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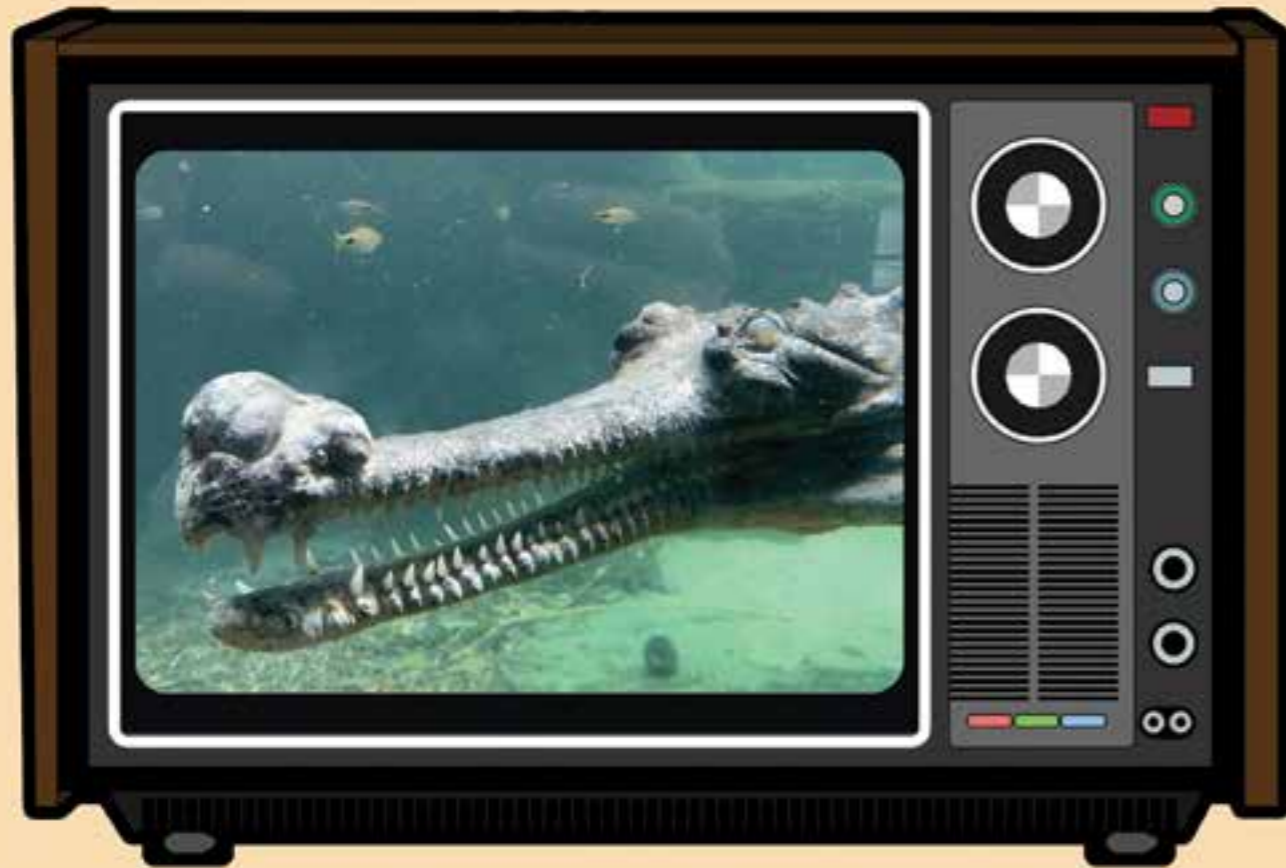
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**THE ORIGINS OF
KUEH
PIE TEE**

— p. 04 —



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REELS

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Director's Note

Kueh pie tee is a favourite dish of many Singaporeans. It is especially popular during *popiah* parties. After all, the filling is the same, only the packaging is different. But while you might happily scarf down one or five, have you ever wondered where the name *kueh pie tee* comes from? Christopher Tan did and we are grateful for his curiosity because that led him to do a lot of detective work, resulting in our delectable cover story.

The year 2025 marks the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, and that makes it a good a time as any to look back at the Japanese Occupation. Hannah Yeo's story on opium propaganda sheds light on how Imperial Japan used the Opium War to justify the invasion of Malaya, while John Bray looks at how four Japanese Anglicans used their position and influence to help local Anglicans during the Occupation.

We have yet another anniversary coming up: the Central Provident Fund scheme turns 70 in 2025. When it was first proposed by the Singapore Progressive Party in 1951, it faced competition from an alternative pension scheme proposed by the colonial government. Lim Tin Seng takes a deep dive into how something we take for granted today had an eventful start.

We also cast our eyes on the aesthetics of the written word. Jawi is a beautiful script adapted from Arabic. The work of Ustaz Syed Abdul Rahman Al-Attas – whose calligraphy can be found in local publications, the Sultan Mosque and in other major buildings of the Malay world – is testimony to mankind's eternal quest to marry form and function. Nurul Wahidah Mohd Tambee celebrates the artistic legacy of this talented calligrapher.

Going back a little further in time, we have an illuminating piece on Somerset Maugham. T.A. Morton explains how some of his short stories were based on actual events he had heard about when he visited Singapore in the 1920s. She also reveals the reactions of the people whose lives he had immortalised. Spoiler alert: They were not pleased at being depicted as snobs, racists, alcoholics and murderers.

We have other equally riveting stories in this issue. There is a piece on Sembawang featured in old maps by Makeswary Periasamy, a history of the Nominated Member of Parliament scheme by Benjamin Ho and John Choo, and Timothy Pwee's study of the *chingay* over the last two centuries and how it has evolved into the parade we are familiar with today. Last but not least, Kwa Chong Guan remembers the late historian Dr John Bastin, whose research enriched our understanding of Stamford Raffles (and his friends and contemporaries).

Have a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

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On the cover
Also known as "top hats", *kueh pie tee* contain *popiah* filling. *Courtesy of Christopher Tan.*

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Image credits, clockwise from top left: *Film Raya* (no. 5, May 1951); Christopher Tan; Illustration by Oxygen Studio Designs; Lim Kheng Chye Collection, National Archives of Singapore; Yip Yew Chong and Timothy Pwee; CPA Media Pte Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo.



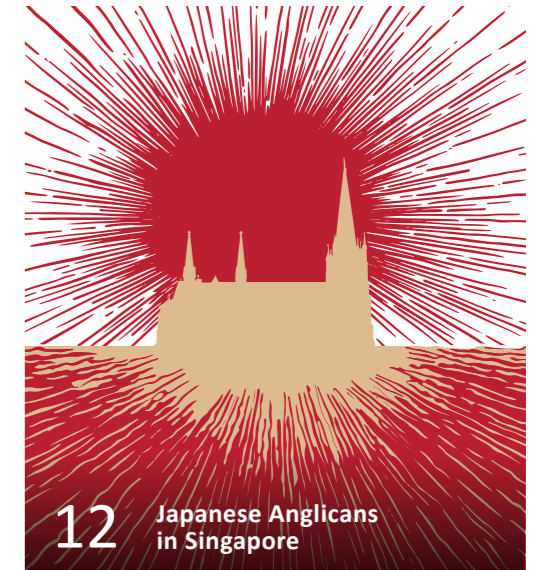
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CUPS AND SOURCES

Hunting Down the Origins of Kueh Pie Tee

Kueh pie tee is a fixture of classic Singaporean cooking, yet its identity has the shape of an enigma, filled with mystery and garnished with riddles.

By Christopher Tan



Also known as “top hats”, *kueh pie tee* contain popiah filling. Courtesy of Christopher Tan.

Christopher Tan is a food writer, author, educator and photographer. His most recent books are *The Way of Kueh: Savouring & Saving Singapore’s Heritage Desserts* (Epigram Books, 2019), a celebration of local kueh culture, and *NerdBaker 2: Tales from the Yeast Indies* (Epigram Books, 2024), about yeast cookery.

When I was growing up, family parties were often graced with *kueh pie tee* – crispy batter cups filled with savoury braised *bangkuang* (yambean or jicama), and garnished with toppings and sauces. Like many others, we called them “top hats” for their resemblance to Fred Astaire’s famous headgear.¹ This Western nickname, plus the fact that “pie tee” has no meaning in any local dialect, always made me wonder about its heritage.

Its earliest mention in local media was in the *Straits Times* on 7 March 1954. “Pie tee’... consists of bits of meat and vegetable packed in a tiny pastry cup and bathed in two delicate sauces. Once you start eating, you can’t stop,” wrote Francis Wong, covering a fundraising food fair at Wesley Methodist Church.² The quote marks and description are telling – was the dish then still unfamiliar to the average reader?

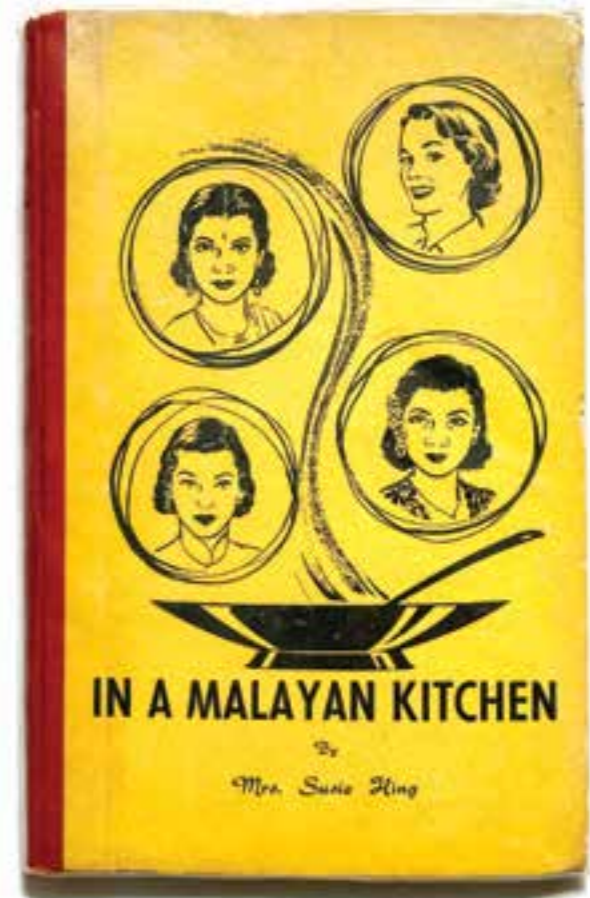
Chan Sow Lin’s recipe, “Top Hats – Chinese Meat Puffs (Hokkien cocktail party dish) (Kueh Patty)”, uses a wheat-free batter and a simple stir-fried filling. Image reproduced from Chan Sow Lin, *Chinese Party Book*, 2nd ed. (S.I.: s.n., 1960), 27. Courtesy of Christopher Tan.

TOP HATS
CHINESE MEAT PUFFS
(Hokkien cocktail party dish)
(Kueh Patty)
福建人之點心

Ingredients:
1 lb. of rice flour,
4 ozs. of tapioca flour or cornflour,
8 ozs. of water-chestnuts,
3 ozs. of roast pork,
2 or 3 patty moulds (which can be obtained in Penang and at the Malay stalls in Sunday Market, Kuala Lumpur, Malaya),
1½ lbs. of peanut oil or vegetable oil. (Six Crowns Brand or Tiger Brand),
4 or 5 eggs,
1 dessertspoonful of sesame oil,
Pepper and salt to taste.

Method:
1. Sift the rice flour, and put it into a basin or mixing bowl.
2. Add eggs, salt, water and stir well till the mixture is thick and not watery.
3. Heat the frying pan or kwali with peanut oil (for deep fat frying).
4. When the oil is hot, put in the patty moulds and heat for 3 minutes.
5. Then put the patty moulds at once into the rice mixture, leave them there for about 3 minutes.

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Susie Hing’s 1956 cookbook, *In a Malayan Kitchen*, includes her recipe for “Kroket Tjanker (Java Kwei Patti)”. Image reproduced from Susie Hing, *In a Malayan Kitchen* (Singapore: Mun Seong Press, 1956), 83. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCLOS 641.59595 HIN-[RFL]).

Its name was certainly not yet standardised – variant spellings like “paitee”, “pieti” and “paiti” appeared in local media until well into the 2000s – but one particular variant was common. Susie Hing’s 1956 cookbook, *In a Malayan Kitchen*, bears her recipe for “Kroket Tjanker (Java Kwei Patti)”.³ Local cooking teacher Chan Sow Lin gave the dish no fewer than four names in her 1960 *Chinese Party Book*, titling her recipe “Top Hats – Chinese Meat Puffs (Hokkien cocktail party dish) (Kueh Patty)”.⁴ As late as November 1980, a *Straits Times* advertisement for C.K. Tang department store featured a “Kueh Patti Maker” costing a princely \$4.20.⁵

As it turns out, this alternative moniker – “patti” or “patty” – is a major clue to *kueh pie tee*’s origin.

World Cups

The technique of dipping preheated metal moulds in batter and then into hot oil, so that the adhered batter firms up into a defined shape and eventually releases to float free, is both very old and very widespread. Its earliest mention in any cookery text dates to 1570, in chef Bartolomeo Scappi’s *Opera dell’arte del cucinare*.⁶

In Scappi’s recipe, moulds depicting lions, eagles and “fanciful shapes” are dipped in a batter of flour, water, white wine, oil, salt and saffron, and then into hot oil. A second recipe for a rose-scented goat’s milk batter fried in hot lard includes the pro tip of blotting excess fat off the preheated mould to obtain a shapelier fritter.⁷



Frying a heart timbale case using the Griswold heart-shaped patty iron. Courtesy of Christopher Tan.

tatlısi.⁸ The Erzurum region’s blacksmiths were particularly famed for forging them: no other irons “hold the batter like an Erzurum iron” commented one author in 1900.⁹ That area lies on the Silk Road, along which Işın surmises the recipe and moulds could have spread to the rest of the globe.

They ultimately did so along paths of migration and colonisation as well as trade routes. The Dutch brought them to Norway, India and Southeast Asia, while the Spanish and Portuguese took them to South America, and Scandinavian immigrants introduced them to the United States.

Along the way, flower shapes became the most popular motifs, as seen in many localised fritter names: *kueh rose* or *kuih ros* (Singapore and Malaysia), *kanom dok jok* (Thailand; meaning “lotus flower sweet”), *rosettbakkels* (Norway; meaning “rose bakes”) and rosette cookies (America).

Cup shapes also evolved, and here is our first link to *kueh pie tee*: antique *krustadjärn* fritter irons found in Swedish museums are identical to vintage *pie tee* moulds in all respects, being heavy fluted round metal cups mounted on steel rods with wooden handles.¹⁰

Food scholar Priscilla Mary Işın traces the technique further back, probably more than five centuries, to Turkey. She notes that in Eastern Turkey, families traditionally each possessed unique bespoke iron moulds to make fritters called *demir*

A set of vintage American patty iron moulds in a variety of decorative shapes such as leaf, flower, shell, fish and bell. Courtesy of Christopher Tan.



The recipe for “Creamed Shrimp and Peas in Timbale Cases” published in *Sealtest Kitchen Recipes: World’s Fair Edition* (1939). Image reproduced from Sealtest Inc., *Sealtest Kitchen Recipes: World’s Fair Edition* (New York: Sealtest Inc., 1939), 37. Courtesy of Christopher Tan.

American Pie... Tee?

In the US, such moulds were widely sold from the late 19th century onwards. A basic set typically paired a flower or geometric motif with a cup shape and a removable handle, while fancier sets ranged across a huge variety of decorative shapes. Fannie Farmer’s famous *Boston Cooking-School Cookbook* features “Swedish timbale irons” with fluted cups in round, oval, heart and diamond shapes.¹¹ Timbale irons later came to be more commonly called “patty irons” or “patty molds”, and the cups they fried up, “patty shells”.

And here is our second link: on 1 April 1958, “The Gourmet Club” column of the *Singapore Free Press* cited “a kwei patty iron for frying batter”.¹² Subsequently, a *New Nation* eatery review on 19 January 1978 expressly equated Singaporean and American fritters, noting that besides *popiah* skins, Joo Chiat’s Kway Guan Huat – an 80-year-old business still thriving today – “sells... ‘kway pie tee’ cups (crispy patty shells)”.¹³

We know that Singapore’s YWCA (Young Women’s Christian Association) conducted Western cuisine cookery lessons from at least 1913 onwards.¹⁴ *The International Cookery Book of Malaya* published by the association includes a classic “pattie shell” recipe using eggs, sugar, salt, milk and flour.¹⁵

Our local newspapers also featured American-style recipes for patty shell savouries in the 1930s.¹⁶ Hence it seems eminently plausible that patty irons came to Singapore via the American expatriate community around the early 1900s, and that “patty” slowly elided to “pie tee” on local tongues. While their fluted pattern remains, the cast iron and aluminium

of American moulds were eventually supplanted by the solid brass most common here today.

In a booklet dating back to the 1939 New York World’s Fair published by the Sealtest Kitchen, a food research body serving the US dairy industry, I came across a recipe for “Creamed Shrimp and Peas in Timbale Cases”.¹⁷ I was able to source the same vintage patty iron pictured in the recipe photo, forged by American ironware firm Griswold. Once cleaned of rust, it flawlessly turned out pretty fluted heart cups with which I recreated the dish. The milk-based sauce bathing the shrimp and peas is



A vintage heart-shaped patty iron made by Griswold, a famous American ironware firm. Courtesy of Christopher Tan.

Similarly archetypal renditions did survive in some of Singapore’s Western restaurants up until the 1990s. For instance, patty shells filled with chicken and mushrooms in white wine sauce were offered at Novotel Orchid Inn Hotel’s Wienerwald restaurant in 1983, while in 1992, The Ship served shells cradling chicken à la King.¹⁸

Christopher Tan’s recreation of Sealtest Kitchen’s creamed shrimp and peas in timbale cases. Courtesy of Christopher Tan.





Khir Johari's kuih jambang moulds. Courtesy of Christopher Tan.

A Vase Difference

However, as is often the case in food heritage, there is another side to the story. Khir Johari, food scholar and author of the award-winning book, *The Food of Singapore Malays*, schooled me about the Malay incarnation of *pie tee* – *kuih jambang* (flower vase *kuih*). According to him, Malay *kuih jambang* “filling was always *daging* [beef], which was reserved for special occasions, as people were mostly pescatarian then”. It was spiced with garlic, ginger, galangal and coriander seeds, and the filled shell decorated with “celery, carrot, pennywort, chives, spring onions and red chilli ‘flowers’, so it really looked like a vase. This is what I remember”.¹⁹

Showing me his family *kuih jambang* moulds, Khir cited Kampong Glam and Joo Chiat as two of Singapore’s established metalsmith hubs, where many cooks sought and bought tools and kitchenware for making *kuih* and cakes. His own smallest mould makes shells barely bigger than walnuts, which would be served to children with a chicken filling. Two larger and much heavier heart-shaped moulds are not in fact “hearts”: in Malay culture this shape is called *sirih*, after betel leaves. Another mould has a *wajik* (diamond) shape. “So much of Malay geometry is based on rhombuses... and *wajik* also tessellate into

stars,” as evidenced in Islamic mosaic, textile and embroidery design, noted Khir, who is also a trained mathematician.²⁰ Fascinatingly, his *sirih* and *wajik* moulds are twins of Fannie Farmer’s timbale irons.

Kuih jambang, a celebratory dish, was also a prized *kuih hantaran* (betrothal *kuih*) exchanged between the families of engaged couples. Khir recalled a story shared with him by the late local singer, Kartina Dahari. When she got married, her grandmother ordered two showpiece *kuih* for the wedding feast, one of which was *kuih jambang*. Making the filling was tasked solely to a cook locally esteemed for it, while on *jambang* duty were a few ladies known to be “expert at *menghadap api*, or facing the fire, and at frying perfect shells without breaking them”.²¹

Khir remembers a 78-year-old Malay doyenne telling him about her grandma making *kuih jambang*, implying that it has a multigenerational pedigree. While researching South African Cape Malay culture in Capetown, he found an old Dutch cookbook which talked about moulds for waffles, rosettes and cups, which is why he was inclined to say that the dish comes from the Low Countries.²²

His conclusion is borne out by recipes in vintage cookery texts from Indonesia. In the iconic cookbook



The iconic cookbook *Pandai Masak 1* by Julie Sutardjana contains Dutch-named recipes for *pie tee* shells containing chicken, prawn and beef tongue in a cream sauce. Image reproduced from *Nyonya Rumah* (Julie Sutardjana), *Pandai Masak 1*, 16th ed. (Jakarta: P.T. Kinta, 1975). Courtesy of Christopher Tan.

Pandai Masak 1 by hallowed Javanese cookery writer and restaurateur Julie Sutardjana, also known as “Nyonya Rumah”, there is a chapter titled “Masakan Eropah” (European Cooking).²³ It contains Dutch-named recipes for “*frituurtjes*” (fritters) filled with “ragout” (stew) – *pie tee* shells holding chicken, prawn and beef tongue in a cream sauce. A similar ragout fills Susie Hing’s Java Kwei Patti.²⁴

From illustrations in a later edition by Sutardjana and in Hing’s book, we can deduce that they both used the same type of mould – a fluted thin metal cup with a thin rod handle. Much lighter than American irons, this would have been easier and less expensive to manufacture and thus more accessible to Indonesian home cooks.

Another popular 1950s cookbook, *Buku Masakan Thursina* by domestic science teacher Siti Mukmin, presents equivalent recipes for “*fritures*” (fritters).²⁵ Mukmin’s milk, egg and wheat flour “friture” batter formula is close to Sealtest’s, but her milk-free filling options are distinctly different – one features diced chicken and the other beef liver plus fatty beef, and both are bound with egg yolk-thickened broth. A third filling cloaks cooked diced vegetables with mayonnaise, a classic combination known as “Russian salad” in Europe.

Asian cooks also tweaked the fritter batter. To help the shells stay crispy in Southeast Asia’s humid weather, cooks would add rice flour, said Khir.²⁶ As did other vintage formulas, a 1960s recipe in the Ipoh-published *The Malayan Cookbook* further adds “a pinch of *chunam*”, which in heritage architecture jargon often means “plaster” but here refers to slaked lime paste, or *kapur sirih*; its alkalinity gives the shells more colour and crunch.²⁷ For this same reason, Sutardjana makes her batter with *air belanda* – “tonic water”.

VII. MASAKAN EROPAH.

149. *Frituurtjes.*

Kep.: 65 gram terigu, 1 telur ayam, 100 cc air belanda, sedikit garam, beasdotie.

Mem.: Telur dengan garam dikopiok sebentar, tuangkan kepada tepang, aduk-aduk, lalu tuangkan air belandanya sedikit demi sedikit sambil adonan diaduk-aduk terus sampai rata.

Panaskan beasdotie di dalam panci, lalu masukkan cetakan frituurtjes ke dalam minyak, celupkan cetakan tsb. dibagian luarnya saja ke dalam adonan fritures (bagian dalam cetakan tak boleh kemasukan adonan). Setelah cetakan dicelup ke dalam adonan tsb. lekas masukkan ke dalam minyak panas lagi. Kalau sudah kering masak dengan wajan, supaya terlepas dari cetakannya. Jika sudah dingin, boleh diisi dengan ragout.

150. *Ragout.*

Kep.: ½ dada ayam rebus, 2 ons udang yang sudah direbus dan dikupas, kira-kira 2 jari lidah asin yang sudah direbus, wortel rebus yang sudah diiris pesagi-pesagi kecil (ini tak pakaipun boleh), 2 sendok mentega, 50 gram tepung terigu, ½ liter susu, 1 sendok bawang merah iris, garam, merica, pala dan sedikit gula.

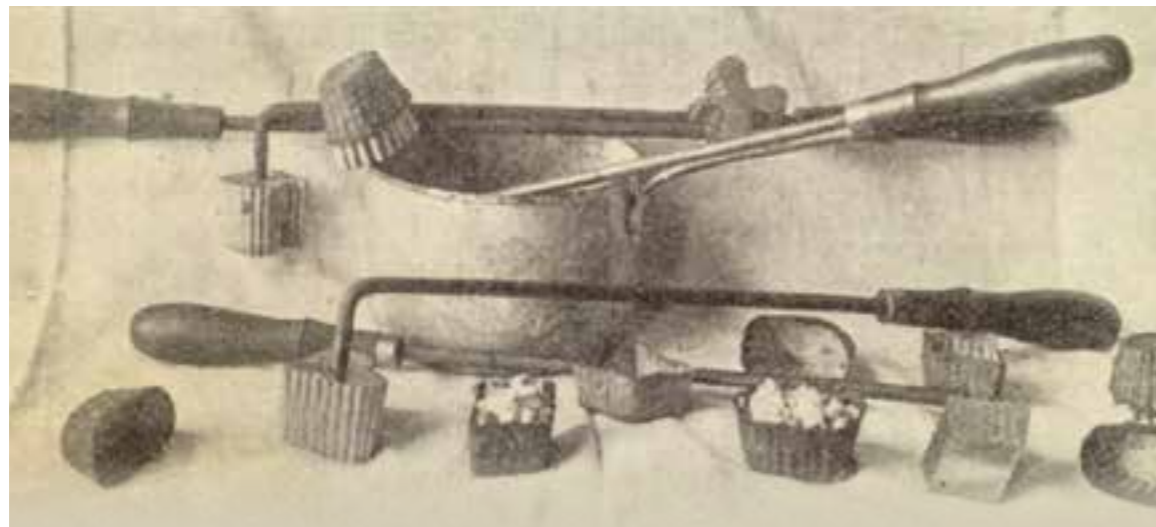
Mem.: Daging ayam, lidah asin dan udang dipotong pesagi-pesagi kecil. Bawang merah ditumis dengan mentega sehingga ½ matang, masukkan tepungnya, aduk-aduk sebentar, tuangkan susunya, masukkan sekalian bumbu-bumbu, aduk-aduk sampai rata, lalu masukkan daging ayam, lidah asin, udang dan wortel iris. Aduk-aduk sebentar, lalu angkat. Biarkan ragout ini dingin betul, baru ditiriskan. Tengahnya sebagai perhiasan boleh diberi 1 tangkai peterisise atau atasnya ditawuri peterisise atau daun selderi yang sudah diiris halus.

(Above) Julie Sutardjana’s recipes for “*frituurtjes*” (fritters) filled with “ragout” (stew) – *pie tee* shells holding chicken, prawn and beef tongue in a cream sauce. Image reproduced from *Nyonya Rumah* (Julie Sutardjana), *Pandai Masak 1*, 16th ed. (Jakarta: P.T. Kinta, 1975), 66. Courtesy of Christopher Tan.

(Below) *Kueh pie tee* shells stored in a biscuit tin, as they traditionally would be. Courtesy of Christopher Tan.



Fannie Farmer’s “Swedish timbale irons” with fluted cups in round, oval, heart and diamond shapes. Image reproduced from Fannie Merritt Farmer, *The Boston Cooking-School Cookbook* (United States: Little, Brown and Company, 1896), 314. Courtesy of Christopher Tan.



