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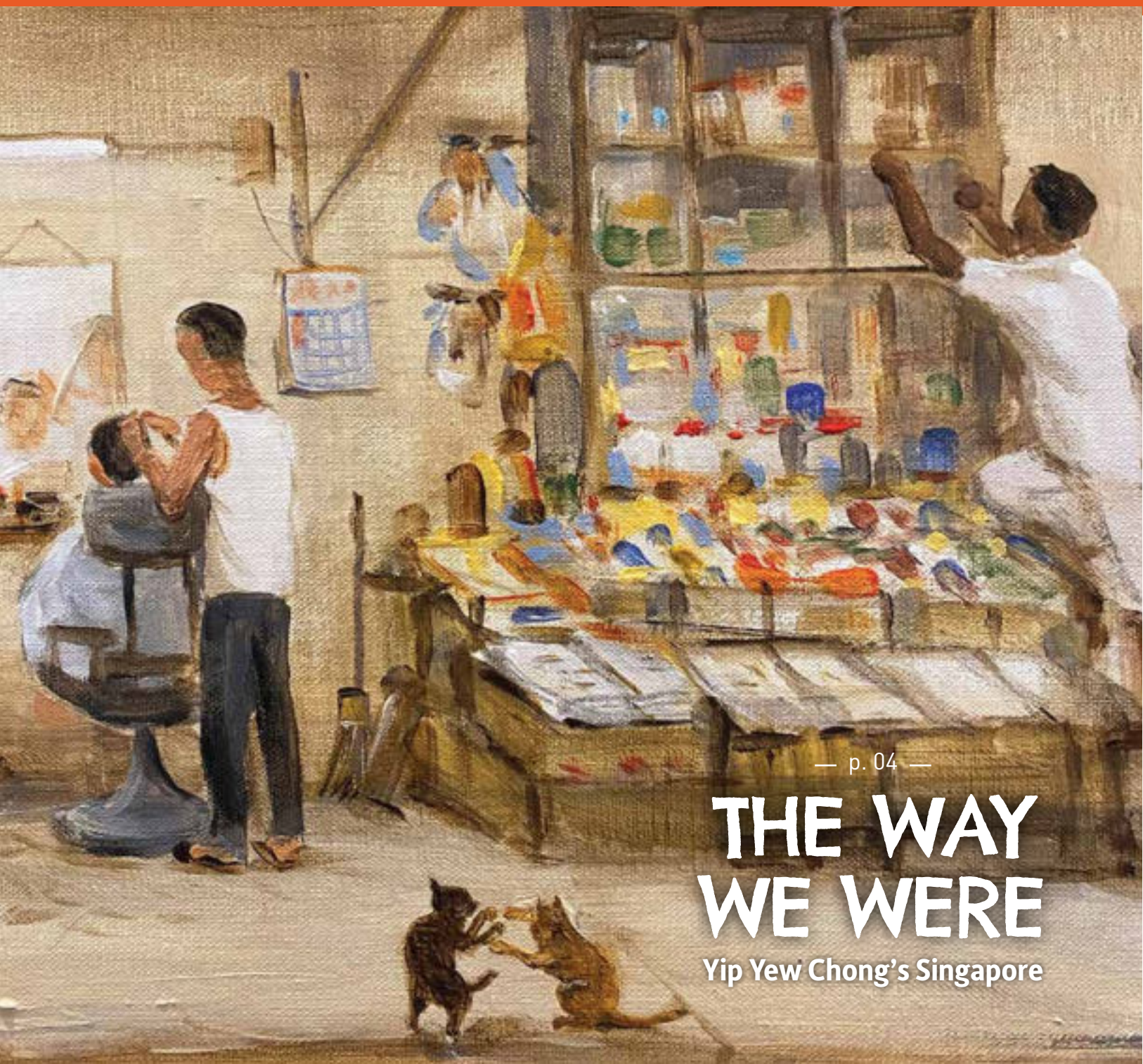

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## THE WAY WE WERE

### Yip Yew Chong's Singapore

# Director's Note

Walk into most art galleries and you'll see visitors padding quietly through the space, thoughtfully contemplating the works. This was *not* the scene at the exhibition of Yip Yew Chong's "I Paint my Singapore". All around, people were chattering away as they shared their memories with their companions, prompted by scenes of Singapore in the 1970s and 1980s.

Yip, a visual artist, had spent a considerable amount of time doing research to ensure that the details in the painting were accurate and the reactions he got suggest he succeeded. Artworks like this validate the importance of history and memory, which is why we made Yip and his painting our cover story this month.

One reason "I Paint my Singapore" received so much attention was because it was a 60-metre-long painting; its length made it notable. Likewise, it was the length, this time of men's hair rather than artworks, that made the government pay attention in the 1960s and 1970s. Librarian Andrea Kee revisits the campaign against long-haired men – aptly called Operation Snip Snip – and uncovers the bald truth behind it.

Long-haired musicians were among the people caught up in the campaign against hippie culture. Not all musicians were peacenik hippies though. In the late 1960s, one small group of local musicians decided that they would try their luck in South Vietnam, entertaining American troops. Writer and content creator Boon Lai finds out why they risked life and limb to perform in a war zone.

Speaking of war, writer and curator Zhuang Wubin's examination of photo studios during the Japanese Occupation is a fascinating study of the challenges that photographers had to go through during that period.

In this issue, you'll also read about the fast and furious history of dirt bike racing, see Singapore through the eyes of Joseph Conrad, and learn what Singlish was like before the word was invented.

In addition, we look at the contemporary collecting effort by the National Library to acquire and preserve materials for posterity. We also check out some interesting things that were recently donated to us, such as items relating to the first Singapore Mount Everest expedition, and photos and documents from a 100-year-old martial arts association.

Interestingly, even though the focus of the group was martial arts, not everybody was kung-fu fighting. What else did they get up to? You'll have to read the article to find out.

**Alicia Yeo**
Director
National Library

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**On the cover**
Detail from Yip Yew Chong's "I Paint my Singapore". Photo by Jimmy Yap.

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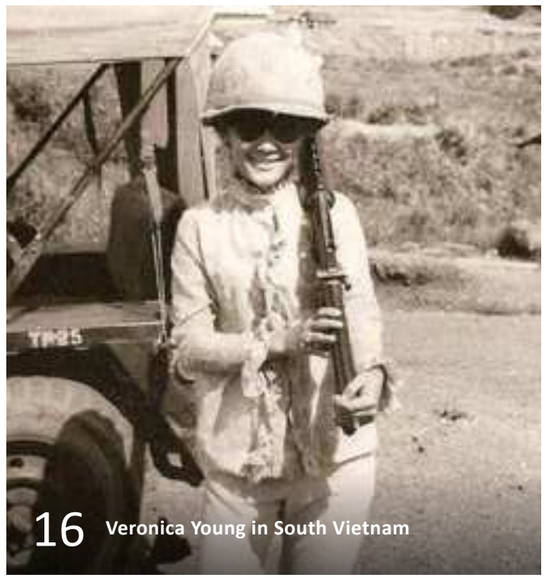

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# MEMORY. HISTORY. ART: YIP YEW CHONG'S "I PAINT MY SINGAPORE"

Yip Yew Chong's 60-metre-long work, "I Paint my Singapore", melds memories and research to produce stories about Singapore.

**By Jimmy Yap**

Looking inside Housing and Development Board flats. Detail from "I Paint my Singapore". *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*





**Jimmy Yap** is the Editor-in-Chief of *BiblioAsia*.

As an artist, Yip Yew Chong made a name for himself painting outdoor murals in places such as Chinatown, Kampong Glam and Tiong Bahru. He would produce huge scenes – mostly with a historical bent – while perched on a ladder, regularly battling the elements. His most recent claim to fame, however, is a little different. While undoubtedly large – "I Paint my Singapore" is a 60-metre-long work – most of the painting was done indoors in the comfort of Yip's studio. And while outdoor murals are a transient medium, exposed as they are to the merciless sun and the pelting rain, Yip's latest painting is meant to last.

The public's response to "I Paint my Singapore" has been remarkable. So many people wanted to view the painting, which was exhibited at the foyer of the Raffles City Convention Centre, that the organisers had to do crowd control.

## A Slice of the Past

Yip's latest work captures Singapore as it was in the 1970s and 1980s. The work (acrylic on canvas) consists of 27 panels (about the length of five double-decker buses lined up) that form a continuous scene, like a panorama, but one that switches perspective from one canvas to the next, from street scene to bird's-eye view.

Yip Yew Chong pointing at the painting of his family in their shophouse on Sago Lane, 2023. *Photo by Woo Pei Qi.*

Another interesting aspect is that Yip has removed the facade of some of the buildings so that people can see what's happening inside, a little like X-ray vision.

Well-known places and landmarks like the former National Theatre and Little India feature in this painting. But Yip also painted more quotidian scenes – of everyday life in housing estates and outlying areas of Singapore. These have probably had greater resonance with Singaporeans.

The National Theatre, which opened in 1963, was built to commemorate Singapore's achievement of self-government in 1959. It was demolished in 1986 to make way for the Central Expressway. Detail from "I Paint my Singapore". *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

The atmosphere at the exhibition, where the work was displayed from 30 November 2023 to 1 February 2024, was more akin to a bazaar than an art gallery, especially in its closing days. But what was more interesting than the size of the crowd was what they were spotted doing. Rather than gazing pensively at each canvas, people could be seen animatedly discussing different scenes with their friends. Within intergenerational groups, you would often hear impromptu history lessons being conducted.

Pointing to a boat filled with recruits en route to Pulau Tekong, a father in his 40s recounted to his young daughter what it was like being ferried on that craft. "When it rained, we all got wet," he explained, noting the lack of shelter. (She did not seem impressed by the anecdote.) A middle-aged women pointed to a hill in Jurong and told her companions, "That's where our church is." People also shared their favourite scenes on social media.

Yip estimates that the people who came to view his work numbered in the tens of thousands. What was it about this particular work that drew so many people and that sparked off all these conversations?

Veteran diplomat Tommy Koh, who opened the exhibition on 29 November 2023, noted that Yip's art was accessible and called Yip "the people's artist". Koh said that the enormous work resonated with people because "it is such a monumental achievement and because the different panels remind people of the places they grew up in or have special memories for".

Yip agreed that familiarity was a big part of the appeal. In response to an emailed query, Yip said he believed that the painting struck a chord with people because "they can see themselves, their families, relatives and friends; their homes, where they've played, worked, studied, served NS etc. in the painting".

The 54-year-old artist said that he chose to paint scenes of Singapore of the 1970s and 1980s because the period was personally significant to him. "The decades are my growing-up years as a child and as a youth, and I have fond memories [of that time]."

Because everything has changed so much in the ensuing decades, Yip had to rely on his memory, supplemented by extensive research, to paint each scene. In a BiblioAsia+ podcast, Yip said he had spent more time thinking about the work and researching it than actually painting it.

In terms of research, a lot of time was spent online looking at photos of Singapore of that period, with the National Archives of Singapore being an important source, he said.

It was through his research in the archives that he discovered that the 150-year-old Sri Krishnan Temple on Waterloo Street looked very different in the 1970s from how it does today. "Today, that temple is so elaborate and so colourful," he said. "But in the 1970s, it was just a simple temple with a *gopuram* [pyramid-shaped tower] on the roof and the statue of Sri Krishnan in the archway." Thanks to his research, Yip was able to depict the temple accurately.

In addition to capturing scenes of a Singapore lost to time, what also adds charm to Yip's work is that each scene has mini stories embedded within them.


**(Left)** Kreta Ayer by day. Detail from "I Paint my Singapore". *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

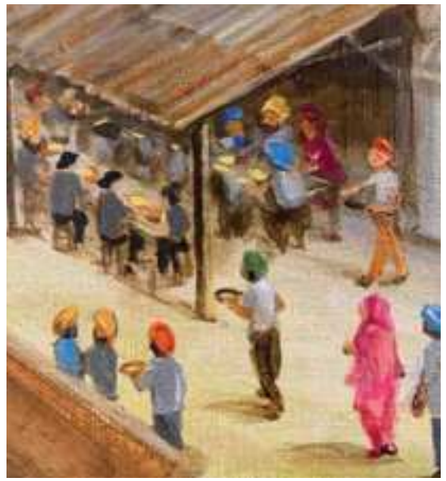
**(Below)** The Sri Krishnan Temple in the 1970s. Detail from "I Paint my Singapore". *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

**(Bottom)** The Sri Krishnan Temple undergoing extensive renovations, 1985–89. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

**(Below)** Transporting recruits and military equipment to Pulau Tekong on a vessel known as a ramp-powered lighter. Detail from "I Paint my Singapore". *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

**(Below right)** A hilltop village in the Sembawang-Nee Soon area. Detail from "I Paint my Singapore". *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

In depicting the old Central Sikh Temple on Queen Street (the temple is now on Towner Road), Yip painted a non-bearded Sikh serving food because the artist wanted to tell the story he had read about a Chinese man who had entered the faith. "He wanted to be a Sikh, wanted to embrace the religion, but he couldn't grow a beard… but the Sikh community welcomed him so he just wore a turban and he served in the temple and the community."



**(Right)** A Chinese convert to Sikhism (in khaki pants) serving food at the Central Sikh Temple that used to be on Queen Street. Detail from "I Paint my Singapore". *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

**(Below)** A wake being held in the void deck. Detail from "I Paint my Singapore". *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

In another scene, Yip painted a wake being held in the void deck of a Housing and Development Board apartment block. Members of the funeral band are disembarking from the lorry that brought them to the wake. Nearby, a parking attendant in a straw hat is writing out a ticket. Around the corner, a man in grey is hurrying down the road in a desperate attempt to avoid a ticket.

## A Penchant for the Past

Yip is the latest cultural worker to mine history to create art. Rachel Heng's novel, *The Great Reclamation*, is another example of a recent work based on occurences or events that have actually happened in Singapore. While Yip pored over old photos, Heng devoured oral history transcripts from the archives and dived into old newspaper reports from NewspaperSG, an archive of old local newspapers that the National Library makes available to the public.

This interest in history is not just coming from artists and writers, but also from the general public as well. Over the years, there has been greater interest in both preserving and revisiting the past. This can be seen in the clamour to conserve old buildings as well as the mushrooming of groups on Facebook dedicated to sharing photos and memories of days (and places) gone by.

Even if this is only driven by a very human desire to revisit the "good old days", that has value too. For individuals, nostalgia can help improve their mood as they reminisce about life back in the day. It can also be good for society. Nostalgia creates a sense of place, a feeling of connection, generates shared stories – these all help to knit a people together.

In all fairness, it must be said that the good old days weren't necessarily always that good. In the BiblioAsia+ podcast, Yip recalled how, at one point, there were as many as five different families living on the same floor of the tiny shophouse on Sago Lane that his family had rented. While he recalled that memory fondly, it is unlikely that many people would want to return to a Singapore where that was common.

Likewise, if you look at the scene of men unloading cargo off boats in the Singapore River, you can see that the river was filled with activity and human life. At the same time, the river itself was probably devoid of aquatic life, choked as it was with waste and effluent. The painting, of course, also fails to capture the appalling stench that the river was a byword for.

At the time of writing, Yip has yet to find a buyer for his monumental work. He said he hoped to find someone, preferably a custodian or curator, who would be able to "conserve, re-exhibit and develop it further, such as into a multimedia experience that can travel around the world". There are probably not many individuals or institutions with the ability and space to purchase and then exhibit a 60-metre-long painting. Yip, nonetheless, is hopeful that a buyer will eventually emerge. And indeed, if the black, fetid waters of the Singapore River can be transformed into an environment where fish thrive and even otters frolic, then just about anything is possible. ♦

**(Top right)** Unloading goods from boats on the Singapore River in the 1970s. Detail from "I Paint my Singapore". *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

**(Right)** The old National Library building on Stamford Road. Detail from "I Paint my Singapore". *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

**(Below)** Yip Yew Chong (boy in blue shorts) and his family in their shophouse on Sago Lane watching a Cantonese opera performance. Detail from "I Paint my Singapore". *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

Listen to Yip Yew Chong talk about his work on the BiblioAsia+ podcast or watch him on BiblioAsia Reels on YouTube. His book, *I Paint my Singapore: Familiar Scenes of Home* (Landmark Books, 2023), reproduces all the 27 scenes that make up the full painting. Another book, *Art of Joy: The Journey of Yip Yew Chong* (World Scientific, 2024), discusses how Yip became an artist. Both books are available for purchase at bookstores. *I Paint my Singapore* can be reserved via PublicationSG, while *Art of Joy* is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos. RSING 759.95957 WOO and SING 759.95957 WOO).

# SINGAPORE'S HIPPIE HYSTERIA AND THE BAN ON LONG HAIR

Hippie culture was seen as a risk to Singaporean society in the 1960s and 1970s, and efforts made to reduce its influence eventually led to a campaign against men with long hair.

By Andrea Kee

In an interview in September 1970, just five years after Singapore became independent, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was asked about the problems Singapore had to resolve in the near future. Unsurprisingly, he identified economic viability as the first task that the young nation had to address. What was surprising, however, was what he identified as the next most pressing problem facing Singapore.

