The Straits Times* a notice announcing his injunction against Gaffoor in October 1904 and had it reprinted again in April 1910.<sup>27</sup> It seemed that he still had problems with Gaffoor six years later. The next case in December 1909 was against a Chiong Fye Wan for "applying a false trade mark to bottles of scent". The scent bore a label with an image of a rooster, some English words and the words Messrs. Clouët & Co. in Malay. The accused was fined \$25 and his goods confiscated.<sup>28</sup>

Like others in the trade, Clouët imported canned foods and sold them through retailers. His advertisement for French "Triomphe" canned sardines made its first appearance in the 15 March 1916 edition of *The Straits Times* and continued until 1918. However, along the way, the Chop Ayam trademark and the Clouët company name merged with the Triomphe name and appeared in the branding for the sardines. This combined branding first appeared in a 23 March 1917 advertisement.<sup>29</sup> In December 1916, an advertisement offering 100 limited Christmas hampers for sale at \$10 per hamper, each comprising 36 tins of "Ayam" Triomphe sardines, "Ayam" green peas and "Ayam" Alaska salmon was placed in *The Straits Times*. Interestingly, only the sardines carried the combined branding. It was only from 1934 onwards that sardines bearing solely the Ayam brand trademark were advertised.<sup>30</sup>

The Ayam brand represents the growth of one of Singapore's first home-grown products in what is today known as the FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods) sector. Although products sold under the Ayam brand were originally manufactured by others and brought in by Clouët, it was the brand name that became successful – a name painstakingly built up over the years. In 1922, an article in *The Straits Times* mentions that the A. Clouët & Co. stall in the local Malaya-Borneo exhibition and its "Ayam" brand had drawn many visitors.<sup>31</sup> But the best testament to the strength of a brand is, ironically, the imitators it attracts and the consequent need of the brand owner to defend his trademark.

Although it has been claimed that Ayam brand sardines were canned in Singapore, there is no record of a fish cannery ever existing here or in the Malay Peninsula during the early 20th century. Although the colonial government's Fisheries Department actively promoted the idea of a fish cannery

in Malaya at the time, it never took off – but not from want of trying. In 1925, the director of fisheries complained, "No Malayan fish is tinned. Yet canned fish find a ready market even in Malayan fishing villages. Few sundry goods shops in such villages are without those large oval tins of large sardines imported from California. This canned fish is cheap even to the fisherman..." It was a decade later in 1936 that the Fisheries Department opened an experimental fish cannery in Kuantan – the first in Malaya.<sup>32</sup> However, a cannery can only process fish when there is a ready and plentiful supply of fresh fish close at hand. According to Tom Burdon in his book, *The Fishing Industry of Singapore*, published by Donald Moore in 1955, canneries develop in association with fishing fleets but the waters around Malaya were not productive enough to support trawlers with the technology of that era.<sup>33</sup>

In 1954, the Denis Frères Company, run by the sons of a French mariner who settled in Saigon,<sup>34</sup> bought the Clouët business from the son of one of Alfred Clouët's partners, Ned Clumeck. They grew it into the firm you see today. Clouët Trading is now the dominant player in Singapore's canned and preserved goods sector, holding 20 percent of the market share as at 2013.<sup>35</sup> It is also a worldwide player under the name Ayam SARDL, and one of 13 companies analysed by Research and Markets in their report for the global canned food market.<sup>36</sup> ♦

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# "Triomphe" Sardines

( IN OIL ) ( IN TOMATO )

Packed in 1 lb. and ½-lb. white tins with brass labels as above.  
Easily opened by keys attached.

## BUY "TRIOMPHE" SARDINES—YOU WILL LIKE THEM.

Because they represent the highest quality in Sardines, being packed in pure olive oil; and in tomato. These Sardines have been specially selected, and every part of the fish is a dainty morsel. There is no waste, and Triomphe Sardines are therefore economical. They should be tried to be fully appreciated.

RETAILED BY

<b>M. PAKIRMAIDEN,</b> 34, Kling Street.	<b>BUN BEE &amp; CO.,</b> 11, Rochore Road.
<b>GUAN CHIN HONG,</b> 94, Robinson Road.	<b>CHIN WAH HENG,</b> 64, Beach Road.
<b>KWONG YAN HIN &amp; CO.,</b> 14, North Canal Road.	<b>THYE HIN &amp; CO.,</b> 12, Kling Street.

Wholesale from:

# A. CLOUËT & CO., 7, RAFFLES QUAY, SINGAPORE.



# ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

## Singapore's First Zoos

Few people are aware that the island's first public zoo was set up in 1875.

**Lim Tin Seng** traces the history of wildlife parks in Singapore.

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The Singapore Zoo, located on a 26-hectare promontory in Upper Seletar Reservoir, is considered as one of the finest of its kind in the world. Home to over 2,800 animals from more than 300 species, the zoo has received a string of awards and accolades over the years. The zoo is part of a cluster of wildlife attractions in the vicinity, including the Night Safari and the River Safari, and serves as a centre for research in the areas of wildlife conservation, wildlife rescue and rehabilitation.<sup>1</sup> The Singapore Zoo was set up in 1973, but unbeknownst to many, smaller animal enclosures have existed on the island since colonial times.