Peranakan Perfusion

As the fillings of the two dishes are nigh identical, *kueh pie tee* may well be a riff on, or extension of, Peranakan-style *popiah*. Law Jia Jun, the young chef-founder of Province restaurant in Joo Chiat, remembers his Teochew Peranakan grandaunt making *pie tee* for special occasions like Chinese New Year. “She’d start by frying garlic, *haybee* [dried shrimp], shallots, and then she added *taucheo* [salted fermented soybeans] to fry and really intensify it before throwing in the *bangkuang*. If you don’t, she told me, ‘*bu gou wei dao*’ [it won’t be fragrant enough].” She garnished the *pie tee* with coriander leaves, prawns, a vinegar chilli sauce and sweet flour sauce. “It was super fun to eat,” Law fondly described.²⁸

Law Jia Jun, chef-founder of Province restaurant, plating his lobster croustade cups. *Courtesy of Christopher Tan.*



From the 1950s to the 1980s, *pie tee* appeared in many seminal local cookbooks featuring Peranakan recipes as well as Western-influenced local dishes. Among these are Ellice Handy’s *My Favourite Recipes*,²⁹ Mrs Leong Yee Soo’s *Singaporean Cooking*,³⁰ Yu Yoon Gee’s *Nyonya Food, Satay and Padang Curry Cooking*,³¹ Dorothy Ng’s *Entertaining Cookbook*³² and Terry Tan’s *Her World Cookbook of Singapore Recipes*.³³ Their *pie tee* recipes all adhere to a classic filling template of *bangkuang* and bamboo shoots braised with garlic, *taucheo*, and a pork and seafood stock.

A 1978 restaurant review in the *New Nation* describes *kueh pie tee* as “a dish hardly ever found outside the home, and even then rarely... this is not an everyday Nonya dish”.³⁴ Times do change, though. A decade later, when the *New Paper* asked local chefs to nominate candidates for a “national dish”, then vice-president of the Singapore Chefs’ Association Joe Yap chose Peranakan *kueh pie tee*.³⁵ Today, one can find the dish at Peranakan restaurants and private-dining enterprises of every stripe – from quotidian to ultra-posh – and perhaps even topped with abalone, lobster or microgreens.

Top Shells

Croustade (pie crust) cups and rosettes have recently been enjoying a renaissance in fine dining in the West.³⁶ Professional chef equipment makers in Europe are reviving old shapes and inventing new ones. While some call the cups *croustades*, a translation of the Swedish *krustad* into kitchen French, some dub them “pie tee” outright,³⁷ a testament to the currently modish intermingling of Nordic and Asian culinary influences – and also to how the mould genre has boomeranged around the world and back.

Law Jia Jun’s lobster croustade cup. The jet-black shell is the result of adding dehydrated kombu (kelp) powder and squid ink to the batter. *Courtesy of Christopher Tan.*



New applications for them are being explored, such as the trend that Francisco Migoya, Head of Pastry at Copenhagen’s three-Michelin star Noma restaurant, started witnessing around 2019. “Chefs in the Western world have found an interesting use... instead of using the tool for frying doughs, they dip it in liquid nitrogen to get it very cold, and then they dip it in a liquid chocolate or even a sorbet base. The liquid freezes quickly, taking on the shape of the mould, and then is easy to release. It’s quite attractive, not to mention clever and delicious. So it works for cold and frozen preparations as well, which is fascinating to me,” he told me.³⁸

Inspired by his grandaunt, Law Jia Jun puts his own stamp on *pie tee* by blending dehydrated kombu

Scan the QR code to watch a video of Christopher Tan making *kueh pie tee* using vintage moulds as well as listen to his podcast discussing the origins of the dish.



(kelp) powder and squid ink into his batter to boost its flavour. “The theme of Province’s summer menu this year is to showcase my own heritage... my generation of cooks, I feel, is trying to define what Singaporean cuisine can be, might be, or will be in the future,” he explained. After frying the jet-black shells, Law further dehydrates them for 12 hours to bestow upon them a denser, cracklier crunch.³⁹

Their intense umami savour hums a deep oceanic bass note under the bamboo lobster meat, fried broccoli sprig, wild pepper leaf and lime gel that Law fills them with at point of service. Not his grandaunt’s *kueh pie tee* for sure, but one day, perhaps his grandchild’s. ♦



An antique local *kueh pie tee* mould. *Courtesy of Christopher Tan.*

NOTES

- 1 Violet Oon, “Real Nonya-Style Fare – from a True Artist of the Wok...,” *Straits Times*, 27 January 1980, 15. (From NewspaperSG)
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JAPANESE ANGLICANS IN WORLD WAR TWO SINGAPORE

During the Japanese Occupation, four Japanese Anglicans were a sign of hope for the locals during a dark chapter in Singapore's history.

By John Bray

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In February 1942, a week after the fall of Singapore, Reverend John B.H. Lee, the vicar of the Holy Trinity Anglican Church on Hamilton Road, was surprised – and probably more than a little alarmed – to receive a visit from a Japanese military officer.¹ The officer, Taka Sakurai (1914–2010), did his best to put the vicar at ease. He explained that he too was an Anglican Christian and that, like Holy Trinity, his home church in Japan was affiliated with a London-based Anglican missionary group, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.

A week later, Sakurai returned with another Japanese Anglican officer, Andrew Tokuji Ogawa (1905–2001). The two men said that the vicar need not fear: the churches were to leave their doors open, and services could continue.

In addition to Sakurai and Ogawa, we know of at least two more Japanese Anglicans who were in Singapore during the Japanese Occupation. The third was Reverend Tadashi Matsumoto (1907–66), who arrived in 1943 and served as a military interpreter. A fourth, Chiyokichi Ariga (1895–1987), likewise arrived in 1943, having been released from internment in Canada. He spent the last two years of the war as a civilian teacher in an orphanage in Singapore.

All four men lived through a particularly difficult period of Japanese and Southeast Asian history. In their home country, the mood of the times was intensely nationalistic but many of their friends and teachers were foreigners, and they belonged to a faith whose claims are universal. Although they were relatively junior in rank, they were able to use their influence to ease the difficulties of the churches here at a time of crisis. Their interconnected personal stories offer a distinctive angle on the complexities of life in Japanese-occupied Singapore.

Christian Faith and the Japanese Empire

All four men were members of the Nippon Sei Ko Kai (NSKK; literally the “Holy Catholic Church in Japan”), which became an autonomous church within the Anglican communion in 1887. They had an additional personal connection in that they were all graduates of Rikkyo University – founded in 1874 as St Paul's School – one of Tokyo's leading universities today.

In the 1930s, Japanese Christians struggled to determine their response to the political pressures of Japanese nationalism.² Key issues included the question of how to respond to official demands that the Emperor be respected as a divine figure in accordance with the state-sponsored Shinto religion. Foreign missionaries fell under growing suspicion

as a result of the nationalist fervour accompanying the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. In December 1941, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, Samuel Heaslett (1875–1944), the UK-born Presiding Bishop of the NSKK, was imprisoned on charges of espionage and then deported.

Against this background, Japanese Christians needed to tread carefully lest they be accused of disloyalty. These challenges were all the greater in occupied Singapore.

Lieutenant Andrew Tokuji Ogawa – Director of Education and Religion

As Director of Education and Religion in Singapore, Lieutenant (later Captain) Ogawa was responsible for liaising with the churches. He served in this post for a relatively short period and was posted to Sumatra, Indonesia, in May 1943. However, his initial cooperation with the churches set the tone for the administration's policy for the duration of the occupation. The churches in Singapore were treated much more favourably than their counterparts elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

Ogawa had been educated at Rikkyo and then earned his master's degree at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania in 1932. After returning to Tokyo, he taught economics at Rikkyo before being drafted into the army.

Once in Singapore, Ogawa soon made contact with the Right Reverend John Leonard Wilson (1897–1970), the Anglican Bishop of Singapore.³ Almost all Europeans in Singapore were interned in the prisoner-of-war camp in Changi. However, Ogawa was able to arrange for Wilson to return to his residence, together with Reverend John Hayter, the Assistant Chaplain at St Andrew's Cathedral, and Reverend Reginald Keith Sorby Adams of St Andrew's School. Ogawa also provided Wilson with a Japanese-language pass permitting him to visit Changi for confirmation services to prisoners-of-war. Until March 1943, when they were again interned, these three were the only European Anglican priests to operate freely in Singapore.

They made full use of the opportunity to continue their ministry in the churches and to build up the Asian church leadership in preparation for the time when they might again be detained. Their access to prisoner-of-war camps meant that they were also able to maintain an illicit “postal service” connecting the inmates with civilian detainees held elsewhere on the island.⁴



Andrew Tokuji Ogawa as a young man in Japan, c. 1930. Courtesy of Rikkyo University Archives.

Ogawa regularly attended services at St Andrew's Cathedral. According to Hayter, he and a fellow officer (possibly Sakurai) "made a point of arriving in a military staff car with a blue flag flying", thus demonstrating by his presence that the cathedral was under military protection.⁵ Hayter adds that it was "largely due to his persistence that an order was issued that no churches or their compounds should be used for military purposes".

Ogawa recruited Reverend Dr D.D. Chelliah, a recently ordained Indian priest who had previously been the vice-principal at St Andrew's School, to serve as his assistant at the Department of Education and Religion.⁶ Chelliah continued in the same role after Ogawa was replaced by a Mr Watanabe. Chelliah also served as Wilson's deputy following the latter's internment in March 1943.

Ogawa, Wilson and Chelliah worked together to establish the Federation of Christian Churches. According to Chelliah, Ogawa wanted to deal with the churches "collectively and not individually", and the federation was supposed to be the link.⁷ All the main Protestant churches joined the federation, with Chelliah serving as its president while Wilson was the chairman of the Union Committee.⁸

The federation's objectives included representing the needs of the churches to the Japanese authorities, organising relief work and holding combined services. At a "United Service of Christian Witness" held at St Andrew's Cathedral on Whit Sunday (Pentecost) in May 1942, Ogawa read the lesson in English.⁹ In an interview published in the *Syonan Times* on 1 November 1942, Ogawa pointed out that the "ideal of Christian Federation was the call of Jesus Christ to strengthen the churches in the 'present circumstances'". He also said that "the work of Western missionaries had ceased, and it was the

task and privilege of Oriental leaders to continue their work on their own initiative".¹⁰

The federation was widely regarded as the beginning of ecumenical activity in Singapore. However, Hayter speculated that it might have been "too successful", noting that the Kempeitai – the much-feared military police of the Imperial Japanese Army – regarded it with great suspicion.¹¹ In March 1943, after Ogawa had been moved to a different post, the Japanese authorities abruptly shut the federation down.

Ogawa might have had his own problems with the Kempeitai. He had become a firm friend of Wilson and the other Anglican clergymen. However, he discontinued his visits to their residence after the Kempeitai had warned him that he was becoming "too friendly".¹²

Much later, in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1969, Ogawa commented that senior officers were "always eyeing me down and trying to get some[thing] nasty over me".¹³ However, he added that there were quite a few friends who had a similar faith in Christ, and they had also helped him.

Lieutenant Taka Sakurai – Military Propaganda Department

One of those friends whom Ogawa mentioned would have been Lieutenant Taka Sakurai. In his role in the Military Propaganda Department, Sakurai had less formal contact with the churches than Ogawa. However, in his personal capacity, he attended services at St Andrew's Cathedral. Local Christians evidently regarded him as a "friend in high places", noting his eventual transfer away from Singapore with regret.¹⁴

Sakurai was born in Yokosuka, Kanagawa prefecture, in 1914. He became a Christian while in junior high school and discovered a vocation to the priesthood. In June 1938, he graduated from the NSKK seminary, which was affiliated with Rikkyo.¹⁵ However, in November that year, he was drafted into the Imperial Japanese Army and in early 1942, he was part of the Japanese military expedition that captured Singapore.

Reverend Tadashi Matsumoto in Singapore, c. 1943. Courtesy of his daughter, Mrs Hiroko Ito.

Sakurai's office was on the fifth floor of the Cathay Building (renamed Dai Toa Gekijo; Greater Eastern Asian Theatre), which also housed the Japanese Broadcasting Department and the Military Information Bureau.¹⁶ There he met Ogawa for the first time in five years, and they went to the officers' club to exchange stories. According to Sakurai, there were as many as 15 or 16 Rikkyo graduates in Singapore, perhaps including both Christians and non-Christians, and they later held a reunion dinner.¹⁷

In an oral history interview with the National Archives of Singapore in 2006, Sakurai recalled that there had been no other Christians in his unit. When the Syonan Jinja – a Shinto shrine at MacRitchie Reservoir commemorating fallen soldiers who had died in the battles for Malaya and Sumatra – was consecrated, all the other senior officers were given roles to play with the exception of Sakurai, who was exempted as he was a Christian.¹⁸

Interestingly, one of Sakurai's assignments in Singapore was to liaise with five Japanese artists to produce paintings of Singapore. These were Tsuguharu Fujita (1886–1968), Goro Tsuruta (1890–1969), Saburo Miyamoto (1905–74), Kenichi Nakamura (1895–1967) and Shin Kurihara (1894–1966). Sakurai used the paintings to create postcards celebrating Japan's victory in the war that soldiers could send back home to their families. Sakurai donated the five original drawings as well as postcards to the National Archives in 2006 and the paintings are currently on display at the Former Ford Factory museum in Bukit Timah.¹⁹

In 1944, Sakurai was redeployed to the military frontline in the Japanese invasion of northeastern India. By July 1944, the Japanese forces had been defeated at the battles of Imphal and Kohima – which together formed one of the turning points of World War II – and they were forced to retreat into Burma (now Myanmar). By this time, their supply lines were over-extended and soldiers had to rely on their own resources to find their way back to central Burma. Many more died from sickness and starvation than from actual fighting.²⁰

Sakurai himself led a group that struggled to rejoin the main Japanese forces in central Burma.²¹ Their route led them to the Sittang River at a point where it was some 250 yards (230 m) wide and in full flood because of the rainy season. Shortly before attempting to cross the river on crudely assembled rafts, Sakurai realised that Noguchi, one of his comrades, was missing. Leaving his men at the riverbank, Sakurai went back to look for him but to no avail. As he later recalled, it was his Christian faith that had given him the courage to continue. Finally, Sakurai managed to cross the river as one of the few survivors from his original group.²²

Sakurai's experience in Burma was imprinted in his mind for the rest of his life, underlining his sense of the futility of war. In his will, he asked for some of his ashes to be scattered in the Sittang River after his death.



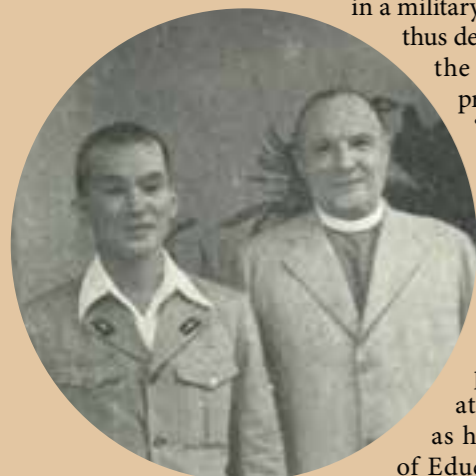
Reverend Tadashi Matsumoto – Military Interpreter

The third Japanese Anglican, Reverend Tadashi Matsumoto, came to Singapore in 1943. He was fluent in English and was therefore recruited as a military interpreter. In his spare time, he attended church services and did his best to encourage the local Christians whom he encountered.

Matsumoto had graduated from Rikkyo and the NSKK seminary in 1930. He then went to Prince Edward Island in Canada to serve in a church for Japanese migrants, some 500 miles (800 km) north of Vancouver.²³ Subsequently, he embarked on postgraduate theological studies, first in Chicago in the United States and then in Toronto in Canada. After returning to Japan, he served in churches in the Narita area and in Kanagawa prefecture before being drafted into the Imperial Japanese Army. On his arrival in Singapore, he contacted Sakurai, having been alerted to his presence by another Anglican priest in Japan.²⁴

One of the churches where Matsumoto worshipped was St Hilda's in Katong. He developed a close connection with the congregation, but was dismayed at what he regarded as poor attendance at Sunday services. In a letter to Reverend John Hayter, the Assistant Chaplain at St Andrew's Cathedral, in early 1945, Mrs Doris Maddox, one of the church's parishioners, wrote: "St Hilda's had a friend in the Revd. Matsumoto of the Tokio Diocese in Japan. He rounded up those who missed Church, stressed the importance of regularity and was pained to find that all four hundred members did not come every Sunday."²⁵

She added that Matsumoto had advised Reverend John Handy, the priest in charge of St Hilda's, "when there were tricky knots to unravel". This advice evidently



Andrew Tokuji Ogawa and Bishop John Leonard Wilson, c. 1942. Image reproduced from John Hayter and Jack Bennitt, *Singapore, The War and After series, no. 2*. (London: Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, 1946). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 275.957 HAY-[JSB]).



"Fighter Plane W8155 at Kallang Airport" by Saburo Miyamoto, 1942. Taka Sakurai Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

included recommendations on how to keep on the right side of the Japanese authorities. Apparently, he had said: “You do not cooperate enough with the Government. You are concerned only with helping people. You must make some gesture towards the Government.”²⁶ St Hilda’s responded with a move that was both diplomatic and humanitarian: the church arranged to give the Good Friday collection to the Japanese Red Cross.

In early 1945, Matsumoto was transferred to Taiping in northern Malaya. After the Japanese surrender in August 1945, he was held in a British internment camp there. During his detention, he met a British army chaplain who gave him the book, *Prophets for a Day of Judgement*.²⁷ The book was written specifically for a wartime audience and looks for inspiration from four people who had lived through earlier catastrophes: the Prophet Jeremiah (c. 770–c. 650 BCE), Augustine of Hippo (354–430), Julian of Norwich (1343–c. 1416) and the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821–81).

Chiyokichi Ariga (standing) with his wife and daughter and George Suzuki at Jurong Camp in Singapore, 1945. George Metcalf Archival Collection, Canadian War Museum (CWM 19830626-001_14a).



Matsumoto was so impressed by the book that he translated it into Japanese. Of the four, Dostoyevsky was the one who struck him the most. As a young man, Dostoyevsky had been sentenced to death, only to be reprieved at the very last moment. Matsumoto believed that the book held a special message for his fellow prisoners, some of whom were on trial for war crimes. In the foreword of his translated version, Matsumoto wrote that he was able to share the draft with prisoners who had been sentenced to death, and to pray with them before their executions.²⁸

Matsumoto was eventually released from detention and found his way back to Japan where he resumed his career as a parish priest.

Chiyokichi Ariga – Schoolteacher and Orphanage Warden

Chiyokichi Ariga was the fourth Japanese Anglican in Singapore of whom we have definite knowledge. Unlike the others, he was a civilian rather than a military official. Being part of the same network of Rikkyo alumni, he made contact with Sakurai soon after arriving in Singapore in August 1943.

Ariga had previously worked in Canada, first as a journalist and then as a teacher in a school for children of Japanese migrants. He kept in close contact with both the Canadian and the Japanese branches of the Anglican church, and he had been instrumental in encouraging Matsumoto to go to Canada.²⁹

After the outbreak of war, Ariga was detained in a prisoner-of-war camp in Ontario.³⁰ However, together with his wife and daughter, he was among a group of Japanese who were repatriated in exchange for Canadian prisoners. They travelled by sea via Mozambique to Singapore. Ariga decided to stay on in Singapore as he believed that there might be more opportunities for Japanese speakers of English. He also felt that the Japanese mainland would be more militaristic.³¹

According to Ariga’s memoirs, his wife was appointed to head an orphanage at York Hill, whose children included those of foreign detainees. Ariga became a teacher at the orphanage, and the couple worked there together until the end of the war, making a small but important humanitarian contribution in difficult times.³²



Taka Sakurai’s wedding to Tadashi Matsumoto’s sister Fusae, 8 April 1948. Chiyokichi Ariga (with white hair) is standing next to the groom. He was the one who introduced Sakurai to Fusae. Matsumoto is standing on the extreme left of the back row. Courtesy of Mrs Hiroko Ito.

Postwar Reconstruction in Japan

After the war, all four men contributed to the rebuilding of the NSKK in Japan. Ogawa became a professor in Rikkyo. In 1953, Bishop Wilson invited him to the annual meeting in the UK of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel where he presented on “Christian Work in Japan Today”, noting that there was still a role for foreign missionaries.³³

At the end of the presentation, Ogawa briefly commented on his own role in Singapore during the war, stating that he had not done anything beyond what Christians had been taught to do. “I certainly did not want to disappoint the prayers that our friends had been offering for our work,” he said. While in Britain, Ogawa joined the crowds outside Westminster Abbey for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.³⁴ He met Wilson once more when both men returned to Singapore in 1969 for a documentary by the British Broadcasting Corporation on wartime Singapore. Ogawa died in 2001.

Ariga became the principal of Rikkyo Elementary School, working alongside Sakurai as the chaplain. On a more personal note, Ariga introduced Sakurai to Matsumoto’s sister Fusae, and they got married in 1948. In retirement, Ariga returned to North America.

Matsumoto returned to parish ministry at St Mary’s Church in Ichikawa, Chiba prefecture, while also serving as a lecturer in the NSKK’s Central Theological College in Tokyo. He died in 1966, aged 58.

After nearly a decade’s interruption, Sakurai was able to return to his original vocation: he was ordained as a deacon in 1947 and became a priest the following year. He then served as a chaplain to the Rikkyo Elementary School, which was associated with Rikkyo University. One of his contributions was arranging for Singapore basketball teams to play in Japan.³⁵

Sakurai visited Singapore for the last time in 2006. He had learnt of the opening of Memories at Old Ford Factory, an exhibition about the Japanese Occupation (now the Former Ford Factory). He decided to donate the paintings by the five war

artists he had worked with to the National Archives of Singapore. Sakurai also gave an oral history interview where he talked about the donation and his time in Singapore during the war.³⁶ Sakurai concluded by saying that he loved Singapore and was glad that he had had an opportunity to live here. He was only sad that it was the war that had brought him here. ♦

I thank Sharon Lim, producer of the video *Unity of Faith: The Story of St Andrew’s Cathedral During World War II* (available on YouTube), who provided the initial impetus for this research by inviting me to contribute to the St Andrew’s Cathedral project. Joseph Thambiah recently wrote a book on the Anglican Church in the war, *Providence in Adversity: World War 2 and the Anglican Church in Singapore* (2022). This article builds on both projects by providing more details on the Japanese Anglicans and their motivations.

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- Chiyokichi Ariga, *Rokki No Yūwaku* [“Temptation of the Rockies”] (Tokyo: n.p., 1952), 171–72; Sakurai, “Hito-wa Shinko Naku Shite Ikirarenai.”
- Ariga, *Rokki No Yūwaku*, 171–72; Sakurai, “Hito-wa Shinko Naku Shite Ikirarenai.”
- Tokuji Ogawa, “Christian Work in Japan Today,” 1953, typescript. (From Rikkyo University Archives)
- Typescript article (in English) by Tokuji Ogawa, *Rikkyo Echo*, 4 June 1953. (From Rikkyo University Archives)
- Correspondence with Reverend Isao Uematsu (Sakurai’s nephew), April 2022.
- Taka Sakurai, oral history interview, 30 June 2006, Reel/Disc 3, 69–74.

In Good Hands

The Calligraphy of Ustaz Syed Abdul Rahman Al-Attas

The master calligrapher's artworks not only adorn physical spaces but are also found in Malay print publications.

By Nurul Wahidah Mohd Tambee

Nurul Wahidah Mohd Tambee is a Manager/Librarian at Resource Discovery, National Library Board. She works closely with Malay-language materials.

If you visit Sultan Mosque, you are likely to hear stories about its history and architecture, and especially how, as part of fundraising efforts, glass bottles line the base of each dome in neat rows as a contribution from the people in the community in the late 1920s.¹ This was a mark of the hands of people who gave, despite not having much to give. Hands made this building, hands have kept it together, and hands will keep it going.

But if you enter Sultan Mosque and walk up to the *mihrab* (the pulpit or prayer niche that indicates the direction of Mecca), you will notice the work of another hand. Above the *mihrab*, right at the top of the middle panel is the Arabic word “Allah”, written in the Thuluth calligraphy style noted for its curvilinear features. Encircling the word is the text from “Surah Al-Ikhlâs”, the 112th chapter of the Qur’an. The name and salutations for Prophet Muhammad flank the left and right sides of this circle. Below the circle is verse 18 of “Surah At-Tawbah”, the 9th chapter of the Qur’an. Both the text and verse are written in Thuluth Jali, a decorative form of Thuluth calligraphy used in Islamic architecture.

If you squint a little bit more, you will see on the bottom right corner of the central panel the Arabic words “Katabahu Abdul Rahman Al-Attas”

(Written by Abdul Rahman Al-Attas) in Diwani calligraphy, a cursive style which traces its history to the 16th-century Ottoman court. On the bottom left corner is the date “6 Rabi’ulawal Sanat 1368” in the Hijri (Islamic) calendar, or 5 January 1949, indicating the completion date of the calligraphy. The man behind the calligraphy is Abdul Rahman Al-Attas.

(From left) Abdul Rahman Al-Attas’s calligraphy is easily identified by his signature bearing his family name, Al-Attas. The title of this article in entertainment magazine *Majalah Bintang*, written in both the Diwani and Thuluth calligraphy styles, wishes its readers “Selamat Berhari Raya Aidil Adha” (Happy Eid al-Adha). Image reproduced from *Majalah Bintang*, no. 100, June 1959, 19–20. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL0S 793.43095957 MB).

Abdul Rahman Al-Attas used the Nasta’liq calligraphy style for the title of the book, *Rumah Itu Dunia Aku* (The Home is My World), written by Hamzah Abdul Majid bin Hussin. Image reproduced from *Rumah Itu Dunia Aku*, 1951. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL0S 899.283 HAM).

The design for the masthead of *Film Raya* incorporates ornate lettering in both Jawi and romanised Malay. In this example we see Abdul Rahman Attas’s signature in both Arabic and romanised Malay. Image reproduced from *Film Raya*, no. 5, May 1951. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL0S 793.43095957 FR).

In subsequent designs for the masthead of *Film Raya*, Abdul Rahman Al-Attas also included the description “Majalah film bulanan yang terkemuka di Malaya” (Leading film monthly in Malaya) in the Diwani calligraphy style. Image reproduced from *Film Raya*, no. 48, May 1952. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL0S 793.43095957 FR).





The masthead of *Majalah Bintang* magazine showing a variation of the word “Majalah” written in the Thuluth style by Abdul Rahman Al-Attas. On the front cover is an illustration of the actor Salleh Kamil and his name in the Diwani style. Some lines from Salleh Kamil’s interview appear on the top left rendered in the Khat Ijazah style, which combines both the Naskh and Thuluth styles. Image reproduced from *Majalah Bintang*, no. 70, March 1958. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL0S 793.43095957 MB).

In this masthead of *Majalah Bintang*, Abdul Rahman Al-Attas wrote “Majalah” in the Nasta’liq calligraphy style. Image reproduced from *Majalah Bintang*, no. 1, May 1955, reverse page of front cover. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL0S 793.43095957 MB).



A Prolific Calligrapher

Abdul Rahman Al-Attas, or Al-Ustaz Syed Abdul Rahman bin Hassan Al-Attas Al-Azhari, was a prolific calligrapher who was born in Johor Bahru in 1898. Not much is known about his life beyond that he studied calligraphy in Cairo, Egypt, first at Madrasah Tahsin Al-Khuttut and subsequently at Al-Azhar University, earning him the epithet “Al-Azhari”.² Indeed, the Egyptian influence would pervade the calligraphic works that he would later produce.

Although the more enduring calligraphy artworks by Abdul Rahman Al-Attas still exist today in the form of Qur’anic verses in Sultan Mosque, as well as mosques in other parts of Southeast Asia, his most quantitatively significant contributions can be found in more utilitarian and literary spaces. These are the Jawi titles and headers of Malay print materials, i.e., magazines, books and other ephemera produced mainly in Malaya from the 1950s to 1960s.

To understand why his Jawi calligraphy endured and why it was a significant marker of printed Malay materials in the period before Singapore’s separation from Malaysia and independence, we need to understand the means of producing these materials.