"The second point is the problem of being exposed to deleterious influences, particularly from the 'hippie' culture which is spreading across the jet routes," he said. "We are a very exposed society, having both an important air and sea junction, and the insidious penetration of songs, TV, skits, films, magazines all tending towards escapism and the taking of drugs, is a very dangerous threat to our young. We will have to be not only very firm in damping or wiping out such limitation, but also to try and inoculate our young people against such tendencies. It is a malady which has afflicted several of the big capitals in the West and would destroy us if it got a grip on Singapore."[1]

Hippie culture had reached Singapore's shores by the late 1960s. Hippies represented a countercultural movement and were associated with a particular lifestyle. The fashion was loose, flowy garments, and psychedelic colours and images were common. The fashion for men was long hair and beards. Hippies were sometimes known as flower children because of the association of flowers with the movement. The regular use of recreational drugs such as marijuana and LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide) was also seen as part of the lifestyle.

The culture spread through, among other things, music, and local bands in Singapore soon began to show signs that the movement was taking hold in Singapore. In April 1968, the local band The Straydogs performed at a show titled *Purple Velvet Vaudeville* at the National Theatre, an event that the *Eastern Sun* dubbed "the big Hippie show". The paper reported that the stage and auditorium were "decked up with flowers and other psychedelic decorations".[2]

"My sister dressed me up with a lot of flowers and sewed bulbs all over me," recalled Dennis Lim, the band's bass guitarist. "So, when the intro [started], I stepped on the switch, and I was all lighted up."[3] Lim also sported long hair that he had grown since his school days in anticipation of becoming a musician.[4]

**Andrea Kee** is a Librarian with the National Library of Singapore, and works with the Singapore and Southeast Asia collections. Her responsibilities include collection management, content development, as well as providing reference and research services.



The Straydogs weren't the only local band to embrace the movement. "We followed the flower [power], and we made flower coats," recalled Sam Toh, who played bass guitar for The Quests. "And Vernon [Cornelius] has got a lot of ideas. And he was wearing flower things. We are all flower people."[5]

In September 1968, the *Straits Times* reported that there were approximately 50 "Flower People" in Singapore sitting outside shopping centres and cinemas strumming their guitars and making chalk drawings on the pavements.[6]

## Drugs and the Hippie

Wearing flowers, strumming guitars and making chalk drawings were not necessarily a problem. Consuming illegal drugs, however, was a different story. In the late 1960s, the drugs of choice were Mandrax (MX) sedative pills and marijuana (also known as cannabis or ganja). The users were mainly young people who visited discotheques and nightclubs. However, what concerned law enforcement the most was the increasing number of students taking drugs.[7]

In November 1971, the government set up the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) to deal specifically with drugs in Singapore. "The spread of [MX pill abuse among students] was due to the influence of the hippie culture from the West," recalled Poh Geok Ek, Chief Narcotics Officer with the CNB.[8]

**(Below)** The cover of The Straydogs' 1967 vinyl release of "Mum's Too Pampering" and "I Can Only Give You Everything". Dennis Lim is standing, second from the left. *Courtesy of Vernon Cornelius.*

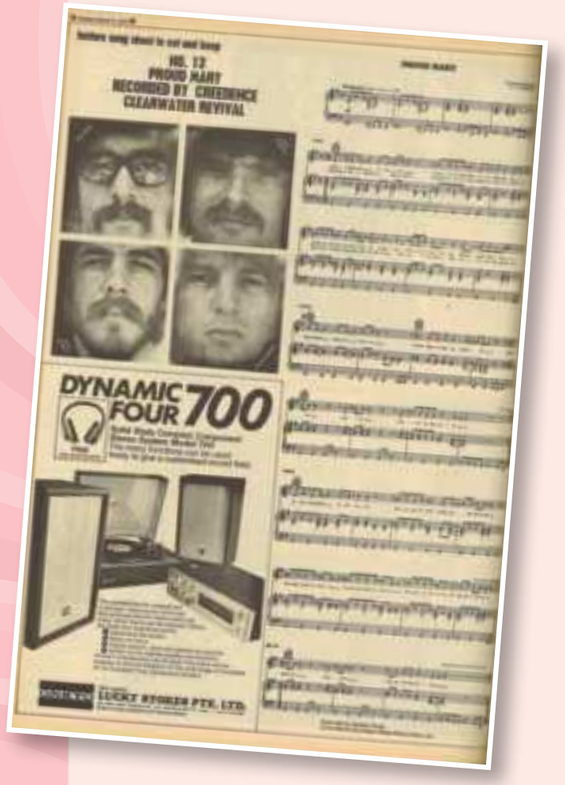
**(Bottom)** Vernon Cornelius of The Quests, looking groovy in a paisley shirt. Bassist Sam Toh is on the right. Lead guitarist Reggie Verghese is on the left. The band was recording their LP, *The 33rd Revolution*, at EMI's studio in MacDonald House in September 1967. *Courtesy of Vernon Cornelius.*


Former CNB narcotics officers Sahul Hamid and Lee Cheng Kiat remember working on several drug cases involving people they identified as hippies in the 1970s. One of these was a "hippie garden" at the junction of Paya Lebar and Geylang Road, which hosted nightly gatherings attended by kampong residents who were using cannabis supplied by a "big time ganja trafficker". Despite numerous raids, the "hippie garden" continued being a favoured haunt, until the main drug supplier was nabbed.[9]

Because of the strong association between the hippie movement (including music) and illegal drugs, in 1970, the Ministry of Culture set up a team to "scrutinise all records which are suspected of disseminating 'drug tunes' through popular folk and [W]estern hit songs".[10]

By April 1971, a total of 19 Western pop records had been classified as "detained publications" under the Undesirable Publications Ordinance due to their "objectionable" lyrics that supposedly made references to drugs. These songs were not allowed to be sold or performed in public and included The Beatles' "Happiness Is a Warm Gun" and "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds". The only record that was officially banned was the soundtrack for the Broadway rock-musical, *Hair*, which had to be surrendered to the government or be destroyed.[11]

The government's decisions were not always easily understood. One of the songs that made it to the list of "detained publications" was "Proud Mary" by Creedence Clearwater Revival. In March 1971, the Culture Ministry actually instructed the Straits Times Group to remove a page from an issue of the magazine *Fanfare* because it contained the lyrics of "Proud Mary". As the *New Nation* newspaper noted in its report, "The words of 'Proud Mary' appear to refer to an American river ferryboat and the generosity of the people who live on the banks of the river. It does not seem… to contain any references to drugs".[12]




The Ministry of Culture ordered *Fanfare* to tear out this page before putting the issue up for sale as it contained the sheet music and lyrics to "Proud Mary", a "detained" song that supposedly made references to drugs. *Image reproduced from Fanfare, 5 March 1971 (Singapore: The Straits Times Group, 1971), 10. (From PublicationSG).*

## Banning Hippies

As part of its anti-hippie efforts, in April 1970, Singapore banned foreigners who resembled hippies from entering Singapore. "Anybody who looks [like] a hippie has got to satisfy the immigration officers that he in fact is not, and that his stay in Singapore will not increase the 'pollution' to the social environment," read the short statement from the Immigration Department.[13] "The Immigration Department takes the stand that dirty and untidy-looking people with long, unkempt hair and beard are presumed to be hippies unless proved otherwise," L.P. Rodrigo, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Home Affairs, told Parliament in 1971.[14]

"Long-haired, unshaven visitors", like American students Gordon Burry and Klaus Kilor, were turned away by Singapore immigration officers at the Causeway due to their long hair, beards and floral shirts. "Both of us made a beeline for the barber's [in Johor Bahru] immediately. Klaus did not need a haircut, but he had his moustache shaved off. I had my shoulder-length hair cut," recounted Gordon. "We then went to a nearby laundry where I had a good blue suit of mine pressed. Klaus didn't have a suit, but I loaned him a clean white shirt and tie. We then rented a chauffeured car and made a second bid at entering the city. This time, the guard smiled broadly at us and waved us on, after looking into the car for a brief second."[15]

The subjective nature of who looked like a hippie led to inconsistent treatment. School teacher Andrew Jones and motoring instructor Trevor Roberts, both from London, were granted a special pass for a five-day stay when they first arrived in Singapore. But Jones' later request to extend his stay was rejected by immigration. He told the *Straits Times*: "We believe that many travellers like us are being mistaken as hippies and are asked to leave Singapore after a short stay. There should be some sort of a system to differentiate those who are hippies and those who are not. I have a beard but that does not make me a hippie. I personally do not believe in their philosophy and way of life."[16]

Besides screening for hippies at checkpoints, immigration and police officers also raided red-light districts on Sam Leong Road and Kitchener Road to track down "undesirable" foreign hippies living in Singapore who were known to take drugs and frequent those areas. Between 6 and 18 April 1970, 28 hippies were successfully rounded up and deported.[17]

The government defended the ban as necessary for Singapore's survival. Defence Minister Lim Kim San said that Singapore could not risk adopting hippie culture due to its "degenerating and weakening" influence while Minister for Social Affairs Othman Wok said that "[w]hilst some may consider the policy adopted by the government in this regard as harsh and stern, it is inevitable if we have to protect what we have and improve on it".[18]

In addition to stopping so-called hippies from entering Singapore, the government also began to clamp down on local manifestations of the movement. In June 1970, long-haired male performers were banned from appearing on all locally recorded television programmes.[19] The police also conducted surprise raids in areas frequented by youth. Their goal was to round up boys with long hair, bring them to police stations, photograph their hair and advise them to get haircuts. "Hippie dress and long hair are outward manifestations of a state of mind that may lead a person eventually to being hooked on drugs," said Minister for Home Affairs Wong Lin Ken.[20]

## Operation Snip Snip

The campaign against long hair on men shifted up a gear when the Ministry of Home Affairs launched Operation Snip Snip in January 1972. Immigration rules were tightened to refuse entry to all long-haired men unless they got haircuts. Those exempted were visitors invited by the government or "respectable organisations" for official business.[21]

One of the "victims" stopped at the Woodlands checkpoint was Malaysian businessman Frankie Tan who wanted to visit his wife before she gave birth. "I was really surprised and shocked by this sudden crackdown. I used to travel between Century Gardens housing estate in Johore Bahru and Singapore quite often. But this is the first time I have experienced such an embarrassing situation. Fortunately, my colleagues and I had enough money for a crop," he told the *Straits Times*.[22]

Singaporean males with long hair were permitted entry, but they had to surrender their passports and could only collect them at the Immigration Headquarters the following day after getting their hair trimmed. While travellers were inconvenienced, barbers like M. Kandasamy near the checkpoint enjoyed a boom. "In my 20 years as a barber, I have never had such business. I closed shop at 10.30 pm yesterday instead of 8 pm as usual," he said. Kandasamy also charged 30 cents more per cut instead of the usual $1.20.[23]

Musicians, who typically wore their hair long, bore the brunt of the campaign. The police visited nightclubs to advise long-haired musicians to trim their hair. While local musicians were willing to toe the line, some foreign performers were not as amenable, and cancelled their shows or stopped signing contracts with Singapore's hotels and nightclubs altogether.[24]

In August 1972, British pop singer Cliff Richard cancelled all three of his September concerts at the National Theatre, leaving fans disappointed. Richard and his band members had refused to cut their long hair, and it was believed that their applications for a professional visit pass was rejected by the Singapore authorities.[25]

Other top rock and pop groups, including The Who, Bee Gees, Cat Stevens, Tom Jones, Joe Cocker and the Chris Stainton Band, as well as Rick Nelson and the Stone Canyon Band, also scrapped their plans to perform in Singapore. Nelson's promoter explained that they were passing over Singapore due to the "no-long-hair policy", while other promoters were afraid that "any application made to the Immigration Department would be turned down" due to the long-hair policy.[26]

**"Hippie dress and long hair are outward manifestations of a state of mind that may lead a person eventually to being hooked on drugs," said Minister for Home Affairs Wong Lin Ken.**


Album cover of The Quests' 1967 vinyl release, *The 33rd Revolution*. Band members are in floral printed shirts. *Courtesy of Vernon Cornelius.*

## Not Serving and Hiring: Men with Long Hair

A few months after the start of Operation Snip Snip, the Ministry of Home Affairs announced that men with long hair would be served last at all government offices. Posters in English, Chinese and Malay with

A year after he cancelled his concerts in Singapore, Cliff Richard, still sporting long hair, was allowed into Singapore for a one-night stopover on 13 April 1973. Not here on a summer holiday, he was en route to Australia and New Zealand. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission.*

the message, "Males with long hair will be attended to last", were displayed in government offices. Eventually, private-sector companies were also given these posters.[27]

The government also discouraged employers from hiring long-haired men. In July 1973, the Economic Development Board sent out a circular to the Singapore Manufacturers' Association to inform that "the government strongly disapproved the appointment of long-haired male employees".[28]

Civil servants were warned that those who defied the hair rules would face disciplinary actions, including termination of service. Those in the private sector were not exempt from the rules as names of male workers who continued wearing their hair long despite warnings were shared with the government for "appropriate action" to be taken.[29]

Schools also held regular "hair inspections", and boys with long hair who refused to comply with warnings were given haircuts immediately. The lucky ones got their hair professionally cut by a barber hired by the school, while the unfortunate ones received a haircut from a teacher or the principal.[30] However, the savvy ones would find ways to avoid detection. "Every time before I go to school, I would bundle my [long] hair and clip [it up] so it looked short," said Dennis Lim of The Straydogs.[31]

Predictably, not everyone were fans of Operation Snip Snip. On 18 January 1972, a group of University of Singapore undergraduates staged a protest and told reporters that "the campaign against long hair is an infringement of our individual rights". They marched around campus carrying posters and placards, some of which read, "When your hair is long, your rights are short".[32]

Regardless, supportive letters appeared in the local newspapers. "My thanks go to the government for its campaign against drug-taking and long hair," wrote a letter writer to the *New Nation*. "If prompt action was not taken earlier to check hippism, drug abuse and long hair, I believe our country by this time would have seen teenagers in shabby clothes with long hair and perhaps with drugs in their pockets, walking all over the clean and green island of Singapore."[33]

## Other Consequences

The campaign against long hair led to unexpected consequences. In November 1972, some 200 apprentices from Sembawang Shipyard staged a sit-in during their lunch hour to protest fellow shipwright apprentice Koh Tze Jin's hair-related seven-day suspension. Earlier that week, he had received a one-day suspension for refusing to get a haircut as he felt that his hair was well above his collar. In response, he shaved his head bald. Koh told reporters that he did so "to avoid any further arguments with the company". Unfortunately, his bosses saw his shaved head as an act of protest and suspended him for seven days, igniting the sit-in.[34]

It even led to a minor international incident with Malaysia in August 1970. Three Malaysian youths were caught up in an anti-long hair raid in Orchard Road and detained by Singapore police. They later accused the police of mistreating them and forcing them to get haircuts. Although the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) investigators who detained them stated in an internal report that the youths had agreed to the haircut, the damage was already done.[35]

Students from the University of Malaya protested the incident at the High Commission in Kuala Lumpur, prompting Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to postpone a planned visit with Tunku Abdul Rahman. Reports stated that the postponement was "mainly to avoid embarrassing both governments". As a result of this incident, Singapore issued an apology to the Malaysian government and all hair-cutting by the CID ceased.[36]

## Changing Trends

By the end of the 1970s, there were fewer reports in the press about the crackdown on long-haired men. In March 1986, Lee Siew Hua of the *Straits Times* reported that "the long-hair-last signs have virtually disappeared even though officials maintain that the policy is very much alive".[37] Part of the reason for the easing up of long hair in the 1980s was simply due to changing trends. Hippies and hippie culture had long fallen out of fashion by then.

The government also lifted restrictions on music previously banned for being associated with hippies. In May 1993, the Ministry of Information lifted its ban on a number of songs, including Beatles classics like "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds", "With a Little Help from My Friends" and "Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band". Fans of Bob Dylan were delighted that "Mr Tamborine Man" could finally play a song for them. Another song that got the green light, none too soon, was Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Proud Mary".[38]

Looking back, it might seem odd that the government would want to regulate men's hair styles back in the 1960s and 70s. Perhaps the most eloquent explanation comes from Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam who said in 1972 that the government "was not concerned whether men have long hair, short hair or no hair at all. It is not so stupid as to believe that the future of Singapore will be determined by the length of the dead cells its citizens sprout". It was, he explained, "hippieism not hair style we are attacking" and added that the government did not believe that "hippieism can be eradicated simply by shearing locks". What the government hoped was that by focusing and attacking long hair, "one of the symbols to which hippies attach great importance, we would be deterring many young people who are just being fashionable from being drawn into what is basically an obscene and pernicious lifestyle".[39]

Hippies and hippie culture have become a footnote in history. These days, it is not uncommon for men to have long hair, though the fashion is for those tresses to be tied up in a ponytail or tucked into a man bun. A man sporting long shaggy locks is more likely to be a fan of an 80s bands like Bon Jovi or Guns N' Roses than a wannabe hippie. The times, indeed, have been a-changing. ♦

END OF THE QUEUE AT GOVT OFFICES

Long hair means a long, long wait...