### An Early Fascination for Wildlife

Zoology, a branch of natural history that studies all aspects of animals, was a subject that captivated the island's colonial administrators, including its founder, Stamford Raffles. A keen natural historian, Raffles was deeply fascinated by the diversity of animals and plants of the East Indies. He regularly embarked on expeditions to explore the tropical flora and fauna of the region, and came across the *Rafflesia*, the giant parasitic flower named after him, and exotic wildlife such as the crab-eating macaque, moonrat, siamang, sun bear, white-crowned hornbill and barred eagle owl.<sup>2</sup>

Raffles maintained a menagerie when he was stationed in Penang, Malacca, Java and Sumatra. He kept a siamang, an elephant, two orangutans, a tiger and a sun bear. Many of the animals were given to him by Malay, Javanese and Sumatran rulers and, oddly, a few were tamed with a distinctly anthropomorphic slant.<sup>3</sup> For instance, Raffles was said to have dressed his pair of orangutans in Malacca in human attire, and fed his sun bear Bencoolen champagne. The sun bear was raised together with his children in the same nursery and allowed to sit at his desk.<sup>4</sup> Following his return to Singapore in October 1822, Raffles proposed in his Town Plan the creation of an animal enclosure with 200 spotted deer in a botanic garden – however this did not materialise.<sup>5</sup>

William Farquhar, the first resident of Singapore (1819–22), was also deeply inter-

ested in natural history and zoology. During his years as commandant and resident of Malacca between 1803 and 1818, Farquhar hired Chinese artists to document the flora, mammals, birds, reptiles, fish and insects of Malacca in close to 500 watercolour paintings. He also made a number of zoological discoveries in Malacca that included the Malayan tapir, binturong, banded linsang and bamboo rat. Farquhar similarly kept a menagerie at his residence that housed animals such as the leopard, wild cat, wild dog, porcupine, cassowary and binturong. He even owned a tiger, acquired when it was still a cub. Farquhar also reared many different types of birds as he was particularly interested in ornithology.<sup>6</sup>

Some prominent and well-off early settlers in Singapore, such as Chinese merchant Hoo Ah Kay, or Whampoa, were similarly interested in the wildlife of the region. In the 1850s, Whampoa established a private menagerie in the expansive gardens of his mansion along Serangoon Road.<sup>7</sup> The menagerie was often cited by travellers as a must-see and comprised many rare birds and animals such as rhinoceroses, tapirs, giraffes and a bear.<sup>8</sup> Whampoa had a pet orangutan that not only preferred cognac over water, but also possessed "manlike propensities" that could "win over some of his visitors to the Darwinian Theory".<sup>9</sup>

Whampoa sent the remains of the orangutan to the Raffles Museum to be preserved after its death in 1878.<sup>10</sup>

### The First Public Zoo

In 1867, Harry St George Ord, governor of the Straits Settlements (1867–73), suggested to the Agri-Horticultural Society that a zoological garden be established within the Botanic Gardens on Cluny Road for educational purposes.<sup>11</sup> To encourage the effort, Ord offered the society two elephants, two tapirs, a leopard and a black panther in 1870, and a government grant to defray the cost of upkeeping them. The society declined Ord's offer as it felt that it did not have the means to manage a zoo.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the zoo that Ord envisioned did not materialise until after the society, overcome by debt, handed the gardens to the Gardens Committee appointed by the colonial government in January 1875. Henry James Murton, a botanist with Britain's Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, England, was hired as the superintendent of the Botanic Gardens. Murton immediately expanded the gardens and concurrently established the zoo.<sup>13</sup>

Murton hired William Krohn, a zoology expert, as the superintendent of the Zoological Garden.<sup>14</sup> By 1877, the developed parts of the gardens were dotted with enclosures housing an impressive collection of about 150



(Left) This dark-handed gibbon hanging off a mangosteen tree is one of the paintings that William Farquhar commissioned Chinese artists to do between 1803 and 1818 when he was resident and commandant of Malacca. *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.* (Facing Page) Entrance of the Singapore Miniature Zoo in Pasir Panjang that was started by Tong Seng Mun in 1957. *Tong Seng Mun Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

animals. Many were gifts from administrators and dignitaries from Singapore and Malaya: the governor of the Straits Settlements, Andrew Clarke (1873–75), presented the zoo with a female two-horned rhinoceros, while the British resident of Perak, Ernest Birch, gave a sloth-bear, and the sultan of Terengganu gifted a tiger. The public also donated a pair of orangutans, a leopard, a number of deer and other small animals. The King of Siam gave the zoo a leopard and the Acclimatisation Society in Melbourne an emu, a great kangaroo, three bed kangaroos and a brush-tailed rock wallaby.<sup>15</sup>

However, the cost of upkeep of the animals soon exceeded the budget allocated to the zoo, and it faced problems in caring for the animals. By 1878, several enclosures had fallen into disrepair. Coupled with the loss of its only keeper, H. Capel, due to a dispute in pay, many of the bigger animals, including the rhinoceros, leopard and two kangaroos died due to poor living conditions. In a bid to stem further losses and reduce its overheads, Murton, Krohn and the Gardens Committee decided to limit the collection to only birds and small animals in 1878. The larger animals were sent to the Calcutta Zoological Gardens in exchange for several Indian bird species.<sup>16</sup>

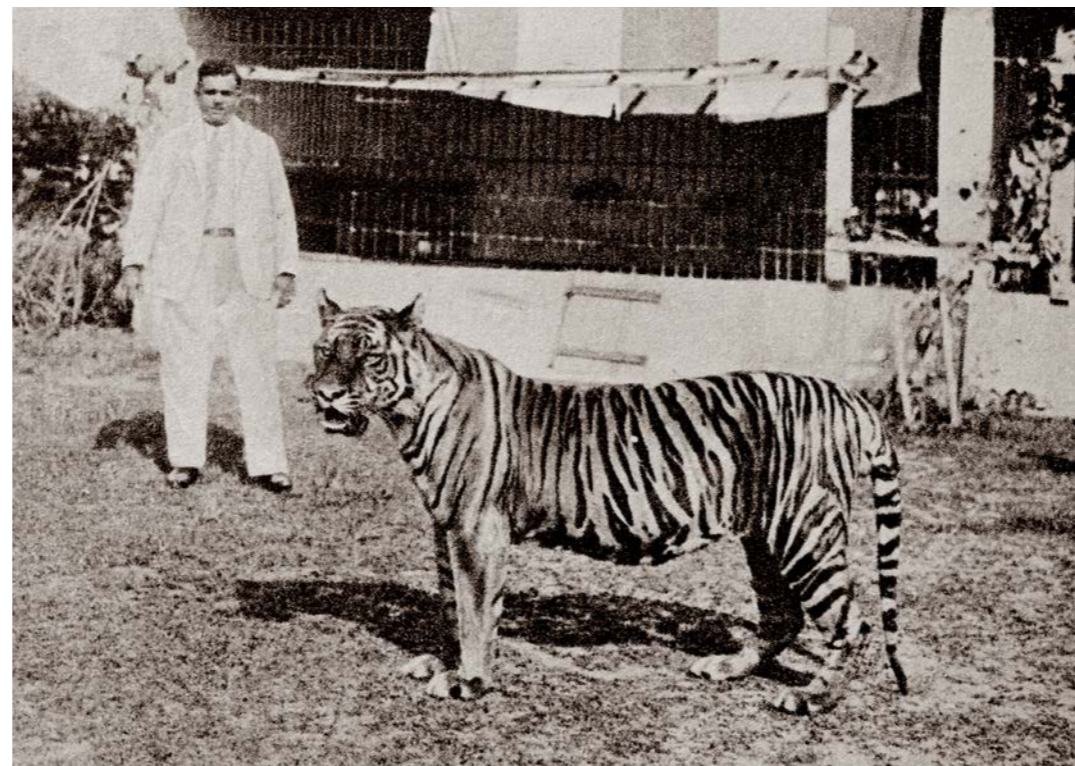
The scaled-down Botanic Gardens zoo was now able to operate within budget. In fact, by 1880 many of the enclosures had been repaired,<sup>17</sup> and new aviaries and enclosures were built to house its growing bird and small animal collection. Residents once again donated animals to the zoo. Some of the animals it received during this period include the Asian golden cat from Pahang (1893), the Indian jackal (1895) and the dingo from Australia (1893). At the turn of the century, the zoo collection, as Henry Nicholas Ridley, director of the Botanic Gardens, wrote, “had become the very representative of the fauna of the Malay Peninsula and islands”.<sup>18</sup>