Jawi Calligraphy in Malay Print Materials

The romanisation of Malay print materials only came about in the latter half of the 20th century, after World War II. Before the romanisation of the Malay language, the predominant way of conveying knowledge, information and stories in print was in Jawi – a means of visually representing or encoding the Malay language using a modified Arabic script.³

Although book printing and production in the Western world changed with the arrival of the printing press and the moveable type, much of the world that relied on Arabic characters in their means of communication – such as Ottoman Turkey, Northwestern Africa and India – found the moveable type restrictive and stilted; it could not quite capture the fluidity of the handwritten Arabic script.

It was not until the invention of lithography that the reproduction of texts in Arabic characters flourished since lithography was able to reproduce handwritten text. Handwritten Arabic made for much easier reading and was visually more acceptable to the readerly eye than Arabic typography.⁴ A notable example of a lithographed text in Singapore is the famous *Hikayat Abdullah* (Stories of Abdullah) by the Malay teacher and scribe Abdullah Abdul Kadir (better known as Munshi Abdullah) lithographed by the Mission Press in 1849.⁵

Nevertheless, many of the printing presses in Southeast Asia eventually adopted the moveable type due to the speed, ease and volume of reproduction. The bulk of Jawi texts, books, newspapers and periodicals eventually began to be printed using compositions of Arabic characters in a moveable type.⁶

However, many Malay books and magazines still preferred to use Jawi calligraphy for their titles and masthead on the cover instead of the romanised script for aesthetic reasons. These illustrated words would require a reproduction – via lithography, other methods of relief printing, customised plates or customised metal type – of a skilled calligrapher’s work. One would assume that it was because calligraphy offered these printed Malay books and magazines what the moveable type could not provide – aesthetic variety, style and flexibility. And this was where the handwritten work of Abdul Rahman Al-Attas came in.

A Master of All Styles

A unique feature of Arabic calligraphy, and thus Jawi calligraphy – which lends itself to the aesthetics of Malay print materials – is its ability for words and sentences to be compressed in a prescribed space by way of artfully stacking letters. Abdul Rahman Al-Attas used this aspect of calligraphy to his advantage such as when creating variations of the title of entertainment magazine *Majalah Bintang* on the cover and first page.

Whether it was the more compact and sturdy Riq’ah, the rounded curls of Diwani, the romantic Nasta’liq, or the precision and perfection of Naskh and Thuluth, Abdul Rahman Al-Attas’s calligraphic proficiency was well demonstrated on the page. Because he had learnt these styles while studying in Egypt, his calligraphy carries a distinctive Egyptian influence that is slightly different from the Ottoman Turkish or Baghdadi variants of the same style.⁷

Calligraphy in Singapore and Southeast Asia

Other than Sultan Mosque, Abdul Rahman Al-Attas’s calligraphy also adorns the shrine of Muslim saint Habib Noh bin Muhammad Al-Habsyi on Palmer Road in Tanjong Pagar.⁸ Across Southeast Asia, Abdul Rahman Al-Attas’s calligraphy can be found in places such as the tomb of Sultan Zainal Abidin in Kuala Terengganu, the Malaysian parliament building and Masjid Jame’ in Bandar Seri Begawan. His works are also preserved in collections owned by the Sultan of Johor, the Museum of Asian Art in the University of Malaya as well as the National University of Malaysia.⁹

Abdul Rahman Al-Attas also designed the titles and mastheads for a number of Malay print publications. Easily identified by his signature, his calligraphy is found in the works published by various Malay publishing houses in Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s, including Qalam Press, Melayu Raya Press, Pustaka H.M. Ali and Matba’ah Sulaiman Mar’ie. For instance, for the title of *Film Raya*, a magazine published by Melayu Raya Press, his signature is found just beneath the letter “F”.

The master calligrapher’s penmanship also decorates the graduation certificate of Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah. Neatly written in Jawi amid the swirling green vegetal border at the bottom right



Abdul Rahman Al-Attas designed a few variations of the masthead for the *Majalah Bintang* magazine. In this version, the words “Majalah” and “Bintang” are stacked one above the other. Image reproduced from *Majalah Bintang*, no. 100, June 1959, 3. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL0S 793.43095957 MB).



Abdul Rahman Al-Attas demonstrates his proficiency in the Diwani Jali calligraphy style in the Jawi version of the company logo of Melayu Raya Press. This style allows for greater stacking and compression of Arabic letters in the Diwani calligraphy style. Image reproduced from *Alam Perempuan*, published in 1951 by Melayu Raya Press. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL0S 305.4 MUH).



This short story in *Majalah Bintang* showcases Abdul Rahman Al-Attas’s calligraphy in different styles. The title of the story, “Jalan Begitu Panjang” (The Long Road), is written in the Nasta’liq style, whereas the byline, “Oleh Salim Manja” (By Salim Manja), is in the Naskh style. Image reproduced from *Majalah Bintang*, no. 65, January 1958, 26. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL0S 793.43095957 MB).



While most of the advertisement for the *Film Raya* magazine was done using a letterpress, the ornate lettering for the title of the magazine was designed by Abdul Rahman Al-Attas in both Jawi and romanised Malay. Image reproduced from *Alam Perempuan*, published in 1951 by Melayu Raya Press. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL0S 305.4 MUH).



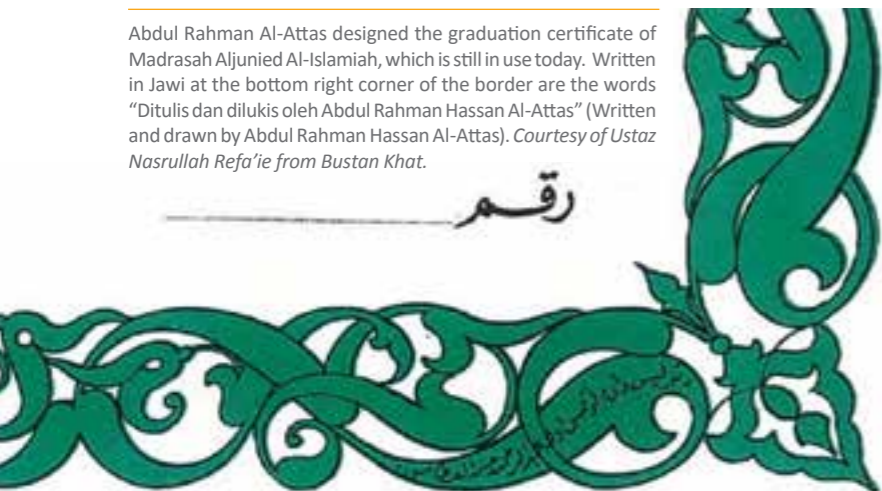
Abdul Rahman Al-Attas's calligraphy reference book, *Tulisan Cantik* (date and place of publication unknown). Courtesy of Ustazah A'tii Qah Suhaimi from Bustan Khat.

corner of the certificate is the text “Ditulis dan dilukis oleh Abdul Rahman Hassan Al-Attas” (Written and drawn by Abdul Rahman Hassan Al-Attas), which indicates that he was responsible for both the calligraphy and the design of the decorative border.

Abdul Rahman Al-Attas's calligraphy is not just limited to buildings and print publications. His calligraphy can also be found in a series of commemorative glass cups produced in 1957 after the Federation of Malaya gained independence from the British. Printed on the cups is “Merdeka” written in Jawi, and just below the Arabic letter “م” (*mim*) is his signature.

Abdul Rahman Al-Attas also produced his own calligraphy reference book, *Tulisan Cantik*. (Unfortunately, the date and place of publication are unknown.) The publication showcases his handwriting in the Thuluth, Naskh and Riq'ah styles, a section on

Abdul Rahman Al-Attas designed the graduation certificate of Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah, which is still in use today. Written in Jawi at the bottom right corner of the border are the words “Ditulis dan dilukis oleh Abdul Rahman Hassan Al-Attas” (Written and drawn by Abdul Rahman Hassan Al-Attas). Courtesy of Ustaz Nasrullah Refa'ie from Bustan Khat.



how calligraphers may create and prepare their own calligraphy pen for writing, and instructions such as writing in a well-lit place.

Other Calligraphers and Calligraphy Styles

According to Ustaz Syed Agil Othman Al-Yahya, the former principal of Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah in Singapore (who is himself a prolific calligrapher), some of the other calligraphers who were active in Singapore in the 1940s up to the 1990s include Al Ustaz Al-Fadhil As-Sayyid Abu Bakar bin Abdul Qadir Al-Yahya, Al-Ustaz Al-Fadhil Mustajab Che' Onn, Al-Ustaz Al-Fadhil Muhammad Tarmidzi Hj Hassan, Al-Ustaz Al-Fadhil Ameen Muslim and Al-Ustaz Al-Fadhil Mahmood Abdul Majid.¹⁰

While perusing Jawi print materials in the collections of the National Library, I came across the works of other calligraphers that bear their signatures. However, for the moment, the identity of these calligraphers remains a mystery to me until more research is done.

Decoding Jawi Texts

While Arabic and Jawi calligraphy may have limited use in the Malay print and publishing industry in the 21st century, Jawi texts – such as handwritten manuscripts, lithographed materials and print publications – should nonetheless be studied and referenced as a point of access to the wealth of knowledge and perspectives across the Malay Archipelago.



(Above) The text “Dari hati ke hati” (Heart to heart), read from top to bottom, is yet another demonstration of the creativity that can be incorporated into Jawi lettering. Image reproduced from *Fashion*, no. 20, June 1966, 1. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL05 059.9928 F-[UAS]).

(Above right) An advertisement by Jaya Waras. Abdul Rahman Al-Attas's identifiable signature is seen beneath the Arabic letter “م” (*mim*) in the Jawi word “Merdeka” printed on the glass cup commemorating the independence of the Federation of Malaya in 1957. Image reproduced from *Fashion*, no. 170, May 1957. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL05 059.9928 F-[UAS]).

There have been efforts to create software that can convert Jawi to romanised Malay. But most of these focus on Jawi printed text reproduced via moveable type and not so much on handwritten Jawi or Jawi calligraphy, where the different ways of depicting characters in various calligraphy styles and the idiosyncrasies of handwriting pose a challenge.

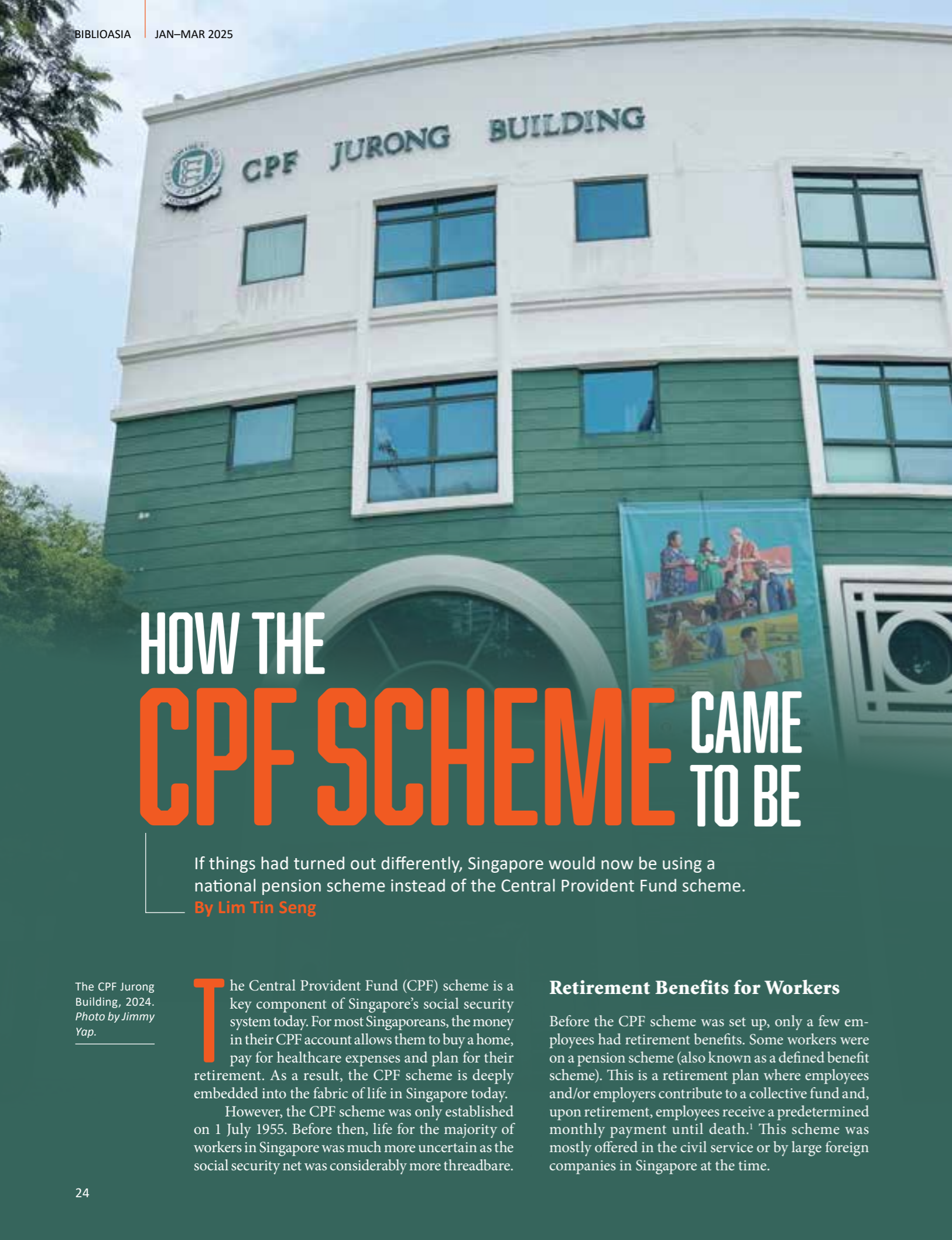
Also, the many spelling variations of certain words¹¹ present a problem to those looking to use more precise software for the transliteration of Jawi texts. Added to that, deciphering Jawi calligraphy – especially when it is more complex and artistic – is sometimes difficult even to a proficient Jawi reader. Perhaps with time and advancements in technology, the right software will be able to decode intricate works of Jawi calligraphy. What is at stake is not only works in Malay. That same technology can be used for knowledge recorded in Arwi or Arabu Tamil – a dialect of the Tamil language written using Arabic characters – to make it accessible to the wider audience as well. ♦



This article is written with the assistance of Ustaz Nasrullah Refa'ie, Ustazah A'tii Qah Suhaimi and Ustazah Amirah Raimi from Bustan Khat, a collective of Islamic calligraphy experts. I thank Ustaz Syed Agil Othman Al-Yahya for his insights and anecdotes. Ustaz Syed Agil met Ustaz Abdul Rahman Al-Attas when the latter was working on the calligraphy for the various Malay publishing houses in the 1950s and 1960s. The photograph of the *mihrab* of Sultan Mosque was provided by Sheikh Belaid Hamidi whose calligraphy syllabus is taught in Bustan Khat.

NOTES

- 1 Ten Leu-Jiun, “The Invention of a Tradition: Indo-Saracenic Domes on Mosques in Singapore,” *BiblioAsia* 9, no. 1 (April–June 2013): 16–23; National Heritage Board, “Sultan Mosque,” *Roots*, last updated 1 July 2022, <https://www.roots.gov.sg/places/places-landing/Places/national-monuments/sultan-mosque>.
- 2 Faridah Che Husain, “Seni Kaligrafi Islam Di Malaysia Sebagai Pencetus Tamadun Melayu Islam” (Master’s thesis, Universiti Malaya, 2000), 65–66, <http://ir.upm.edu.my/find/Record/u502336>.
- 3 Jawi includes additional characters that do not exist in the Arabic alphabet to encompass the “ny”, “ng”, “p”, “v” and “ch” sounds present in the Malay language.
- 4 Ian Proudfoot, “Mass Producing Hourī’s Moles or Aesthetics and Choice of Technology in Early Muslim Book Printing,” in *Islam: Essays on Scripture, Thought and Society. A Festschrift in Honour of Anthony H. Johns*, ed. Peter G. Riddell and Tony Street (New York: Brill, 1997), 170–77.
- 5 Abdullah Abdul Kadir, Munshi, *Hikayat Abdullah* (Singapore: Mission Press, 1849). (From National Library Online); Bernice Ang, Siti Harizah Abu Bakar and Noorashikin Zulkifli, “Writing to Print: The Shifting Roles of Malay Scribes in the 19th Century,” *BiblioAsia* 9, no. 1 (April–June 2013): 40–44; Gracie Lee, “The Early History of Printing in Singapore,” *BiblioAsia* 19, no. 3 (October–December 2023): 30–37.
- 6 A Jawi moveable type has additional characters that do not exist in the Arabic alphabet to encompass the “ny”, “ng”, “p”, “v” and “ch” sounds in the Malay language.
- 7 Hasan Abu Afash, “Tamyizul Furuqāti al-Asāsīyah fi Asālibi Katābati al-Khaṭ al-Dīwānī” [Distinguishing the Basic Differences in the Methods of Writing Diwani Calligraphy], Hiba Studio, 1 January 2014, <https://hibastudio.com/diwany-difference/>.
- 8 Bonny Tan, “Habib Noh,” in *Singapore Infopedia*, National Library Board Singapore. Article published 19 August 2016; Syed Agil Othman Al-Yahya, *Arabic Calligraphy* (Singapore: S. Agil Othman Alyahya, 2022), 3. (From PublicationSG)
- 9 Faridah Che Husain, “Seni Kaligrafi Islam di Malaysia Sebagai Pencetus Tamadun Melayu Islam,” 65–66.
- 10 Syed Agil Othman Al-Yahya, *Arabic Calligraphy*, 21–22.
- 11 Dr Hirman Khamis, a Malay-language teacher and an expert in Jawi, once shared that he had encountered almost 13 ways in which the word for “humans”, i.e., “manusia”, was spelt in Jawi orthography.



HOW THE CPF SCHEME CAME TO BE

If things had turned out differently, Singapore would now be using a national pension scheme instead of the Central Provident Fund scheme.

By Lim Tin Seng

The CPF Jurong Building, 2024. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

The Central Provident Fund (CPF) scheme is a key component of Singapore's social security system today. For most Singaporeans, the money in their CPF account allows them to buy a home, pay for healthcare expenses and plan for their retirement. As a result, the CPF scheme is deeply embedded into the fabric of life in Singapore today.

However, the CPF scheme was only established on 1 July 1955. Before then, life for the majority of workers in Singapore was much more uncertain as the social security net was considerably more threadbare.

Retirement Benefits for Workers

Before the CPF scheme was set up, only a few employees had retirement benefits. Some workers were on a pension scheme (also known as a defined benefit scheme). This is a retirement plan where employees and/or employers contribute to a collective fund and, upon retirement, employees receive a predetermined monthly payment until death.¹ This scheme was mostly offered in the civil service or by large foreign companies in Singapore at the time.

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Some workers had access to a provident fund (also known as a defined contribution scheme). This is a retirement plan where both employees and employers contribute to the employees' individual accounts, and the retirement benefits depend on their contributions and investment performance. The Singapore Municipality and some private companies such as Singapore Cold Storage, Fraser and Neave, and the Singapore Swimming Club were some employers that had established a provident fund for their employees before the CPF was created.²

While some employers might offer "a thousand dollars or two" as a gratuity to their employees when they retired, the majority did not offer any retirement benefits at all.³ As a result, most workers were left to fend for themselves after retiring. As the *Singapore Standard* observed in April 1951: "[I]n 90 cases out of a 100, for those employed in non-governmental services, the thought of retirement is a nightmare... For when the employee leaves his job he would be losing his only means of livelihood. After his long service he leaves his post the way he came in – almost penniless. Many of them end their last days in misery and poverty."⁴

In March 1949, Singapore started to look for a suitable retirement benefit scheme for workers. This came after Lim Yew Hock, a Legislative Council member representing trade union interests, introduced a motion in the Legislative Council calling for "legislation for social security, and that a committee should be appointed by Government at an early date to investigate and make recommendations on medical care, sickness and unemployment benefits, and old age pensions".⁵

Lim had earlier spoken up about non-existent social security measures for workers. "This lamentable lack of social security for non-Government workers is highly deplorable and I know Government's sympathies are with them," he said. "But so long as these sympathies are not translated into protective legislative measures the workers will have cause to reflect sadly that this Government is still run by capital as it was before the war."⁶

Although the Legislative Council fully supported the motion, Colonial Secretary P.A.B. McKerron emphasised that the scheme needed to be not only "desirable and workable, but also financially sound", as "everything you get has got to be paid for".⁷

The Central Provident Fund commenced on 1 July 1955. Image reproduced from *Indian Daily Mail*, 12 May 1955, 4. (From *NewspaperSG*).

The Central Provident Fund Bill

It took two years before Tan Chye Cheng of the Progressive Party introduced the Central Provident Fund (CPF) Bill at the Singapore Legislative Council on 22 May 1951. The delay sparked criticism and was even viewed by some political parties as "a publicity stunt" by the Progressive Party. However, the real reason for the delay was the party's struggle to draft the CPF Bill as "there was no precedent which could be found in the English Statute Books".

Although the Progressive Party was aware that India and the government of the Federation of Malaya were introducing their own provident funds at the time, it felt those versions were "not a suitable precedent". Consequently, lawyers in the United Kingdom were sought to draft the CPF Bill "on instructions of the Progressive Party" before it was presented to the Singapore Legislative Council in May 1951. The bill aimed to "establish a compulsory central provident fund for all employees except those whose employers have already provided comparable or better retiring benefits".⁸

The proposed legislation called for workers who were earning at least \$100 per month and not covered by any retirement benefit scheme to make a monthly 5 percent contribution of their salary to a central provident fund. The contribution would be matched by employers, and the accumulated amount would then draw an interest rate of 3 percent. Once the worker reached the age of 55, he or she would be able to withdraw the accumulated amount.⁹

Unions and employees reacted positively to the introduction of the CPF Bill, commenting that it was "a measure long overdue". The Singapore Clerical Union hoped that the bill would be "rushed" through the Legislative Council as "much time had been already lost". The Clerical Union also suggested that contributions by employers be arranged "in a graduated scale" so that firms making "handsome profits" would contribute more.¹⁰



Tan Chye Cheng of the Singapore Progressive Party tabled the Central Provident Fund Bill at the Legislative Council on 22 May 1951. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

PROVIDENT FUND WILL COMMENCE ON JULY 1 LABOUR MINISTER'S ASSURANCE

The Minister for Labour and Welfare, Mr. Lim Yew Hock, announced last evening that although it had been necessary to defer enforcement of the Central Provident Fund Ordinance whilst Government considered further amendments to this scheme it was intended to bring the Central Provident Fund into operation as soon as possible.

While the CPF Bill was being introduced, a separate Retirement Benefits Commission was convened on 19 May 1951 by Franklin Gimson, governor of Singapore, to explore alternative retirement scheme options. Headed by F.S. McFadzean, director of the Colonial Development Corporation, the commission was tasked to “investigate the best possible retirement benefits scheme for Singapore workers”. This led to a delay in the progress of the CPF Bill in the Legislative Council as the latter now had to consider the commission’s recommendations.¹¹

When the commission submitted its report to the government in February 1952, it recommended a pension scheme instead of a provident fund. The proposed pension scheme would require employees to make a weekly contribution of 60 cents until retirement. This amount would be matched by their employers. Upon retirement at age 55, the employee would receive a monthly pension of \$30 till death.¹² The commission felt that the pension scheme would require a shorter timeframe of “a few years” to be ready, whereas the provident fund scheme “would not be able to provide adequate amounts for retirement until about 1970”, and those who were middle-aged or older at the time could “never truly benefit under it”.¹³

Adopting the Provident Fund Scheme

When the Retirement Benefits Commission’s recommendations were presented to the Legislative Council during the second reading of the CPF Bill on 17 June

1952, the pension scheme was rejected in favour of the central provident fund scheme.¹⁴ The Legislative Council believed that a provident fund was a more suitable and sufficient retirement mechanism. “From the views gathered by me, employees prefer to receive a lump sum on retirement instead of a paltry \$25 or \$35 per month,” said Tan, who had introduced the CPF Bill in 1951. S. Jaganathan, general secretary of the Singapore Trade Union Congress, commented that the \$30 monthly pension was “not enough for a family to live on”.

According to a *Straits Times* survey conducted in May 1951, most unions, particularly non-government ones, felt that a provident fund “would not only be acceptable to all types of employers, but would be very fair to both employers and employees because it cuts both ways and gives both labour and management a sense of joint responsibility for the workers’ future”.¹⁵

After receiving support in the Legislative Council, the CPF Bill was sent to a select committee, which among other things, was tasked to determine how the CPF should be administered.¹⁶

After 16 months of deliberation, the select committee put forth a number of amendments, including the proposal to create a “separate full-time organisation” in the form of a board to administer the provident fund. Comprising a chairman “with appropriate qualifications” and six members that were of equal “representative of the Government and of both employers and employees”, the board would be appointed by the governor on a three-year term. Elected members of the Legislative Council and City Council were not allowed to serve on the board to ensure that the provident fund was “entirely removed from the realm of politics”.¹⁷

Other additional amendments included expanding the coverage to include employees earning between \$25 and \$500 per month; revising the interest to 2.5 percent; allowing employees such as those in the civil service who were already covered by an existing retirement benefit scheme to be exempted from making a contribution; and setting a \$500 salary cap for contributions.

On 24 November 1953, the amended CPF Bill was passed by the Legislative Council. The news was welcomed by both employers and employees. Lim Seow Eng, managing director of Ho Hong Oil Mills, said the compulsory measure would benefit all parties as “there would be security for the workers and better working results for the company”.¹⁸

Timber merchant Gan Thean Hoo felt that the CPF would foster closer ties between employers and employees and benefit society in general. “Employers will be able to set aside something every month for the welfare of those who bring them the profits,” he said. “The fund will encourage employees to stick to their jobs. Government will have money in hand for investment purposes, which will also benefit the general public and the Colony.” Agreeing that the CPF would bring long-term benefits to workers, John Tan, a commercial assistant, said: “Working people will not begrudge the small monthly sacrifices which will benefit them in later years. All my friends welcome the fund.”¹⁹

An Unexpected Delay

The new CPF Board, with E.L. Peake as the chairman, was up and running as early as January 1954. To prepare for the CPF scheme, which was slated to come into effect on 1 May 1955, one of board’s first tasks was to register all employers both in the civil and private sectors, who would then provide the fund with details of their employees. This registration exercise began on 4 January 1955 and by 30 March, some 17,000 firms with 60,000 employees had joined the fund.²⁰

However, just two days before the Central Provident Fund Ordinance was scheduled to take effect, Minister for Labour and Welfare Lim Yew Hock unexpectedly announced a delay. This came in response to criticism that the 5 percent CPF

NEW ZEALAND EXPERT WILL ADVISE SINGAPORE

Dole and health service planned for workers

SINGAPORE, Oct. 25.

THE Singapore Government may introduce contributory health and unemployment benefit schemes affecting the Colony’s 300,000 workers.


An International Labour Organisation expert has come to study problems of introducing these benefit schemes in Singapore and to make recommendations to the Government.

The expert is Mr. G. J. Brocklehurst, a member of the three-man Social Security Commission of New Zealand.

Mr. Brocklehurst told the Straits Times that his social security survey in Singapore would embrace:

- Existing measures, their co-ordination and possible extension;
- All schemes of public assistance, including the Central Provident Fund.