SINGAPORE, Thurs.

MALES WITH LONG HAIR WILL BE ATTENDED TO LAST

LONG HAIR IS

Campaign

The poster that will be put up today

All government offices had to display this poster and serve men with long hair last, 1972. *Source: The Straits Times, 23 June 1972 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

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*Illustration by Boon Lai.*

# American Troops. Singapore Bands. The VIETNAM WAR

Lured by the prospects of money and adventure, local performers braved the dangers of the Vietnam War to provide entertainment to American troops.

**By Boon Lai**





The Vietnam War, which ended in 1975, is a distant memory to most people in Singapore who lived through the period. For many, it was an event that largely did not touch their lives personally. While fierce fighting was taking place in the region, to many in Singapore at the time, the main face of the war was drunk soldiers on rest and recreation leave.

However, for a small group of Singaporeans, the war in Vietnam was highly personal. Some of them were photographers and cameramen who worked for news organisations covering the war. Embedded with American troops who were doing the fighting in South Vietnam, they were exposed to the same dangers as the soldiers. And like the soldiers, some of them lost their lives.

Apart from daring local journalists, there was another group of Singaporeans who were personally affected: local singers and bands who had gigs to entertain American troops in Vietnam. Young, seeking adventure, and looking for a chance to earn some cash, these musicians signed up without knowing what they were in for.

Once there, they were plunged into a situation unlike anything they had experienced before. Apart from keeping their instruments tuned, they had to learn to fire weapons (they were given a crash course). Getting to each gig did not involve merely a tour bus; sometimes, they were flown there in helicopters that would come under fire.

This is what life in a war zone was like, as told by three musicians who experienced it: Veronica Young, Harris Hamzah and Steve Bala Siren.

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## Veronica Young

Veronica Young got her break in 1964 at the age of 16 when she met prominent local musician Siva Choy. She was a versatile singer, performing with many bands (such as the Silver Strings and The Quests) and singing at local clubs, British military bases and in shows at Capitol Theatre or Odeon Theatre Katong. She was the winner of the "Singapore's Millie Small" competition (Mille Small was a Jamaican singer best known for the 1964 hit "My Boy Lollipop"), which opened doors to other opportunities including recording deals under the Philips label. By the time she was 20, Veronica was performing extensively in Singapore, Malaysia and Borneo.

One day, she was approached by an agent about going to South Vietnam to play with local Malay band, the Impian Bateks. She jumped at the opportunity. "I was only concerned with singing, didn't care or know much about what was happening around the world," she said.

Veronica flew to Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City today) with the Impian Bateks in 1969.[1] Landing at Tan Son Nhat Airport, the grim reality hit her. She saw "[a] country that looked sad. War-torn. Soldiers everywhere… The situation was… like what we see in the movies".

A few days later, Veronica, the Impian Bateks, and two dancing girls (on occasion a Korean stripper would join them) started their tour. They went to American bases around then South Vietnam, such as Phu Bai, Phu Loi, Quang Tri, Chu Lai, Cam Ranh Bay, Da Nang. They travelled by road or air via army trucks, C130 planes, CH-47 Chinooks and Huey helicopters, to and from the 10 major bases, to over 100 towns and military outposts throughout South Vietnam.

**(Left)** Veronica Young was 16 when she first broke into the local music scene. *Courtesy of Veronica Young.*

**(Above)** Veronica Young in South Vietnam, 1969. *Courtesy of Veronica Young.*

**(Top)** Veronica Young and the Impian Bateks boarding the flight at Paya Lebar Airport to Vietnam, 1969. Harris Hamzah is on the extreme right. *Courtesy of Veronica Young.*

**(Above)** Veronica Young (centre) and the other entertainers rehearsing at the compound of the bungalow where they were housed in the Cho Lon area, with Harris Hamzah at the back, prior to the start of their tour, 1969. *Courtesy of Veronica Young.*

Veronica and the Impian Bateks were assigned a Filipino manager by their Korean agent. They played hundreds of gigs within the span of a few months. Their schedules were unpredictable and gruelling. "Sometimes, we had to leave in the morning and travel just to make a show at night," she recalled. "Sometimes, it took us one to two days to get to the next destination." She later discovered while they were receiving US$400 per month, the agents were getting US$400 per show.

They performed indoors in clubs and mess halls and outdoors on makeshift stages. Conditions ranged from basic to downright poor. Sanitation was a major challenge. Female entertainers also attracted a lot of unwanted attention – shows often got wild, even with the military police present. Some soldiers would try to take advantage of the girls, even trying to sneak into their quarters. Friendly exchanges sometimes led to demands for sex or worse.

Veronica recounted an incident at the Chu Lai barracks. It was dark and quiet, and she was alone at the cooking stove at the end of the barracks. She was boiling a pot of water, cutting chillies. She did not hear anything, but someone suddenly pounced on her and wrapped his arms around her. She instinctively thrust the knife in her hand backwards into the gut of her unseen assailant. There was heavy thud. She looked down and saw a GI groaning, writhing in pain, bloodied. Startled but relieved, she said, "Sorry… you got the wrong one."

Yet, Veronica remembers most of the troops as "nice and polite". She said, "They were waiting just to touch you. They didn't mean any harm. It was so sad. They were there – to live or die – they didn't know… having been sent over."

Once, onboard a C130 Hercules airplane en route to their next gig, Veronica overheard the pilots asking about the girls. She asked the crew for his headset and joined the conversation. "Which one are you?" the pilot asked. She replied coyly, "The small pretty one that sings. Now, which one do you want to know about?" Veronica was invited into the cockpit. "Would you like to fly?" the pilot asked. She jumped at the chance and squeezed into the co-pilot's seat. She gripped the yoke tightly, sending the plane into a sudden dive, momentarily suspending everyone mid-air. Fortunately, the pilot quickly regained control and steadied the plane.

On another occasion, this time in a helicopter, Veronica asked to sit next to the door gunner. Flying between Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang, she asked if she could fire the mounted heavy M60 machine gun: "One shot?" She had to wait until they reached a clearing before the gunner gave her the go-ahead. He placed his hands on her and said, "But I gotta hold you." She responded that she didn't care what he did. "You can hold me or kiss me. Just let me shoot!" She pulled the trigger and bullets sprayed out in rapid fiery bursts, tearing through the air. The powerful recoil of the machine gun threw her violently back and she realised why the gunner had insisted on holding on to her.

But the realities and atrocities of war were unavoidable. Escorted by soldiers, Veronica remembers seeing signs of brutal confrontation as they passed underground tunnels, the sites of bloody fighting. "I'll never forget it… Even now, talking about it, I have it in my vision. A dead body, covered in maggots."





Veronica returned home after her first tour and embarked on her second a little more than a year later in 1971. "Things [were] much [more] peaceful there than before. But the entertainment scene had also become poorer."[2] When asked if she would go for the third time, she replied that it was no longer worth it since the United States (US) were withdrawing its troops.

## Harris Hamzah

In July 1969, the *Berita Harian* newspaper announced that Singapore-Malay band Impian Bateks would embark on their first South Vietnam tour.[3] The Impian Bateks comprised vocalist and manager Rudin Al-Haj, keyboardist Ismail Ahmad, drummer Jantan Majid, lead guitarist Harris Hamzah and bassist Suffian. When asked about their decision to go to Vietnam despite the dangers, Harris said, "Our families were worried, but the money was really too good."

The band stayed in their agent's halfway house in Cho Lon, Saigon, and within days, it became clear that they were in a danger zone. Bursts of gunfire rang out day and night. News of bands being blown up mid-performance rattled young Harris: "Whenever I saw a box or a can left unattended, I'd stay away. We didn't feel safe."

Once considered the Pearl of the Orient, Saigon had developed the reputation of a Sin City. It was already overcrowded but more and more people kept flooding in, fleeing their battle-ravaged villages for the perceived safety of the city. The enormous inflow of US dollars drove prices up, and grossly inflated American goods were peddled alongside drugs, booze and sex. The Vietcong (a communist guerilla force supported by the North Vietnamese army to fight in the South) were everywhere, effectively putting Saigon under siege.

**(Top)** Female dancers were always a big hit with the soldiers, 1969. *Courtesy of Veronica Young.*

**(Above and left)** Veronica Young and the Impian Bateks riding a Chinook to their gig, 1969. *Courtesy of Veronica Young.*

"The [US soldiers] would talk to us," said Harris. "Some of them would show us photographs of friends who were killed stepping on boobytraps and mines. Like them, we were also given [dog] tags to wear in case anything were to happen to us... Sometimes, when we boarded the transports, there would be someone there praying, as if we might not make it."

Recounting chopper rides to remote outposts, Harris said that he sometimes had to sit on the sides of the choppers. "And the GIs, maybe drunk or high on drugs, would just shoot at anything they [saw]." Drug use was common among the GIs. "Maybe they were given drugs so that they [could] keep on fighting. It was everywhere. Like it was free."

Harris described playing in Vietnam as "very challenging". During the monsoon season, it would get very wet and muddy. Behind trucks, on shaky stages, under tarpaulin canvases or parachutes – anything that could provide cover from the intense sun or rain – entertainers played on even with gunfights taking place nearby. They had to improvise. "Often we didn't get to wash properly," recalled Harris. "We wore the same clothes for days. They were stinking of dried sweat. We couldn't always get clean water. I even bathed once using beer!"

## Steve Bala Siren

Steve Bala Siren was the founder and lead guitarist of the band Esquires. A Korean agent had offered the band US$2,000 per week for a six-month stint in Vietnam, along with half a million dollars of insurance money for their families in the event of death. The band, comprising Steve Bala Siren, Gilbert Louis (guitar), Charlie Sundaram (drums), Denys Logan (vocals) and Raymond Lazaroo (bass), agreed to go even though they had no idea what to expect.

Setting up the stage at the back of an army truck, 1969. *Courtesy of Veronica Young.*

The band arrived in May 1969 and Steve remembers the grim welcome of 50-millimetre gun turrets mounted on sandbags and signs of fresh skirmishes on the drive from the airport to Saigon. "There were gun turrets along the route, sandbags stacked," he recalled. "Buildings were half-standing. The whole place was quiet and grayish."

For their first show, the Esquires flew to the US base in Cam Ranh Bay in a C130 Hercules. Upon arrival, Steve was assigned an M16 rifle and a .45 side revolver, and given a crash course on how to handle the weapons, change magazines and shoot.

The band travelled with three strippers and a Filipino roadie, often squeezing into a single Huey helicopter to get to their gigs. "Our instruments were strapped in the middle, the girls were in the middle on the seats, and [the boys] were on the sides with our legs dangling out in the open," he said. "No doors! We had two gunners on the left and right, with two 50 mm guns on the sides. Occasionally, they fired. And we [got] fired at." Zipping over treetops across battle-ravaged vistas, the GIs played songs on mounted speakers, blaring out the likes of Credence Clearwater Revival's "Run Through the Jungle" and The Animals' "We Gotta Get Out of This Place".

The chopper would land at landing zones near the forest. Out in the clearing, four army tanks would have been lined up, with a wooden platform on top as a stage. He said, "[At first] there was nobody, just us." They set up their instruments and a flimsy curtain so the girls could change backstage. When they were ready, the band strummed the final tune-ups.

Within 15 to 20 minutes, GIs appeared out of nowhere in camouflage – twigs and leaves on their helmets. Thousands of them, shouting the titles of Jimmi Hendrix songs like "Purple Haze" and "Fire". The girls turned up the heat with their routine. At the last minute, they stripped completely, sending the GIs into a frenzy and showering the stage with money. "At the end of the show, we collected the money in a box. US$300–400 dollars per show."

Danger was everywhere. During a show at a base in Chu Lai, bassist Raymond Lazaroo was playing just next to Steve and they both heard a sharp zipping sound cutting through between them. They looked at each other and turned back. In the wall behind them was a fresh bullet hole.

Being ensconced in an American base did not mean that the performers were safer. Early one morning, Vietcong soldiers were spotted creeping around the barracks where the Esquires were staying. Sirens went off and the band was ordered to stay by their bunk beds. A fierce gunfight ensued. After the lockdown was lifted, they went to the mess hall for breakfast and saw the bloodied bodies of six Vietcong laid out on the floor.





**(Right)** From left: Raymond Lazaroo, Steve Bala Siren, Denys Logan and Charlie Sundaram. This photo of the Esquires performing was taken moments before a bullet zipped between Raymond and Steve, 1969. *Courtesy of Steve Bala Siren.*

**(Below)** American GIs being entertained by the Esquires, 1969. *Courtesy of Steve Bala Siren.*

Steve had heard of other incidents too. "[The Vietcong] wiped out a whole Filipino band… they came into where [the band] was staying and took five boys and two girls," he recalled. "All seven of them were shot dead. To the Vietcong, you are entertaining the GIs, so you're just like the GIs. You are my enemy."

Their worst experience was on 6 September 1969, when the band was in Da Nang at their agent's villa called the Stone Elephant Villa. They had broken curfew and were outside when the shelling began after midnight. The band made a panicked run for their villa. Nearly 200 rockets pummelled Da Nang and nearby installations that night.[4]

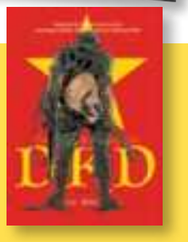
"When [the rockets] hit the ground, it was like millions of diamonds thrown up, right in front of us!" Reaching the villa, they hid under their metal beds. The onslaught persisted until dawn. In the end, 17 Vietnamese and three Americans were killed, with 23 Vietnamese and 120 Americans wounded.[5]

By then, the Esquires had decided that they would not tempt fate further. They flew home in November 1969.

## Living to Tell

Now in their 70s, Veronica, Harris and Steve are still living out their passion for music. Steve resides in Sweden and performs on cruise liners plying the Atlantic. Veronica lives an active life in France and performed at the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay in early 2023. Harris still lives in Singapore and performs whenever he has the opportunity. The trio performed in extraordinary circumstances and lived to tell the tale. They, and other unsung entertainers, had given soldiers cheer, comfort, escape and some connection to their home and families faraway. ♦

The stories of Veronica Young, Harris Hamzah and Steve Bala Siren inspired a serialised graphic novel *The Once & Marvellous DKD*. This book is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library at Level 8 of the National Library Building (call no. RSING 741.595957 LAI).

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# A QUICK HISTORY OF THE SINGAPORE SPEEDWAY

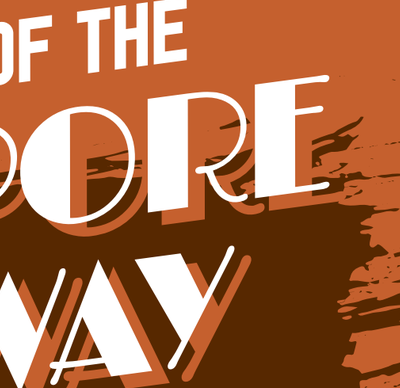
The history of the Singapore Speedway was as fast and furious as the races it hosted.

By Yap Jo Lin

Before the bright lights, glitz, glamour and celebrity of the Formula One Singapore night race, there was the Singapore Grand Prix (which started in 1961). But 30 years before that, speedsters and curious locals alike were privy to the thrills and spills of motorcycle racing at a specially constructed dirt track called the Singapore Speedway.

The Speedway had a very short life. It hosted just six races from April to June 1930 before its closure, but it marks an interesting chapter in Singapore's motor-racing history. It was located at Alkaff Avenue, near the junction of MacPherson and Upper Serangoon roads, roughly where Sennett Estate is today,[1] and next to Alkaff Lake Gardens, which had opened a year earlier in 1929.

News of the Speedway first broke on 3 December 1928, when the *Straits Times* reported that Australian promoter F. Heron Pitcher was in town to set up a company, Singapore Speedway Limited, and that efforts were underway to identify a site.[2] Pitcher claimed to have "ample evidence" that dirt track racing would have wide and universal appeal in Singapore. "I have no doubt that once the people see the races they will want more," he said. "Besides having some of the greatest experts of the dirt track in the world performing on the Singapore track, opportunities will be given for local amateurs and professionals to race, for which trophies and cash prizes will be given."[3]



Sketch of Speedway managing director A.J. Reynolds. *Image reproduced from "Career of the Man Behind Successes in Car Racing," Malaya Tribune, 14 April 1930, 19. (From NewspaperSG).*

**Yap Jo Lin** is a Senior Archivist with the National Archives of Singapore. Her responsibilities include managing the archives' collection of building plans.





In the months leading up to the Speedway's debut, another Australian came on board as managing director – a Mr A.J. Reynolds, whose last stint was as an advertising manager for Western Australia Speedways Ltd.[4] Reynolds came to Singapore with almost three decades of experience in the entertainment and sports industries under his belt. He had a colourful past. When he was 15, Reynolds joined a troupe of acrobats touring Australia. He eventually left the troupe and received some technical training on the applications of electricity in commerce. He managed a few cinemas and several racetracks in Australia before turning his attention to racing in Singapore.[5]

## Speedway Construction

Construction of the Speedway started in February 1930 and was reported to have cost $40,000. It was spread out over 11.5 acres (about seven soccer fields) with an initial planned capacity of 5,000 spectators. The racetrack was 440 yards (402 m) long and 8 inches (20 cm) thick. According to the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, the track comprised "a mixture of sand, cinders, decomposed granite, loam soil and screen [granite powder] and saturated with water, rendering it completely dustless".[6]

The Speedway was designed by Keys and Dowdeswell, a well-known architectural firm in Singapore that had worked on Capitol Building and Capitol Theatre (both circa 1930). Founding partners Percy Hubert Keys and Frank Dowdeswell had been in government service when they designed the Fullerton Building in the late 1920s (now known as the Fullerton Hotel).