Ridley held high regard for the Botanic Gardens zoo, describing it as an attraction that “was known all over the world, and the first thing asked for by visitors”. He saw the zoo as a means for researchers and the public to learn about animal behaviour objectively. He wrote, “The only way of knowing what an animal thinks is to keep it comfortable and snug and observe its ways. It will soon let you know what it likes, which probably does not at all fall in with your ideas of what it ought to like”.<sup>19</sup> The public began urging the government to allocate more funds for the zoo to improve its infrastructure but as the cost of its upkeep was too high, the government decided in 1903 to sell all the animals and birds and shut down the zoo.



(Above) William Lawrence Soma Basapa. Courtesy of the Basapa Family.

(Right) William Lawrence Soma Basapa with his favourite pet Bengal tiger Apay. Courtesy of the Basapa Family.



### Basapa's Private Zoo

The next zoo was a private venture by William Lawrence Soma Basapa in 1928.<sup>20</sup> Basapa was an Anglican Indian landowner who had an unequivocal passion for animals. In fact, he was an animal trader by profession, and had a pet Bengal tiger named Apay, which he led around with a chain since it was four years old. In the early 1920s, Basapa converted part of his estate at 317 Serangoon Road into a space for his collection of animals and birds.<sup>21</sup> Among the first who visited Basapa's private menagerie was Albert Einstein, the father of modern physics, who described it as a “wonderful zoological garden” when he visited Singapore in 1922.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, Basapa had to relocate his animals in 1928 when his neighbours, the Rural Board and even his wife complained about the noise and the stench of his zoo.<sup>23</sup>

The new 11-hectare site for his animals was situated on Punggol Road. Although it was a deserted mangrove swamp overgrown with weeds, bushes and coconut palms, Basapa was able to transform it into a working zoological garden. By 1930, the zoo, which was called the Singapore Zoo, had become quite respectable, attracting large numbers of visitors, particularly during weekends.<sup>24</sup> Other than showcasing animals native to the Malay Peninsula and Borneo such as the Malayan tiger, Malayan tapir, spotted leopard and orangutan, Basapa also imported animals that were entirely new to Singapore in order to make the collection interesting for visitors.<sup>25</sup>

The first animals that arrived from overseas in 1930 included three seals from the US, a pair of lions from Africa and some rare birds from South America.<sup>26</sup> In 1935, the zoo witnessed one of the biggest shipments of animals when the Norddeutscher Lloyd cargo steamer *Neckar* arrived from Germany with “her top and main decks crammed with boxes and crates containing a remarkably varied collection of animals and birds”. Described as a veritable “Noah's Ark” by the press, some of the wildlife the steamer was carrying included two African lions, 15 African grey parrots, four Brazilian blue-necked turacos, two pairs of white swans, two Angola cats, a pair of Brazilian trumpet birds and a pair of silver marmozets.<sup>27</sup> The zoo had previously received a chimpanzee from France, a pair of polar bears from Germany and the monkey-eating eagle from the Philippines.<sup>28</sup> Through regular animal exchanges with Sydney's Taronga Zoo, Basapa was able to introduce Australian wildlife such as the Wagga Wagga pigeon, golden shoulder parakeet, Tasmanian devil and kangaroo.<sup>29</sup>

By 1936, Basapa had amassed a collection of about 200 animals and some 2,000 birds, turning his zoo into a major attraction in pre-war Singapore. In the 1936 edition of the *Willis' Singapore Guide*, the definitive travel guide of the time, the zoo was described as a place where visitors could indulge in a unique experience viewing animals in their primitive state, enjoying refreshment at an affordable price, and mingling with two friendly free-roaming chimpanzees that were most willing to pose for photographs.<sup>30</sup> As the zoo cost

about \$35 daily to maintain, Basapa charged an admission fee of 40 cents for adults and 20 cents for children, which was considered pricey back then.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, many locals visited the zoo as it was a novelty. Local resident Mohinder Singh said, “People used to visit it because they couldn't see any other. There was no other. Even Johore Zoo which Tengku started was also very small, [and] was started later”.<sup>32</sup> The zoo was also commended by prominent individuals, including Roland Braddell, barrister and joint editor of *One Hundred Years of Singapore*. He wrote in *The Lights of Singapore*:<sup>33</sup>

The Singapore Zoo at Ponggol [is] a truly delightful place that has the full approval of the local authorities. Here you will see a magnificent collection of birds, amongst which the crown pigeons are said to be the best in the world. The orangutans are really happy here and in a climate natural to them...As it is, I think the town owes much to Mr Basapa's very courageous lone effort in providing with us what is a very great attraction... A trip to the zoo is one of the things that no visitor should omit, it has a personality entirely its own, and is pitched in beautiful surroundings on the Straits of Johore.