G.J. Brocklehurst of the International Labour Organization was appointed to assess the feasibility of contributory health and unemployment benefit schemes for workers in October 1955. Image reproduced from the Straits Budget, 27 October 1955, 17. (From NewspaperSG).



contribution would reduce the already low wages of many workers to a level “too low to provide for basic necessities”. A.E.M. Geddes, secretary of Great Eastern Life Assurance Co. Ltd., observed that the objection to CPF contributions came not from employers but from employees, noting that “[s]ome workmen seem to regard their contributions as a kind of tax instead of a form of saving subsidised by their employers”.²¹

An amending bill was quickly drafted and rushed through the Legislative Assembly under a Certificate of Urgency. The amendment exempted workers earning less than \$200 from contributing to the fund, although their employers still had to pay their share. The bill was passed on 29 June 1955, allowing the fund to come into effect on 1 July 1955.²²

Revisiting the Pension Scheme Proposal

The colonial government continued to seek alternative views on how the CPF should be expanded to cover not only the entire population, including casual workers and the self-employed, but also others in need such as the unemployed and the sick. On 21 November 1955, Chief Minister David Marshall announced the formation of the Committee on Minimum Standards of Livelihood headed by Sydney Caine, Economic Adviser to the Government and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Malaya. This committee was tasked with “establishing a minimum living standard in Singapore” by providing a basic wage and unemployment insurance, as well as improving the adequacy of existing social security programmes, including the CPF.²³

Concurrently, a study led by International Labour Organization expert, G.J. Brocklehurst, was initiated in October 1955 to assess the feasibility of introducing “contributory health and unemployment benefit schemes affecting the Colony’s 300,000 workers”. This was later expanded to evaluate the

overall effectiveness of existing social security initiatives including the CPF.²⁴

In their findings, both Caine and Brocklehurst found shortcomings with the CPF scheme. Caine felt that the provident fund was “in essence one of compulsory saving, not of social insurance”,²⁵ while Brocklehurst concluded that it was “not adequate as a social security measure”.²⁶ They recommended replacing the CPF with a new integrated social security system governed by a department of social security. This system would include a contributory pension scheme and a public assistance scheme, providing coverage not only for retirees but also for widows, the sick and those on maternity leave. However, unemployment benefits would be introduced at a later stage.²⁷

Caine and Brocklehurst also recommended varying contribution rates based on wage levels, with lower-paid employees contributing a lower percentage. Benefits should be adjusted so that lower-paid workers would receive a larger proportion of their wages compared to higher-paid workers.²⁸

The idea of creating a new social security system received mixed reactions. Some trade union leaders praised the extension of social security coverage but preferred it to be voluntary. C. Muthucumar, secretary of the Singapore Federation of Unions of Government Employees, said: “We have been asking for some sort of social insurance scheme to safeguard our members. Mr. Brocklehurst’s scheme is a good one because it will benefit everyone, but we think it should be on a voluntary basis.”

Some trade unions were wary of the new system though, especially since it might replace the CPF. John Chung, president of the Business Houses Employees Union, argued that the CPF should continue and that “any form of social security measures should be in addition to the Fund”. A.M. Nair, vice president of the Singapore Trade Union Congress, felt that it was “not

Sydney Caine, Economic Adviser to the Government and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Malaya, was appointed to head the Committee on Minimum Standards of Livelihood on 21 November 1955. Source: *The Straits Times*, 22 November 1955. © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

THE WORKERS’ LOT MAY BE RAISED SHORTLY

Sir Sydney will explore welfare state

BASIC WAGE, DOLE FOR ALL

THE whole field of minimum living standards in Singapore, including a basic wage, unemployment insurance and pensions, is to be examined by a new Government committee.

The Chief Minister, Mr. David Marshall, announced the appointment of the committee, under the



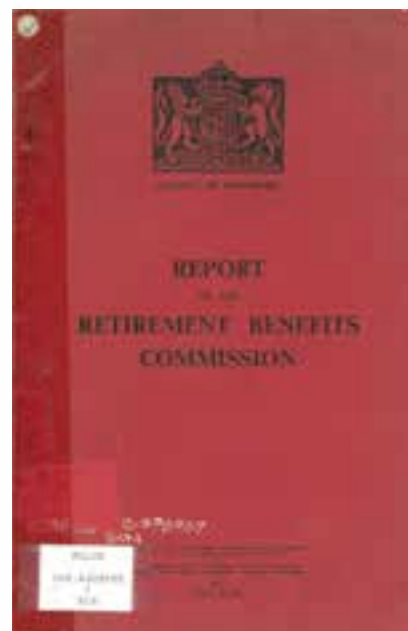
chairmanship of his Economic Adviser, Sir Sydney Caine, in the Legislative Assembly yesterday.

Mr. Marshall also announced the formation of an Economic Advisory Unit, which Sir Sydney will also head, with two full-time assistants.

The unit’s job will be to advise the Government on general economic policy.

Mr. Marshall said the committee’s terms of reference will direct it to inquire into the setting up of unemployment insurance, the prescribing of

SIR SYDNEY



The Retirement Benefits Commission was convened to “investigate the best possible retirement benefits scheme for Singapore workers”. Its report was presented to the government in February 1952. Image reproduced from *Report of the Retirement Benefits Commission* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1951). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL05 368.43095957 SIN).

necessary” to replace the CPF to broaden social security coverage. He suggested that the government could finance the proposed social security scheme through a levy on luxury goods, a special tax on totalisator lottery and the introduction of a social welfare lottery.²⁹

On 14 January 1958, the government appointed a select committee, led by L.C. Goh, permanent secretary to the Ministry of Labour and Welfare, to review and integrate the recommendations by Caine and Brocklehurst into a legislation for a new social security system. This system would cover all employees over 18 years old earning more than \$40 a month, including casual workers, with the option for the self-employed to join voluntarily.³⁰

Employee contribution rates for the new social security fund would vary according to their monthly wages, ranging from \$1 to \$30 per month, while employers were to contribute a fixed 6 percent of the employee’s wages, up to a maximum of \$30. Retirement, sickness and maternity benefits were standardised, with higher proportions for lower-paid workers.³¹

Benefits were calculated based on a percentage of wages and the employee’s family status. For example, single individuals would receive 30 percent of wages up to \$100 per month and 15 percent of any excess, capped at \$90 per month. Those with dependents would receive 50 percent of wages up to \$100 per month and \$25 of any excess, capped at \$150 per month. Retirement pensions would begin at age 60, while sickness benefits were limited to three months per year and maternity leave up to eight weeks. Benefits for widows were determined by numerous factors such as age, whether they had children and the length of the marriage.³²

The committee also noted that once the new social security legislation came into effect, the CPF would be discontinued, and members who had contributed to the fund would be eligible to have their savings either refunded or transferred to the

new social insurance fund. The proposed legislation for the new social security scheme, dubbed the “Social Security Bill”, was unveiled in March 1959 but its progress was put on hold due to the Legislative Assembly general election in June that year.³³

Retaining the Central Provident Fund

The 1959 Legislative Assembly general election ushered in a new era. At the election, the People’s Action Party (PAP) swept into power, taking 43 out of 51 seats. The new administration took a different stance on social insurance. Labour and Law Minister K.M. Byrne stressed that the government would “first have to fulfil its declared policy, and to attend to other urgent problems before embarking on any social security scheme”. These issues included unemployment, establishing a trade union house, organising trade unions, setting up an industrial court and amending the Labour Ordinance.³⁴

The government later clarified that the CPF was “not meant to provide unemployment assistance because it covered a savings scheme”.³⁵ In fact, it was cautious about transforming Singapore into a welfare state.³⁶ As founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew wrote in his memoir: “Watching the ever increasing costs of the welfare state in Britain and Sweden, we decided to avoid this debilitating system. We noted by the 1970s that when governments undertook primary responsibility for the basic duties of the head of a family, the drive in people weakened. Welfare undermined self-reliance... The handout became a way of life.”³⁷

Instead of a welfare state, Lee believed that the CPF could encourage self-reliance among Singaporeans. “The CPF has made for a different society. People who have substantial savings and assets have a different attitude to life,” he wrote. “They are more conscious of their strength and take responsibility for themselves and their families.”³⁸

Balloting ceremony for the sale of new flats in Toa Payoh under the Home Ownership for the People Scheme, 1967. In September 1968, the government launched the Public Housing Scheme to allow CPF members to use their savings to buy public housing. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Lee also said that the CPF system “needed time to build up” before it could prove its worth, including allowing CPF savings to be used for important social needs such as home ownership. “Only then,” he wrote, “would people not want their individual savings put into a common pool for everyone to have the same welfare ‘entitlement’.”³⁹

The Central Provident Fund Today

The CPF scheme has undergone numerous changes in the decades following its establishment. Beyond retirement, today Singaporeans can also use the money in their CPF accounts for housing, insurance, investment and education. However, even as the CPF scheme has expanded, the system has also not deviated from its original goal, i.e., to ensure that Singaporeans have funds for their retirement.

Over the years, the scheme has been tweaked to improve the retirement aspect. Originally, members were able to fully withdraw their savings when they retired. In 1987, the Minimum Sum Scheme was introduced which held back an amount, the so-called “minimum sum”, out of which the CPF savings are doled out monthly until it runs out. In 2009, the CPF Life annuity scheme was introduced. Under this scheme, members receive payouts for life.

The CPF annuity scheme has also been modified since 2009 to allow people to save more for their retirement. From 1 January 2025, the Enhanced Retirement Sum (ERS), which is the amount that goes into the annuity scheme, will be raised to four times the Basic Retirement Sum. Previously, the enhanced amount was three times the basic one. This change will allow those who are able to save more to get more per month as a payout.

In 2025, the ERS will be \$426,000, up from \$308,700. According to the CPF Board, those who turn 55 in 2025, and who top up to the new maximum amount, will be able to receive more than \$3,000 a month for life from age 65.⁴⁰

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W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

SECRETS FROM THE OUTSTATIONS

W. Somerset Maugham's visits to Singapore in the 1920s inspired some of his greatest fictional works, but these stories also triggered a fierce backlash against him throughout British Malaya.

By T.A. Morton

Portrait of Somerset Maugham, undated. CPA Media Pte Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo.

T.A. Morton is a Singapore-based Irish/Australian writer and a Cambridge graduate. She is co-host of the podcast, *The Asian Bookshelf*, and author of the upcoming novel, *The Coffee Shop Masquerade*. In 2020, she was shortlisted for the Bridport Prize for her short work, "Faded Ink", and the Virginia Prize for Fiction for *The Queen, The Soldier and The Girl*. Her novel, *Someone Is Coming*, based on plantation murders in Malaya in the 1900s, was published by Monsoon Books in 2022 and has been optioned for television.

In April 1921, William Somerset Maugham – the bestselling novelist, famed playwright and master of short stories – landed in Singapore. Then aged 47, Maugham was already considered one of the world's most well-known writers. During his lifetime, he penned 20 novels, filled nine volumes of short stories, wrote 31 plays and published several volumes of non-fiction.

However, it was his arrival in Singapore that marked a turning point in Maugham's career. Encountering locals, empire builders, missionaries and the earliest cosmopolitan travellers, Maugham discovered a treasure trove of "new types" that appealed to his imagination.¹ Yet, as a former doctor and an avid note-taker, he quite literally took these individuals at their word. This approach led to some of his most celebrated short stories, but it also damaged his reputation due to the insensitivity of publicly airing secrets for his own benefit.

Upon his arrival, the *Malaya Tribune* reported that "Mr W. Somerset Maugham, famous British playwright, some of whose productions are well-known here, is at present staying at the Van Wijk Hotel. He is seeking some Eastern Colour for some of his future work".²

Maugham was accompanied by his private secretary, Gerald Haxton, during his trips. Haxton was adventurous and easy-going and was an asset to the shy writer. Maugham had a speech impediment, a stammer that tormented him over periods of his life, and he was unable to fall easily into conversation. It left him feeling self-conscious and often humiliated. It was Haxton who would pass hours talking to people they encountered on ships, in hotels and in clubhouse bars, and then relay their stories back to Maugham.

The expatriate society of British Malaya was thrilled by the arrival of such a popular writer, and Maugham was quickly inundated with invitations to parties and dinners. Their only mistake, perhaps, was that, during their cocktail hours, drinking sundowners before their lavish dinner parties, they revealed too much of themselves.

Singapore was then, like now, one of the great ports of the East. It was the bustling heart of Southeast Asia and a jewel of the British Empire. When Maugham docked, it was going through a period of prosperity with the boom of the rubber trade due to the expansion of the motor trade in the United States.

After the First World War, tin and rubber prices soared and fortunes were to be made in Southeast Asia. An influx of British expatriates, who referred to themselves as "Empire builders", consisted of people

migrating for work, either as government officials to uphold British rule or people moving away for monetary gain. Maugham found these "new" types intriguing, and often in some bar or club, Maugham and Haxton would hear extraordinary tales from people who were living seemingly ordinary lives. Maugham wrote: "[I]n those parts of the world where civilisation is worn thinner. I found the unique man far easier to see."³ This could be due to the lack of social constraints and ties from home, the new climate; people were living differently and had stories to tell.

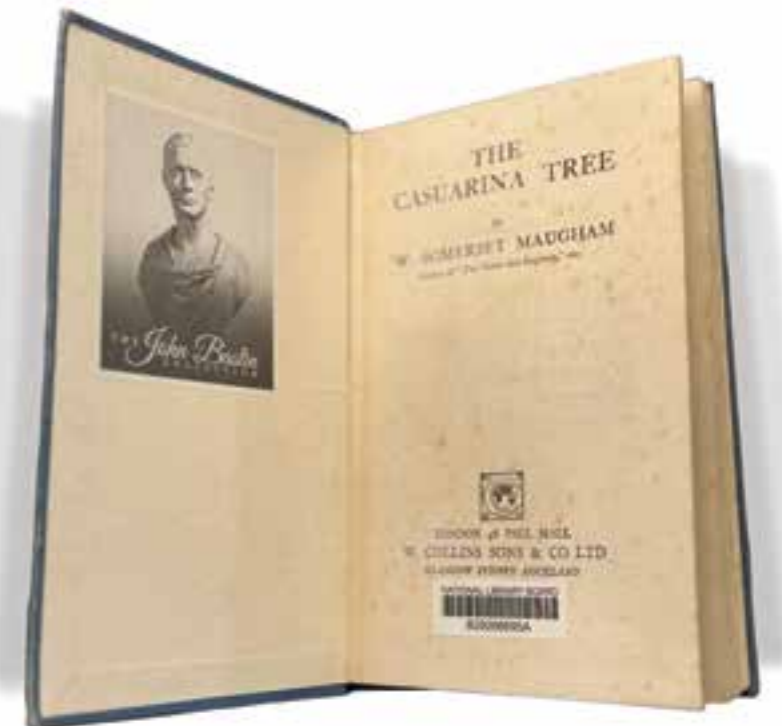
Inspiration for Stories

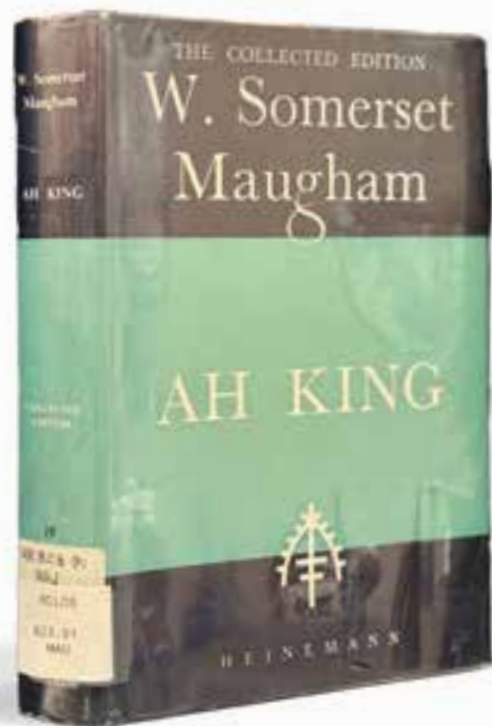
Maugham and his partner Haxton journeyed throughout Southeast Asia during the 1920s. In 1921, he spent six months in the region and another four months in 1925. Maugham and Haxton travelled extensively through British Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, French Indochina and Siam. Being a celebrity, his movement in these parts of the world did not go unnoticed. As the *Singapore Free Press* noted in May 1921: "Mr W. Somerset Maugham has been taking the opportunity during his visit to Kuala Lumpur to acquaint himself with the routine of a planter's life."⁴

Maugham was greatly inspired by the life of a plantation manager. Most of his Far Eastern tales, short stories based in Malaya, take place in and around plantations, and when looking at old articles of that time, it is evident what inspired him. The deaths of plantation managers were avidly reported by the local papers.

In November 1916, the *Malaya Tribune* reported that "Mr Gilbert Goundry was found dead on Monday morning with a deep wound in the temple, and with one hand clutching the trigger of a double-barrelled

The title page of *The Casuarina Tree* published by William Collins, Sons & Co. in 1936. The short story, "The Letter", is featured in this anthology. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCLOS 823.912 MAU-[JSB]).





The anthology, *Ah King: Six Stories*, contains the short stories "The Book-Bag" and "Footprints in the Jungle". This edition was published by William Heinemann, 1936. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL05 823.91 MAU).

shot gun".⁵ Just over a week later, the *Straits Times* reported that the manager of the rubber estate in Johor had been killed. "Mr Wilson was shot dead at nine this morning... the assailant escaped and got into the jungle and so far has not been captured."⁶

These stories provided Maugham with material and the "Eastern colour" he was in search of. Maugham wrote that "[o]ften in some lonely post in the jungle or in a stiff, grand house, solitary in the midst of a teeming Chinese city, a man has told me stories about himself that I was sure he had never told to a living soul. I was a stray

acquaintance whom he had never seen before and would never see again, a wanderer for a moment through his monotonous life, and some starved impulse led him to lay bare his soul".⁷

It was during these occasions that Maugham first heard about the incestuous affair of the brother and sister he wrote about in "The Book Bag", a short story in the anthology *Ah King*.⁸ A trader staying in the same residence as Maugham and Haxton had apparently told them the story of an English wife's discovery of her husband's "half-caste" children, which Maugham wrote about in "The Force of Circumstance".⁹

One evening in Sumatra, Maugham and Haxton had agreed to dine but Haxton was running late. Maugham waited and was then forced to eat alone. He was furious after dinner; it was then that Haxton, drunk, rushed in apologising and saying, "But I've got a corking good story for you!"¹⁰ He went on to relay the story that became "Footprints in the Jungle", about the death of Mrs Cartwright's first husband, Reggie Bronson, shot dead by her lover after she became pregnant with the lover's child. Owing to the lack of evidence to convict, the body had to be removed quickly from the jungle due to the heat.¹¹

Murder was a common theme in Maugham's Far Eastern stories. He referred to a "murderous heat", which caused his characters to become mad and commit murder.

Maugham engaged his readers by creating very entertaining stories based on what he came across here, and even though the murderers sometimes confess their sins, they live on freely keeping that stiff upper lip. Their social manners and customs are embedded within their club life; they meet to play bridge and dress for dinner despite the heat. His characters came out to the East on the promises

of a better life for the future. However, once here, they are forced to battle against the terrain, customs and themselves. Their mask quickly slips, revealing deeply flawed people. Klaus W. Jonas writes that Maugham's society in the East represents some sort of "micro-England" in that those who live here try to maintain their customs despite the environment they now dwell in.¹²

Maugham's Englishwomen in the East exclude themselves from all foreign influences. In the short story, "Door of Opportunity," he wrote, "they make a circle that was more provincial than any in the smallest town in England".¹³

During his time here, Maugham was interviewed by the *Malay Mail*. The journalist wrote: "The interview ended with some appreciative remarks from Mr. Maugham on the beauty of Malaya, where, he complained, people 'grumbled at the hardships of exile' when they had more of the 'conveniences of civilisation' than in England."¹⁴ This astute remark from Maugham about the expatriates heralded a warning of what Maugham was going to write about the people he encountered here.



The Letter/The Proudlock Case

Maugham's travels through Southeast Asia resulted in his short story collection, *The Casuarina Tree*, published in 1926. The collection consists of six stories, all of which feature characters based in the region. One story in particular riled up the expatriate community – "The Letter".¹⁵ This is probably one of Maugham's most famous stories and is based on a true event: the arrest and conviction of Ethel Proudlock in 1911, in Kuala Lumpur, for killing a man.

On 23 April 1911, William Steward, the former manager of the Salak South Tin mines, was dining at the Empire Hotel with friends when he abruptly got up and announced that he had an appointment at 9 pm that evening. Steward went to call on the Proudlocks, friends of his, and found Mrs Ethel Proudlock home alone. Her husband, William Proudlock, acting headmaster of the Victoria Institution House, was out dining with a friend. Steward arrived by rickshaw and told the driver to wait for him outside. Mrs Proudlock welcomed him into the house.

What transpired next is unclear, but according to Mrs Proudlock, Steward attempted to rape her. While escaping, she found the revolver that she had presented to her husband on his birthday. She turned and shot Steward twice, she claimed, but the rickshaw driver witnessed Steward stumbling out of the house onto the veranda, where Mrs Proudlock followed shooting at him. Steward collapsed and died, after being shot at six times.

Mrs Proudlock then summoned the police to her residence, who searched the grounds and discovered the dead body of Steward. A Webley revolver was

Somerset Maugham at the Raffles Hotel, 1960. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission.

A PAINFUL TRAGEDY.
MINE MANAGER SHOT DEAD.
A EUROPEAN LADY CHARGED.
 [From Our Own Correspondent.]
 Kuala Lumpur, April 25.

A painful sensation has been caused here by a tragedy on Sunday night. About half-past ten o'clock the police were summoned by Mrs. Proudlock, wife of Mr. W. Proudlock, Acting Headmaster of Victoria Institution, to the Institution bungalow, where they found, lying some distance from the bungalow steps, the dead body of Mr. W. Steward, late Manager of Salak South.

Riddled with Bullets.

The police also found a Webley revolver with nearly all the bullets discharged. They had all lodged in or passed through Mr. Steward's body.

Police Court Proceedings.

Yesterday Mrs. Proudlock appeared in the Police Court and was formally charged with causing the death of Mr. Steward, bail of \$1,000 being granted.

Inquest to be Held.

The inquest on the body will probably take place in a couple of days, hence the further hearing of the charge was fixed for Monday, May 1.



A rubber plantation in Singapore, c. 1900. Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

One of the first articles to be published about the murder case of Mrs Ethel Proudlock. Image reproduced from "A Painful Tragedy," *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 25 April 1911, 5. (From NewspaperSG).

found nearby; all of its bullets had been discharged, with most of them hitting Mr Steward. Witnesses recounted that Mrs Proudlock's face and chest were covered in blood, and her dress was torn.

Ethel Proudlock confessed to shooting Steward, claiming that he had attacked her and she was acting in self-defence. Her husband testified in court that he believed her and that she had become mentally distressed. In giving her account of the evening, Mrs Proudlock said that Steward had come to visit and found her alone. She had gotten up to get a book when Steward rose, kissed her, and told her: "You're a lovely girl and I love you." She claimed that she remonstrated him, tried to call for her servants and switch on the lights; that is when her hand found the gun and she shot him twice as he ran towards the veranda.¹⁶

Those who knew Mrs Proudlock referred to her as a quiet woman and noted that she and her husband never quarrelled. Although she claimed self-defence, she was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. However, Mrs Proudlock was subsequently given a free and unconditional pardon as the State Council felt that the effect of having her modesty outraged caused hysteria and made her unconscious of what she was doing, and therefore she was not responsible for her actions.¹⁷

Maugham may have changed the location from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore and the names from Proudlock to Crosbie, but many similarities remained. Maugham met a lawyer who was involved in the case and took the facts from the trial. He listened to the gossip that Ethel Proudlock had been having an affair with Steward and shot him in a jealous rage after he tried to call it off. Maugham had extracted the juiciest details and written a scandalous fictional account.



A matchbox from the Raffles Hotel, mid-20th century. Printed on it is Somerset Maugham's quote: "Raffles Hotel Singapore stands for all the fables of the exotic East." Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

The Backlash

However, it wasn't just "The Letter" that caused an outcry. Most of the other stories in *The Casuarina Tree* were based on true stories that Maugham had heard and embellished, leading to scandalous and unflattering portrayals.

To say that the British in the East did not receive this well is an understatement; people were furious. "All that decent-minded people want of S.M. [Somerset Maugham] is a wide berth," the *Malayan Saturday Post* wrote in July 1931. "If he ever comes here again he'll learn that even the tropics can produce frozen mitts. He's the Man who makes money out of the Muck."¹⁸

Critic Logan Pearsall Smith wrote: "These stories of Maugham's are all ghastly betrayals of confidences the publication of which has ruined the lives of the hosts who kindly entertained him in the East and confided in him the sad secrets of their frustrated lives."¹⁹

"It is interesting to try to analyse the prejudice against Somerset Maugham, which is so intense and widespread in this

Somerset Maugham stayed at the Raffles Hotel when he visited Singapore, c. 1955. Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Somerset Maugham visiting a bookshop on Orchard Road, 1960. Source: *The Straits Times*, 12 February 1960 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

part of the world," the *Straits Budget* wrote in June 1938. "The usual explanation is that Mr Maugham picks up some local scandal at an outstation and then dishes it up in a short story... the second cause is disgust at the way Mr Maugham has explained the worst and least representative aspects of the European life in Malaya. Murder, cowardice, drink, seduction, adultery... always the same cynical emphasis on the same unpleasant things. No wonder that white men and women who are living normal lives in Malaya wish that Mr Maugham would look for local colour elsewhere."²⁰

Maugham's books were deemed notorious enough that Lady Clementi, wife of the Governor of the Straits Settlements, requested a warrant for their immediate removal from library shelves on the grounds of "immorality."²¹

This backlash in the East did not appear to bother Maugham. Back in Europe, he did not show any sign of remorse or apology. Instead, he did what he did best: he went in search of more stories.

Maugham Returns

About 30 years later, in 1959, Maugham, returned to Singapore and found the city altered. "The Raffles I knew then was nothing like it is today. The East is a very different world from the one I knew. The people are different. The planters, the government officials and the businessmen who stayed very long stretches here and who, except for infrequent trips, lived the rest of their lives in the East, have all gone. Today, I feel very much a stranger here."²²

People apparently lined up to meet him, inviting him to parties, but Maugham suffered greatly from the heat and reportedly spent most of his time inside the Raffles Hotel in the air-conditioning. He made a surprise visit to a bookshop on Orchard Road and signed his books for a few lucky patrons present.²³

Yet, even at the age of 85, Maugham still had the capability to shock and annoy the expatriate community here. Apparently, Maugham and Raffles Hotel manager Frans Schutzman went to the Tanglin Club for lunch one day. Because of their improper attire, they were denied entry. But Schutzman, due to his close relationship with the club's management and staff, talked his way into the bar. Maugham, provoked and annoyed at not being able to dine, looked around and announced loudly: "Observing these people, I am no longer surprised that there is such a scarcity of domestic servants back home in England."²⁴

They were both asked to leave immediately and Schutzman lost his membership at the club. It was as if Maugham had to make one more gibe at the expatriate society of Singapore. Maugham left Singapore in 1960. He died in Nice, France, in 1965 at the age of 91. ♦



NOTES

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- 6 "Planter Murdered," *Straits Times*, 24 November 1916, 9. (From NewspaperSG)
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- 22 Ilsa Sharp, *There Is Only One Raffles: The Story of a Grand Hotel* (London: Souvenir Press, 1981), 106. (From National Library, Singapore, RSING 647.945957 SHA)
- 23 "An Old Man Gives the Bookstore Crowd a Pleasant Surprise," *Straits Times*, 12 February 1960, 11. (From NewspaperSG)
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Opium Propaganda in the Syonan Shimbun

Imperial Japan justified its occupation of Singapore with opium propaganda and prohibition promises.