The buildings at the Speedway included three octagonal ticket kiosks, a rectangular shed with seating for spectators, an enclosure for motorcyclists adjacent to the track, and men's and women's lavatories. There were two updates to the plans submitted for approval. The first was for the removal of a refreshment room with a bar counter, a "crush hall" or a foyer/reception area, and a manager's office from the design. The changes might have been made to lower costs and/or accelerate the project's completion. The second update was for additional seating along the racetrack.

Original plans drafted by Keys & Dowdeswell in 1930 for the proposed Speedway. *Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

## Run-up to the Opening

As the inaugural race drew near, riders began arriving in Singapore, some of whom had travelled by ship.[7] The star rider was Charles Datson. At the time, Datson had held the world two-mile record for three years and broken his own world record for the mile two years earlier in 1928.[8]

Each race day had two main events, each with a trophy – the Vernon Cup for amateur local riders and the Castrol Silver Gauntlet for professionals from further afield like England and Australia. While the Vernon Cup was meant for local racers, it also included riders from beyond Singapore and Malaya such as Sob Prasong from Thailand and Beppo Wahid from the Cocos Islands.

The Castrol Silver Gauntlet was designed by local jewellers B.P. De Silva and sponsored by motor oil company Castrol.[9] The Vernon Cup was sponsored by Francis Vernon, a member of the Speedway's Riders' Club that had been formed to bring together dirt bike enthusiasts who would serve as officials during the races.[10]

YOU MUST NOT MISS THIS SENSATIONAL CHALLENGE PROGRAMME

First race 3 p.m. — To-Night AT SINGAPORE — Musical programme from 7.30 p.m.

SPEEDWAY

Director, Singapore Speedways, Ltd., A. J. Reynolds, Managing Director

SIG SCHLAM, Western Australia's most fearless rider, HAS CHALLENGED Singapore's champion, CHAS. DATSON, to a special four lap match race to-night.

CHAS. DATSON HAS ACCEPTED SIG SCHLAM'S CHALLENGE.

Chas. Datson says: "Yes, Schlam is a great rider and never shuts his motor. If he defeats me he will undoubtedly shatter every record in the world and create a new world record, but to-night we will know."

Sig Schlam writes: "I, the undersigned, Sig Schlam, herewith challenge Chas. Datson to a match race of four laps at Singapore Speedways on Saturday next, May 24th, for the sum of fifteen pounds, this amount to be won straight out by winner, plus the five pounds deposited by Mr. Datson and the five pounds I have deposited with Singapore Speedways. The challenge is made on the understanding that previous to the race I am given one trial lap."

(SIGNED) SIG SCHLAM.

BOTH ARE CONFIDENT OF VICTORY.

THIS SENSATIONAL MATCH RACE IN ADDITION TO

Chas. Datson's attack on Jack Sharp's record.

Jack Sharp's attack on Chas. Datson's record.

ALL THE AUSTRALIANS IN A SPECIAL BORNEO HANDICAP.

Chas. Datson (Scratch)
Jack Sharp (One Second)
Tiger Lewis (Two Seconds)
Ted Yates (Three Seconds)
IS IT POSSIBLE FOR THE SCRATCH MAN TO WIN?

THE $500 VERNON CUP HANDICAP.

Sob Prasong, Cho Jolly, Jack Holliman, Harry Riches, Ong Chin Beng, J. Milne, Bobby Waters, Beppo Wahid, Syd Edlin and Lee Seng Soon.
OVER SIX EVENTS.

LOCAL MATCH RACE:
SYD. EDLIN vs. BEPPO WAHID.

THE BIG FOUR IN THE CASTROL SILVER GAUNTLET rolling start scratch race

WHAT A SENSATIONAL PROGRAMME, SO MAKE TO-NIGHT YOUR SPEEDWAY NIGHT

USUAL PRICES OF ADMITTANCE: Grandstand $2./ First Class $1. Second class 50c., Car with sycc 50c.

The Singapore Speedway advertising the match between Charles Datson, Singapore's champion, and Sig Schlam, Western Australia's "most fearless" rider. The men will compete in a special four-lap match. *Image reproduced from "To-Night at Singapore Speedway," Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser, 24 May 1930, 9. (From NewspaperSG).*

To raise the profile of dirt track racing in Singapore, Speedway organisers displayed the trophies and bikes of Datson and three other riders at the Borneo Motors showroom on Orchard Road (around Plaza Singapura today).[11] The public was also invited to watch the riders practise at the Speedway for free.[12]

## Media Coverage

Five days before the grand opening, the *Malaya Tribune* carried a three-page story about the Speedway. Besides running profiles of the races and race organiser A.J. Reynolds, they also featured articles about the companies and brands involved in the event. These included beverages produced by Phoenix Aerated Water Works Factory, and Osram lights installed by General Electric. There was even an entire article devoted to the Speedway's lavatory arrangements (organisers had apparently been wondering how to cater for the huge numbers expected until prominent Eurasian contractor G.R. Oehlers stepped in with some sanitary solutions).[13]

## Race Highlights

The inaugural race day was on the eve of Easter Sunday, 19 April 1930. Ticket prices ranged from 20 cents to $2.50 (the *Straits Times* cost 10 cents a copy at the time). The $2.50 seats were in a special section with reserved seating. Grandstand tickets were priced at $2, followed by first-class tickets at $1, second-class at 50 cents and third-class at 20 cents. A large crowd turned up that day, including a number of cars from "up-country", indicating that people had driven all the way from the Malay Peninsula to watch the races.[14] Encouraged by the turn out, organisers added another 5,000 seats in the $1 and 50-cent sections ahead of the second race on 26 April.

Inclement weather saw the postponement of the third race from Saturday 3 May 1930 to Wednesday 7 May 1930. Besides the main events, there was a novelty 400-metre rickshaw race that took the winner 1 minute 44 seconds to complete.[15]

As exciting as it was, there was more drama off the track than on it. During the race, Reynolds was arrested on gambling charges. Each race programme had a unique number printed on it and it was declared that the holder of a randomly selected programme number would receive a $20 Robinson's voucher. This was, in essence, a lottery. Reynolds pled guilty but his lawyer said Reynolds had only been trying to "encourage patrons" rather than promote gambling. Reynolds eventually received a nominal fine of $1.[16]

Rain once again saw the postponement of the fourth and fifth races. The highlight of the fifth race (held on 31 May 1930) was a hotly anticipated matchup between racing stars Charles Datson and Sig Schlam. Datson was going into the match holding the world two-mile record, while Schlam held the four- and five-mile records at Claremont Speedway in Western Australia. The race was advertised as a personal challenge from Schlam with a bold promise that "both are confident of victory".

Unfortunately for Schlam, his motorcycle chain snapped in the very first lap. This meant he was out of the race as the rules stated that once the race had begun, whoever finished the four-lap course first would take the prize. Race organisers decided not to call for a rematch and declared Datson the winner. Datson finished the course at his leisure and spectators made known their disappointment at the anticlimactic race by "heckling" and "doing their utmost to create a stir".[17]

Charles Datson in an undated photo. He was declared the winner of the match against Sig Schlam held on 31 May 1930. Schlam's motorcycle chain had snapped in the very first lap. *Courtesy of Australian Motorcycle News.*

## The End of Racing

On 14 June 1930, the day of the seventh race, the *Malayan Saturday Post* ran an article noting that "[s]ome mischievous person has been spreading a rumour in town that the racing season stopped last Saturday night [7 June 1930, the sixth race] – but this is emphatically denied by the Speedways Limited. There will be the usual racing tonight."[18]

It was more than a mischievous rumour though. By this time, the Speedway management had been trying to increase revenue. They had raised grandstand ticket prices from $2 to $3 and done away with 50-cent tickets. They had introduced more entertainment, such as a musical programme, novelty slot machines and additional refreshment stands.[19] But it was not enough.

On 17 June 1930, the *Malaya Tribune* noted that "reorganisation is taking place" and that the paper had been "asked definitely to state that there is no truth in the rumour that a receiver has been appointed to wind up Singapore Speedways". More telling, however, was the *Tribune*'s report that Reynolds – the erstwhile public face of the business venture – was "visiting Colombo", and no further race dates were advertised.[20]

What followed was a string of bad news for the Speedway. In an open letter published in the *Malaya Tribune*, rider Cho Jolly asked, "Is the Dirt-Track Club still in existence?" He also revealed that he was writing on behalf of his fellow riders "as we have not received what is due to us in the shape of prizes [for the final Speedway race]". Meanwhile, most of the "star" racers from Australia and England had left for home.[21]

On 21 June 1930, the *Singapore Free Press* revealed that the Speedway had $9,000 in liabilities and almost no assets.[22] In a letter to the Western Australian newspaper, *The Daily News*, on 31 July 1930, promoter F. Heron Pitcher said that Reynolds had delivered the bad news to shareholders at a meeting on 11 June 1930. Pitcher also claimed that Reynolds was facing several High Court lawsuits and had booked passages to Australia for his family and some of his riders.

According to Pitcher, two days before the group was scheduled to set sail for Australia, news had already leaked out that Reynolds had booked his own ticket to Colombo on the P&O liner *Khiva*, which eventually left Singapore on 13 June 1930. Pitcher ruefully remarked that "[u]p to the present only echo answers to our question, 'Where is Reynolds?'"[23]

By 22 July 1930, the company was wound up, and on 6 August 1930 an auction was held to sell any Speedway assets of worth – from the much-vaunted electric lights right down to changkols (gardening hoes), buckets and brooms.[24]

## Downfall of the Speedway

Speedway's demise was likely due to a combination of factors. The public's interest in the races – and willingness to pay for tickets – might have waned due to the lack of headlining star racers and disinterest in watching amateur riders. In his diatribe against Reynolds, Pitcher complained that too many races had been crammed into each session and that the initial turnout of 16,000 on opening night had never been repeated – the next best being closer to 4,000.[25] Another reason could be the numerous times the races had to be postponed due to wet weather, which might have frustrated punters and caused inconvenience when races originally scheduled for a Saturday were held on a Wednesday instead.

The closure of the Speedway marked the end of dirt track bike racing in Singapore. In 1935, the *Malayan Tribune* described the track as "disused and weed-grown". The Speedway was demolished and eventually became part of Sennett Estate after construction began in 1951.[26]

There was one attempt to revive dirt track racing in Singapore. This time, an Australian group applied to the Singapore City Council in 1953 to hold dirt track midget car racing at Jalan Besar Stadium. However,


A map of the area between Upper Serangoon Road and MacPherson Road shows the former Singapore Speedway – labelled "Old Speedway" in the 1938 map (left) – being replaced by the Sennett Estate in the 1953 map (right). *Survey Department Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

the application was rejected on the grounds that dirt track racing would damage the football pitch.[27]

The next major motorcycle event held in Singapore was the Grand Prix, running from 1961 to 1973, which featured both car and motorcycle races.

## A Digital Return

Although dirt bike racing is history, the Singapore Speedway name has been resurrected in Nintendo's Mario Kart game. In Mario Kart Tour, the new digital Singapore Speedway has three courses, showcasing the best of downtown Singapore. The first course focuses on the Marina Bay Sands area – including an exciting drive up to the hotel's infinity pool. The second course goes along the Helix Bridge and Gardens by the Bay, and the third passes by the Esplanade, ArtScience Museum and Chinatown.

In Mario Kart 8 Deluxe, elements of all three Singapore Speedway courses are combined into a single thrilling ride.[28] So while the physical Speedway might be no more, it now lives on in the public consciousness of a new generation of Mario Kart fans around the world. ♦

**NOTES**

1 Location derived from comparison of Survey Department, Singapore, *Survey Map of Singapore*, 1933, map. (From National Archives of Singapore accession no. SP002117)
2 "Dirt-Track Motor-Cycling," *Straits Times*, 3 December 1928, 12. (From NewspaperSG)
3 "Speedway for Singapore," *Straits Times*, 15 June 1929, 10. (From NewspaperSG)
4 "Keeps Speedway in the Spotlight," *Mirror* (Perth, Western Australia: 1921–1956), 9 November 1929, 9, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article76195192.
5 "Career of the Man Behind Successes in Car Racing," *Malaya Tribune*, 14 April 1930, 19. (From NewspaperSG)
6 "Speedway for Singapore. Dirt-Track Racing To Start Shortly," *Singapore Budget*, 20 June 1929, 9; "The New Speedway," *Malaya Tribune*, 1 March 1930, 10; "Singapore's New Sport," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 8 March 1930, 20; "The New Speedway," *Straits Times*, 24 February 1930, 13. (From NewspaperSG)
7 "Dirt Track Speed Wizard Arrives," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 20 March 1930, 20; "More Riders Arriving," *Malaya Tribune*, 26 March 1930, 10; "Passengers," *Straits Budget*, 3 April 1930, 8. (From NewspaperSG)
8 "Dirt Track Speed Wizard Arrives."
9 "The Home of Trophies," *Malaya Tribune*, 15 April 1930, 17; "Some Trophies," *Malaya Tribune*, 27 March 1930, 10. (From NewspaperSG)
10 "Riders' Club Gaining Members," *Malaya Tribune*, 2 April 1930, 10 (From NewspaperSG); "Some Trophies."
11 "Nearly Ready," *Malaya Tribune*, 2 April 1930, 10. (From NewspaperSG)
12 "Speedway Ready," *Malaya Tribune*, 5 April 1930, 10. (From NewspaperSG)
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14 "Sports & Pastimes. Record Opening Night," *Malaya Tribune*, 21 April 1930, 10; "Serangoon Dirt-Track Thrills," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 21 April 1930, 10. (From NewspaperSG)
15 "Last Night's Speedway Thrills," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 8 May 1930, 20; "Twins," "Dirt-Track Racing Notes," *Malayan Saturday Post*, 17 May 1930, 24. (From NewspaperSG)
16 "Speedway Manager Arrested," *Straits Times*, 8 May 1930, 12. (From NewspaperSG)
17 "Page 9 Advertisements Column 5," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 24 May 1930, 9; "Speedway Attractions," Malaya Tribune, 29 May 1930, 10; "Thrilling Riding at the Speedway," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 4 June 1930, 11; "Sports & Pastimes. Clever English Rider," *Malaya Tribune*, 2 June 1930, 10; "Topics of To-Day," Malaya Tribune, 4 June 1930, 8. (From NewspaperSG)
18 "Dirt-Track Racing Notes," *Malayan Saturday Post*, 14 June 1930, 41. (From NewspaperSG)
19 "The Singapore Speedway," *Malaya Tribune*, 28 May 1930, 11. (From NewspaperSG)
20 "Meeting Suspended," *Malaya Tribune*, 17 June 1930, 10. (From NewspaperSG)
21 "The Singapore Speedway. Dirt-Track Racing – Will the Club Continue?" *Malaya Tribune*, 19 June 1930, 10; "Reorganisation of the Speedways," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 21 June 1930, 20. (From NewspaperSG)
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23 "Singapore Speedway," *The Daily News* (Perth, WA: 1882–1955) (Home Final Edition), 31 July 1930, 5, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article83574622. The article mentions that the shareholders' meeting took place on Wednesday, 11 July 1930. However, 11 July 1930 was a Friday. The meeting is more likely to have taken place on Wednesday 11 June 1930, two days before Reynolds left for Colombo. "Untitled," *Malaya Tribune*, 12 June 1930, 7. (From NewspaperSG)
24 "Page 9 Advertisements Column 6: Distress Sale," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 31 July 1930, 9. (From NewspaperSG)
25 "Singapore Speedway," *The Daily News (Perth, WA: 1882–1955)* (Home Final Edition), 31 July 1930, 5, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article83574622.
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27 "Council Says No to Dirt Track Racing," *Straits Times*, 26 June 1953, 5. (From NewspaperSG)
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# PHOTO STUDIOS AND PHOTOGRAPHY DURING THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

During the Japanese Occupation, local photographers worked under challenging conditions.

**By Zhuang Wubin**


This is a greeting card, presumably sent to Lee Brothers Studio by Fee Fee Photographic Store, which provided photographic supplies and services, sometime during the 1930s. *Lee Brothers Studio Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

The Japanese Occupation of Singapore that began in February 1942 and ended in September 1945 was a harrowing time for Singapore. The months leading up to the British surrender were marked by almost constant bombing by the Japanese. The initial weeks of Japanese military rule were particularly brutal, especially as they attempted to eliminate anti-Japanese elements within Singapore. However, a semblance of normalcy eventually returned as people attempted to rebuild their lives while waiting for better times ahead.