Unfortunately, Basapa's zoo suffered during the Japanese invasion of Singapore in January 1942. In preparation for the assault of the Japanese from Johor, the British

### A Coterie of Private Zoos

The Singapore Zoo at Punggol was not the only private zoo in Singapore during the colonial period. As wildlife trade was unregulated at the time, Singapore became a wildlife trading hub, leading to the establishment of a number of private zoos.<sup>36</sup> Among them was Tong Seng Mun's Singapore Miniature Zoo at Pasir Panjang. Opened in 1957, it was home to many bird and animal species such as lions, bears, a camel and a rhinoceros. There was also a zoo off Tampines road, which was started in 1954 by L.F. de Jong. It reportedly housed cassowaries, tapirs, leopards, gibbons, crocodiles and snakes. Another zoo, called Mayfield Kennels and Zoo and owned by Herbert de Souza, was located on East Coast Road in the early 1950s. Here, visitors could purchase animals ranging from white mice to giant pythons and even elephants.<sup>37</sup> Besides Basapa's zoo in Punggol, there was another opened by the Chan brothers in the same area in 1963. The zoo, however, went bankrupt in the early 1970s and its animals and birds were auctioned off.<sup>38</sup>

deployed troops to defend the northern coastline of Singapore, including Punggol coast. The zoo was ordered to close and Basapa was given only 24 hours to move his birds and animals elsewhere. Unable to find another location at such short notice, many of Basapa's animals were either killed or released into the wild.<sup>34</sup> The Japanese subsequently took over the zoo compound to store their supplies. Heartbroken, Basapa passed away shortly after, in 1943.<sup>35</sup>

### Asia's Best Zoo

Shortly after gaining Independence in 1965, discussion for a public zoo surfaced when then chairman of the Public Utilities Board (PUB) Ong Swee Law proposed in January 1968 to set one up in the Upper Seletar Reservoir Catchment forest. The aim was to utilise the land around the reservoir for recreational purposes and create a space for family outings.<sup>39</sup> Ong set up a committee in April 1968 comprising PUB officials to study the feasibility of a new Singapore zoo.<sup>40</sup> During the course of the study, the committee consulted with many zoological

experts from zoos and zoological societies around the world to make up for their lack of knowledge on the subject.

When the committee's report was submitted to the government in September 1969, senior officials and cabinet members, including then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, were startled by the proposal. Lee, in particular, was concerned about two things: First, situating a zoo in the middle of a reservoir could pollute the nation's precious water supply, and second, the zoo might become a dirty and smelly place.

To allay these fears, the committee emphasised that the zoo would adhere to a high standard of cleanliness and hygiene. It also proposed having a storm drain around the perimeter of the zoo's compound to separate it from the reservoir, and its own sewage treatment plant to process human and animal waste. The processed waste would be pumped away from the water catchment area via a 4.5-km-long pipeline into the Mandai River. The committee had also given considerable thought to how the zoo would sustain itself, promising to avoid the financial pitfalls of other zoos by having affordable admission charges, running restaurants and shops, and seeking grants and donations.<sup>41</sup> All this might seem par for the course today, but one has to remember this was 1969 and Singapore's leaders were more concerned with creating jobs and addressing public housing woes rather than building recreational facilities for its people.

However, right from the start the planners had a good idea of how they would manage the zoo – from the animal species to exhibit to the number of staff to hire – and they persevered. As a result, the zoo proposal gained the support of Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee and Law Minister E. W. Baker who in turn convinced the other ministers, including Lee, to support the idea.<sup>42</sup> In September 1969, the government gave its approval and a public limited company, Singapore Zoological Gardens, was set up to oversee the construction and management of the zoo. The government also allocated S\$9 million for its construction, and two experts – Lyn de Alwis of Sri Lanka's Dehiwala Zoo and A.G. Alphonso, director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens – were appointed as consultants.<sup>43</sup>

De Alwis was instrumental in conceptualising the zoo's design. The “open concept” design framework that de Alwis employed at the Dehiwala Zoo dispensed with cages, even for the big cats. Instead, the animals were to be kept in open enclosures that resembled their natural habitats.<sup>44</sup> Alphonso made a concerted effort to landscape the zoo such that it blended into the surrounding rainforest. During the construction phase from 1971 to 1973, some 2,000 new trees and plants



were added to give the zoo a lush and tropical appearance.<sup>45</sup> As the zoo neared completion, it started receiving pets and animal captures from the public. Surprisingly, these included gibbons, macaques, mousedeer and an orangutan named Zabu.<sup>46</sup> A staff of some 130 personnel – including the first batch of keepers Png Bee Chye, Subash Chandran, B. Dhanapala and Sim Siang Huat – were hired to care for the animals.<sup>47</sup> When it officially opened on 27 June 1973 as the Singapore Zoological Gardens, it had a modest collection of 272 animals from 72 species held in about 50 enclosures.<sup>48</sup>

Despite charging an entrance fee of S\$2 for adults and S\$1 for children, considered high at the time, the zoo was able to welcome its one-millionth visitor on 30 November 1974, less than two years after it opened.<sup>49</sup> Throughout the 1970s, the zoo would register over 500,000 visitors annually, and by the time it received its 10-millionth visitor in August 1987, it was attracting nearly a million visitors a year.<sup>50</sup> The popularity of the Singapore Zoological Gardens (which was renamed Singapore Zoo in 2005) was largely due to its canny ability to introduce new and innovative attractions and programmes. Between the 1980s and the turn of the millennium, the zoo rolled out one attraction after another in quick succession – from Breakfast with Ah Meng, the zoo's star orangutan, to choreographed animal shows that were meant to educate visitors. It also added many endangered animals to its collection through loans, gifts or acquisitions, including the Siberian tiger, golden lion tamarin, Komodo dragon, golden monkey, Russian brown bear, red panda lemur, polar bear, koala, snow leopard and gorilla.<sup>51</sup>

All this while, the zoo held steadfast to its open concept and exhibited the animals thematically. One of the first of such enclosures was the Fragile Forest in November 1988, which recreated a rainforest habitat with species such as lemurs, sloths, flying foxes and butterflies.<sup>52</sup> Other major thematic enclosures followed: Wild Africa (1991), Primate Kingdom (1991) and Great Rift Valley of Ethiopia (2001).<sup>53</sup> On 3 May 1994, the zoo took these thematic enclosures to a new level by unveiling the world's first Night Safari. The 35-hectare park allows visitors to observe nocturnal animals in settings that imitate natural habitats such as the Himalayan Foothills and Equatorial Africa.