By Hannah Yeo

From a postcard of an opium smoker, c. 1920. Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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The date: 8 March 1907. The location: Ipoh. A parade of enormous lanterns shaped as opium beds, pipes and lamps snaked through the town by torchlight, along with effigies of opium smokers. Nearly 40 former opium smokers who had broken free of their habit took part in the procession, shouting their gratitude for the anti-opium movement. Hundreds of real opium pipes surrendered by former smokers and two 70-year-old former addicts brought up the rear.¹

This theatrical display was part of the first Conference of Anti-Opium Societies in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States – the largest ever recorded in the world at the time – with the participation of some 3,000 delegates from Penang, Singapore, Melaka, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan.²

By the turn of the 20th century, anti-opium sentiment was gaining ground in Malaya and on the world stage. As early as 1898, medical doctor Lim Boon Keng and lawyer Song Ong Siang had criticised the colonial government for drawing over half of its revenue from opium sales.³ “[W]e wish to call the attention of the Straits Government to its position in regard to the baneful habit of opium smoking, to the revenue which it derives from this luxury and to the duties which it morally owes to the poor and helpless victims of the opium habit,” Lim wrote in the *Straits Chinese Magazine*.⁴

When it was clear that the colonial government was not listening, Lim’s medical partner Wu Lien-Teh raised the issue at an anti-opium meeting in London in 1907. There, to his surprise, “speaker after speaker railed at its [the opium trade’s] iniquities and demanded stoppage of further traffic between India and China,” he wrote in his memoir. “I gave up my notes and spoke impromptu when describing conditions in the Straits Settlements... [and] received continued ovation from the 500 persons assembled.” Wu’s petition was brought before Winston Churchill, then Under-Secretary of



A government chandu (smokable opium) retail shop in Singapore, c. 1941. Photo by Harrison Forman. From the American Geographical Society Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries.

State for the Colonies. Churchill assured him that the “Home Government was not indifferent, but that it was only possible to move step by step in the Colonies in view of the vast interests involved”.⁵

The Straits government was in no hurry to ban opium. Despite Britain’s participation in international conferences and treaties, colonial governors believed prohibition was ineffective in reducing addiction. To protect opium revenue while appeasing diplomatic pressure, the Straits government monopolised the opium business, opening government-controlled shops where registered smokers could buy rationed tubes of opium. An Opium Revenue Replacement Fund was also established in 1925 to hedge against expected revenue loss. Amid growing pressure by the United States for a complete ban on opium, the Home Office admitted Britain’s stance was “an equivocal and an embarrassing one”.⁶



(Above) An anti-opium publication by Chen Su Lan, president of the Singapore Anti-Opium Society. Image reproduced from Chen Su Lan, *The Opium Problem in British Malaya* (Singapore: Singapore Anti-Opium Society, 1935), 1. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RRARE 178.8 CHE; microfilm no. NL7461).

(Left) The Anti-Opium Clinic on Kampong Java Road founded by Chen Su Lan, president of the Singapore Anti-Opium Society, which operated from 1933 to 1937. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.

A postwar report estimated there were still 16,500 active smokers on government record in Singapore at the end of 1941. This figure, however, was highly disputed as it did not account for illegal smuggling or redacted smokers.⁷

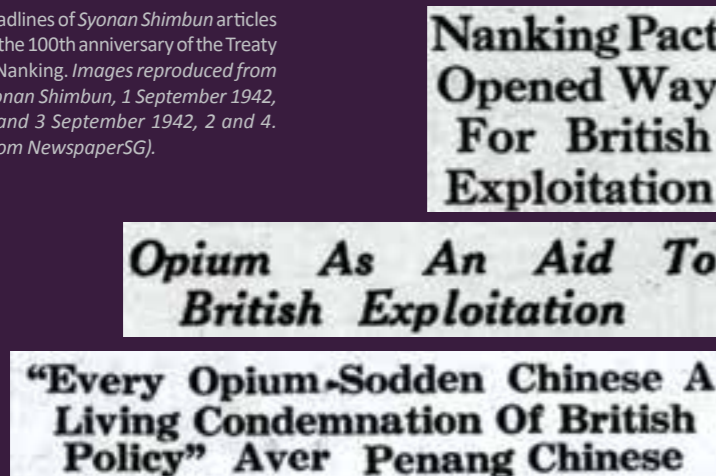
In his 1935 study, President of the Singapore Anti-Opium Society Chen Su Lan put conservative estimates at one in four Chinese adults in Malaya being opium addicts.⁸ Chen, a medical doctor and third-generation Methodist, described addicts as slaves of opium in need of salvation:

Day by day we hear of wives, mothers and children being left to starve while the bread-winners of the family spend their time smoking opium... [The Anti-Opium Clinic] is the only place where they can rid themselves of the opium poison and gain their liberty and freedom from their cruel master... OPIUM.⁹

Headlines of *Zhao Nan Ri Bao* articles on the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Nanking. (From left) “Nanjing Treaty Centennial – China’s 100 Years of Pain from Britain’s Aggression” and “Join Forces with the Empire to Defeat the Anglo-Americans and Erase the Shame of the Nanjing Treaty”. Images reproduced from *Zhao Nan Ri Bao*, 28 August 1942, 1.



Headlines of *Syonan Shimbun* articles on the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Nanking. Images reproduced from *Syonan Shimbun*, 1 September 1942, 3, and 3 September 1942, 2 and 4. (From NewspaperSG).



Peddling Propaganda

The problem of opium addiction in Malaya was well known internationally by the time the Imperial Japanese Army crossed the causeway into Singapore. Long aware of the problem of opium addiction in Asia, Japan used this to their advantage as well as to justify their invasion of China and Malaya as one of emancipation from Western oppression. In Singapore, this same narrative was communicated through newspapers.

The *Syonan Shimbun* (published from 20 February 1942 to 4 September 1945) was the only English-language newspaper available in Singapore during the Japanese Occupation.¹⁰ Although known to be a propaganda paper, the Japanese authorities’ tight ban on listening to the radio and the ban on Western broadcasts meant that people in Malaya turned to the newspaper to get a sense of how the war was unfolding.

Across the 43 months of occupation, the *Syonan Shimbun* carried over 80 articles with titles such as “Britain’s Opium Policy in China Condemned” and “Opium War Most Disgraceful Chapter in British History”.¹¹

The Chinese edition, *Zhao Nan Ri Bao* (昭南日報), carried similar articles, often syndicating them from the state-controlled Domei News Agency in Shanghai, Nanjing and Tokyo. Examples include 《南京条约百年紀念-反英与亞运动强烈展开》 (Nanjing Treaty Centennial – Pan-Asian Anti-British Campaign Intensifies) published on 25 August 1942, 《南京条约百年紀念-英国侵略·中国百年痛史》 (Nanjing Treaty Centennial – China’s 100 Years of Pain from Britain’s Aggression) on 27 August 1942 and 《与帝国协力打倒英美-雪南京条约之耻辱》 (Join Forces with the Empire to Defeat the Anglo-Americans and Erase the Shame of the Nanjing Treaty) on 28 August 1942.

To win over the community in Singapore, two opium propaganda strategies were implemented. First, an anti-Anglo-American campaign timed with the centennial of the Treaty of Nanking was launched a few months after Japan’s takeover. Having established Britain as the villain, Japan positioned itself as the forerunner of Asian emancipation through success stories of opium suppression and treatment in its colonies. Its goal was to justify Japan’s aggression as a war of liberation and convince subjugated populations to work with Imperial Japan as part of the New Order, later known as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere.¹²

Campaign Centennial

“[T]he primary cause for the outbreak of the present war ‘can be traced directly to the rampant encroachments by Britain and the United States upon East Asia these past decades,’” said Japanese Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo in a speech before the Institute of Pacific Relations, as reported by the *Syonan Shimbun* on 12 May 1942. He recalled that “Britain following the shameful Opium War extensively exploited China with Hong Kong as its stronghold”.¹³

His speech set the tone for a rapid series of articles on opium timed with the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Nanking. Signed on 29 August 1842 between Great Britain and the Qing dynasty, the treaty gave British subjects the right to live and trade in five Chinese port cities (Canton, Amoy, Fuzhou, Ningbo and Shanghai), ceded Hong Kong to Britain and demanded 21 million dollars from China as war compensation, in return for Britain ending hostilities in what is now known as the First Opium War.¹⁴

Between 26 August and 3 September 1942, 13 more articles zeroed in on the Opium War and Treaty of Nanking as part of the “Anti-British and East Asia Development Week” commemorating the treaty’s centenary.¹⁵ The articles drew battle lines between the East and the West.

On 30 August, the newspaper carried reports on the comments by Tomokazu Hori, head and spokesperson of the Board of Information, and former premier Koki Hirota on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Nanking. Hori called the Opium War and the treaty the most “disgraceful and ugly chapters in British history”. Rousing “the people of China, India and other countries exploited by Britain” to “meet them squarely”, he argued that British exploitation would never end otherwise. “Is it really possible for the British who for the past 100 years have regarded the Chinese people as uncivilised people regard the Chinese as equal to themselves and respect Chinese cultural equality? Nonsense! All their lip services will disappear instantly when the necessities cease”.¹⁶

Hirota presented Japan’s alternative to British imperialism. He said that Japan’s New Order in East Asia would be “characterised by peace and love of humanity” with “genuine mutual assistance among the various races, instead of the conception of power and supremacy based on power”.¹⁷

On 3 September, the paper published a scathing report on the Opium War and wrote that the Nanking Treaty had “brought China down from an Empire to a third class nation dominated and controlled by Britain, which condition lasted until the China Incident when Nippon started her war of liberation, which would ensure that never again would any Asian nation be so humiliated”. The paper added that “millions of opium sodden Chinese have paid the price demanded by Britain in her policy of drugging the people of a nation into senselessness in order to render them helpless against her methods of exploitation”.¹⁸

In the crucible of war, Japan linked its occupation of Malaya to the historical struggle against British imperialism, framing the Pacific War as a continuation of the Opium War.

Prohibition Promises

When the tirade against the Opium War ended, a new narrative emerged – promises that Japan would eradicate opium addiction by setting up opium clinics and creating antidotes in the territories they had seized.

The *Syonan Shimbun* cited Japan’s puppet state of Manchukuo in Manchuria as a model example of

how the government had taken gradual steps to prohibit opium smoking. “All habitual smokers have been registered and nearly 40 clinics to cure addicts have been established,” the paper reported.¹⁹ Through the efforts of the Opium Prohibition Bureau and the Opium Law, the paper wrote that the number of opium smokers in Manchukuo had dropped from 1.3 million in 1937 to 508,000 in 1942.²⁰

In Malaya, the Japanese authorities aimed to gradually reduce opium smoking by limiting the amount of opium people could buy, “supplying just sufficient quantities to keep addicts from resorting to faked drugs which are more poisonous”.²¹ The *Syonan Shimbun* carried reports of local leaders praising Japan for solving the opium problem.

“Everybody welcomes the policy of the Nippon authorities,” were the words of Lim Boon Keng, who was also a leader of the Chinese community. Eurasian leader Charles Paglar said: “It will take some time to cure addicts without injurious results. Nippon-xin can safely do it in the most efficient manner.” “Even if [the policy] causes... some loss in the revenue, no good Government could possibly enrich itself at the expense of the health of the people whom they are to govern,” said S.C. Goho, leader of the Indian community.²²

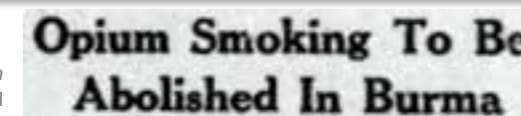
Naturally, these endorsements cannot be taken at face value as prominent men like Lim and Paglar were forced to serve as Japanese mouthpieces. Mamoru Shinozaki, who was the chief education officer and chief welfare officer during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, noted that he had, on one occasion, given each community leader “a slightly different version of [a] message which [he] wrote [himself]. The leaders had to read these messages to carry out [his] orders”.²³



Headlines of *Syonan Shimbun* articles covering Imperial Japan’s anti-opium efforts. Images reproduced from *Syonan Shimbun*, 27 August 1942, 4; 23 September 1942, 1; and 26 September 1942, 4. (From NewspaperSG).



A statement by Tomokazu Hori, head and spokesperson of Japan’s Board of Information, on the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Nanking. Image reproduced from *Syonan Shimbun*, 30 August 1942, 1. (From NewspaperSG).





Opium on the Big Screen

Articles in the *Syonan Shimbun* reveal that Japan knew the seriousness of the opium problem and held it as an emotive point on which loyalties could turn. Besides news articles, propaganda films about the First Opium War were screened at the Kyoei Gekkyo (the former Capitol Theatre) from 1943 to 1944.²⁴ Advertisements for 《阿片战争》(The Opium War) and 《万世流芳》(Eternity) appeared in the *Syonan Shimbun* and *Zhao Nan Ri Bao*. 《万世流芳》 is a romantic historical drama about statesman Lin Zexu, whose destruction of British opium catalysed the First Opium War. Produced in Japan-occupied Shanghai

Poster for 《万世流芳》(Eternity), a 1943 Chinese film about the First Opium War. Li Xianglan (left) portrays Feng Gu, a candy seller who helps her lover overcome opium addiction with medicine from Zhang Jingxian, a role played by Chen Yunshang (right). Image from Wikimedia Commons.

by the Manchurian Motion Picture Association and China United Productions for the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Nanking, the film was well-received for its anti-imperialist theme and star-studded cast.²⁵

Retired teacher Wong Hiong Boon, who was 11 at the time, remembers it was one of the most popular films. Lead actress Li Xianglan (also known as Yoshiko “Shirley” Yamaguchi) was a “very good singer, her songs were very popular and everyone [was] singing her song about giving up opium smoking”, he said in an oral history interview.²⁶

Unveiling the Smokescreen

In reality, however, opium was too lucrative a business to stop. The Japanese administration continued the British policy of selling opium under a monopoly in government retail shops and repaired the opium factory at the foot of Bukit Chandu in Singapore.²⁷ Although the Japanese permit for opium was easily attainable, public access to the drug was restricted by supply and demand.²⁸



A 1942 Japanese-issued opium permit for one tube of chandu per day. Chew Chang Lang Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Between 1942 and 1944, opium rations were halved from 60 tubes (each containing two *hoon* or 0.77 g of opium) to 30 tubes per month because stock had run out.²⁹ This drove even more addicts to the booming wartime black market, where they could buy opium from smugglers, dealers working with Japanese soldier-carriers, or those who would trade their drug ration for food.

A 1958 study by medical doctor Joseph Leong Hon Koon for the United Nations reported that the “addict population at the end of the war was approximately 16,000 in Singapore alone”. But taking into account the unrecorded illicit drug trade, others estimate this figure to be almost as high as 30,000.³⁰ For all its propaganda, Japan’s New Order was little different from the self-interested spectre it had painted of Britain’s Empire. In fact, Imperial Japan had long been raising opium revenue through farms in their colonies of Formosa (now Taiwan) and Manchuria before the war.³¹

Ironically, the accusations Japan had levelled against Britain for encouraging opium-smoking were levelled at Japan by the victors of war.³² At the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, the United States called out opium dealing as imperial exploitation, an intentional means of financing wars of aggression and enforcing servility in occupied territories.³³

Governments could no longer argue that raising revenue from opium was morally defensible. On 1 February 1946, the Opium and Chandu Proclamation for “the suppression of opium smoking” was published in the Singapore Gazette. Section 3 stipulated that “any person who has in his possession or under his control any opium or chandu or opium pipe, lamp or opium cooking utensil shall within fourteen days from the commencement of this Proclamation surrender the same to a Chandu Officer at any Customs Office or at any Police Station of the Civil Affairs Police”.³⁴

In the end, it was not only Japan’s promises of an opium-free New Order, but the entire enterprise of international opium trade that went up in smoke.♦

Postcard of an opium smoker, early-mid 20th century. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

戒烟歌 (QUIT SMOKING SONG) Sung by Li Xianglan

Da, oh Da, won't you wake up.
Why do you still think about opium?
It drains your spirit, ruins your years
Your career goes up in smoke,
the sacrifice is terrible,
You exchange your whole life for sand,
the price is too great.
Even if opium is your lover,
you should still let go of it!
Opium is actually your enemy, and my enemy too.
Da, oh Da, why do you still think about it?
If you really love me, listen to me, don't think about opium from now on.

达呀达, 你醒醒吧, 你为什还想着它,
它耗尽了你的精神, 断送了你的年华,
你把一生事业作烟霞, 这牺牲未免可怕,
你把一生心血换泥沙, 这代价未免太大。
它就是你的情人, 你也该把它放下,
何况是你的冤家, 也是我的冤家。
达呀达, 达呀达, 你为什还想着它,
你要真爱我, 要听我的话, 从今以后别再想着它。

Source: “戒烟歌 - 李香蘭 Li Xiang Lan (山口淑子 Yoshiko Yamaguchi),” YouTube, 3 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3DzRMDKXEm8>.

[Transcribed and translated by Hannah Yeo]

NOTES

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- 3 On average, the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Penang and Melaka generated 49 percent of their annual revenue from opium farming between 1898 and 1906 at least. See Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore: The Annotated Edition* (Singapore: National Library Board and World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd., 2020), 629. (From NLB OverDrive); Carl A. Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800–1910* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 2. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCLOS 305.895105957 TRO)
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- 8 Chen Su Lan, *The Opium Problem in British Malaya* (Singapore: Singapore Anti-Opium Society, 1935), 1. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RRARE 178.8 CHE; microfilm no. NL7461)
- 9 Chen Su Lan, *Opium Is a Deadly Poison: An Ad Interim Report May 8th to December, 1933* (Singapore: The Anti-Opium Clinic, 1934), 1. (From NUS Libraries)
- 10 The first issue of the paper, published on 20 February 1942, was called *The Syonan Times*. It was renamed *The Syonan Times* the next day. On 8 December 1942, it was renamed *The Syonan Shinbun*. On 8 December 1943, the paper was renamed *The Syonan Shimbun* and retained this name until its last issue on 4 September 1945. A Chinese edition, *Zhao Nan Ri Bao* (昭南日报), was introduced on 21 February 1942. See Lee Mei-yu, “Propaganda Paper,” *BiblioAsia* 11, no.4 (January–March 2016): 40–41.
- 11 “Britain’s Opium Policy in China Condemned,” *Syonan Shimbun*, 29 August 1942, 4; “Opium War Most Disgraceful Chapter in British History: Our Spokesman Points Out Enemy’s ‘Trait of Ruthless Exploitation,’” *Syonan Shimbun*, 30 August 1942, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
- 12 The New Order, later known as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, was Imperial Japan’s empty promise to unite territories in East and Southeast Asia under justice, peace and economic cooperation. In reality, it enabled Japan to advance their wartime interests under the guise of mutual benefit.
- 13 “Present East Asia War Due Entirely to British and American Encroachments,” *Syonan Shimbun*, 12 May 1942, 2. (From NewspaperSG)
- 14 Julia Lovell, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China* (London: Picador, 2012), 238–40. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. R951.033 LOV)
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- 19 Charles Neil, “The New Order,” *Syonan Shimbun*, 1 April 1942, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
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- 21 “Nippon Opium Policy in Malaya Contradicts Anglo-American Lies,” *Syonan Shimbun*, 26 September 1942, 4. (From NewspaperSG)
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- 23 Mamoru Shinozaki, *Syonan, My Story: The Japanese Occupation of Singapore* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1982), 152. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCLOS 959.57023 SHI-[JSB]). These messages were read out in praise of the Japanese Emperor during his birthday celebrations.
- 24 Chan Kwee Sung, “Capitol Screened Japanese Movies,” *Straits Times*, 8 January 1999, 66. (From NewspaperSG)
- 25 Jie Li, “A National Cinema for a Puppet State: The Manchurian Motion Picture Association,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, ed. Carlos Rojas and Eileen Cheng-yin Chow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 79, 89. (From Central Public Library, library@chinatown and Punggol Regional Library, call no. 791.430951 OXF-ART); “Film Shows Chinese Revolt Against British Imperialism,” *Syonan Shimbun*, 13 May 1943, 2; “Story of Britain’s Introduction of Opium into China,” *Syonan Shimbun*, 3 August 1944, 2. (From NewspaperSG)
- 26 Wong Hiong Boon, oral history interview by Mark Wong, 8 June 2010, MP3 audio, 3:00–3:25, Reel/Disc 2 of 9, National Archives of Singapore (accession no. 003526)
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- 30 Lim Thean Soo, Sukumaran Nair and S. Mohd. Razak, *The Impact of Customs* (Singapore: Singapore National Printers, 1974), 11. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCLOS 336.26095957 LIM); Leong Hon Koon, “The Opium Problem in Singapore,” United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, January 1958, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/bulletin/bulletin_1958-01-01_4_page003.html.
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- 34 “Notice: Opium and Chandu Proclamation,” *Straits Chronicle*, 11 February 1946, 2; “Suppressing Opium Smoking,” *Straits Times*, 4 February 1946, 3. (From NewspaperSG)



This map, *Sketch of the Island of Singapore*, was based on earlier surveys of the island by James Franklin and William Farquhar. It features vegetation by the coasts as well as soundings (sea depth) along the southern coast and the Singapore Strait. It was printed as an inset within the 1829 *Map of the Island of Sumatra* by William Marsden. Image reproduced from William Marsden, *Map of the Island of Sumatra Constructed Chiefly from Surveys Taken by Order of the Late Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*. (From National Library Online, accession no. B29029422H). [Note: The fold separations are inherent in the map.]

THE STORY OF SEMBAWANG

from 19th-Century Singapore Maps

Sembawang’s history can be told through the many maps that have charted its changes over the years.

By **Makeswary Periasamy**

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overhanging streams and rivers in forests” whose local Malay name is “Buah Sembawang”.⁶

Now the tree is simply known as the Sembawang tree. It is generally accepted that the name “Sembawang” originated from this tree. It is also likely that the tree was found growing along the Sembawang River (Sungei Sembawang), which shares its name.

When the British first arrived in Singapore in 1819, it was sparsely populated and a large part of the island was covered with primeval forests. They also encountered 20 gambier and pepper plantations owned by Teochew planters who had arrived from Riau.⁷

Although these plantations were initially located near the Singapore River at the southern part of the island, they moved further inland to the north when agricultural land in the town centre became scarce due to the development of the town and harbour area. As gambier and pepper plants were harvested through a shifting cultivation method, these require new land every 15 to 20 years.⁸

Crops were planted along navigable rivers, which served as a mode of transportation. Prior to the cultivation of gambier and pepper plantations, Sembawang was covered with lush vegetation such as freshwater swamps, mangrove or coastal forests like the rest of the island. These were depleted by agricultural cultivation and human settlements over the decades.⁹

Today, people are attracted to Sembawang for a number of reasons. Families visit the beach there to have a picnic or barbeque, and fishing enthusiasts congregate at the jetty hoping to score a good catch. Sembawang is also well known for its hot spring – with supposed health properties – that brings people from all over Singapore to the north to enjoy a leisurely foot bath.¹

In the 19th century, however, Sembawang looked very different. Located at the northernmost tip of Singapore facing the narrow Selat Tebrau, or Strait of Johor (erroneously labelled as Old Straits of Singapore on some early maps),² Sembawang once had vast swathes of dense forest before these were cleared for the cultivation of cash crops like pepper, gambier (*pale catechu*), coconut and rubber in the early 19th century. The plantations subsequently gave way to Chinese and Malay villages.

Origin of “Sembawang”

Sembawang is a Malay word for a timber tree which grows in wet tropical areas especially along streams and flowing rivers in forests.³ The first record of the tree specimen in Singapore was by Danish surgeon Nathaniel Wallich in 1822, who named it *Mesua singaporiana*.⁴ In 1897, the tree was recorded as *Kayea ferruginea* by Henry Nicholas Ridley, then the director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, who also noted its local name, Pokok Sumbawang, as well as its proximity to Johor.⁵ In his book, *The Flora of the Malay Peninsula* published in 1922, Ridley described the *Kayea ferruginea* as a “fairly large straggling tree... [found]

Early Surveys of Singapore

As early as 1822, Captain James Franklin surveyed the coastlines of the main island of Singapore. The results of his surveys were incorporated into a map, *Plan of the Island of Singapore Including the New British Settlements and Adjacent Islands*, produced by William Farquhar, the first Resident of Singapore, in 1822.¹⁰ Farquhar’s map was subsequently published as an inset, *Sketch of the Island of Singapore*, within an 1829 map of Sumatra by the Irish orientalist and linguist William Marsden.¹¹

Although Sembawang is not named on these two maps, they show the coastal areas of the island of Singapore being covered with vegetation, a likely reference to the mangrove and freshwater swamp forests as well as the gambier and pepper plantations¹² that existed in the early 19th century.¹³ The inset in Marsden's map also features coconut trees along the island's coastlines, including the Sembawang coastal area.¹⁴

In 1828, Franklin, together with engineer and land surveyor Lieutenant Philip Jackson, prepared *Plan of the British Settlement of Singapore*, the first map to accurately capture the outline of Singapore island and possibly contains the earliest reference to the Sembawang area. The map shows several rivers throughout the island, including a "R. Tambuwang" in the north, most likely a corruption of the toponym, River Sembawang.¹⁵ (Other variant spellings of Sembawang in the 19th century include "Sumbawang" or "Sambawang".)

During the 1830s and 1840s, several topographical surveys were conducted, but most of the maps of Singapore produced at the time tended to focus on the harbour and the town and its environs. The few maps that were produced of the entire island after 1828, such as the 1830 *Sketch of the Island of Singapore* and the 1836 *Chart of Singapore Strait the Neighbouring Islands and Part of Malay Peninsula*, did not indicate Sembawang River, and instead featured the adjacent Sinocho (Senoko) and Pungul (Punggol) rivers.¹⁶

When John Turnbull Thomson was Government Surveyor of the Straits Settlements (1841–55), he conducted extensive surveys of the interior of Singapore island as well as the surrounding waters. One of

Thomson's key tasks was to map the pepper and gambier plantations throughout the island and draw up boundaries of the various lots. This was needed for registering the plantations, which had different owners, and for issuing grants for the use of the land as well as to solve disputes that may arise.

The "Kang" in Sembawang

Thomson also surveyed the various streams and creeks near where most of the plantations were sited and noted the *kang* there. *Kang* refers to Chinese settlements by the river with a headman known as *kangchu* (港主; "owner of the river"). The headmen were usually the plantation owners, who took charge of the coolies (labourers) employed at the plantations.¹⁷

In his official report submitted in April 1848, Thomson noted that the Sembawang River is "navigable by the gunboats at high water" and that the area was "inhabited by Chinese gambier planters, who possessed one *pukat*" (*pukat* refers to a large native boat used for shipping gambier between Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore).¹⁸

Unlike the town and municipal areas which were more developed, the interior of the island of Singapore was heavily forested with no proper roads. Travelling by boat was a common mode of transport in the 19th century.

In his report, Thomson mentioned that the Chinese (mostly unmarried males) formed the bulk of the population in the north and interior of the island. He also listed 15 *kang* and the names of the Chinese headmen.¹⁹

The 1828 *Plan of the British Settlement of Singapore* by Captain James Franklin and Lieutenant Philip Jackson is the first map to accurately capture the outline of Singapore island and possibly contains the earliest reference to the Sembawang area. Image reproduced from John Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin-China* (London: Henry Colburn, 1828), facing page 529. (From National Library Online, accession no. B20116740J).



Detail from *Old Straits or Silat Tambrau and the Creeks to the North of Singapore Island* by John Turnbull Thomson. This 1848 map is one of the earliest to feature the *kang* in the northern part of Singapore. National Archives of India Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (accession no. HC000870).