During the Japanese Occupation, people who applied for the Labour Identity Booklet (shown here) would be required to submit an identification photograph. The booklet was issued by the Labour Control Office of Malaya and Sumatra. This was one reason for the modest, sustained demand for photographic services during the war. *Image reproduced from 勞務手帖: 馬來スマトラ勞務管理協會 = Malaya Sumatra Romukanrikyokai, 1942. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RRARE 331.095957 MAL).*

The demand for certain photographic services resumed. Some of the prewar photo studios that had serviced people wanting to mark significant events in their lives were able to reopen their businesses. It was not business as usual though. The studios had a significant new clientele, which were the military personnel and residents connected to the Japanese administration. The studios also had to be creative, as items like film were in short supply.

## Chinese Photo Studios

During the period when Singapore was known as Syonan-to ("Light of the South"; 昭南島), there were at least two types of Chinese-run photo studios. There were those established before the war, some of which resumed operations during the Occupation period. There were also studios that opened during the Occupation years.

Daguerre Studio fell into the first category. It was set up in 1931 by Lim Ming Joon (circa 1904–91, b. Hainan). Two Japanese photographers had helped him pick up the trade and establish his business. In the latter half of 1941, his nephew Lim Tow Tuan (b. 1916, Hainan) joined him as an unpaid apprentice.[1]

The Japanese invasion began in December 1941 and Daguerre Studio on Middle Road was among the many buildings in the city that suffered damage from air raids. A bomb fell behind the studio, shattering the glass panels on the roof.[2] "The Japanese soldiers had already reached Johor Bahru. [We] decided to move all our photographic equipment to my uncle's wooden hut at the 6th milestone of Hougang, in a village of coconut trees. [We] had bought some rice and food, which we also moved there," recalled Lim Tow Tuan. "I stayed with my uncle in the village."[3]

A few weeks after the Japanese had established control over Singapore, Lim Ming Joon and his nephew decided to reopen Daguerre. They walked from Hougang to Middle Road and found that their studio had not been badly damaged, although the shattered glass panels meant that it was not possible to operate on rainy days. Eventually, they began to get a few customers as people trickled in to take identification photographs.[4] One of the Japanese photographers, who had previously helped Lim, returned to Singapore and helped Lim apply to the Labour Control Office for Daguerre Studio to be one of the officially appointed photographers on the island.[5] That provided a boost to his business.

By early October 1942, Daguerre Studio was listed in the *Syonan Times* – the newspaper that replaced the *Straits Times* during the Occupation years – as an officially appointed photo studio.[6] With the appointment, Lim believed that those associated with the Japanese authorities were more likely to patronise his studio.[7] After the appointment, Japanese customers, including soldiers, became more polite to him. They would bow and greet Lim before entering the premises. In general, he found that the Japanese were respectful towards photographers.[8]

Tai Tong Ah Studio (大东亚) was one of those that opened during the Occupation years. It was established in October 1942 by the photographer Chew Kong (b. circa 1905, Taishan, China). Chew had already been contributing his photographs to various newspapers before the war. In the final days leading to the fall of Singapore, he tried to join the Singapore Overseas Chinese Anti-Japanese Volunteer Army (also known as Dalforce), which was hastily established in December 1941.

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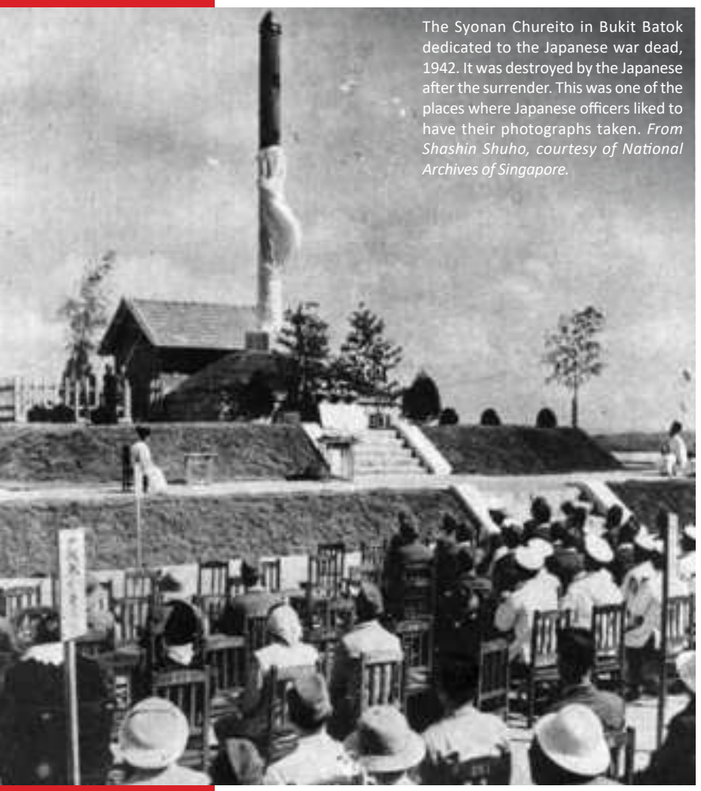


The Syonan Chureito in Bukit Batok dedicated to the Japanese war dead, 1942. It was destroyed by the Japanese after the surrender. This was one of the places where Japanese officers liked to have their photographs taken. *From Shashin Shuho, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Some months after surviving Operation Sook Ching,[9] Chew joined an Indian-owned studio at 78 Bras Basah Road (most likely Ukken's Studio).[10] When the owner was conscripted to work in the Japanese army, he sold the business to Chew cheaply. Chew then renamed the studio Tai Tong Ah. Chew did not bother applying to be an officially appointed photographer because he already had sufficient work and did not believe that the appointment would help his business.[11]

## The Challenges of Working During the Japanese Occupation

Photographers working during the Japanese Occupation faced a number of challenges. During this period, every single photograph printed by the photo studios had to be checked by the dreaded Kempeitai, the Japanese Imperial Army's military police. The photos had to be brought to the YMCA building on Orchard Road for vetting. Images concerning the private affairs between a man and a woman were prohibited along with photographs of soldiers from other countries.[12]

To avoid the hassle of being questioned by the Kempeitai, Chew would usually decline to develop the negatives that some random customers brought to the studio. "I would claim that I had run out of chemicals," he said.[13]

During the Occupation, lack of film was a major issue. Before the war, Lim Ming Joon of Daguerre had the foresight to stock up on paper, film and chemicals. When Daguerre resumed business during the Occupation, he had his stock to fall back on. He eventually ran out of negatives though and at one point, Lim used film intended for motion pictures to produce identification photographs for his customers.[14]

Chew, on his part, used expired film left behind by the Royal Air Force. The Japanese had actually discarded the film, which allowed some soldiers to steal the stock and sell it to operators like Chew. However, it still required a level of ingenuity by Chew to make the expired materials yield reasonable results.[15]

It was sometimes possible to buy fresh film intended for military use, which had been smuggled out by soldiers. Higher-ranking service personnel could obtain fresh film for their own use and if they had a few frames left, the more generous ones would give the remainder to Chew. Occasionally, some Japanese merchants were able to import 120 mm film. If Chew could purchase two or three rolls, he would cut the film into smaller pieces so that these could last him for a longer time.[16]

Like many others living in Japanese-occupied Singapore, they also had to survive coming into contact with the Kempeitai. Chu Sui Mang (b. 1922–96, Singapore), who ran Fee Fee Photographic Store at 160 Cross Street, survived two encounters with the Kempeitai. (Fee Fee was not a photo studio but a shop providing photographic supplies and services.) After the Occupation began, Chu reopened his shop as he still had some supplies left. However, in the subsequent months, Chu was arrested twice on trumped-up charges. "My hand became crooked," Chu recalled the torture that he had suffered. "The beating made me deaf in the ear."[17] He was eventually allowed to go home but had to report to the special police whenever they needed him to develop and print photographs. Chu was only given meals and was not paid for his work. This lasted for some months.[18]

Another person who survived a run-in with the Kempeitai was Lim Tow Tuan, the nephew of the owner of Daguerre. Someone named Lim as a member of the anti-Japanese resistance and he was picked up by the Kempeitai around September 1944 and detained at its centre on Smith Street. The interrogation began two months later, and Lim was subjected to daily beatings and torture to get him to admit that he was involved in the resistance. "After more than a month of waterboarding, I had a dream at night. Someone patted me and told me to admit the charges, or else I would be beaten to death," Lim recalled. The following day, Lim admitted to the false accusation. Upon hearing his confession, the attitude of the interrogating officer changed immediately. The officer asked if he was hurt and whether he wanted coffee or tea, Lim recalled.[19]

The whole ordeal of detention and interrogation lasted six months.[20] After confessing to the charges in March 1945, Lim was sentenced to twelve-and-a-half years of imprisonment and sent to Outram Prison.[21] He was released when the Japanese surrendered in August that year.





## Customers of the Photo Studios

According to the authors of *Singapore: A Biography*, the The Japanese Occupation marked the "birth of the territory's first bureaucratically obsessed state", which "undertook the first ever registration of Singapore and Malaya's entire population".[22] The officially appointed studios were tasked to produce these photographs.

For Daguerre and Tai Tong Ah, service personnel and immigrants connected to the Japanese authorities also made up an important part of their clientele. Not long after the start of the Occupation, an officer asked Lim Ming Joon of Daguerre to accompany him to Bukit Timah. The officer believed that his friend had fallen in battle in the area and wanted to take a photograph of his final resting place to send back to Japan. "After failing to find his friend's remains, the officer poured an offering of alcohol into the stream and muttered a few words in tears," Lim said.[23]

A more common request was by military personnel who wanted group photographs at their barracks so that they could send the prints home.[24] "Japanese and Taiwanese personnel were especially enamoured with taking portraits in military attire," Chew of Tai Tong Ah recalled. Special occasions, including the birthday of a superior, also warranted photo-taking.[25]

Photographers were sometimes asked to accompany military personnel as they went sightseeing in their newly conquered territories. Lim Ming Joon was taken on a leisure trip to Johor Bahru by a Japanese officer. One of the stops was the royal palace, where Lim took a portrait of the officer for commemoration.[26] In Singapore, Chew accompanied different groups of soldiers to Haw Par Villa and Syonan Jinja.[27] Located near MacRitchie Reservoir, Syonan Jinja was a Shinto shrine that commemorated the conquest of Singapore and served to instil patriotism towards the Japanese emperor.[28]

Among the people whom Chew photographed were women who worked in the Japanese sex industry. Once, he was asked to go to a big house in Pasir Panjang which was full of women asking him for group photographs. Most of the women were Japanese, but Chew believed there might be Taiwanese and Korean women among them. "Some of them also enjoyed having their individual portraits taken," he recalled.[29]

During the Occupation, civilian residents in Singapore tried, as best as they could, to carry on with their lives. People continued to work, to live and to get married. As a result, there was still a modest demand for wedding portraits. The demand for photography was not entirely frivolous. Apart from marking the occasion, the photographs also served as visual evidence that a woman was married, thus conferring some protection from the Japanese. Chew recalled, in particular, doing the wedding portraits of Chinese women who married Japanese men. He remembered photographing around six such couples. "From the way they spoke Chinese, I think the women were from the educated class," Chew said.[30]

David Ng Shin Chong, 1961. *David Ng Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

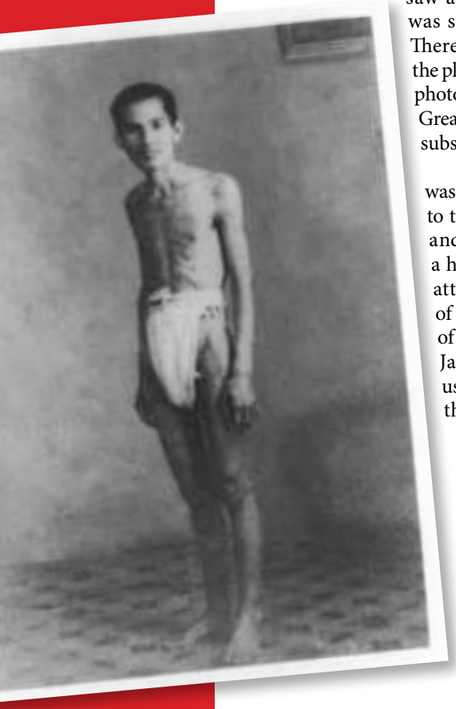
## Working for the Japanese

Alongside the photo studios that managed to remain open, there were a few photographers who were asked to work for the Japanese. The photographer David Ng Shin Chong (b. 1919, Singapore) had apprenticed at Natural Studio before the war. During the Occupation period, he worked for the Japanese in Cathay Building, which housed the Japanese Military Propaganda Department, the Military Information Bureau and the Japanese Broadcasting Department.[31] His job was to develop film while his colleague, Cai, did the printing and enlargement. For his work, Ng was paid a small salary, but more crucially, he was given rations – rice, sugar, salt and, once a year, some coarse fabric that he would use to make clothes.[32]

Japanese soldiers in Kallang Airport, 1942. This is likely one of the photos taken by David Ng Shin Chong during the Japanese Occupation. *David Ng Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Most of the photographs that Ng and Cai produced were for propaganda purposes. Ng remembered two incidents vividly. The first was a set of photographs taken after the Japanese had shot down an American B-29 bomber. Back at Cathay Building, Ng developed the negatives and in the frames, he saw an American sergeant who was still alive but tied to a tree. There were also many images of the plane's wreckage. The resulting photographs were displayed at the Great World amusement park and subsequently sent to Japan.[33]

The other memorable incident was when Ng and Cai were tasked to take photographs as Japanese and Indian troops charged up a hill in Sembawang in a mock attack while carrying the flag of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind (Free India), the Japanese-supported effort to use Indian nationalists against the British in India.[34] Shortly after, Ng's photograph appeared on the cover of a local magazine, which reported that the forces had reached Burma and secured victory. Their photographs were also printed in a photo spread in the magazine. Relating the incident more than four decades later, Ng let out a curse and chuckled: "What a joke!"[35]



A few days after the Japanese surrendered on 15 August 1945, Lim Tow Tuan was released from Outram Prison. One of the first things he did after returning to Daguerre Studio was to take a self-portrait to mark his suffering and eventual release. This is possibly the photograph he took that day. *Lim Seng Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

## Freedom At Last

Towards the end of 1944, Lim Ming Joon heard rumours that the Allied forces were planning to retake Singapore. Worried that fierce fighting would break out, Lim relocated his family to Alor Gajah in Melaka where they lived there for eight months until the Japanese surrender. A friend helped to look after Daguerre Studio, though by then there were very few customers.[36]

His nephew, Lim Tow Tuan, who had spent much of the last months of the Occupation in Outram Prison, was released after Japan surrendered. One of the first things he did was to return to the studio to take a self-portrait to mark his suffering and eventual release.[37] Lim also changed his name as he felt that his name had been sullied by the imprisonment. With people who knew him very well, he used Lim Tow Tuan. For mere acquaintances, he went by the name Lim Seng.[38]

According to David Ng, those who worked at Cathay Building were among the first to learn about the surrender. His Japanese superior conveyed the announcement and asked Ng what his plans were. When Ng told him that he would continue working as a photographer, his superior promptly gave Ng and Cai some of the photo supplies and equipment, including chemicals, paper, enlarger and a few cameras.