Many of these attractions were conceived during Bernard Harrison's term as executive director from 1981 to 2002. After graduating from the University of Manchester with double honours in zoology and psychology, Harrison joined the zoo as an assistant administrative officer in 1973 and rose through the ranks. With his shaggy



(Top) A couple riding an elephant at the Singapore Zoological Gardens in the mid-1980s. Singapore Tourist Promotion Board Collection. Courtesy of Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB) Collection, National Archives of Singapore.

(Above) Deers inside a fenced enclosure at the Singapore Zoological Gardens in 1973. Courtesy of Ho Seng Huat.

hair and preference for T-shirts and cargo shorts over designer suits, Harrison was affectionately regarded by employees as a bohemian Tarzan of sorts. However, beneath his laid-back appearance was a deep and abiding interest in animals. With his creativity and willingness to think big and take risks in executing bold ideas, Harrison was able to transform the Singapore Zoo into what it is today.<sup>54</sup>

### What's Next?

The most recent jewel in the wildlife crown is the 12-hectare River Safari, Asia's first river-themed wildlife park that opened in February 2014. Just months later, in September, Prime

Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced that the zoo precinct in Mandai, encompassing the Singapore Zoo, Night Safari and River Safari, would be revamped and developed into a world-class nature themed attraction. The development would be led by the Singapore Tourism Board and Temasek Holdings, the majority shareholder of Wildlife Reserves Singapore (WRS), which runs the three zoos as well as Jurong Bird Park. Although developers have yet to announce concrete plans, bold moves such as having a fourth zoo, moving Jurong Bird Park to Mandai, as well as the construction of new public spaces, waterfront trails and green spaces for visitors to view wildlife in their natural habitats are said to be in the works.<sup>55</sup> ♦

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# Sketches of Singapore

Doodlings and drawings of the cityscape by the community of artists who make up Singapore's Urban Sketchers find expression in a new book.

Urban Sketchers is a global community of artists – from different walks of life, of varying ages, and living in different parts of the world – with one thing in common: a love for sketching the world around them. The movement was started in Seattle, United States, by the journalist and illustrator Gabriel Campanario, and today it has taken root in almost every major city worldwide. The Urban Sketchers group in Singapore is exceptionally active, having self- or co-published books in partnership with community and cultural institutions, and also held exhibitions of their works.

Group members regularly meet up for a mass “sketchwalk” every last Saturday of the month – always at a different part of Singapore. Participants use all manner of art tools and techniques to capture their surroundings. There are neither joining fees, attendance sign-ups nor skill requirements to fulfil; the community has only two simple rules – to always sketch the scenes on location, and be truthful in capturing what they see. More information is available at: <http://urbansketchers-singapore.blogspot.sg/>

## Urban Sketchers Singapore: Volume Two

In May this year, Urban Sketchers launched a book titled *Urban Sketchers Singapore: Volume Two*, the long-awaited sequel to the eponymously titled first book that was published in 2011. While the debut was a visual tribute to Singapore's urban landscape and history, volume two invited members to submit sketches of places that hold special

personal significance and to include their stories and memories of each place – some of which have since met the wrecking ball.