After completing his survey of the rivers that flowed into the Johor Strait, Thomson produced the *Map of the Old Straits or Silat Tambrau and the Creeks to the North of Singapore Island* in 1848.²⁰ It is one of the earliest maps to feature the *kang* in the northern part of Singapore. Shown on the map, at the foot of Sembawang River, is Nám Tó Káng (烂土港), whose headman, according to Thomson, was Tan Ah Toh.²¹

A survey conducted in 1855 revealed that Sembawang comprised mostly gambier and pepper plantations. The survey recorded 10 of such plantations in Nám Tó Káng, which employed 137 coolies. Besides gambier and pepper, there were also indigo plants in Nám Tó Káng.²²

By the late 19th century, gambier and pepper plantations were mainly found in the northern and western parts of Singapore where the soil conditions were more favourable. Due to the constant felling and depletion of timber trees for lucrative cash crops, in 1883, the colonial government created forest reserves for two reasons – to protect the virgin forest reserves and also for a continuing supply of timber.²³ In 1884, the first eight forest reserves were identified and administered, including in Sembawang.²⁴ By 1889, the forest reserve in Sembawang occupied 379 ha (3.79 sq km).

In 1903, Nám Tó Káng was described as having two Chinese huts, one mile apart, in a jungle area.²⁵ These huts, known by the Malay term *bangsal*, referred to both the plantation as well as the large *attap* building where the plantation owner and the coolies resided and processed the gambier.

Villages soon replaced the plantations. By the 1960s, the number of villages in the Sembawang

area had expanded to eight.²⁶ Unlike the *kang* whose inhabitants comprised Chinese male plantation workers, the villages were inhabited by families (sometimes of mixed ethnicities) who had access to basic amenities such as shops and schools.

In November 1968, the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* Chinese newspaper reported that Nám Tó Káng had become a large village and was renamed first as 水池村 ("reservoir village") and later Ulu Sembawang (淡水港). It described the villagers as a mix of Chinese dialect groups, with the majority belonging to the Min (Hokkien) dialect group.²⁷

Sembawang District

The present Sembawang town is bounded by the Strait of Johor to the north, Simpang to the east, Woodlands to the west, and Mandai and Yishun to the south. However, early maps of Singapore reveal that Sembawang covered a much larger area than now, which included parts of Woodlands and Mandai. In the present day, Sembawang occupies a smaller area although it stretches beyond Sembawang Road into parts of Simpang and Seletar.

One of the earliest maps to name the area as "Sambawang" is the 1873 *Map of the Island of Singapore and Its Dependencies* prepared by the Surveyor-General's Office of the Federated Malay States and Straits Settlements. An area occupying about two-thirds in the north – stretching from Sembawang Road to Bukit Timah Road – is indicated as "Mandai and Sambawang".²⁸ Prior to this, maps did not name the places on the island but featured the *kang* and rivers only.



(Left) Detail from *Map of the Island of Singapore and Its Dependencies*. This 1873 map is one of the earliest to name the area as “Sembawang”. It also shows the locations of the police stations across the island. The nearest police stations to Sembawang were in Chan Chu Kang (Police Station No. 7) and Seletar (Police Station No. 8). *Singapore Land Authority Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (accession no. GM000297_1)*.

(Below left) Detail from *Map of the Island of Singapore*. This 1886 map is one of the first to feature “Sembawang” in its current spelling. It also shows the forest reserve in Mandai and Sembawang. *The National Archives of the UK, ref. MPG1/857 (1)*.

From the mid-1880s, maps began to indicate Mandai and Sembawang as separate areas. An 1886 map, originally enclosed with the *Annual Report of the Forest Department, Straits Settlements*, is one of the first to feature “Sembawang” in its current spelling. It shows the location of the forest reserve more accurately, which occupied both the Mandai and Sembawang areas, and is today part of Mandai Wildlife Reserve.²⁹

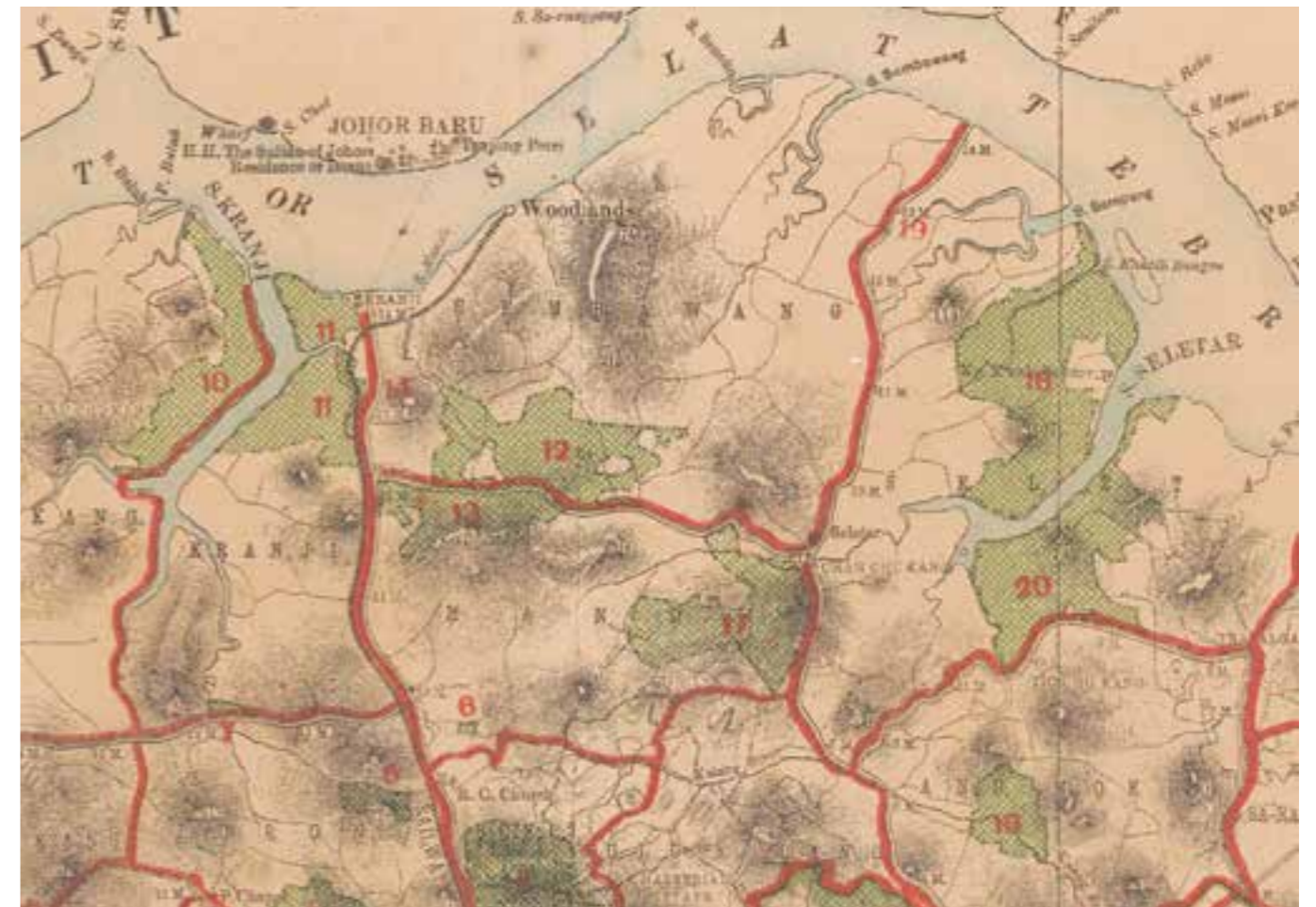
When the third population census was conducted in 1891, the report featured a map showing the different census districts. A large area in the north is referred to as “Sembawang”, with “Mandai” and “Upper Mandai” as separate districts situated to the west.³⁰

Milestone Markers

In the early days, Singapore lacked prominent landmarks or a proper address system especially in the rural areas. Before the implementation of postal codes, places were identified by milestones, which were tall stone markers labelled with numbers and placed at key locations along roads, a mile apart (about 1.6 km).

First introduced in the 1840s, these milestone markers (about 2 m in height, with about 35 cm exposed above ground) were useful for postal mail delivery, fare calculation when commuting in buses or trishaws, as well as for policing. The General Post Office sited at the former Fullerton Building was designated the “zero point” for measuring distance on the roads.³¹

An 1898 map produced by the Straits Settlements Forest Department is one of the earliest to feature the milestone markers erected throughout the island. As shown on the map, five milestones from the 10th to 14th miles were placed along Sembawang Road.³²



Detail from *Map of the Island of Singapore and Its Dependencies*. By the late 19th century, primary forests in Singapore had begun to diminish due to the indiscriminate clearing of land for cash crops. To save the primary forests and to also provide sustainable wood supply for the plantations, nature reserves were established in each district, as shown on this 1898 map. The five milestones on Sembawang Road are also indicated. *Image reproduced from Map of the Island of Singapore and Its Dependencies, Executed by the Colonial Engineer and Surveyor General of the Straits Settlements in 1898, to Accompany Report on the Forest Administration in the Straits Settlements by H.C. Hill Esquire, Conservator of Forests. (From National Library, Singapore, accession no. B20124024D)*.

However, maps produced after 1910 show an extra milestone, the 15th mile, added at the end of Sembawang Road. In 1908, the Municipal Commission had embarked on a project to re-measure main roads and reset milestones. The 15th milestone was most likely added at the time.³³

By the early 20th century, the 13th to 15th milestones became synonymous with Sembawang, and people began referring to the area as 13th mile, 14th mile and 15th mile.

Sembawang Road

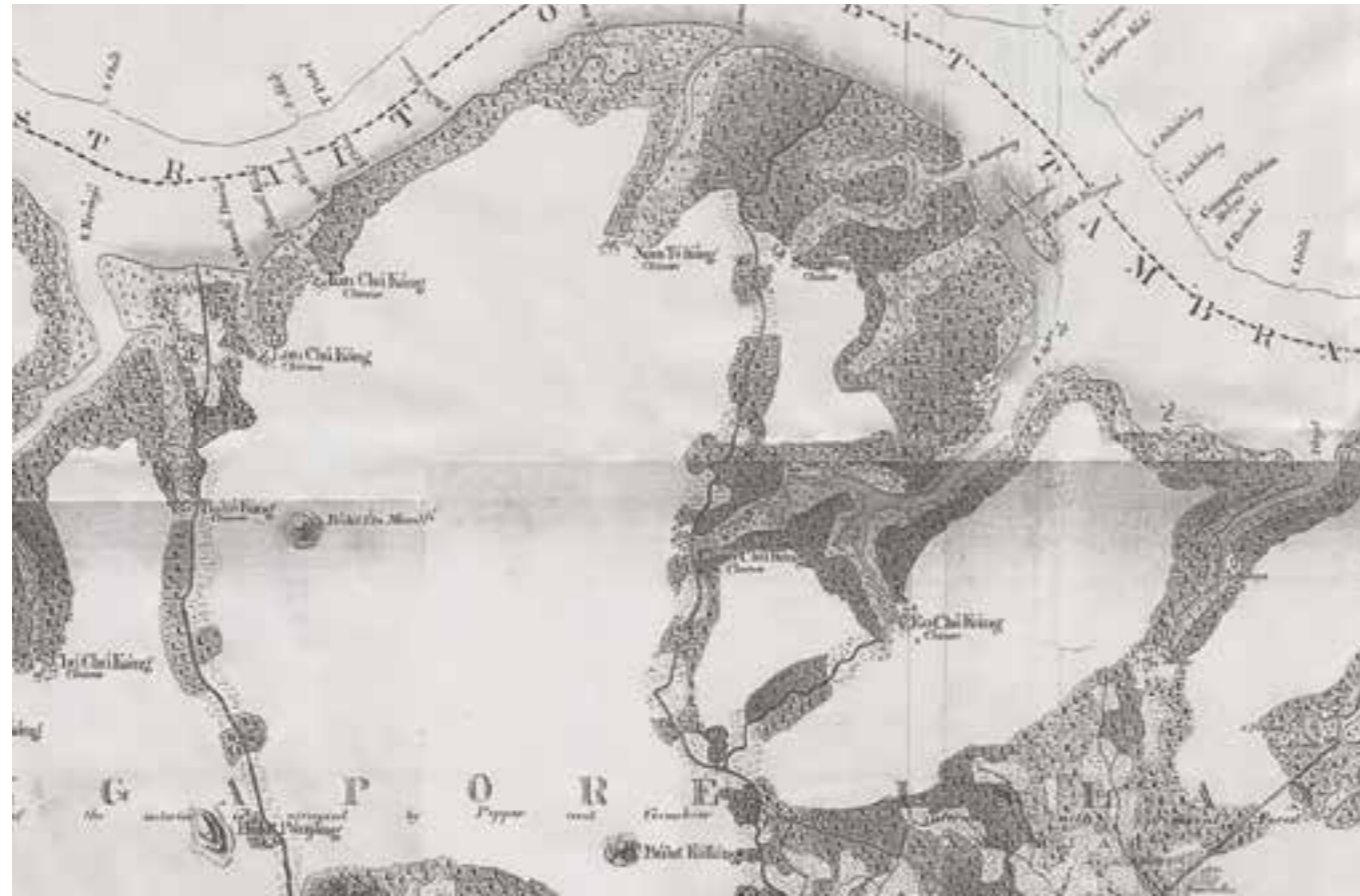
At present, Sembawang Road is a 23-kilometre-long dual carriageway that stretches from the junction of Mandai Road and Upper Thomson Road all the way to Sembawang Park. It is an important arterial road in northern Singapore and, until the 1980s, it was the only main road connecting the area to town.³⁴

When Chinese coolies cleared the forests for plantations, pathways were also cut to facilitate transportation of the produce into the town area. Sembawang Road began as a carriage road. In his 1844 map of the island of Singapore, John Turnbull Thomson had depicted the road as connecting to Bukit Timah

Road and extending all the way to the town centre.³⁵ But after his thorough survey of the interior of Singapore in 1848, and also based on other maps from the 1840s, Thomson showed the road as emerging from two Chinese villages at the foot of Sungei Seletar – Yio Chu Kang in the east and Chan Chu Kang in the west – in the 1848 *Map of the old Straits or Silat Tambrau and the Creeks to the North of Singapore Island*.³⁶

Works to build a new road, most likely in Sembawang, began sometime around March 1849, and was probably supervised by Thomson who oversaw public works at the time. By the middle of the year, the carriage road had extended to the northern coast facing the Johor Strait. The new road that ran between Sungei Sembawang and Sungei Simpang is clearly depicted on an 1849 map by Thomson titled *Map of Singapore Island and Its Dependencies*.³⁷

News articles from mid-1849 began referring to the new road as “Thomson’s new road”, and subsequently as “Thomson Road”, “Thomson’s Road” and “Thomsons Road”. The name appears slightly later on maps. On an 1851 British chart titled *Straits of Singapore, Durian and Rhio*, the road is depicted as “Thompsons Road” and on another 1850s *Map of the Island of Singapore and Its Dependencies*, the road is called “Thomsons Road”.³⁸



Detail from *Map of Singapore Island and Its Dependencies* by John Turnbull Thomson. This 1849 map is one of the earliest to show Sembawang Road extending to the sea coast. *National Archives of India Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore* (accession no. SP007229).

By the 1870s, the road was shown as a major road on maps, with newspapers calling the upper half of the road (from the junction of Mandai Road to the sea) “Seletar Road” and the lower half “Thomson Road”.³⁹

The *Straits Times* reported in February 1939 that Seletar Road and parts of Thomson Road would be renamed to avoid confusion. “In future [Seletar Road] is to be called Thomson Road as far as the Yio Chu Kang junction, where it will become Upper Thomson Road, and from the Mandai Road junction to the sea it will be called Sembawang Road.”⁴⁰

By the beginning of the 20th century, the rubber trade had begun to replace the declining pepper and gambier trade. With the opening of the

Sembawang Naval Base in 1938, the area underwent a transformation. Instead of *bangsals*, villages for rubber plantation workers, living quarters for port workers and black-and-white colonial bungalows for senior British military personnel and their families were built, forever changing the demographics and look of the area. ♦

Detail from *Straits of Singapore, Durian and Rhio*. Based on earlier surveys, the chart was first printed by the British Admiralty’s Hydrographic Office in 1840. This 1851 edition was revised and corrected by John Turnbull Thomson. Unlike the earlier editions, this chart includes details of Singapore’s interior and identifies “Thompson’s Road”. *Image reproduced from Great Britain Hydrographic Office, Straits of Singapore, Durian and Rhio* (London: Hydrographic Office of Admiralty, 1851). (From National Library, Singapore, accession no. B20124033D).



NOTES

1. (n.p.: n.p., 1847–1853), 50. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RDLKL 526.9092 THO). The 1848 report can be found in this volume. In his report, Thomson does not mention any other settlements along Sungei Sembawang.
2. Thomson, *Letters: J. T. Thomson*, 52. Thomson states that the Chinese were unwilling to reveal the names of the headmen because they did not speak the “Malayan language” and misconstrued Thomson’s motives. Instead, the names were provided by Thomas Duncan, the Superintendent of Police at the time.
3. John Turnbull Thomson, *Map of the Old Straits or Silat Tambrau and the Creeks to the North of Singapore Island*, 1848, map. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. HC000870)
4. The *kang* were usually named after the surname of the headmen, but researcher Lim Guan Hock speculates that Nam To Kang was likely named after a geographical feature. It is also known that the *kang* had links to Chinese secret societies, with Nam To Kang being affiliated to the Ngee Heng Kongsi.
5. “Untitled,” *Straits Times*, 15 May 1855, 5. (From NewspaperSG); O’Dempsey and Chew, “The Freshwater Swamp Forests of Sungei Seletar Catchment: A Status Report,” 121, 124–25.
6. Nathaniel Cantley, “Report on the Forests of the Straits Settlements,” in *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements for the Year 1883* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1883). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RRARE 328.5957 SSLCP; accession no. B20048240)
7. H.M. Burkill, “The Botanic Gardens and Conservation in Malaya,” *The Gardens’ Bulletin Singapore* 17 (1958): 201–02, <https://www.nparks.gov.sg/sbg/research/publications/gardens-bulletin-singapore/-/media/sbg/gardens-bulletin/4-4-17-2-13-y1959-v17p2-gbs-pg-201.pdf>; Lim Tin Seng, “Saving Singapore’s Forests,” in National Library Board, *Stories From the Stacks: Selections From the Rare Materials Collection National Library* (Singapore: National Library Board, 2020), 93. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 016.95957 SIN-[LIB])
8. “Gang Robbery,” *Straits Times*, 3 March 1903, 5. (From NewspaperSG)
9. For further information on the villages, see the manuscript notes of Lee Kip Lin in his report, *Villages in the Rural District Areas* [circa 1960s]. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RDLKL 307.72095957 VIL)
10. “Cong lan tu gang dao shuichi cun,” *從爛土港到水池村* [From Lang Tu Port to Pool Village], *星洲日報 Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 11 November 1968, 20. (From NewspaperSG)
11. Survey Department Singapore, *Map of the Island of Singapore and Its Dependencies*, 1873, map. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. GM000297_1)
12. The National Archives, United Kingdom, *Map of the Island of Singapore*, 1886, map. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. D2016_000204)
13. *Map no. II – Map of the Island of Singapore and Its Dependencies: Shewing Census Divisions – 1891* in E.M. Mereweather, *Report on the Census of the Straits Settlements, Taken on the 5th April 1891* (Singapore: Printed at the Government Printing Office, 1892). (From National Library Online, accession no. B18976509A)
14. National Archives of Singapore, “Singapore, Mileages Along Roads, 1936,” 11 December 2015, <https://corporate.nas.gov.sg/media/collections-and-research/singapore-mileages/>; Melody Zacheus, “In Singapore, All Roads Lead to the General Post Office,” *Straits Times*, 22 June 2015, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
15. *Map of the Island of Singapore and Its Dependencies, Executed by the Colonial Engineer and Surveyor General of the Straits Settlements in 1898, to Accompany Report on the Forest Administration in the Straits Settlements by H.C. Hill Esquire, Conservator of Forests*. (From National Library, Singapore, accession no. B20124024D)
16. Royal Geographical Society, London, *Map of the Island of Singapore and Its Dependencies, 1911, 1912*, map. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. D2018_000214_RGS); “Municipal Commission,” *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 6 June 1908, 12. (From NewspaperSG)
17. Thulaja Naidu Ratnala, “Sembawang Road,” in *Singapore Infopedia*. National Library Board Singapore. Article published September 2020.
18. John Turnbull Thomson and John Arrowsmith, *Singapore Island Surveyed and Drawn by J.T. Thomson, Government Surveyor, Singapore 20th Dec 1844*, 1844, map. (From National Library Online).
19. Lim, “Gambier and Early Development of Singapore,” 49; Thomson, *Map of the Old Straits or Silat Tambrau and the Creeks to the North of Singapore Island*.
20. “Page 1 Advertisements Column 3: Disbursements,” *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 1 March 1849, 1. (From NewspaperSG); John Turnbull Thomson, *Map of Singapore Island and Its Dependencies*, 1849, map. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. SP007229)
21. See for example, “Gang Robbery and Murder,” *Straits Times*, 26 June 1849, 4; “Local,” *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 3 May 1850, 2; “Page 1 Advertisements Column 2,” *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 12 February 1857, 1. (From NewspaperSG). For the maps, see Great Britain Hydrographic Office, *Straits of Singapore, Durian and Rhio* (London: Hydrographic Office of Admiralty, 1851). (From National Library, Singapore, accession no. B20124033D); The National Archives, United Kingdom, *Map of the Island of Singapore and Its Dependencies*, c. 1854, map. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. SP006818)
22. “Monday 1st November,” *Straits Times*, 6 November 1875, 4; “The Municipality,” *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 12 April 1879, 3; “New Names for Roads,” *Straits Times*, 14 February 1939, 14. (From NewspaperSG)
23. “New Names for Roads.” The name “Seletar Road” originated from the Malay word *Seletar*, which was also used for Sungei Seletar (Seletar River) and the Orang Seletar living along the river. It was most likely a name used by the locals to refer to the new road.



PROVIDING INDEPENDENT AND NON-PARTISAN VIEWS

The Nominated Member of Parliament Scheme

The Nominated Member of Parliament Scheme was set up to present more opportunities for Singaporeans to participate in politics. But its implementation in 1990 was not without controversy.

By Benjamin Ho and John Choo

Assoc Prof Maurice Choo Hock Heng being sworn in as a nominated member of Parliament at Parliament House on 20 December 1990. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

On Thursday, 20 December 1990, Maurice Choo Hock Heng, a cardiologist, and Leong Chee Whye, a businessman and former senior civil servant, were sworn into Parliament. What made this particular swearing ceremony historic is that the two men were Singapore's first nominated members of Parliament (NMPs).¹ Unlike elected members of Parliament (MPs), NMPs are appointed by the president of Singapore on the recommendation of a Special Select Committee appointed by Parliament, and do not belong to any political party nor represent any constituency. The role of NMPs is to bring more independent voices into Parliament. Even though they were first appointed in 1990, the idea of having non-elected MPs was actually proposed by founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew as far back as the early 1970s.

"Seats for the Universities?" was the headline that greeted the readers of the *Straits Times* on the morning of 4 September 1972.² Two days earlier, the barely seven-year-old nation had witnessed its second general election as an independent state. The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) made a "clean sweep" at the polls, winning all 57 contested seats and 69.02 percent of the 760,472 votes cast.³ At the post-election press conference on 3 September, Lee publicly floated the idea of having parliamentary seats set aside for higher institutions of learning to promote the growth of an intelligent and constructive opposition. These could be graduates of the then University of Singapore, Nanyang University, Teachers' Training College, Singapore Polytechnic and Ngee Ann Technical College. "I think the problem of getting an intelligent, constructive Opposition has got to be solved. Singapore has not got the kind

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of people going into politics who are likely ever to develop into a coherent, constructive Opposition," he said. "They should be intelligent enough to point out where the Government was wrong." However, he stressed that the government needed more time to mull over it before coming to a decision.⁴ The idea possibly stemmed from a three-century-old system in Britain, which saw as many as 15 parliamentary seats reserved for English, Scottish, Irish and Welsh universities in the 1930s. Although this practice was abolished in 1948, the idea was the catalyst for key changes in Singapore's parliamentary system in the subsequent decade.⁵

Seeding a Constitutional Change

The idea gained traction 12 years later, although in a different form when the ruling party introduced the concept of non-constituency members of Parliament (NCMPs). These would be "defeated Opposition candidates who have polled the highest votes nationwide in a general election, subject to a minimum of 15 percent of ballots cast".⁶ Under the proposed amendment to the constitution, at least three Opposition MPs would enter Parliament, if not as full MPs, then as NCMPs.

Speaking at the second reading of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Amendment) Bill in July 1984, Lee, who was still the prime minister, argued that the presence of Opposition members could provide opportunities for younger ministers and MPs to hone their debating skills. It would also educate the younger generation of voters, who had never experienced political conflicts in Parliament, about the role and limitations of a constitutional Opposition. Finally, having non-PAP MPs would "ensure that every suspicion, every rumour of misconduct, will be reported to the non-PAP MPs, at least anonymously" and "will dispel suspicions of cover-ups of alleged wrongdoings".⁷

Summing up, Lee said that the NCMP scheme would "enable Singapore to have a good and effective government" and "at the same time, satisfy those who feel that there should be a few Opposition MPs represented in Parliament".⁸

Legislative changes to the Constitution and the Parliamentary Elections Act were made in August 1984.⁹ After the general election in December that year, two Opposition candidates, Chiam See Tong of the Singapore Democratic Party and J.B. Jeyaratnam of the Workers' Party, were voted into Parliament, leaving one NCMP seat on offer. However, the two top highest-scoring defeated Opposition candidates declined to take the seat and it was left vacant until the next general election.¹⁰

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew first broached the idea of having non-elected members of parliament in 1972. Source: *The Straits Times*, 4 September 1972. © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.