Ng used these items well. During the surrender ceremony held at the Municipal Building in Singapore on 12 September 1945, Ng went there with his camera. As he was not a press photographer, Ng could not enter the building so he took a few photographs from the Padang, with the intention of commemorating the occasion. Ng quickly realised there was a demand for these photographs and he made a small fortune from selling the images.[39] Later that year, Ng rented a space in a shop beside Liberty Cabaret on North Bridge Road and established David Photo.[40]

After the war, Lim Ming Joon continued to run Daguerre Studio on Middle Road. Over time, he became known for taking commemorative group portraits for schools, guilds and unions. He remained active professionally until his death in 1991.[41]

As for Tai Tong Ah, Chew Kong closed it after the war as he preferred to work freelance, taking on photo commissions and contributing images to newspapers.[42] However, in May 1949, he opened Kong Photo Studio on Geylang Road.[43]

With the return of peace to Singapore, Chu Sui Mang rebuilt his business at Fee Fee. Today, his daughters continue to run Fee Fee House of Photographics on a modest scale in Hong Lim Complex.[44] It is one of the few remaining photo businesses established locally prewar, which survived the Japanese Occupation and advances in photography. ♦

The Japanese delegation marching down St Andrew's Road after signing the surrender documents at the Municipal Building on 12 September 1945. This is one of the photos that David Ng Shin Chong took from the Padang after the surrender ceremony. He later made money from selling the photos. *David Ng Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

**NOTES**

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10 If Chew Kong's memory of the address was accurate, the studio was owned by K.J. Ukken and was known as Ukken's Studio. See "Page 3 Advertisements Column 2," *Syonan Times*, 20 October 1942, 3. (From NewspaperSG)
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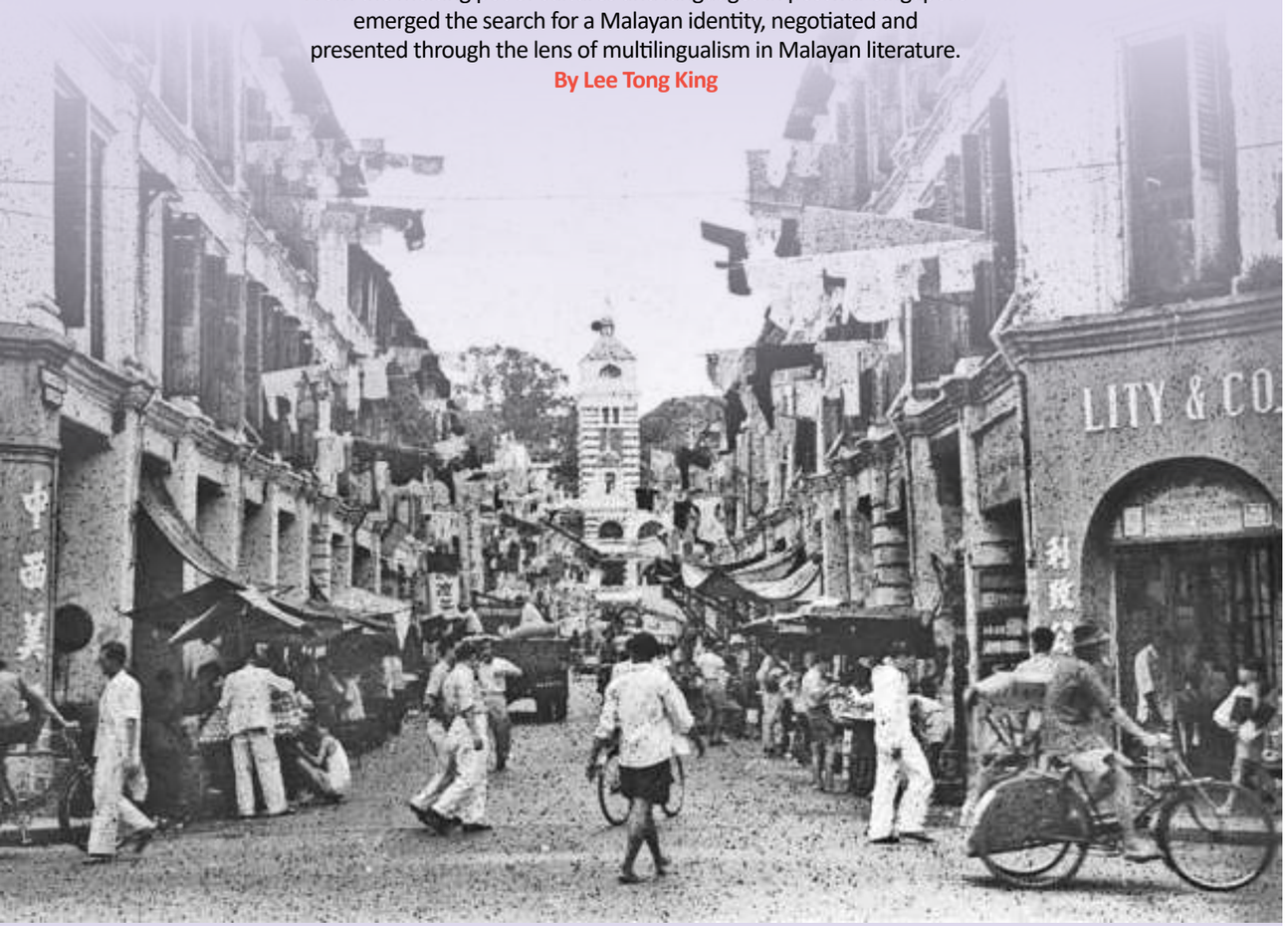
# A Plethora of Tongues

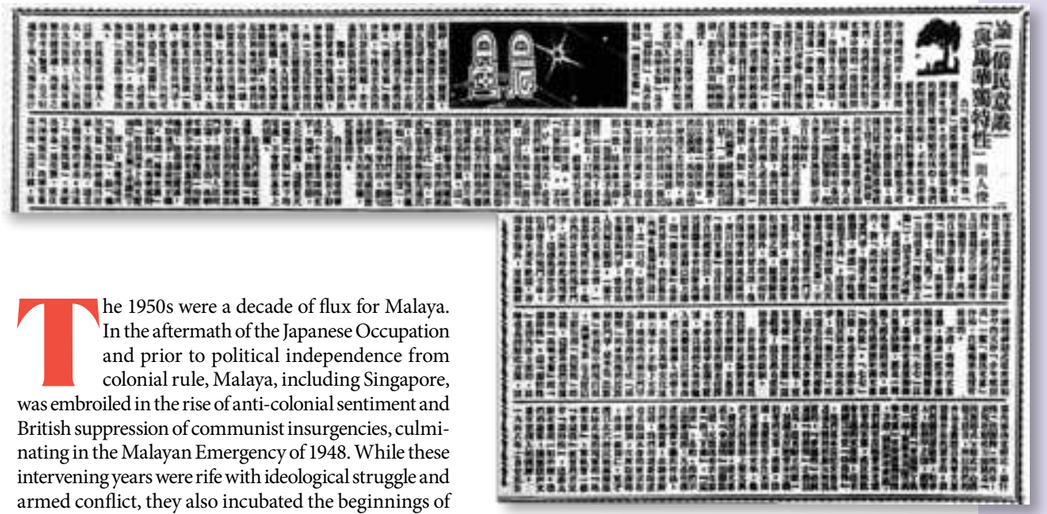
## Multilingualism in 1950s Malayan Writing

From the melting pot of cultures and languages in postwar Singapore emerged the search for a Malayan identity, negotiated and presented through the lens of multilingualism in Malayan literature.

By Lee Tong King




Junction of North Bridge Road and Hock Lam Street, c. 1950s. Various ethnicities and languages could be seen and heard on such streets in Singapore. *George Tricker Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



In this article, Miao Xiu advocated for a recognition of the "uniqueness of Malayan Chinese literature" and called on his fellow Malayan Chinese writers to participate in the local liberation movement through their writing. *Image reproduced from《論僑民意識與馬華獨特性》,《星洲日報》[Sin Chew Jit Poh], 28 February 1948. Microfilm no. A01597333I. (From National Library, Singapore).*

The 1950s were a decade of flux for Malaya. In the aftermath of the Japanese Occupation and prior to political independence from colonial rule, Malaya, including Singapore, was embroiled in the rise of anti-colonial sentiment and British suppression of communist insurgencies, culminating in the Malayan Emergency of 1948. While these intervening years were rife with ideological struggle and armed conflict, they also incubated the beginnings of a distinctive Malayan literature – for instance as seen through the incorporation of local vernacular into written works – thereby opening the doors to a vibrant tradition of creative writing in the region.

### Uniqueness of Malayan Chinese Literature

Since the early 1950s, Chinese fiction writers in Malaya became more experimental with their language medium, which was a standard written Chinese, based on the Mandarin vernacular, or *bai hua*, hailing from the 1919 May Fourth Movement in China. The backdrop to such experimentation was a polemic, sometimes dubbed the Great Debate, that occurred between December 1947 and April 1948. This took the form of a "paper war" across the literary supplements of several major Chinese newspapers of the time, such as *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, *Nan Chiau Jit Pao* and *Min Sheng Pau*.

There were two camps, the Malayan-Chinese Literature School and the Overseas-Chinese Literature School,[1] that expressed opposing stances around the contentious idea of the "uniqueness of Malayan Chinese literature". The first group believed that the Chinese literature of Malaya should be distinct from China's, as each had developed under very different sociopolitical circumstances. The latter group, comprising the so-called "immigrant writers" (writers from China who sojourned in Malaya), sometimes derogatorily called "refugee writers", insisted that Malayan Chinese literature was but a diasporic offshoot of Chinese literature from China and not fundamentally "unique".[2]

Twenty-five articles were exchanged in this debate, including a number by a minority of contributors who sat on the fence. While there was no clear winner, advocates of the "uniqueness of Malayan Chinese literature" eventually prevailed as a result of a historical contingency. After the British declared a state of emergency in Malaya in June 1948, immigrant writers either voluntarily returned or were repatriated to China.[3] Strict controls over imported reading materials from China were imposed under the Emergency Regulations Ordinance of 1948 that restricted the import, sale and circulation of publications.[4] This further created a vacuum in Chinese-language literature,[5] compelling Malayan Chinese writers to "seek their genius in themselves"[6] and create works that spoke to locale-specific cultures and sensibilities.

### Dialects and Malay in Chinese Fiction

It is within this context that an interesting linguistic phenomenon emerged among a new generation of Malayan Chinese writers in the 1950s. This was namely the representation of Chinese dialects and, to a lesser extent, colloquial Malay (also known as Bazaar Malay) in fictional works composed in standard written Chinese. Miao Xiu (1920–80) was one of the most prolific writers in this period who used this technique.

Born in Singapore, Miao Xiu (under the pseudonym Wen Renjun) clearly expressed support for the Malayan-Chinese Literature School in an article he contributed to the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* on 28 February 1948.[7] Hence, his writing unsurprisingly features Chinese dialects and colloquial expressions (including vulgarities) as the use of place-based language is one of the principal means through which the locale-specificity of Malayan Chinese literature can be manifested.

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The majority of dialect segments in Chinese fiction from this period appear in dialogues, in apparent mimicry of the parole of locals, although they were occasionally found in the main narrative. Cantonese was frequently used, likely because it was one of the most widely spoken dialects among the ethnic Chinese in Malaya. Miao Xiu's family, for instance, hailed from Canton (Guangzhou today) and was almost certainly conversant in Cantonese. Cantonese is also more readily representable in writing as compared to, say, Hokkien, as it has its own unique set of characters used alongside standard characters. Cantonese words were often peppered throughout the text, although it was not uncommon for entire stretches of dialogue to be in Cantonese, particularly for characters from the working class (characters who were intellectuals generally did not converse in Chinese dialects). Apart from Cantonese, Hokkien and colloquial Malay words also popped up, contributing to the rich linguistic texture of the literary language.

**(Left)** Miao Xiu's writings often feature Chinese dialects and colloquial expressions. *Image reproduced from Singapore Literary Pioneers Gallery Guide (Singapore: National Library Board Singapore, 2006), 43. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. S809 SIN).*

**(Below)** Cover of《新加坡屋顶下》(*Xinjiapo Wuding Xia*; *Under Singapore's Roof*) by Miao Xiu (1951). *(From National Library, Singapore, call no. Chinese C813.4 MX).*


To take an example from Miao Xiu's well-known novella《新加坡屋顶下》(*Xinjiapo Wuding Xia*; *Under Singapore's Roof*, 1951), consider these lines about Sai Sai, a character who reluctantly pays protection money – haggled down from five to three dollars – to a lackey of the 707 triad in exchange for protection from other gangs: "這鬼是「**七0七**」的「**草鞋**」(私會黨的總務),每逢禮拜晚就來黑巷向她賽賽討「**包爺費**」,為了免得別的私會黨的三星**臭卡**「**卡周**」(馬來語: 欺凌),她賽賽不得不忍痛付給這鬼一筆保護費; 可是這**臭卡**一開口就是**一巴掌**(**五扣**錢),講到口乾才減到**三扣**。"[8]

Here we see a succession of terms (in bold) that would surely baffle the non-local Chinese reader – and, for that matter, even a contemporary Chinese reader today. These include the name of a triad (**七0七**, or "707"), the informal term for someone who runs errands for triads (**草鞋**, literally "straw sandal"), the slang for "protection money" (**包爺費**, literally "fee for reserving the master"), the Malay term for "bully" (**卡周**, or *kacau*), the colloquial word for "five dollars" (**一巴掌**, literally "one slap"), and the term **扣** in Hokkien/Teochew for counting cash dollars.

On occasion, Cantonese and Hokkien were mixed within a single utterance. Miao Xiu's book also features scenes where characters use different dialects in alternation, for example, when one person speaks in Cantonese and the other responds in Hokkien. This technique of code-switching creates a complex weave of different voices on the page, even though it also leads to a contrived linguistic style peculiar to the written form.

Annotations were often provided for terms transliterated from Chinese dialects or colloquial Malay (for instance 卡周 [*ka zhou*] refers to *kacau* in the example above). This suggests that fiction writers like Miao Xiu did not assume their readers would understand the non-Mandarin terms without assistance. For although Chinese dialects and colloquial Malay were commonplace on the streets during the 1950s, their representation in writing was, and still is, a marked practice. Indeed, there is some evidence to indicate that some readers of the day might have been alienated by the generous sprinkling of Chinese dialect words, particularly Cantonese.

In a forum article published in the *Nanyang Siang Pau* on 7 July 1954, one reader expressed frustration with a story written "entirely in Cantonese" published in the paper. The reader complained that Hokkien speakers like himself were unable to understand the story and maintained that literary authors should write mostly in standard Chinese.[9] Hence, while the use of dialects (and colloquial Malay) in Chinese writing instantiated the "uniqueness of Malayan Chinese literature", it was ultimately still experimental in nature.

## EngMalChin and Malayan English Poetry

Chinese writers were not alone in experimenting with the linguistic medium of the literary arts. In the realm of Anglophone writing in Malaya, a similar development was taking place. Amid the rise of a Malayan consciousness, a group of young students at the University of Malaya came up with the novel idea of amalgamating the various languages spoken in the region to create a synthetic medium for English-language poetry. Most prominent among these young advocates was Wang Gungwu, who would later become one of the most influential historians of the Chinese diaspora.

The initiative championed by Wang and his contemporaries, dubbed EngMalChin, was an ambitious attempt to create a new literary language based on English but specifically Malayan in constitution. A portmanteau that conflates "English", "Malay" and "Chinese", the term "alludes to the way in which the English of a poem made room for Malay and Chinese words and phrases".[10] Most exemplary of this linguistic style is Wang's poem "Ahmad",[11] particularly its penultimate stanza featuring code-mixing in English and Malay:

> Thoughts of Camford fading,
> Contentment creeping in.
> Allah has been kind;
> Orang puteh has been kind.
> Only yesterday his brother said,
> Can get lagi satu wife lah!

Insofar as the teaching and learning of English poetry in British Malaya very much subscribed to canonical classics à la T.S. Eliot and the like, the use of "Allah" (god in Islam), "Orang puteh" (white men) and "Can get lagi satu wife lah!" (Can get another wife lah!) would have been highly unusual for Wang's readers. And therein lay the motivation for EngMalChin, specifically designed to invoke "plural imaginings of Malaya".[12]

In a 1958 essay reflecting the ethos of EngMalChin, Wang reminisced that he and other student poets were "self-consciously Malayan" and were invested in the distinctiveness of English as it was used in Malaya: "What floored us was the illegitimate mixing of various languages; our stock example of this was *Itu stamp ta' ada gum ta' boleh stick-lah* ["the stamp has no glue so it can't stick"]. What can we make of that? We could not even decide whether that was Malay with a few English words or English with a Malay syntax."[13]

EngMalChin therefore thrived on an ambivalence that ensued from the fusion of different tongues. It branded itself as a linguistic signature that distinguished Malayan English from British English. In a 1950 article published in the journal *Young Malayans*, Beda Lim, a contemporary of Wang's, described Malayan English as a "champurised language"; "champurised" taking reference from the Malay word *champur*, meaning "to mix", creatively inflected into a past perfect form as if it were an English word.

In making a case for Malayan English as a "solution for Malaya", Lim asserts that "Champurisation should not be frowned upon but rather should be regarded as a healthy development", because "[a]lthough we [Malayans] use English words, the way we juxtapose them must necessarily be different from the way the English people do it".[14] Although the term EngMalChin did not appear in Lim's article, the word *champur* in its various forms ("champurised", "champurisation") embodied the multilingual ethos of EngMalChin.

Wang Gungwu (pictured here in 1950) is the author of *Pulse* and a much-lauded scholar today. *Courtesy of Professor Wang Gungwu.*

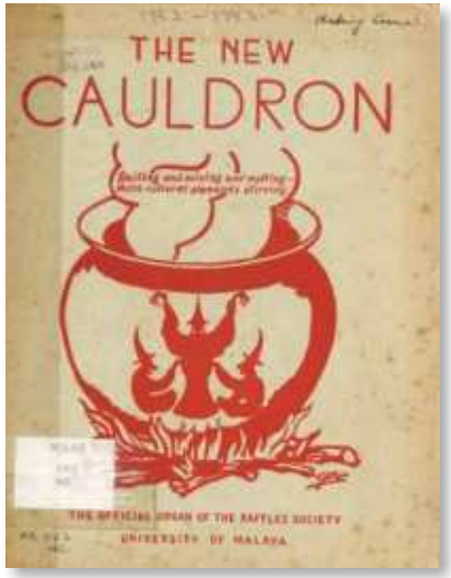
Although EngMalChin manifested itself primarily in poetry, it was not a purely aesthetic project; its sociopolitical agenda was clear from the outset. As Wang recalled: "We persisted, however, not so much for the art of poetry as for the ideal of the new Malayan consciousness. The emphasis in our search for 'Malayan poetry' was in the word, 'Malayan'."[15]

Before the close of the decade, however, it was clear that EngMalChin was a floundered mission. In his 1958 essay, Wang conceded that there was an inherent paradox of seeking a Malayan identity through an English-language matrix: "the most serious error was . . . the contradiction between our search for Malayan poetry and our decision to base that search on the English verse forms".[16] In addition, EngMalChin was very much a theoretical concept without a substantial empirical base. There were too few players in the game to render it meaningful.