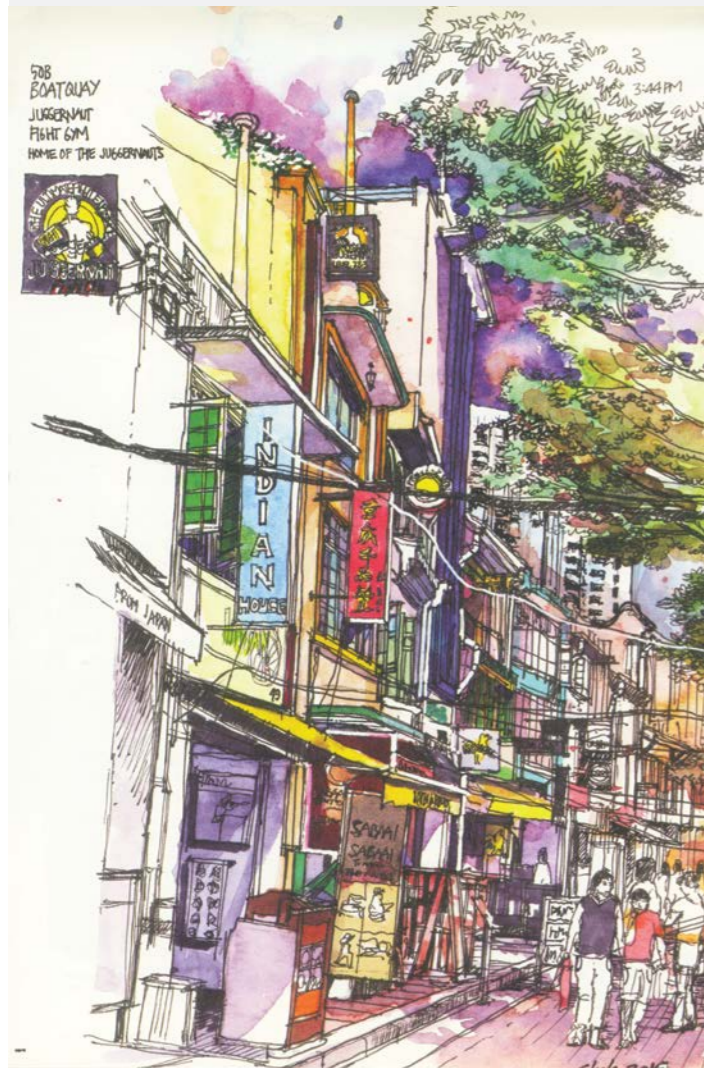
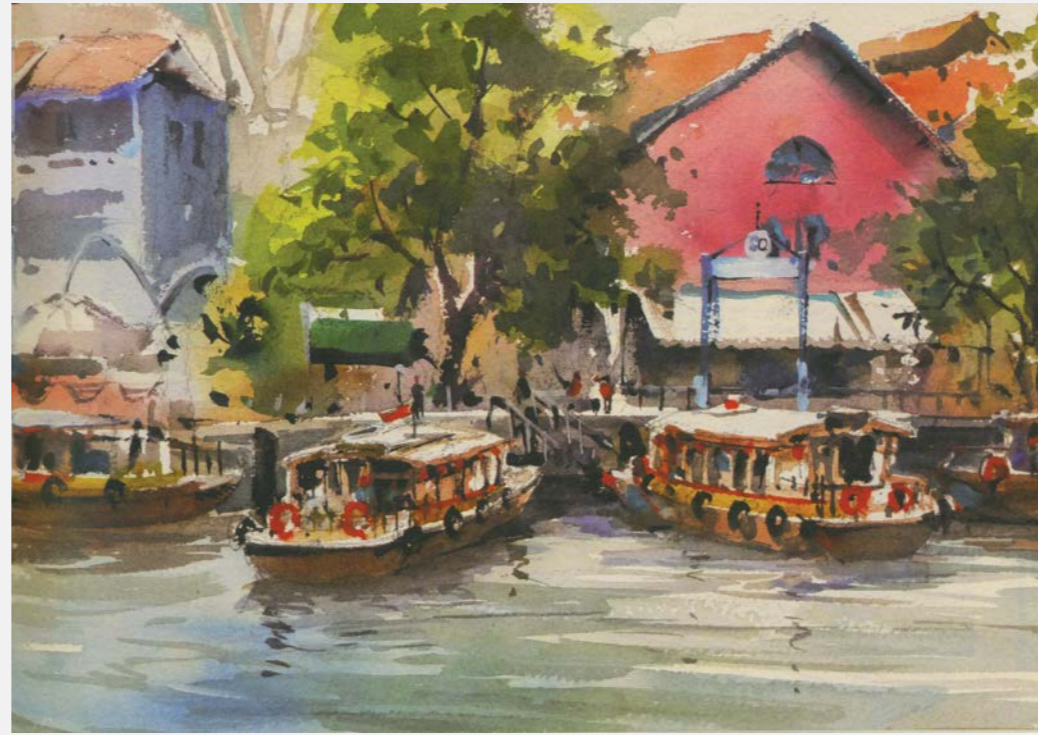
The artists spent hours revisiting and capturing these special locations, and have penned personal anecdotes about each place. Singapore is seen in a new perspective from the candid writings and more than 200 vibrant artworks featured in the book. Copies of both volumes are available for reference and loan at all public libraries and the National Library.

*Urban Sketchers Singapore: Volume Two* is supported by the Singapore Memory Project's (SMP) irememberSG Fund that was set up to encourage organisations and individuals to develop content and initiatives that collect, interpret, and showcase memories of Singapore. The fund has currently stopped accepting applications.

## Urban Sketchers Symposium

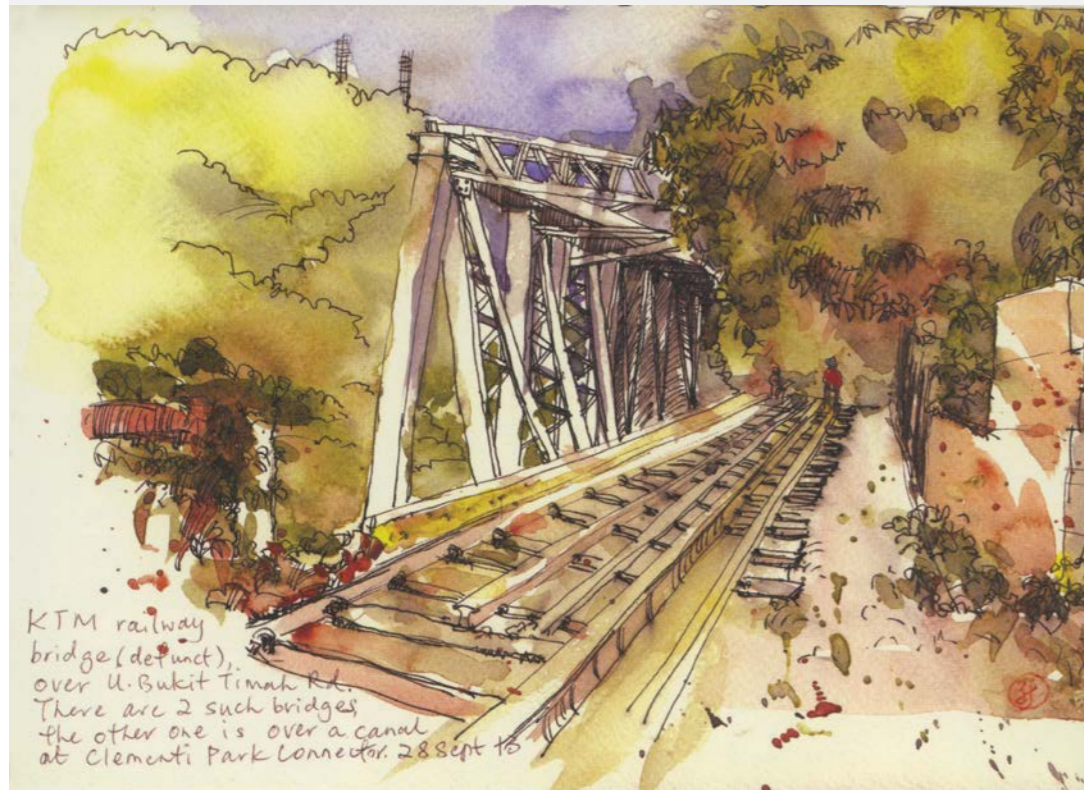
The International Urban Sketchers Symposium that will take place in Singapore from 22 to 25 July 2015 is the sixth to be held. Previous host cities include Barcelona, Spain; Portland, United States; and Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. The event in Singapore is especially significant as it marks the first time it is held in Asia. The symposium will see sketching enthusiasts from all over the world gathering in Singapore. Registered participants will be able to attend workshops, lectures and on-location drawing and painting excursions of the host city. ♦