After the general election in September 1988, two NCMP seats were accepted by Lee Siew Choh and Francis Seow from the Workers' Party. However, Seow was disqualified in December the same year after he was fined for tax evasion.¹¹

A Prickly Beginning

In 1989, then First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong introduced the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Amendment No. 2) Bill that would allow for the appointment of NMPs. The timing of this move was to align with the PAP government's vision in 1984 to strengthen the political system by offering more opportunities for political participation among Singaporeans.¹²

At the second reading of the bill in Parliament on 29 November 1989, Goh said that the bill aimed "to evolve a more consensual style of government where alternative views are heard and constructive dissent accommodated". He said that this should be seen in the wider context of political innovations like NCMPs, and the establishment of Group Representation Constituencies and Town Councils.¹³

The bill sought to provide for the appointment of a maximum of six NMPs. They would be appointed by the president of Singapore on the nomination of a Special Select Committee that is in turn appointed by Parliament. Nominated persons are subject to the same stringent qualifications and requirements as

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew gave three reasons for having non-constituency members of Parliament. Source: *The Straits Times*, 25 July 1984. © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

those standing for election. NMPs are politically non-partisan and should not belong to any political party.¹⁴

PAP MP for Pasir Panjang GRC Bernard Chen lent support to the bill but gave a hint on the tone of the debate that is to come. “On this note, I would like to support the First Deputy Prime Minister although I know there will be many others whose support may not be so forthcoming,” he said.¹⁵

Several PAP MPs spoke in strong terms against the bill, even lamenting their inability to vote against it under the Party’s Whip. PAP MP for Siglap Abdullah Tarmugi cautioned that this change would create the perception that the proposal was “tantamount to an indictment of the existing system and of the elected MPs we now have, especially the backbenchers in the House”. He asked: “Are we not creating the impression that MPs are not really bringing up enough solid and diverse views in this Parliament that we need to bring in others to this Chamber to provide such views?”¹⁶

Dixie Tan, PAP MP for Ulu Pandan, evoked the spirit of the Constitution, which is that “each and every citizen of 21 years and above has a vote” and the “votes of citizens collectively decide the persons that will sit in the Parliament Chamber”. She cautioned that this basic principle would be violated if nominated MPs were allowed into the House.¹⁷

PAP MP for Fengshan Arthur Beng’s concluding remarks summed up the tone of the two-day debate: “Sir, I cannot support this Bill. However, as a PAP Backbencher, I say this again, like my colleagues, well realising that I will be subjected to the Party Whip. This is the constraint upon us, and I guess we will have to continue to live a ‘schizophrenic’ political life – speaking against yet voting for a Bill.”¹⁸

Chiam See Tong, the MP for Potong Pasir and the sole Opposition MP, opposed the amendments to the constitution. “I would say that when nominated MPs are installed in our Parliament, they are just like fish out of water. They should not be in our Parliament. They should be tossed back to the universities or statutory bodies or businesses or other work places where they came from. If these people want to be in Parliament, then let them do so by the proper means. Come forward and put themselves through the electoral process. I do not think it is right for anyone to enjoy the privileges and prestige of being a Member of Parliament without earning that right in a parliamentary election.”¹⁹

Concluding the end of the contentious debate, Goh offered a possibility of a “sunset” or “self-destruct” clause to allay the concerns of MPs. He said: “After a certain time, maybe four or five years from now, either before the next general elections or soon after, if the Bill, which if it is enacted becomes law, does not bring us the benefits which I expect, and if Members of Parliament are still not convinced by the wisdom of having such people in Parliament, that law will self-destruct unless it is renewed again by Members in this House.” His final words to the MPs were: “Give this a try. We lose nothing by trying.”²⁰

Eventually, a clause was included in the bill to give each Parliament the discretion to decide whether it wants NMPs during its term.²¹ After the bill was passed into law on 31 March 1990 and the NMP scheme came into effect on 10 September that year, there was still little clarity on the roles and expectations of NMPs. In fact, the scheme remained an experiment even when the first two NMPs – Maurice Choo and Leong Chee Whye – were appointed on 22 November 1990.²²



Newly appointed nominated members of Parliament after the presentation of the instruments of appointment by President Ong Teng Cheong at Command House on 6 September 1996. (From left) Stephen Lee Ching Yen, Walter Woon, Lee Tsao Yuan, Kanwaljit Soin, John de Payva and Imram Mohamed. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Nine nominated members of Parliament taking their oath of allegiance at Parliament House before Parliament sitting on 20 July 2009. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Getting Buy-In

With the scheme in place, a basic question of implementation arose: Who would serve as these NMPs? Few members of the public who fulfilled the criteria stipulated in clause 3(2) of the new Fourth Schedule of the Constitution volunteered themselves. The clause states that “The persons to be nominated shall be persons who have rendered distinguished public service, or who have brought honour to the Republic, or who have distinguished themselves in the field of arts and letters, culture, the sciences, business, industry, the professions, social or community service or the labour movement.”²³

Not many were like Toh Keng Kiat, a haematologist in private practice, who was an NMP from 1992–94. “If you’re looking for someone who can be meaningful in giving an input in, say, medical problems, I’m ready to serve,” the physician shared in an oral history interview.²⁴ “I have always been conscious of the fact that everyone should make a contribution to the country,” he told the *Business Times* in 1992.²⁵

His contemporary, orthopaedic surgeon Kanwaljit Soin, an NMP for three terms from 1992–96, “solicited support from friends because she decided that there should be more women’s voices in Parliament”. However, she was quick to add that she did not want “women’s issues to be seen as women against men, or to be seen as extreme advocate of women’s rights”. “But I do think that we need more female representation in organisations,” she said.²⁶

Many of the early NMPs were approached by PAP leaders to apply for the role. They were frequently caught off-guard, being people for whom participation in formal politics was the furthest from their minds. Some of them even had to read up on the scheme, not having followed the parliamentary debates closely, if at all.

In his contribution to the 2023 book, *The Nominated Member of Parliament Scheme*, Maurice Choo wrote that he was approached by a government minister and asked if he would consider serving as an

NMP. “Not knowing much about what was involved, I asked for time to study the scheme... Among the arguments, the one I felt was the most important was about modifying the perception that Singapore was a ‘one-party parliament’ with an excessively autocratic government.”²⁷ Choo served as an NMP from 1990–91.

The appeal of the NMP role varied from person to person. For someone like businessman Chuang Shaw Peng, who served from 1997–1999, accepting the offer was something of a compromise position, having previously turned down earlier invitations to join the PAP. Describing why he was reluctant to be a party member, he recalled: “Once you’re a member of a party, you have to at least align with them. You cannot say something different, something contrary to what the majority of the PAP members want to do or what they have proposed to do. And then, I cannot say anything anymore. Maybe that led to the view that maybe I’m suitable to be an NMP.”²⁸

Feeling the Ground

Beyond merely being able to contribute to issues on a personal basis, some of the early NMPs saw the scheme as a way to represent the interest of particular groups. Chuang Shaw Peng described his presence as being a loose form of sectoral representation, complementing the system of electoral representation. “If I represent the construction industry, I’ve got a few hundred thousand people with me, you know what I mean?... Construction industry is a big industry; the financial one is a very big industry; education is another big industry. So we bring in... the trade viewpoint or the industry viewpoint, which can be more constructive in formulating policy. Because policies are based on industries, not based on constituencies.”²⁹

That said, prior to his entry into Parliament, Chuang stepped down as president of the Singapore Contractors Association Limited to avoid a perceived conflict of interest.



Leong Chee Whye being sworn in as a nominated member of Parliament at Parliament House on 20 December 1990. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Imram Mohamed, the first Malay-Muslim NMP, similarly resigned from his committee position in the newly established Association of Muslim Professionals.³⁰ He went on to serve for two terms as an NMP, from 1994–96 and briefly from 1996–97.

The ambiguity of whether NMPs represented themselves or a specific sector was gradually resolved over time, beginning with the introduction of “proposal panels” in 1997 representing three functional groups: business and industry, the professions and the labour movement.

It was then Leader of the House Wong Kan Seng who had proposed in Parliament on 5 June 1997 to invite leaders of certain key functional groups to nominate their members for the Special Select Committee’s

consideration. This was in addition to getting members of the public to nominate suitable and interested individuals. “[M]any of the former NMPs came from these key sectors, though they were not specifically nominated by the organisations which make up these functional areas,” he said. “What is new about this approach is that we will formally and systematically request these organisations to get together and nominate some individuals from among their membership for the consideration of the Special Select Committee.”³¹

In July 1997, the three “proposal panels” (business and industry, the professions and the labour movement) were officially formed to “fine-tune and improve the selection process”. “We hope they will come up with the best people, because the whole idea of this new feature in the selection process must be ultimately to enhance the NMP scheme,” said then Speaker of Parliament Tan Soo Khoo.³²

Making History

On 23 May 1994, Walter Woon, then vice-dean of the Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore, made history by becoming the first NMP (he served for three terms from 1992–96) to introduce a private member’s bill, the Maintenance of Parents Bill, in Parliament.³³ The bill was passed without debate at its third reading on 2 November 1995.³⁴

The Maintenance of Parents Act came into force on 1 June 1996, along with the establishment of the Tribunal for the Maintenance of Parents. This is the first public law that originated from a private member’s bill since Singapore’s independence in 1965. The

legislation provides for Singapore residents aged 60 years and above, who are unable to maintain himself or herself adequately, to claim maintenance from their children either in the form of a monthly allowance or any other periodical payment or a lump sum.³⁵

The passing of Woon’s Maintenance of Parents Bill gave other NMPs the confidence to table their own bills. Kanwaljit Soin’s Family Violence Bill introduced on 27 September 1995 did not succeed, but many of its proposals were later incorporated into amendments to the Women’s Charter on 1 May 1997.³⁶ Following consultation with then Minister for Health George Yeo, Imram Mohamed withdrew his motion to introduce the Human Organ Transplant (Amendment) Bill on 10 October 1996.³⁷

Changes to the NMP Scheme

On 5 June 1997, Wong Kan Seng moved a motion in Parliament to increase the maximum number of NMPs from six to nine. In his speech, he assessed that the NMPs had performed well and wanted Parliament to allow views that “may not be canvassed by the PAP or opposition members” and help to fill the void left by the loss of two elected opposition MPs.³⁸

In July the same year, the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Amendment) Act 1997 was passed to raise the maximum number of NMPs to nine.³⁹ Among the first batch of nine NMPs was lawyer Shrinivas Rai, who was sworn in on 1 October 1997.⁴⁰ In his oral history interview, he reflected on the importance of an NMP being an independent voice to “articulate the feeling of the nation, the concern of the community”.⁴¹ He served one term and said that “one term is enough, let’s give others an opportunity”.⁴²

In August 2002, the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Amendment) Act 2002 was passed in Parliament to extend the NMP term of service from

two to two-and-a-half years.⁴³ This administrative change was to avoid going through the NMP nomination process three times for a full five-year term of Parliament. For instance, in the ninth term of Parliament from 1997–2001, there were NMPs who served around a month before Parliament was dissolved.⁴⁴

In 2010, two decades after the scheme was introduced, NMPs had become more comfortable in their role and the public also had a better understanding of what NMPs do. In the same year, the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Amendment) Act 2010 was enforced, abolishing the requirement for a resolution to be passed before NMPs may be appointed.⁴⁵

NMPs have now been entrenched as permanent fixtures in Singapore politics. The current serving NMPs are Usha Chandradas, Keith Chua, Mark Lee, Ong Hua Han, Neil Parekh Nimil Rajnikant, Razwana Begum Abdul Rahim, Jean See Jinli, Syed Harun Alhabsyi and Raj Joshua Thomas.⁴⁶ ♦

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT ON THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF SINGAPORE

This was one of the earliest and longest-continuous running projects undertaken by the then Oral History Unit (renamed Oral History Centre in 1993). The first oral history interview by the unit was conducted in January 1981 with Peter Low Por Tuck, former PAP assemblyman for Havelock and parliamentary secretary (Finance) who was part of the group of 13 that broke away to form the Barisan Sosialis.

Available on Archives Online (www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/), the project is organised by time periods: 1945 to 1965, 1965 to 1985, 1985 to 2005 and 2005 to 2025. There are around 890 hours of such interviews publicly available. Among the former Nominated Members of Parliament whose interviews are accessible online are Chuang Shaw Peng (accession no. 004889), Imram Mohamed (accession no. 004884) and Shrinivas Rai (accession no. 004898).

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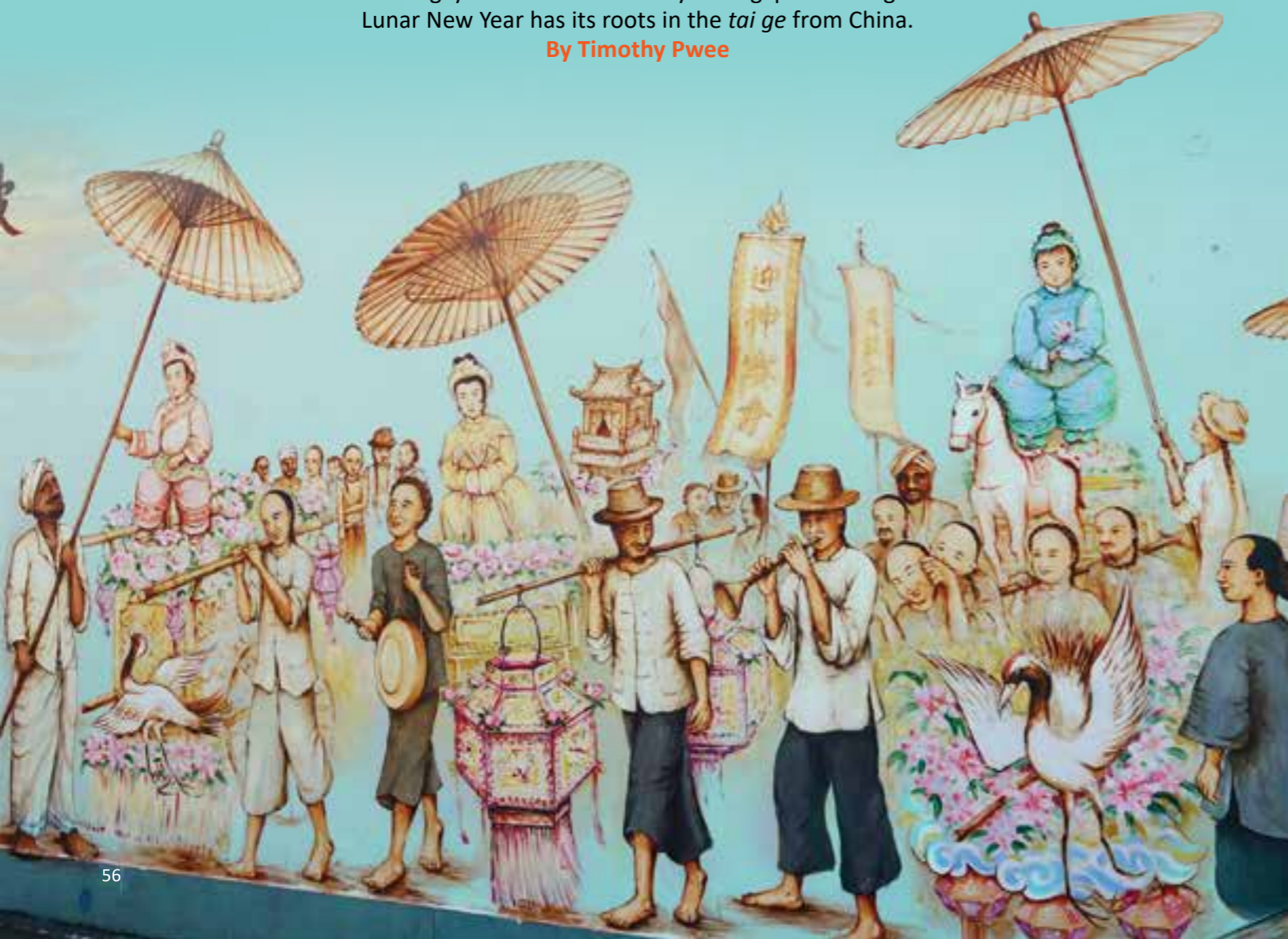
Chingay

in the 19th and 20th Centuries

A Community Procession in Time

The Chingay Parade held annually in Singapore during the Lunar New Year has its roots in the *tai ge* from China.

By Timothy Pwee



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Most people in Singapore today associate the Chingay Parade with the Lunar New Year, which is not surprising because since the early 1970s, the People's Association has been organising the annual Chingay Parade to celebrate the new year.

However, *chingay* originally had nothing to do with the Lunar New Year. According to Carstairs Douglas, who was a missionary in Amoy (now Xiamen) for more than 20 years, *chingay*, or *tsng gē* in Hokkien, is derived from the Chinese term, 裝藝 (*zhuang yi*). In his 1873 Chinese-English Amoy dictionary, Carstairs Douglas says the *gē* (藝) is "a large frame with incense and boys dressed as girls carried in processions", and *tsng* (裝) refers to the children dressed up as characters on that mobile stage to form a tableaux.¹ (A colleague pointed out that Douglas may have meant the traditional Chinese character 妝 [zhuang; meaning to adorn or to dress up] rather than 裝 [zhuang; meaning dress or attire]. Although they are two different words, both have the same pronunciation in Hokkien, Cantonese and Mandarin.)

Tai Ge Processions

The procession of dressed-up children held aloft on poles or on platforms is more commonly known as 抬閣 (*tai ge*) in China, and is frequently seen in various festival processions across the country (抬 meaning "carry").

A well-known *tai ge* takes place annually at Hong Kong's Cheung Chau Bun Festival in the fourth lunar month (April–May) called 飄色 (*piu sik* in Cantonese or "floating" colours). There is also a reference to *tai ge* by the famous author Lu Xun (1881–1936) in a collection of essays about his childhood in Shaoxing, Zhejiang, where he grew up at the end of the 19th century.²

However, an 1868 account by the American Presbyterian missionary John Livingston Nevius of the processions in Ningpo near Shanghai suggests that those being held aloft were not children. He wrote: "On a platform borne on men's shoulders is seen a beautiful and finely-dressed female (it is hardly necessary to say that these are not of a very respectable class), and another one, standing tiptoe on the uplifted hand of the first, is elevated high in air, a very conspicuous object, and much admired and commented upon."³

(Facing Page) In 2017, visual artist Yip Yew Chong was commissioned to paint a mural along the back wall of Thian Hock Keng temple. Part of the mural is this *chingay* scene showing the arrival of the Mazu statue from China in 1840. Photo by Timothy Pwee.

Several municipalities across China have listed *tai ge* as part of their local heritage. These processions were held for different reasons and at different times of the year to honour deities, as prayers for safety and security (祈安), or for thanksgiving purposes. It would be safe to say that *tai ge* was an activity that could be part of festive processions like lion or dragon dances.

The earliest *tai ge* procession in Singapore is possibly the one held in 1840 to welcome the statue of Mazu (Goddess of the Sea) to the Thian Hock Keng temple. The *Singapore Free Press and Daily Advertiser* reported on 23 April 1840:

But what particularly engaged the attention of spectators, and was the chief feature of the procession, was the little girls from 5 to 8 years age, carried aloft in groups on gayly ornamented platforms, and dressed in every variety of Tartar and Chinese costume. The little creatures were supported in their place by iron rods, or some such contrivance, which were concealed under their clothes, and their infant charms were shewn off to the greatest advantage by the rich and peculiar dresses in which they were arrayed – every care being taken to shield them from the effects of the sun's rays, which shone out in full brightness during the whole time the procession lasted.⁴

This Hokkien *chingay* seemed to have developed into an event held every three years, with processions in the 10th and 12th lunar months. The initial procession would take place in the 10th lunar month (generally November in the Gregorian calendar) followed by a return procession in the 12th month (typically in January).

A postcard of a *chingay* tableau, 1900s. You can see the umbrellas used to shade the "actors" from the sun. Kwan Yue Keng Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



A *chingay* procession in Singapore, 1900s. The “car” is being carried by coolies. Lee Kip Lin Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



In the 2006 book about Thian Hock Keng, *The Guardian of the South Seas*, there is an excellent description of the 1901 procession inviting the Tua Pek Kong (大伯公) of Heng San Ting, Guangze Zunwang (广泽尊王) of Hong San See and Qingshui Zushi (清水祖师) of Kim Lan Beo (all Hokkien temples) to Thian Hock Keng for Chinese opera on the 8th day of the 10th lunar month and the return to their respective temples on the 4th day of the 12th lunar month:

The invitational procession began from the back of the Thian Hock Keng, and followed a designated route to the sounds of drums and gongs to Heng San Ting on Silat Road, Hong San See on Peck Seah Street, and Kim Lan Beo Temple on Narcis Street to pick up the three deities. After being “guests” for nearly two months at the Thian Hock Keng, the three gods were escorted back to their temples... The various representatives of the five streets prepared pavilions, drums and gongs, cavalry, and flags to enliven the atmosphere. There were lion dances as well. Groups also acted out various characters in folk tales such as The Eight Immortals Crossing the Ocean, Flooding of Jinshan Temple, and Wang Zhaojun's Mission to the Frontier.⁵

Rival Chingay Processions

The Thian Hock Keng processions appeared to have been overshadowed in the latter part of the 19th century by a larger annual *chingay* organised by a coalition of other Chinese dialect communities (Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese and Hakka) centred around the temple on Phillip Street, the Wak Hai

Cheng Bio (粤海清庙). This *chingay* took place at around the same time at the end of each year.

Lim How Seng discusses this rivalry in his chapter, “Social Structure and Bang Interactions”, published in the 2019 *A General History of the Chinese in Singapore*. He points to the various non-Hokkien *bang* (帮), or mutual aid communities centred around dialect lines, forming a “united front” as a strategy to “counter the over-powering Hokkien bang”. The objective of forming such an alliance was to maintain a balance of power in *bang* politics.⁶ Congratulatory plaques for major events were installed in Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese and Hakka temples but not in Hokkien temples.

The press picked up on the procession's role as a uniting mechanism. In November 1897, the *Mid-Day Herald and Daily Advertiser* observed:

The occasion has been termed “chingay day,” in rough parlance, but otherwise it is known as the celebration attending the removal of one patron saint from one temple to another. It consists of usual feasting and rejoicing, and organising a huge procession through the town. It is said moreover, to be a cementing of old friendships, the patching up of those little disaffections which usually accompany caste differences in the East. It is the meeting of the clans, and a time when the Teochews, Kehs, Cantonese and Hylams, assemble together and congratulate each other.⁷

It is also one of those occasions where “processional cars” were first used, as described by the *Straits Times Weekly Issue* in 1887: “The procession was fortunate in getting magnificent weather, and

there was no fear of rain coming down, so that the most gorgeous of silk banners and silk embroidered dresses and splendid processional cars were brought out to enhance the grandeur of the procession.”⁸ In this context, “cars” meant a wheeled vehicle. (The first motor car arrived in Singapore only in 1896,⁹ and the contraction of “motor car” to just “car” happened much later when the motor car became an everyday occurrence.)

In the early 20th century, Hokkien modernist reformers felt that the large sums of money used for *chingay* processions and Sembayang Hantu (Seventh Month Prayers) were better deployed elsewhere, such as for educational purposes.¹⁰ As a result, public subscriptions to fund the Thian Hock Keng *chingay* ended and the procession was limited to just one carriage for the Tua Pek Kong, meaning that there would no longer be any accompanying processional *chingay* carriages.¹¹ Thian Hock Keng finally ended the procession in 1935.

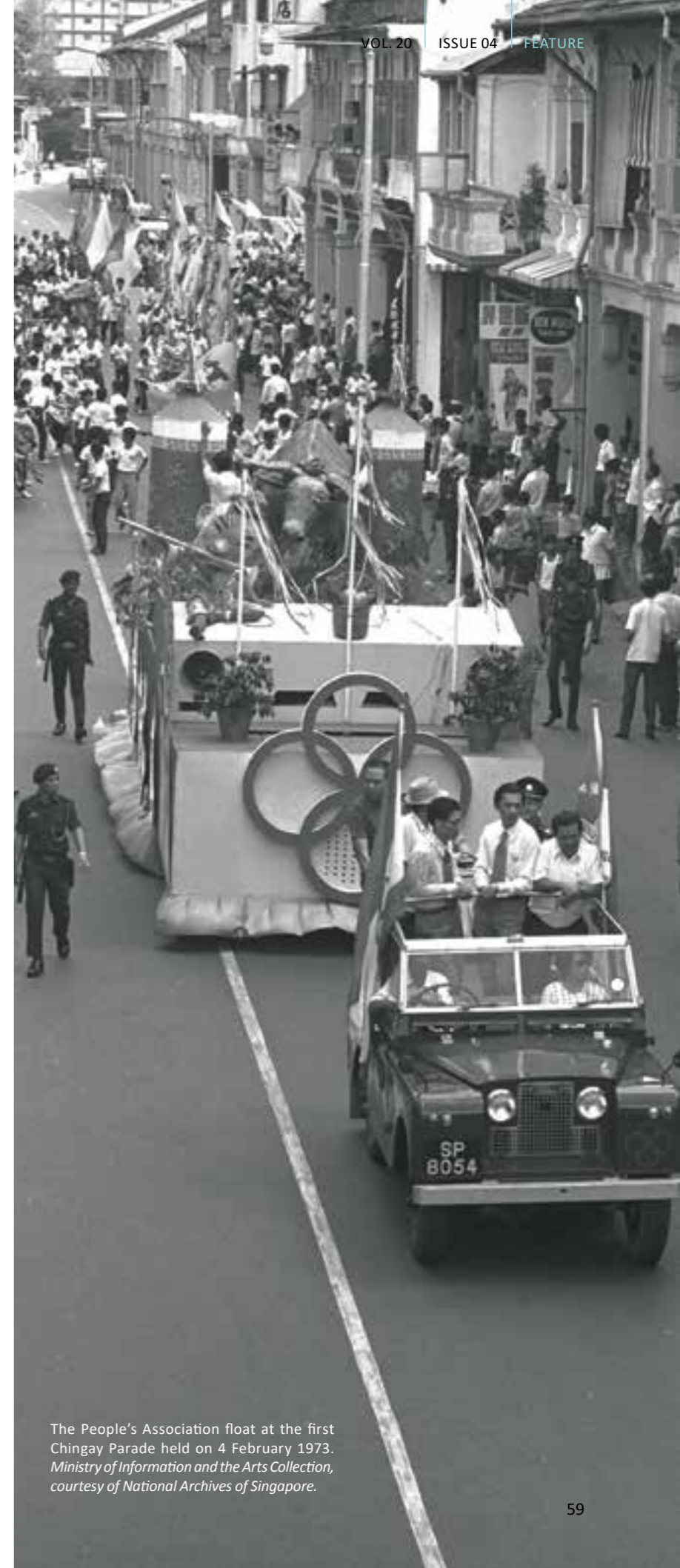
The “united front” *chingay* procession also seemed to have ceased at around the same time. By the 1930s, *chingay* had become a thing of the past according to temple histories. Other reasons for the cessation of Singapore's *chingay* could be the lessening of the divide between the Hokkiens and other Chinese dialect groups as well as the growing inconvenience of stopping the tram system, the banks and the port for the long procession to pass.

Penang: Chingay Capital

Singapore is not the only city in the region to have *chingay*. Johor Bahru's Chingay Festival is held at the end of the Lunar New Year from the 20th to the 22nd of the first lunar month (正月二十至廿二日), which culminates in a night procession. Centred around the downtown Johor Old Temple (柔佛古廟), it brings the Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese communities together. However, it is Penang that is arguably more famous for *chingay*.

The earliest *chingay* in Penang is likely a procession for the reopening of the Kong Hock Keong (广福宫) temple on Pitt Street in December 1862. It was first reported by the *Pinang Argus* on 1 January 1863 and republished in the *Singapore Free Press* on 29 January. The paper wrote:

The strange spectacle, so wild and fantastic to the European imagination, was curious in the extreme, and was, no doubt, immediately relished by the Celestial portion of the spectators, familiar with the meaning of the motley groups – perhaps a mile in length – that paraded the streets with a dreadful din of gongs, trumpets and crackers. Doubtless each *tableau*, rendered so charming to the eye by a diversity of brightly coloured habiliments and flaunting pennants, had some occult significance, but why... poor little children were perched dangling... and forced to remain there for hours in one fixed position.¹²



The People's Association float at the first Chingay Parade held on 4 February 1973. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



A dance performance at Chingay 2015. Photo by Danny Santos. Courtesy of Singapore Tourism Board.

By the last decade of the 19th century, there appeared to be several different processions in Penang. In September 1883, the *Straits Times Weekly Issue* reported on the Poh Choo Siah-Tua Pek Kong procession that attracted the Chinese from the whole of the Straits as well as Burma and Sumatra. Described as a procession “on a scale of magnificence hitherto unequalled”, it had “36 stages or platforms in the shape of an immense centipede – 15 ornamental stages containing paper dolls and animals representing theatrical scenes, fish and fruit lanterns”.¹³ (This was a form of *tai ge* still seen in Taiwan today. It is apparently a variant of the *chingay* called the 蜈蚣阵, or “centipede parade”).