In *The New Cauldron*, a popular literary magazine in the 1950s edited by students from the University of Malaya, there is very scant evidence of EngMalChin, apart from a few of Wang's own poems. The dearth of examples of "champurisation" in Malayan English poetry demonstrates that as a campaign, EngMalChin remained aspirational and never really took off in practice. Nevertheless, as a literary-linguistic ideal, it broke ground by engendering the possibility of a distinctive multilingual voice – or multivocality – for Malayan writing.

## Multivocal Writing as an Expression of Linguistic Citizenship

It is no coincidence that Chinese-language and English-language writers in Malaya experimented with multivocality in their respective literary spheres within the




*The New Cauldron* was a literary journal edited by students at the University of Malaya. *Published by Raffles Society, University of Malaya, 1952. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCLOS 052 NC).*

same period. This is especially so because, as the author Han Suyin observed, there was little communication between the two communities of writers.[17] It was the effervescent ambience of Malayan society in the 1950s that encouraged linguistic creativity and fostered the articulation of a unique locally grounded voice in writing. This voice was decidedly heterogeneous, with Chinese-language and English-language writers breaking with their respective literary traditions to invent an adulterated discourse that reflected the plethora of tongues spoken in Malaya.

It is through this thrown-togetherness of tongues that writers in the 1950s gesture towards what we may call an imagined utopia in Malaya. Multivocal writing, therefore, is not simply about language and literature; it is the symptom of a milieu caught in the transition from colonialism to nationalism, in which citizenship and nationality were under intense negotiation. Multilingualism as an experimental mode of writing, then, speaks to transitions in identity.

Through their experimentation with plural voices, Sinophone and Anglophone writers endeavoured to "capture the utopic experience of thinking language otherwise",[18] forging what sociolinguists call a linguistic citizenship. Linguistic citizenship refers to a condition where "representing languages in particular ways becomes crucial to, becomes the very dynamic through which, acts of agency and participation, and reconceptualizations of self in matrices of power occur".[19] This concept allows us to understand how, as a modality of expression, literary composition is tied to the fervent sociopolitics of 1950s Malaya.

Literary experimentations in that period have also left their imprint on our linguistic landscape today. Singlish, for example, can be seen as a contemporary incarnation of EngMalChin.[20] Endowed with a locale-specific consciousness, Singlish now features in writing to emblematise a distinctively Singaporean ethos, just as EngMalChin had aspired to in the 1950s. Indeed, multivocality constitutes the fabric of our cultural expression today and is one of the many legacies left by our pioneer literary writers. ♦

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# Joseph Conrad's *Singapore*

Joseph Conrad's visits to Singapore in the late 19th century are immortalised in some of his novels, such as *Lord Jim*, *The End of the Tether* and *The Shadow-Line*.

**By Ian Burnet**

Portrait of Joseph Conrad by George Charles Beresford, 1904. *© National Portrait Gallery, London.*

A metal plaque dedicated to Joseph Conrad stands in front of the Fullerton Hotel in Singapore. The text on the memorial describes Conrad as a "British Master Mariner and great English writer who made Singapore and the whole of Southeast Asia better known to the world".

The plaque, which is well over 2 metres high, can be found just across a small road from the hotel, close to Cavenagh Bridge. Flanked by shrubbery, the memorial's placement is no coincidence. Conrad had been a seaman before turning to writing and Singapore had served as his homeport for five months in the late 1880s. Conrad would have been a regular visitor to the spot where the Fullerton Hotel is now because this was where the Master Attendant's Office had been. (The Master Attendant, whom Conrad referred to as the Harbour Master, was responsible for the control of shipping in the roadstead.)

Although Conrad did not spend much time in this region, it made a deep impression on him; about half of everything he wrote revolves around this part of the world. This includes five novels and more than a dozen short stories and novellas. Many of them were directly based on his experience as first mate on a ship that sailed regularly from Singapore to a small trading post about 48 km up the Berau River on the east coast of Borneo between 1887 and 1888.

The people, places and events Conrad encountered in the region come alive in works like *Almayer's Folly* (1895), *The Outcast of the Islands* (1896), *Lord Jim* (1900), *Victory* (1915) and *The Rescue* (1920). It is his excellent visual memory of people, landscape, estuaries, rivers, climate, jungle foliage, commerce, local politics, religion and dress that bring his fictional world to life.

**Ian Burnet** is the author of *Joseph Conrad's Eastern Voyages – Tales of Singapore and an East Borneo River* (2021). He is also the author of *Archipelago – A Journey Across Indonesia* (2015), and *Where Australia Collides with Asia – The Epic Voyages of Joseph Banks, Charles Darwin, Alfred Russel Wallace and the Origin of On the Origin of Species* (2017).

**(Top)** The Master Attendant's Office next to Cavenagh Bridge, 1890. The distinctive roof of the post office can be seen in the background. Photo by G.R.Lambert. *Lee Kip Lin Collection, National Library, Singapore.*

**(Left)** The memorial plaque in honour of Joseph Conrad, located in front of the Fullerton Hotel, 2023. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*


Johnston's Pier was where passengers would disembark when they arrived in Singapore, c. 1910s. It was demolished and replaced by Clifford Pier in the mid-1930s. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

## Sojourn in Singapore

Conrad first set foot on Singapore's shores in 1883. At the time, he was the second mate on the *Palestine*, which was carrying coal from England to Bangkok. The ship set off from Newcastle in November 1881 but while crossing the English Channel, the *Palestine* met strong winds and started to leak. It limped back to Falmouth in Cornwall for repairs and finally left for Bangkok on 17 September 1882. Unfortunately, in March 1883, its cargo of coal caught fire and the ship sank near Sumatra. The officers and crew were rescued and taken to Singapore on the British steamship *Sissie*.[1] Here, the *Sissie* joined the forest of masts anchored in New Harbour (renamed Keppel Harbour in 1900) while around them were hundreds of Chinese tongkangs (a small type of boat used to carry goods along rivers) and Malay prows unloading goods from trading vessels.

This was Conrad's first view of Singapore. Before him was Johnston's Pier, the Master Attendant's Office, the entrance to the Singapore River and warehouses filled with goods that were in transshipment to the Malay Peninsula, Borneo, the Dutch East Indies and Hong Kong. In the centre was Fort Canning Hill (the former Government Hill). Below that lay the European town, the mansions of prominent European merchants and St Andrew's Cathedral.

Singapore is the "Eastern port" referred to in *Lord Jim*, *The End of the Tether* (1902) and *The Shadow-Line* (1917), even though Conrad never names the port. In *The End of the Tether*, Captain Henry Whalley of the steamer *Sofala* describes the busy harbour with the ships and the Riau Islands in the background:

> Some of these avenues ended at the sea. It was a terraced shore, and beyond, upon the level expanse, profound and glistening like the gaze of a dark-blue eye, an oblique band of stippled purple lengthened itself indefinitely through the gap between a couple of verdant twin islets. The masts and spars of a few ships far away, hull down in the outer roads, sprang straight from the water in a fine maze of rosy lines pencilled on the clear shadow of the eastern board.[2]

Close to the Master Attendant's Office was Emmerson's Tiffin Rooms on Flint Street, which drew sailors, merchants and visitors to its daily lunch menu. It advertised a Tiffin à la carte that is best described as Mulligatawny soup and a Malay chicken curry and rice. These men liked the noisy camaraderie of the place, where patrons exchanged tales of ships, sailors, disasters at sea, piracy, and the latest rumours.

At the junction of Flint Street and Battery Road was the ship chandler McAlister and Company. A vast cavern-like space, the store contained every sundry item that a ship needed to put to sea.

Records show that Conrad was discharged from the *Palestine* on 3 April 1883 and he remained in Singapore for the whole of April while waiting for a passage back to England. He would have stayed in the Officers' Sailors Home on High Street, behind St Andrew's Cathedral, until he embarked on his return passage in May that year.

In *The Shadow-Line*, he describes the home, which he refers to as the Officers' Home, as a "large bungalow with a wide verandah and a curiously suburban-looking little garden of bushes and a few trees between it and the street. That institution partook somewhat of the character of a residential club, but with a slightly Governmental flavour about it, because it was administered by the Harbour Office. Its manager was officially styled Chief Steward".[3]

Conrad also frequented the port area, including the various cafes and bars where seamen congregated to swap stories and compare voyages.[4] It is likely that while waiting to return to England in 1883, he would have become acquainted with the scandal around the pilgrim ship *Jeddah*, whose events provided the inspiration for the setting of *Lord Jim*.

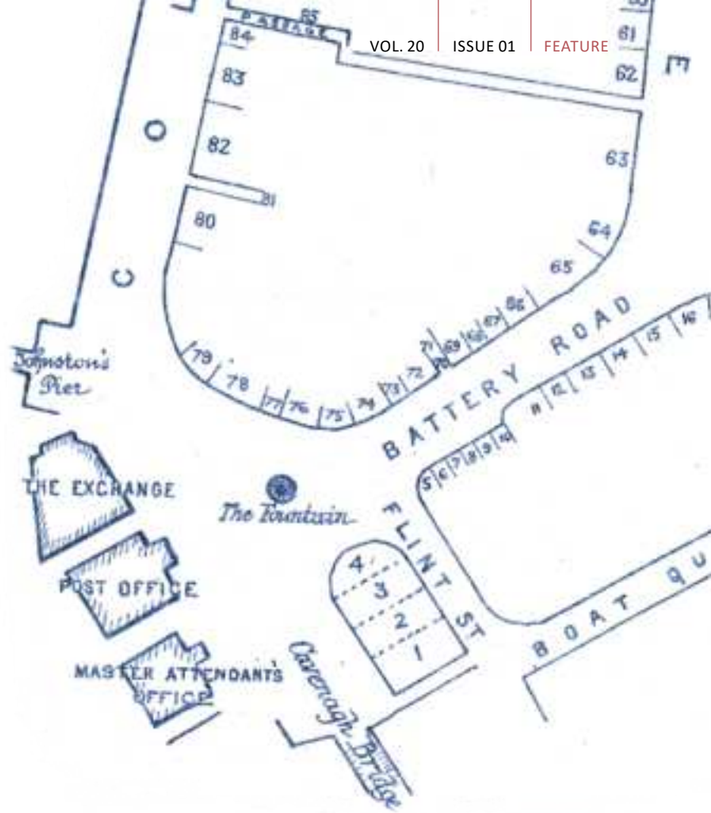
While bringing close to 1,000 Muslim pilgrims from Singapore and Penang to Mecca in 1880, the *Jeddah* ran into trouble and began taking in water. The ship's captain and some of the officers escaped in a lifeboat, leaving behind all the passengers on board. The captain and the officers were subsequently rescued and brought to Aden, in Yemen, where the captain claimed that the *Jeddah* had sunk with all lives lost. Fortunately for the passengers, but unfortunately for the captain, the *Jeddah* did not sink. Instead, it was rescued by a passing ship and towed to Aden, where it arrived a few days after the rescued captain and officers. The captain's deception was thus exposed and the fact that the captain had abandoned his passengers and lied about the sinking caused an enormous scandal.

In *Lord Jim*, a pilgrim ship named the *Patna* undergoes a similar experience and the incident becomes the talk of the town. In the novel, Conrad writes: "The whole waterside talked of nothing else… you heard of it in the harbour office, at every ship-broker's, at your agent's, from whites, from natives, from half castes, from the very boatmen squatting half-naked on the stone steps as you went up."[5]

The events around the *Patna* scandal sets the stage for introducing the main protagonist of the novel, the first mate named Jim, who escapes with the captain and subsequently lives with the guilt








**(Top)** In this 1890 map, the Master Attendant's Office can be seen in the bottom left, next to the post office. McAlister and Company is located at no. 5, at the junction of Flint Street and Battery Road. Emmerson's Tiffin Rooms is listed as occupying the upper floors of nos. 1 and 2. *Image reproduced from B.E. D'Aranjo, The Stranger's Guide to Singapore (Singapore: Sirangoon Press, 1890), 4f, 4g. (From National Library Online).*

**(Above)** In this view from across the Singapore River, the Fullerton Hotel to the left of Cavenagh Bridge is where the Master Attendant's Office would have been. To the immediate right of the bridge would have been Flint's Building, where Emmerson's Tiffin Rooms was located. It is now Maybank Tower. McAlister and Company's godown would have been immediately opposite, just across Flint Street, where the Bank of China building stands today. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*


Fullerton Hotel and Cavenagh Bridge, 2023. The old Master Attendant's Office would have been at the river-facing front of today's Fullerton Hotel. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

and shame of his actions. Jim, himself, has a real-life analogue in the first mate of the *Jeddah*, Augustine "Austin" Williams, who joined the captain in abandoning the ship. After the inquiry, Williams remained in Singapore and worked as a water clerk for McAlister and Company.

## Return to Southeast Asia

In February 1887, Conrad signed on as first mate of the *Highland Forest*, a three-masted barque of a little over 1,000 tons. It was berthed in Amsterdam while waiting to load general cargo for a voyage to the port of Semarang on the north coast of Java.

**Conrad was discharged from the *Highland Forest* on 1 July 1887 and sent on the next ship for hospitalisation in Singapore. Here, he was registered at the hospital as a "Distressed British Seaman" to recuperate.**

It was a rough voyage and Conrad met with an accident when one of the minor spars (used in the rigging of a sailing vessel to support its sail) fell against his back and sent him sliding on his face along the main deck for a considerable distance. In *Lord Jim*, Jim suffers a similar accident, and as a result, Jim "spent many days stretched on his back, dazed, battered, hopeless, and tormented as if at the bottom of an abyss of unrest. He did not care what the end would be, and in his lucid moments overvalued his indifference".[6]

As Conrad's injuries persisted even after the *Highland Forest* had unloaded its cargo in Semarang in June 1887, he reported to the Dutch doctor there that he was experiencing "inexplicable periods of powerlessness and sudden accesses of mysterious pain". The doctor told him that the injury could remain with him for his entire life. He said: "You must leave your ship; you must be quite silent for three months – quite silent."[7]

Conrad was discharged from the *Highland Forest* on 1 July 1887 and sent on the next ship for hospitalisation in Singapore. Here, he was registered at the hospital as a "Distressed British Seaman" to recuperate. In *The Mirror of the Sea*, a collection of autobiographical essays, Conrad describes what it was like lying on his back in a Far Eastern hospital and having "plenty of leisure to remember the dreadful cold and snow of Amsterdam, while looking at the fronds of the palm-trees tossing and rustling at the height of the window".[8] Conrad's experience is the likely inspiration for the scene in *Lord Jim* when the young seaman recuperates in a hospital in that unnamed Eastern port:

> The hospital stood on a hill, and a gentle breeze entering through the windows, always flung wide open, brought into the bare room the softness of the sky, the languor of the earth, the bewitching breath of the Eastern waters. There were perfumes in it, suggestions of infinite repose, the gift of endless dreams. Jim looked every day over the thickets of gardens, beyond the roofs of the town, over the fronds of palms growing on the shore, at that roadstead which is a thoroughfare to the East, – at the roadstead dotted by garlanded islets, lighted by festal sunshine, its ships like toys, its brilliant activity resembling a holiday pageant, with the eternal serenity of the Eastern sky overhead and the smiling peace of the Eastern seas possessing the space as far as the horizon.[9]

As soon as he could walk unaided, Conrad checked out of the hospital for a further period of rehabilitation and to look for a berth back to England. While waiting, he stayed in the Officers' Sailors Home again and spent time with the other seamen in the port.

Once Conrad had fully recovered, he would walk daily from the Officers' Sailors Home towards the Master Attendant's Office to look for a passage home. Along the way, he would have passed the white spire of St Andrew's Cathedral, the frontages of the new government buildings, the famous Hotel de l'Europe (site of the former Supreme Court building and part of the National Gallery Singapore today) and along the shaded Esplanade with its enormous trees towards the Singapore River. He would then cross Cavenagh Bridge to reach the Master Attendant's Office at the other end of the bridge.