**(Facing page)** Fort Canning Park by Dawn Lo, pharmacist.



**(Clockwise from top left)**

1. National Museum of Singapore, Stamford Road by Marvin Chew, artist.
2. Singapore River, Clarke Quay by Marvin Chew, artist.
3. Bukit Timah Nature Reserve Visitor Centre by Chua Hee Lai, R&D Manager.
4. Gardens by the Bay by Lisa Huang, interior designer.
5. Juggernaut Fight Club, Boat Quay by Pocholo Estremos, architect/landscape designer.



**(Clockwise from top left)**

1. Urban Sketcher Ong Whee Teck at work. *Courtesy of Teoh Yi Chie.*
2. 9 Ann Siang Hill by Buz Walker-Teach, design lecturer.
3. Qi Tian Gong Temple, Tiong Bahru by Vu Hoa Giang, architect.
4. The Bedok Marketplace, Bedok Road by Tan Peng Koon, entrepreneur.
5. KTM Railway Bridge, Upper Bukit Timah Road by Tan Chit Seng, freelance engineer.



# Poetry 101



## It Does Not Have to Rhyme

One of this year's Read! Fest initiatives is a celebration of Singapore poetry. **Sharon Lim** tells you what to expect.

**Sharon Lim** is a Project Manager with the Exhibitions and Curation department at the National Library of Singapore.

Launched in 2014, Read! Fest is part of the National Library Board's (NLB) nationwide reading campaign called Read! Singapore. The festival aims to encourage Singaporeans to re-discover books and the simple pleasures of reading.

To mark Singapore's golden jubilee, the second edition of Read! Fest celebrates Singapore's literary arts through a series of events such as Read! Fest Inspiration, Read! Fest Crime, Read! Fest Poetry and Read! Fest Kids.

Read! Fest Poetry puts the spotlight on the creative works of Singapore's very own poets.

### Poetry – A Misunderstood Genre

Poetry is a literary genre that few people truly appreciate or understand. Many people have misconceptions about poetry. They believe that poems have a deeper and hidden subtext that is somehow evident only to their creators or to rare individuals whose reading lists include the likes of Dickens and Proust; that poems must always rhyme; and that formal and flowery language is de rigueur. It is not surprising that many people have developed an abject fear of poetry, probably attributed to unpleasant memories of having to learn and recite poems by rote during literature lessons in school.

Read! Fest Poetry aims to expose more people to this under-appreciated literary genre by stag-

ing exhibitions and programmes that showcase Singapore poetry through novel and innovative ways. Many people would have heard of poets such as T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost and William Wordsworth, but how many are familiar with the works of homegrown poets such as Boey Kim Cheng, Ma Anbalagan, Fang Ran (方然) and S. N. Masuri?

### Poetry on Platforms

Since approximately 50 percent of Singapore's population commute via the MRT daily,<sup>1</sup> NLB hopes to bring poetry to the people through an exhibition that will take place on the platforms of City Hall MRT station. Appropriately titled "Poetry on Platforms" (POP), poems by both Singaporean and Singapore-based poets will be featured on the station's platform screen doors. Commuters will be able to read and mull over the poems in our four official languages while waiting for their trains to arrive.

In addition, the National Library Building on Victoria Street will also dress the walls of its lifts with visuals of selected poems. Hopefully, people will be engaged by the poems as they ride the lifts instead of staring at their toes (or mobile phones).

The poems were curated by NLB's librarians and given the nod of approval by a selection committee chaired by Professor Edwin Thumboo, director of The Centre for the Arts, National

University of Singapore. Included in the selection of poems are humorous, moving, poignant and thought-provoking ones on life, people and places in Singapore.

Poems such as "இருமொழிக் கல்வி" ("Bilingual Education") by Mu Thangarasan and "Stop at Two" by Megadona shed light on the policies that Singapore adopted during its nation-building years, while "ஜூரோங்" ("Jurong") by Patheral Ilamaram and "துறைமுக நாடு" ("Harbour") by I. Ulaganathan celebrate Singapore's economic achievements.

High economic growth and rapid urbanisation in Singapore over the years have resulted in myriad challenges for the city state, including the loss of its natural environment and cultural heritage. Many places and landmarks that older Singaporeans are familiar with are no longer around. Instead, taking over their places are gleaming glass-and-steel skyscrapers that tower over the city.

Singapore's changing social and physical landscapes, along with the feelings of loss and despair over these changes, are depicted in poems such as 《街变》 ("Street") by Zhou Can (周燦), 《看不见的节》 ("Tekka") by Dong Nong Zheng (董农政), "ராபின்சன் சாலைக் குழந்தைகள்" ("The Children of Robinson Road") by K. T. M. Iqbal and "Change Alley" by Boey Kim Cheng:

Alley of change utterly changed.  
The name of the place names  
The lost decades, the places and times  
Gone with our belongings, migrated  
To the country of changelessness

Later the grown man in loneliness  
Would return as evening snuffed out

It seemed he had come through the changes  
Unchanged, searching still the place  
For signs leading home, or out of the street  
Emptying into loss, whichever turn he took.  
And while he waited the country flipped  
The book of changes; streets lost their  
names, the river forgot its source, ...

All is utterly changed, the map useless  
For navigation in the lost city. ...