A Hokkien *chingay* was reported in February 1890 as happening at the end of the Lunar New Year.¹⁴ In March 1897, there was news of a *chingay* held annually for the “Tohpekong” from the temple on King Street¹⁵ (廣東大伯公街; Kuin-Tang Tua Pek Kong Kay) by the Hakka and the Cantonese. This latter procession, taking place on the 15th and 16th days of the second lunar month, featured “groups of beautiful girls and boys perched aloft on flowery cars known as ‘chingay’”.¹⁶

The Penang Chinese even organised *chingay* processions as part of colonial celebrations such as Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897, Prince Arthur of Connaught’s visit in 1906 and the 1911 coronation of King George V. Not to be left out, Singapore’s Chinese community met and agreed in early 1911 to organise a *chingay* for King George V’s coronation, but when the official programme for Singapore came out, there was no *chingay*. Instead, Singapore had a children’s festival, races, fireworks and lanterns.¹⁷

Interestingly, the 1911 Penang Chingay for the coronation served dual purposes. The first two parades on 20 and 22 June were for the coronation and the next

two parades on 24 and 26 June were for Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy.¹⁸ The latter processions were not regular affairs but held from time to time.

The first procession for Guanyin was in 1900 when it was organised as a thanksgiving for the cessation of the 1899 plague in Penang that caused 39 deaths.¹⁹ The second procession was in 1911, while the third procession in honour of the Goddess was in 1919, at the end of World War I. The fourth and final one was in 1928, with the first two days commemorating the reunification of China under the Nanjing government, and the last two days for the revival of trade and industry in Malaya, as well as for good health.²⁰

One of the Penang processions that gradually coalesced into an annual event and continues to this day is a Tua Pek Kong procession held on Chap Goh Meh, the deity’s birthday. On this day, the Tua Pek Kong deity of the Poh Hock Seah Temple (宝福社) in town is transported to Tanjung Tokong’s Sea Pearl Island Tua Peh Kong Temple (海珠屿大伯公庙) for the relighting of the incense. The deity then returns to the Poh Hock Seah Temple the following day.²¹ Tanjung Tokong is where the first Chinese was supposed to have landed and Poh Hock Seah is the second-oldest temple in Penang.²² Hence the annual procession from the “younger” temple to the “senior” one.

Moving with the Times

Press reports of Penang’s *chingay* show how these processions have progressed into the 20th century.

Electric lamps made their appearance on the “cars” for musicians in the 1911 coronation procession. It is only at the 1919 thanksgiving processions for the Goddess of Mercy that there was mention of a silver cup being awarded to the “best decorated

Ch’ng Peh (ornamental car)”.²³ The press reports, unfortunately, did not specify how these *chingay* “cars” were carried or drawn along. For the Chap Goh Meh Tua Pek Kong procession in 1924, the *Straits Echo* reported that “[o]nly one section had the Chingay pulled by men; the others were either drawn by bullocks or motor”.²⁴

Photographs of the 1928 Penang *chingay* were taken by Yeoh Oon Chuan and they appear in the 188th anniversary commemorative publication for the Kong Hock Keong Guanyin temple on Pitt Street.²⁵ While many of the *chingay* “cars” were mounted on motor vehicles, some appeared to be hand-drawn.

Although *chingay* “cars” were organised around deities and temples, these were not necessarily religious in nature. Aside from tableaux depicting stories of deities, the Penang *chingay* featured scenes from *wayang* (Chinese operas) and Chinese legends as well.

Chingay processions were also used as an advertising medium, as the *Pinang Gazette and Daily Chronicle* observed of the 1924 procession: “On one of the banners we saw the name of Messrs. Wearne Brothers and their advertisement of the Ford Cars. This was more conspicuous in the United Merchants’ section where could be seen several advertisements of milk, brandy, flour, etc.”²⁶

As the years went by, people became more creative with their *chingay* “cars”. In the 1927 procession, there was even a “car” dressed up in a Hollywood theme. “A silver cup was presented in Penang for the beautiful car in the Chingay procession, which carried a boy and a girl, dressed as the late Rudolph

Valentino, as they appeared in the film, ‘The Sheik of Araby’,” the *Straits Echo* reported.²⁷

This did not go down well with some. A strongly worded editorial by the *Singapore Free Press* noted that “there is an increasing tendency amongst the many races forming our town communities to discard their picturesque national costumes and customs and take to those of the West”. Although the paper added that the Penang *chingay* was to be admired and respected, but “even here we find that the award goes to a Chinese boy and girl dressed up as Valentino and Agnes Ayres from one of those erotic tales of imaginary passion invented by some Western film producer!”²⁸

While the traditional *chingay* of the 19th and 20th centuries has its roots in the *tai ge* from China where dressed-up children are held aloft on poles or platforms, the Chingay Parade we are familiar with today – a stage mounted on a motor vehicle with dressed actors comfortably displayed within – is similar to the Western idea of parade floats.

After firecrackers were banned in 1972,²⁹ Lunar New Year celebrations became less lively and boisterous. Being familiar with the annual Penang *chingay*, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who was also chairman of the People’s Association, suggested holding a similar *chingay* to enliven new year festivities.³⁰

The first Chingay Parade with the float procession as we know it was staged on 4 February 1973.³¹ The parade has been held annually since then, evolving over the years into a multicultural event involving participants of different ethnicities and nationalities. ♦

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JOHN STURGUS BASTIN

a memoir

The late Dr John Bastin was the leading authority on Stamford Raffles, having published more than 20 books and many essays on Raffles.

By Kwa Chong Guan

Dr John Bastin at the launch of “Raffles’ Letters: Intrigues Behind the Founding of Singapore” exhibition at the National Library on 28 August 2012. Courtesy of the National Library Board.

The eminent historian Dr John Sturgus Bastin (1927–2024) lived much, if not most of his life, with Thomas Stamford Raffles. His first book was based on his 1954 Leiden University doctoral dissertation on Raffles’ ideas on the land rent system in Java.¹ His last book was on the letters that Raffles wrote to his sister Mary Ann Flint published in 2021.² Within the span of those 67 years, Bastin published some 20 other books and dozens of essays, all in one way or another relating to Raffles and his world in the British East India Company.

In addition to being a historian, Bastin was a bibliophile. He systematically collected anything and everything on Raffles and his wide interests that ranged from antiquities to natural history. The National Library of Singapore is proud and privileged to have acquired Bastin’s library of over 5,000 books relating to Raffles and Singapore/Southeast Asia in 2015. These items form part of the John Bastin Collection at the National Library.

Foundation Professor of History at the University of Malaya

Bastin was born on 30 January 1927 in Melbourne, Australia. His great-grandfather had been born in England but migrated to Australia after the Victorian gold rush. After obtaining a first-class honours degree in history and then a master of arts degree from the University of Melbourne, Bastin was awarded a postgraduate scholarship in 1951 to study at Balliol College, University of Oxford.

Bastin’s interest in Raffles was first sparked when he read an article on Indonesia by Harry J. Benda of Yale University (who later became his friend), which included a brief reference to Raffles’ administration in Java. Bastin thought this might prove an interesting topic for academic research. In 1954, he defended his University of Leiden doctoral dissertation on Raffles’ ideas on the land rent system in Java and was awarded the degree of Doctor of Literature and Philosophy. In

Kwa Chong Guan is a former member of the National Library Board and chair of its National Library Acquisition Committee. For his services to the National Library, he was awarded a Public Service Medal in the National Day Awards 2020. He was earlier a member of the National Heritage Board and chair of the National Archives Advisory Committee. He was the last director of the old National Museum which he led through a strategic planning process that expanded the museum into the Singapore History Museum (now the National Museum of Singapore), the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Singapore Art Museum.

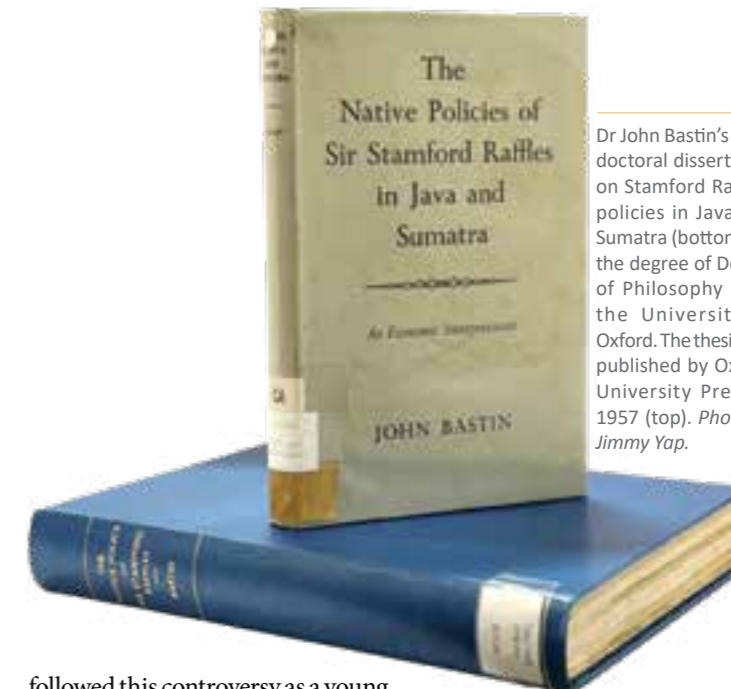
1955, Bastin submitted his doctoral dissertation on Raffles’ policies in Java and Sumatra and was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Oxford. The thesis was subsequently published by Oxford University Press in 1957.³

Bastin’s lifelong fascination with Raffles led him to develop a long relationship with Singapore and Malaya, starting when he was elected Foundation Professor of History at the newly established University of Malaya campus in Kuala Lumpur in 1959. Bastin arrived to head a department of one: the diplomatic historian Alastair Lamb (1930–2023) who, while in Kuala Lumpur, turned his interest to the archaeological investigation of port settlements in the isthmus and the Bujang Valley in Kedah. In May 1959, Bastin and Lamb were joined by Wang Gungwu (currently University Professor at the National University of Singapore and professor emeritus at the Australian National University) after he completed his PhD from the University of London.

Bastin’s inaugural lecture at the University of Malaya in 1959 was a combative response to what he perceived as a disturbing emerging trend in the writing of the region’s history among his Singapore colleagues headed by K.G. Tregonning (1923–2015), who succeeded C.N. Parkinson (1909–93) as Raffles Professor of History in June 1959. Tregonning was deeply influenced by the English translation of essays by the young Dutch scholar-civil servant, J.C. van Leur, who was tragically killed in action in World War II. Van Leur had argued that the writing of Indonesian history should shift from looking at Indonesia “from the deck of ramparts of the fortress, the high gallery of the trading house” to looking at Indonesia’s history from that of the palaces of the Javanese rulers the Dutch were trying to relate to.⁴

Tregonning wrote: “Asia, not the European in Asia, must be our theme, and suddenly, if you think of that, it makes the Portuguese and the Dutch most insignificant, and almost extraneous... they were a few heretical fish in a Muslim sea and... did not affect Asia much.”⁵

Bastin was evidently troubled at this effort to write out the Westerners from Asian history. As he concluded his inaugural lecture, he said: “The exact historical significance of Westerners in the Asian scene may be debated, but it would be a foolhardy historian who would regard them as extraneous.”⁶ The issue of whether it is possible to write Asian history from the viewpoint of Asia was, as Bastin noted, the subject of “a rather one sided debate” in the *Journal of Southeast Asian History* edited by Tregonning.⁷ I



Dr John Bastin’s 1955 doctoral dissertation on Stamford Raffles’ policies in Java and Sumatra (bottom) for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Oxford. The thesis was published by Oxford University Press in 1957 (top). Photo by Jimmy Yap.

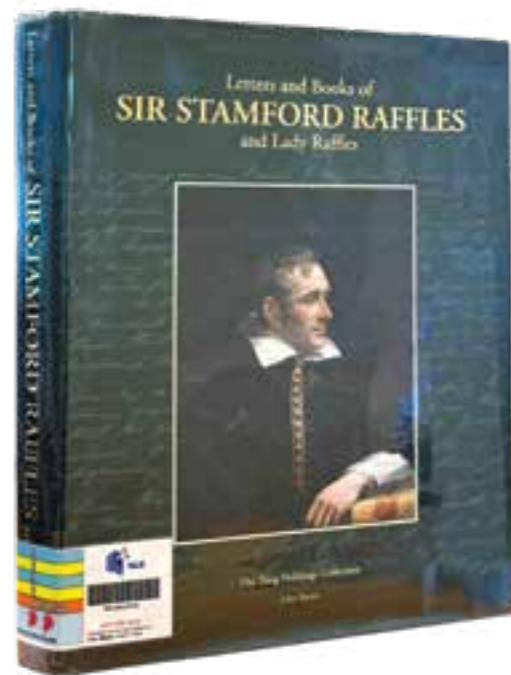
followed this controversy as a young undergraduate at the former University of Singapore. It is a controversy which, I argue, continues to challenge a younger generation of historians.

In his inaugural lecture, Bastin argued that a major issue in writing Asian history from an Asian perspective is that much of the source materials are in Western languages and comprehensible only to a Western historical framework which establishes the historical narrative even before it is written.

Today, a younger generation of scholars continues to grapple with the issues Bastin had highlighted some 60 years earlier. They are exploring how a close “against the grain” or “along the grain” reading of archived colonial records can lead us to a more nuanced understanding of how Asian actors interacted with Western actors and among themselves. For example, Benjamin J.Q. Khoo, the National Library’s 2020/21 Lee Kong Chian Research Fellow, revealed how a Dutch-Bugis misunderstanding over a royal wedding in 1820 led to an uprising among the Bugis community in Riau and their departure for Singapore where they established themselves in a Bugis kampong in the estuary of the Kallang River.⁸

Bastin was apparently sufficiently piqued by the adverse response of his colleagues to his inaugural lecture that he drafted a longer reply pointing to issues of personality, or lack thereof, in the reinterpretation of Malayan history. In this later essay, Bastin argued that we are more familiar with Western actors like Raffles, who left us volumes of reports and correspondence. But we know much less about Asian actors, the Malay sultans who left few, if any, records and are shadowy personalities.⁹ But this was after he had resigned from his professorship and deanship at the University of Malaya to go on to a lectureship in Modern History of Southeast Asia at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in the University of London in 1963. (At the University of Malaya, he was succeeded by Wang Gungwu as Professor of History.)

Dr John Bastin's large-format transcription and editing of *Letters and Books of Sir Stamford Raffles and Lady Raffles: The Tang Holdings Collection of Autograph Letters and Books of Sir Stamford Raffles and Lady Raffles* (Editions Didier Millet, 2009). On the cover is the oil painting of Stamford Raffles by James Lonsdale (1817) from the Zoological Society of London. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 959.5703092 BAS-[JSB]).



Bastin never revealed or discussed why he resigned from the University of Malaya for SOAS where he remained for the rest of his academic career, retiring as an Emeritus Reader. Possibly he may have tired of the debate about how to write Asian history and just wanted to get on with writing history as he understood it.

The Bibliophile

Bastin collected books, reports and records about Raffles and his world, which he was researching. Most scholars view books, archived records and textual material as sources of information to be verified and collated to become historical evidence for the reconstruction of the past. For Bastin, these publications and records were more than source materials, they were historical artefacts in their own right. I realised this in early 1994 when Bastin invited me to lunch at his home in Eastbourne, East Sussex, while I was on a visit to the British Museum and British Library to seek their support for an exhibition, "Raffles Reviewed", that our National Museum was curating. Needless to say, I accepted the invitation with alacrity.

The highlight of my visit was Bastin showing me around his library. He showed me his copy of the first edition of Raffles' *The History of Java*, published in 1817, and copies of all the later reprints of the book.¹⁰ Bastin had also managed to acquire copies of the various pamphlets and reports Raffles had written and printed. He had a copy of the extremely rare "Statement of Services" Raffles wrote in defence of his record of work for the East India Company and had privately printed in 1824. There were shelves of hundreds, if not thousands, of "antiquarian" and more recent books about Raffles and his world. All these books were carefully shelved and displayed like artefacts in a museum exhibition.

My attention was drawn to a locket carefully displayed on a bookcase and asked what it was. Bastin picked up the locket and very carefully opened it to show me a lock of wispy blond hair, whispering "Raffles' hair" (in 19th century England, it was common to preserve locks of hair of a deceased in a locket or keepsake as a memento).

The depth and extent of Bastin's library about Raffles and his world left me in awe. I could not have imagined that some 20 years later, Singapore's National Library would have the opportunity to acquire it, and I would be a member of the team to do so.¹¹

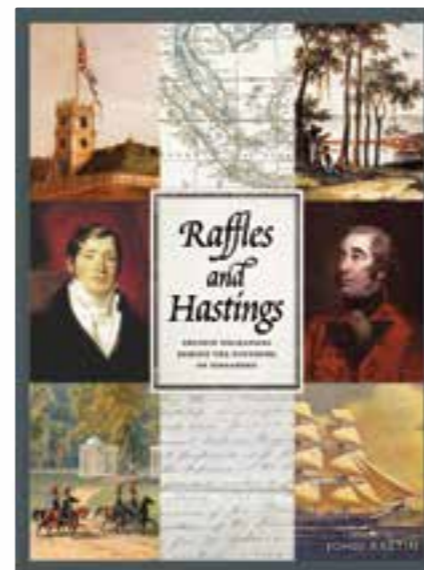
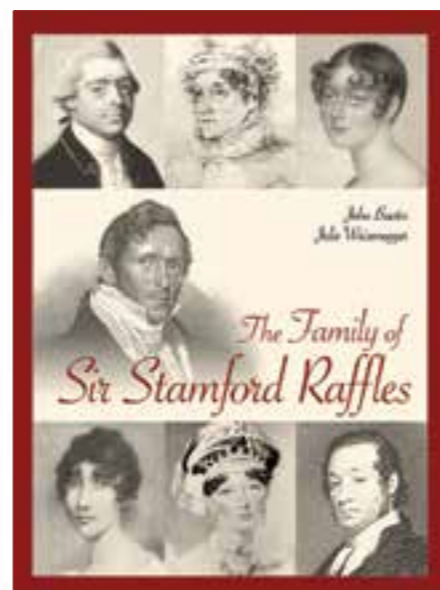
Personalities and the Writing of History

Bastin the bibliophile merges into Bastin the historian in that a significant number of his writings were on the historically significant publications of the 19th century which, as the editor of the *Oxford in Asia Historical Reprints*, he would have recommended be reprinted.

Among the most significant reprints Oxford published was Raffles' *History of Java*, which today has become a much sought-after rare book. Bastin provided a meticulously footnoted 17-page introduction to the reprint, reconstructing the circumstances under which Raffles wrote the book and its production history. Bastin wrote similarly detailed introductions to Oxford reprints of Sophia Raffles' memoir of her husband, *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*, and William Marsden's *The History of Sumatra*.¹²

This, then, was Bastin's forte: micro studies based on close reading of archived records, printed accounts and reports by historical actors and other contemporaneous observers of events. This included drawings and prints of Indonesia and, of course, people, especially Raffles and his circle of friends and

The Family of Sir Stamford Raffles, co-authored with Julie Weizenegger. Image from John Sturgis Bastin and Julie Weizenegger, *The Family of Sir Stamford Raffles* (Singapore: National Library Board Singapore and Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2016). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 959.57030922 BAS-[HIS]).



Dr John Bastin's transcription of the correspondences between Stamford Raffles and the Governor-General of India, the Marquess of Hastings. Image from John Sturgis Bastin, *Raffles and Hastings: Private Exchanges Behind the Founding of Singapore* (Singapore: National Library Board Singapore and Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2014). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 959.5703 BAS-[JSB]).

contemporaries. Bastin's large-format transcription and editing of *Letters and Books of Sir Stamford Raffles and Lady Raffles* is a model of how dry historical records and books can be made fascinating and impressive.¹³

In Bastin's transcription of the correspondence between Raffles and the Governor-General of India, the Marquess of Hastings, he provides us with a more nuanced understanding of Raffles' claim to be the first to recognise the strategic location of Singapore for an East India Company settlement.¹⁴ We are now aware that it was the Marquess of Hastings who directed Raffles to search for a location at the southern end of the Straits of Melaka for this proposed British station, rather than, as Raffles was suggesting, somewhere on the coast of Borneo, in the vicinity of Sambas or Pontianak in western Borneo, or even possibly the island of Balambangan island off the north coast of Sabah where the East India Company had had a settlement since 1762.

It would appear that for Bastin, the study of history is not about great men and their doings, but being able to put ourselves into the shoes of historical actors to understand why they did what they did. Bastin cites the Oxford philosopher, historian and archaeologist R.G. Collingwood, who argued that "for science, the event is discovered by perceiving it... For history the object to be discovered is not the mere event, but the thought expressed in it. To discover that thought is already to understand it".¹⁵

Bastin's careful transcription and editing of archival records and historical publications have helped us to achieve a deep understanding of what was in the minds of Raffles and his superiors, friends and colleagues. In these endeavours, Bastin was thoroughly objective, but not necessarily neutral as can

be seen in his treatment of William Farquhar, the first resident of Singapore (1819–23), and John Crawfurd, who succeeded Farquhar as Resident (1823–26), in Bastin's 2019 book, *Sir Stamford Raffles and Some of His Friends and Contemporaries*.¹⁶

When Bastin showed me a draft of this manuscript, I looked at the contents of the book and noticed that it mentioned the Scottish poet and Orientalist John Leyden, the Danish surgeon and naturalist Nathaniel Wallich, and even Raffles' Malay clerk John Leyden Siami. I asked Bastin why he did not include Farquhar and Crawfurd as they were contemporaries of Raffles and had worked closely with him. Bastin's short and sharp reply to me was "they were not friends of Raffles".

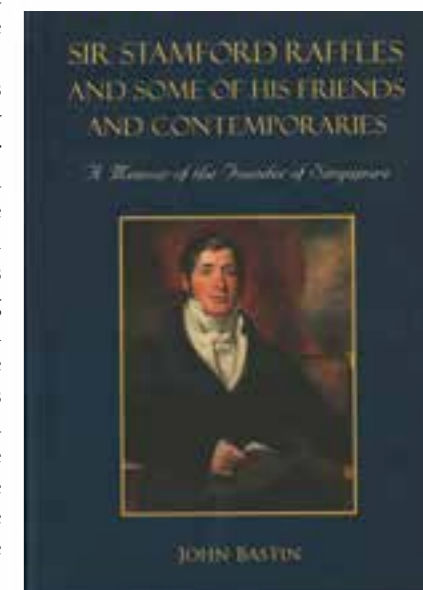
Working with Bastin

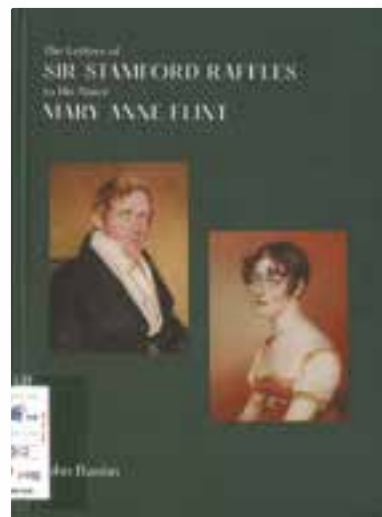
Singapore's National Museum and National Library were fortunate that Bastin appeared to have considered us friends of Raffles, and he readily shared his encyclopedic knowledge of Raffles and his world whenever we approached him for help and advice. In 1993, Bastin wrote an eight-page pamphlet for the National Museum titled "The Farquhar Silver Epergne Presented by the Chinese Inhabitants of Singapore 1824". The museum had acquired the silver epergne (a type of table centrepiece used for holding fruit, flowers or candles) in a private sale from its owner, Captain David John Farquhar Atkins, R.N., a direct descendant of Farquhar. For the museum's 1994 exhibition, "Raffles Reviewed", Bastin wrote a five-page fold-out brochure on Raffles with a detailed timeline of Raffles' life. The brochure remains a succinct reference on Raffles up to today.

But the museum's major collaboration with Bastin was the production of a very large-format catalogue of Farquhar's collection of natural history drawings that Goh Geok Khim, founder of brokerage firm GK Goh, had successfully bid for at a 1993 Sotheby's auction and donated to the National Heritage Board in 1996. Bastin also wrote a detailed essay, "William Farquhar; His Life and Interest in Natural History", for the catalogue.¹⁷

The National Library has been privileged to work closely with Bastin, especially in our acquisition of his unmatched library of rare and heritage materials in 2015. Bastin subsequently donated his personal archives containing his research papers and personal correspondences, which are useful primary source materials on the study of Raffles and Singapore/Southeast Asia. The National Library received the archives in two tranches, the first in August 2019 and the second in January 2022.

Dr John Bastin's "alternative" biography of Stamford Raffles. Image from John Sturgis Bastin, *Sir Stamford Raffles and Some of His Friends and Contemporaries: A Memoir of the Founder of Singapore* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte Ltd, 2019). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 959.5703092 BAS-[HIS]).





Dr John Bastin's latest book. Image from John Sturgus Bastin, *The Letters of Sir Stamford Raffles to His Sister Mary Anne Flint: Together With the Letters of Lady Raffles* (Singapore: National Museum of Singapore, 2021). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 959.5703092 BAS-[HIS]).

In 2016, the library was given the opportunity to publish Bastin's book, *The Family of Sir Stamford Raffles*, co-authored with Julie Weizenegger.¹⁸ Before that, the library had published the private exchanges between Raffles and Hastings, edited by Bastin, on the founding of Singapore. The publication of Raffles' correspondence with the 1st Marquess of Hastings, the Governor-General of India between 1813 and 1823, was the

outcome of an exhibition at the National Library in 2012.¹⁹ The exhibition showcased 13 letters in the private papers of Lord Hastings which are now in The Bute Collection at Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute, Scotland, and exhibited through the generosity of the 7th Marquess of Bute.

Those of us at the National Museum and National Library who had the occasion to work with Bastin, as I had, found him a precise and exacting writer. He knew exactly what he wanted to say and how to say it. Editing Bastin was always a challenge.

Bastin never wrote the definitive biography of Raffles which many of us expected. Instead, what Bastin left us was what he termed "an 'alternative' biographical account of Raffles, as seen through the lives of his friends and contemporaries".²⁰ We are delighted that Bastin chose to publish this "alternative" biography of Raffles, *Sir Stamford Raffles and Some of His Friends and Contemporaries: A Memoir of the Founder of Singapore*, in the bicentenary year of Raffles' arrival in Singapore.

Bastin passed away peacefully in his home in Eastbourne on 7 August 2024, aged 97. He is survived by his wife Rita, and four children, Christopher, Jennifer, Mark and Marianne. ♦



Dr John Bastin with his wife Rita and their two granddaughters, c. 2001. Courtesy of Rita Bastin.

NOTES

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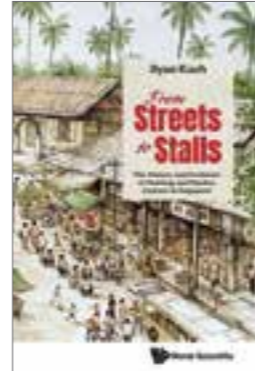


The memoir explores the life and legacy of Tay Seow Huah, Singapore's first director of the Security and Intelligence Division, including his role during events like the Laju incident and his contributions to national security.

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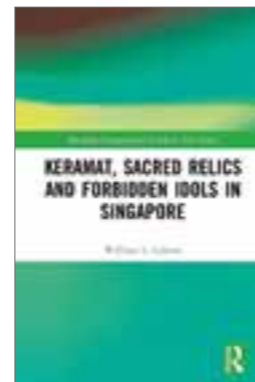


From Streets to Stalls traces the history of hawking in Singapore, from its origins in the 9th century to its present-day sociocultural importance. It also delves into hawker reform and regulation, and the transformation of hawker centres into spaces that promote social mingling and multiculturalism.

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