*An excerpt from "Change Alley"*  
by Boey Kim Cheng

Naturally, Singaporeans' passion for food and eating also figure prominently in the selection of poems, such as Tse Hao Guang's "A Big Pile of Bak Chor Mee" (modelled after W. B. Yeats' "The Lake Isle of Innisfree") in which he waxes lyrical about Singapore dishes such as chilli crab, *chwee kueh*, *naan*, *otak* and *laksa*; Snack by Paul Tan; and 《榴槤》 ("Civet Durian") by Fang Ran (方然), which describes the great lengths that people go to just for a taste of durian – even to the extent of pawning their used sarongs:

就算把沙笼典当  
也要亲亲  
那黄鲜白嫩的  
芳泽  
也想瞻瞻  
你王者风采的  
昂扬

*An excerpt from Civet Durian 《榴槤》*  
by Fang Ran (方然)

Even if I need to sell out all my belongings  
I still would like to kiss on  
The fragrance  
Of the shining soft flesh  
And taste your true flavor  
As a Royal member

*Translation courtesy of The Milky Way Publishing (银河出版社)*

Even poems that are not specifically about food weave in some mention of our local cuisine: "Mencari Seorang Pemimpin"? ("Looking for

a Leader?") describes the *prata* sold along the streets of Joo Chiat, 《街变》 ("Change") bemoans the loss of street stalls that used to hawk *wanton mee* and sweet potato soup, while "சங்கமம்" ("Confluence") makes a passing reference to fish head curry and coconut chutney.

"Poetry on Platforms" will take place at City Hall MRT station from 16 July to 13 August 2015 to coincide with the National Day celebrations. All the poems featured in the exhibition will be compiled in a publication entitled *SingaPoetry: An Anthology of Poems on Singapore*. The book will be available at all libraries in August 2015.

### PoetryWalls

"PoetryWalls" is organised by NLB in partnership with PoetryWalls-Singapore Ltd, an organisation that seeks to develop and promote Singapore poetry.

The exhibition will feature "poems on walls" by both established and emerging poets, including tertiary and secondary school students, as well as members of the public. The selected poems will be geographically and thematically diverse in content so as to showcase the breadth and depth of Singapore poetry, as well as to reach new audiences and foster a greater appreciation for local literary works.

PoetryWalls will be held at the lobby of the National Library Building from 29 August to 25 October 2015.

### Engagement and Outreach

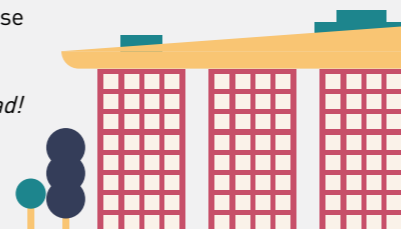
Other than showcasing poetry by established poets, Read! Fest Poetry also hopes to encourage the public to try their hand at creating their own poems. To be held in August 2015, "In Transit: Poetry x Illustration" provides an opportunity for budding poets and illustrators to be mentored by writer Felix Cheong and illustrator Eeshaun to create visually engaging poetry. The public will also have a chance to be "Poetry on Platforms" star poets when they submit their original poems to POP@nlb.gov.sg. The first 150 submissions will each receive a commemorative EZ-link card.

A "Poetry on Platforms" talk will be held on 25 July 2015 from 4 to 5 pm at the Visitors' Briefing Room, Level 1 of the National Library Building. Poet Eric Francis Tinsay Valles and educator and literary critic Ian Chung will share their thoughts about the exhibition and its featured poems. The first 20 participants at the talk will also receive a commemorative EZ-link card. To register, please visit [www.nlb.gov.sg/golibrary](http://www.nlb.gov.sg/golibrary) ♦

*For more information on Read! Singapore, Read! Fest and "Poetry on Platforms", please visit [www.nlb.gov.sg/readsingapore](http://www.nlb.gov.sg/readsingapore)*

### Notes

- 1 Land Transport Authority of Singapore. [n.d.]. *Land transport statistics in brief 2014*. Retrieved from Land Transport Authority website: <http://www.lta.gov.sg/content/dam/ltaweb/corp/PublicationsResearch/files/FactsandFigures/Statistics%20in%20Brief%202014.pdf>



# READ! FEST 2015

From July to October,  
experience Singapore through  
**Read! Fest Poetry**,  
a series of exhibitions and  
programme that showcases  
the breadth and depth of  
Singapore poetry and poets.

For more information, visit  
[www.nlb.gov.sg/readsingapore](http://www.nlb.gov.sg/readsingapore).

Organised by





The Singapore Memory Project celebrates SG50 through *Past Forward*, a monthly showcase of Singapore's past by our forward-thinking irememberSG Fund recipients.

Organised by

In Celebration of



Life Beyond the Big Top  
by Adele Wong

Book Launch and Talk  
11 July | 2pm - 4pm  
Level 5, Imagination Room



Documentary on the  
Sree Narayana Mission

Screening & Talk  
25 July | 2pm - 4pm  
Level 5, Possibility Room



BUAL  
by Tweeq

Screening & Talk  
31 July | 7pm - 8pm  
Level 5, Possibility Room

### TAPESTRY OF LIVES

Fascinating homespun stories of our shared communal lives are showcased in a collection of books, photographs, documentaries and videos of Singapore.



Public Conversations  
by Alecia Neo



On the Road  
by Sean Lee

Exhibition  
3 - 28 July | 10am - 9pm  
The Plaza



Singapore Farmers  
by Ore Huiying

Artists' Talk  
18 July | 2pm - 5pm  
Level 5, Possibility Room



Trades by Postal Code  
by Nicole Chai

### HEARTS & CRAFT

Creative and forward-thinking minds present an eclectic mix of projects, from Lego brick creations, 3D-printed miniatures and a travelling art exhibition.



The Little Red Brick  
by Eugene Tan, Huang Xinying,  
Jeffrey Kong & Hansen Khoo

Exhibition  
1 - 28 August | 10am - 9pm  
The Plaza



3D Printing Singapura Stories  
by TINKR

Artists' Talk  
8 August | 1pm - 3pm  
Level 5, Possibility Room



The Singapore March  
by Dan Wong & Izyanti Asa'ari

All events will take place at the National Library Building (100 Victoria Street, Singapore 188064) unless otherwise stated. Visit [iremember.sg](http://iremember.sg) for registration details and the updated schedule. All information correct at the time of printing.

@irememberSG