Cavenagh Bridge, opened in 1869, straddled the entrance to the Singapore River and provided one of the most famous views of Singapore. In the late 19th century, Boat Quay would have been packed with a myriad of lighters, tongkangs and sampans bringing goods and people onto the river. The crescent of buildings and warehouses along the quay was taken up with the unloading and loading of these boats. Hundreds of coolies unloaded huge crates, casks, boxes and bales of British manufactured goods into the warehouses, followed by the loading of bales of gambier, bundles of rattans, and bags of tin, sago, tapioca, rice, pepper and spices for export to foreign markets. Conrad describes this scene in his book, *The Rescue*:


View of Boat Quay from Cavenagh Bridge, c. 1906. *Arshak C. Galstaun Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

> [O]ne evening about six months before Lingard's last trip, as they were crossing the short bridge over the canal where native craft lay moored in clusters… Jörgenson pointed at the mass of *praus*, coasting boats, and *sampans* that, jammed together in the canal, lay covered with mats and flooded by the cold moonlight, with here and there a dim lantern burning amongst the confusion of high sterns, spars, masts, and lowered sails.[10]

## Voyages on the Vidar

In August 1887, Conrad was hired as first mate on the trading ship *Vidar*. He found the vessel berthed at the Tanjong Pagar docks, a squared-off compound of warehouses, coal sheds and workshops. According to the *Singapore and Straits Directory*, its owner, Syed Mohsin Bin Salleh Al Jooffree, also owned several other steamers.[11]

The *Vidar* was a picturesque old steamship with a colourful crew, and its captain, James Craig, had sailed the local waters for the last 10 or 12 years and knew them like the back of his hand. Not only did he have to navigate an often dangerous archipelago, filled with marauding pirates and treacherous rivers, he also had to deal with local traders – Dutch, English, Chinese, Arab, Malay and Bugis – in each of these unusual ports. Besides the captain and the first mate, there were two European engineers, a Chinese third engineer, a Malay mate, a crew of 11 Malays, as well as a group of Chinese coolies who worked as deckhands for the loading and unloading of cargo.[12]

This was a microcosm of the people of the archipelago and they would all have communicated in bazaar Malay which was the commonly used trading language of the region. Already an accomplished linguist, Conrad would have quickly picked up a good knowledge of Malay and this would have brought him into direct contact with the people he later describes in his books.

On the *Vidar*, Conrad makes four voyages from Singapore to the Berau River in Borneo before signing off from the ship on 4 January 1888. He lowered himself and his seabag into a sampan in the harbour and was rowed ashore to Johnston's Pier from where he took a horse-drawn cab to the Officers' Sailors Home.

He had just given up a good berth and a comfortable life in a fine little steamship with an excellent master. However, Conrad's ambition was to command a sailing ship, a square rigger, not in the comfortable waters of the East Indies, but on the great oceans of the world. In *The Shadow-Line*, which is based on Conrad's own experience of his first command, the protagonist, who was accompanied by his captain, describes a similar event, of signing off from a ship, as taking place in the Harbour Office, in a "lofty, big, cool white room" where everyone is in white.

> The official behind the desk we approached grinned amiably and kept it up till, in answer to his perfunctory question, "Sign off and on again?" my Captain answered, "No! Signing off for good." And then his grin vanished in sudden solemnity. He did not look at me again till he handed me my papers with a sorrowful expression, as if they had been my passports for Hades. While I was putting them away he murmured some question to the Captain, and I heard the latter answer good-humouredly: "No. He leaves us to go home." "Oh!" the other exclaimed, nodding mournfully over my sad condition.[13]

Joseph Conrad commanded the *Otago* between 1888 and 1889. *Courtesy of State Library of Queensland.*

## Commanding the Otago

Conrad was ashore for two weeks when he received a message on 19 January 1888 that the Harbour Master would like to see him urgently. The Harbour Master explained that the master of a British ship, the *Otago*, had died in Bangkok and the Consul-General there had cabled him to request for a competent man to take command.[14] Since Conrad already had his Master's ticket, the Harbour Master gave him an agreement which read:

> This is to inform you that you are required to proceed in the S.S. *Melita* to Bangkok and you will report your arrival to the British Consul and produce this memorandum which will show that I have engaged you to be the Master of the *Otago*.[15]

Conrad would undoubtedly have been thrilled by this twist of fate. Perhaps he felt the same way the protagonist did in *The Shadow-Line*, who likewise had just been given his first command:

> And now here I had my command, absolutely in my pocket, in a way undeniable indeed, but most unexpected; beyond my imaginings, outside all reasonable expectations, and even notwithstanding the existence of some sort of obscure intrigue to keep it away from me. It is true that the intrigue was feeble, but it helped the feeling of wonder – as if I had been specially destined for that ship I did not know, by some power higher than the prosaic agencies of the commercial world.[16]

The *Melita* was leaving for Bangkok that evening and Conrad would be on it. He arrived in Bangkok on 24 January 1888 and as the coastal steamer came up the river, its captain was able to point out Conrad's new ship. The lines of its fine body and well-proportioned spars pleased Conrad immensely as this was a high-class vessel, a vessel he would be proud to command.

After almost two years away, Conrad returned to London in May 1889, idle and without a ship. His memory and imagination returned to Singapore and the Malay Archipelago, and he began writing a novel based on his voyages from Singapore on the *Vidar*. As he wrote in his autobiographical work, *A Personal Record* (1912), the characters from his time on the Berau River began to visit him while he was in-between work in London:

> It was in the front sitting-room of furnished apartments in a Pimlico square that they first began to live again with a vividness and poignancy quite foreign to our former real intercourse. I had been treating myself to a long stay on shore, and in the necessity of occupying my mornings, Almayer (that old acquaintance) came nobly to the rescue. Before long, as was only proper, his wife and daughter joined him round my table and then the rest of that Pantai band came full of words and gestures. Unknown to my respectable landlady, it was my practice directly after my breakfast to hold animated receptions of Malays, Arabs, and half-castes.[17]

**Along the way, Conrad helped craft a particular image of Singapore, the Malay Archipelgo and the Dutch East Indies in the imagination of the reading public.**

These characters and places eventually end up populating *Almayer's Folly*, Conrad's first novel. Published in 1895, the work would launch Conrad's career as a writer. He would go on to draw upon his experiences in the Malay world in subsequent novels and short stories. Along the way, he helped craft a particular image of Singapore, the Malay Archipelgo and the Dutch East Indies in the imagination of the reading public. ♦

**NOTES**

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# BY THE PUBLIC AND FOR THE PUBLIC

# CONTEMPORARY COLLECTING AT THE NATIONAL LIBRARY

Singapore's National Library is hard at work collecting new forms of documentary materials today for the sake of future generations.

**By Janice Loo and Lee Meiyu**

**Janice Loo** is a Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. She is part of the team that looks after the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection, and Rare Materials Collection. Her work includes collection development, content creation, as well as research and reference assistance on topics relating to Singapore and the region.

**Lee Meiyu** is a Senior Manager with the National Library Board. She manages the statutory functions of the National Library Singapore, including its Legal Deposit Collection.

To put together an account of the past, historians typically go through things like manuscripts, letters, diaries, memoirs, documents and photographs. These primary sources provide the raw material from which historians reconstruct the past, which is why these items are carefully preserved by libraries, archives and museums all over the world.

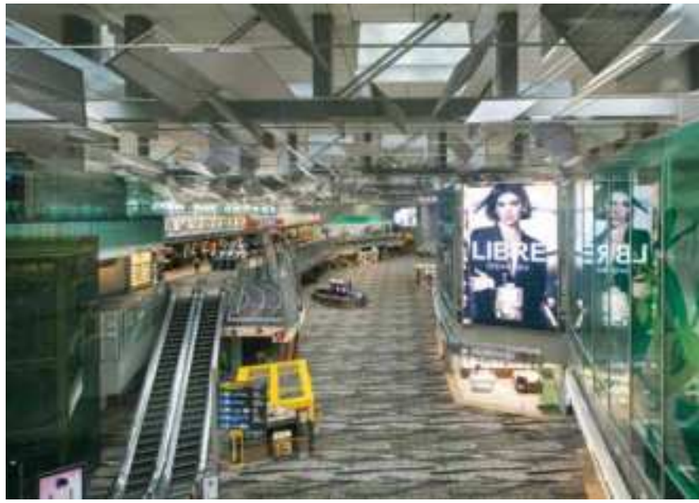
However, these days, people document their lives using new media. While vivid and immediate, new media is also digital and ephemeral, which means libraries and archives need to find new ways to collect and preserve content and information.

The National Library, Singapore (NL) aims to address this through an initiative called Contemporary Collecting. This initiative looks at the acquisition and preservation of materials that represent not only our distant past, but also our recent history. These materials can be collected and contributed by individuals, organisations and institutions to capture the essence of life in the 21st century as we know it.

As part of this initiative, on 1 October 2023, NL launched a new online platform, "Singapore Memories: Documenting Our Stories Together", where the public can contribute videos, audio clips, photographs and even social media accounts of present-day Singapore for posterity. It uses crowdsourcing – harnessing the collective efforts of the public – to quickly gather and build up a diverse record of the present.

## "Documenting Covid-19 in Singapore"

The value of contemporary collecting can be readily appreciated through the National Library's Covid-19 collection, comprising crowdsourced materials about the pandemic in Singapore.



The pandemic brought massive disruptions to international travel. These scenes of Singapore's Changi Airport devoid of its usual bustle were captured on 28 March 2020. *Photos contributed by Tan Yong Lin.*

Singapore saw its first case of Covid-19 on 23 January 2020, marking the start of stringent measures to contain the spread of the disease. Between 7 April and 1 June, the government imposed a "circuit breaker" period to pre-empt further transmissions. Schools, offices and most retail outlets were closed, and social gatherings prohibited.

To record and document the impact of Covid-19 on everyday life, NL partnered with the National Museum of Singapore on a project called "Documenting Covid-19 in Singapore" from 22 May 2020 to 30 June 2021. This was a collection drive for the public to contribute photographs, personal stories, videos, ephemera, web material and objects on their experiences during the pandemic.

More than 5,700 items were received, mainly digital photographs accompanied by brief descriptions or personal anecdotes, from some 470 individuals and organisations. It was timely to launch the collection drive during the partial lockdown as it enabled people to record and contribute scenes that were unique to that moment. There were many photographs depicting changes that people observed around them, such as shuttered retail shops and restaurants, deserted streets, and empty buses and trains, as well as the appearance of safe-distancing markers to guide people to keep at least one metre from each other to reduce the risk of virus transmission.

There were also shared snapshots of daily life reflecting how people adapted to the restrictions, how they found creative ways to spend time at home, and how they kept in touch with family and friends. Notably, the submissions also covered how the pandemic affected festive celebrations and important events such as weddings and births.

Yvonne Cheng and her husband welcomed their first child during the circuit breaker in May 2020. Cheng wote: "In doing our part to stay safe and stay home, even my husband's mother (a first-time grandma) couldn't visit and cuddle with him. The postpartum period has always been a time when family and emotional support are important, yet we can only connect virtually and be there for one another in a very different way than we have imagined."

Yvonne Cheng and her husband with their newborn, 14 May 2020. *Photo contributed by Yvonne Cheng.*

Safe-distancing markers on a public bus, 9 May 2020 (below), and closure of the beach at East Coast Park, 27 April 2020 (bottom). These photos are part of a series about the circuit breaker titled "A Broken Circuit: Singapore Amidst Covid-19". *Photos contributed by Sebastian Soong.*




**(Above and top right)** Muhammad Farhan Osman and his family used Zoom to connect with relatives, friends and the wider community during Hari Raya Puasa in 2020. *Photos contributed by Muhammad Farhan Osman.*

Through these photographs, Muhammad Farhan Osman provided an intimate glimpse of how his family celebrated Hari Raya Puasa on 24 May 2020 during the circuit breaker. Due to the ban on gatherings with family or friends who do not live together, Muslims took to video conferencing apps such as Zoom to connect and celebrate virtually with loved ones. The communal prayer calls (*takbir*) and a live sermon were also broadcasted over radio and online channels such as YouTube and the Facebook pages of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) and local mosques.

The collection also features stories and photographs of those working on the frontlines to keep Singapore safe, as well as individuals whose acts of charity and kindness made a difference in the community.

Dr Shyamala Thilagaratnam – who is also an avid photographer – and her team at the Health Promotion Board organised and implemented swab operations at migrant worker dormitories. The photos that she contributed formed part of a photo essay titled "Covid Chronicles". Oliver Guo and Amanda Chua are active volunteers who gathered their family and friends to sew transparent face masks using fabric donated by CYC Tailors. Unlike opaque masks, these clear ones facilitate better communication as they allow lip-reading by those who may be deaf or hard-of-hearing.

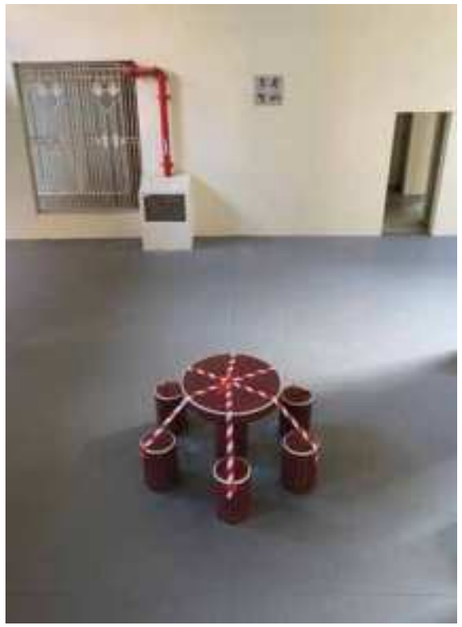
**(Above right)** Administering swab tests at a migrant worker dormitory, 23 April 2020. This photo forms part of a photo essay titled "Covid Chronicles". *Photo contributed by Dr Shyamala Thilagaratnam.*

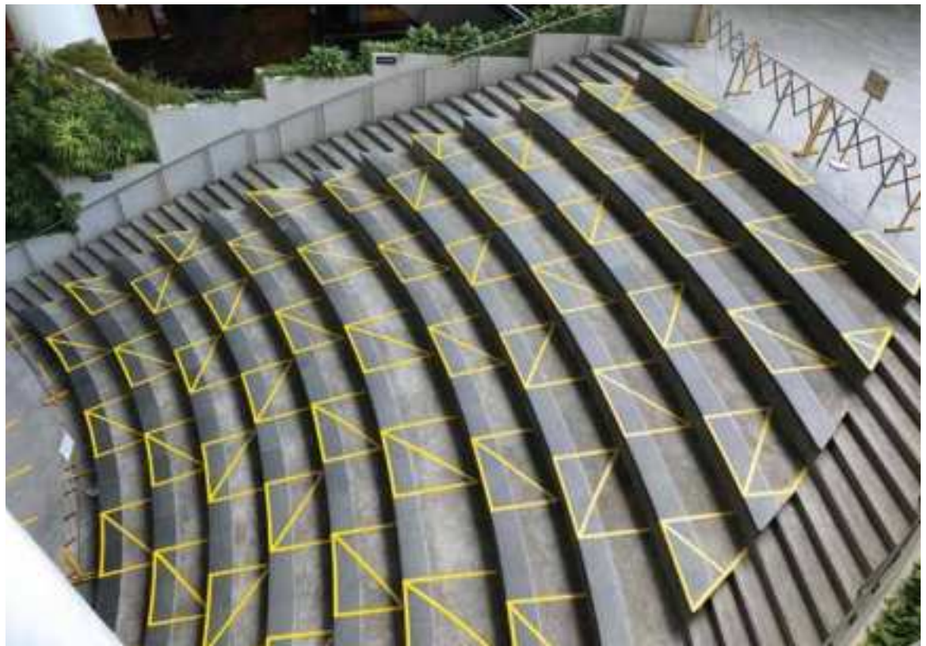
**(Right)** Oliver Guo modelling a transparent face mask, 2020. *Photo contributed by Oliver Guo and Amanda Chua.*

**(Far right)** Amanda Chua (left), Oliver Guo (middle) and Oliver's mother, Cheong Yoke Fong, sewing the masks, 2020. *Photo contributed by Oliver Guo and Amanda Chua.*

A highlight of the collection drive included a substantial contribution from artist and independent curator Berny Tan. She shared some 640 photographs taken of safe-distancing markers around Singapore between March and August 2020. These represent the earliest, most conspicuous and widespread change in the landscape as coloured sticky strips were stuck to floors, and hazard tape draped over structures and furniture to demarcate where people should queue or sit.

Safe-distancing configurations ranged from basic to elaborate, and some even resembled artworks. Over time, these bore the signs of wear and tear, and depending on the severity of the restrictions, the markings were maintained, adjusted, removed and applied anew. Tan's contributions helped to capture the ephemeral nature of safe-distancing markers – once a ubiquitous feature of life during the pandemic.





**(Right)** Community facilities in the void decks of Housing and Development Board flats were cordoned off with tape as part of measures to contain the spread of the virus (left). Red sticky tape and decals were used to mark out where people should queue in a local eatery (right). *Photos contributed by Berny Tan.*

**(Bottom right)** Safe-distancing markers at the open-air plaza of the Star Vista mall. *Photo contributed by Berny Tan.*





"Workers in nearby offices pack their lunch back to their office, 8 Jun 2020. Singapore is in phase one after circuit breaker and eating out is still not allowed." *Contributed by Gavin Foo as part of InstaSG's photo competition.*

"Uncles in Chinatown adapting to the new normal." *Contributed by Dennis Fajardo as part of InstaSG's photo competition.*

The collection includes photographs from InstaSG, a community of Singapore Instagram photographers. InstaSG, which runs regular photo competitions where entries are submitted via hashtags, organised an open call in March 2021 for photographs documenting life in Singapore during the pandemic. Their established panel of judges, which includes professional photographers, shortlisted about 100 best entries and these were contributed to NL.

"Appreciating the dedication shown by these safe distancing ambassadors keeping our Covid-19 cases as low as possible. They ensure that no one walks around without masks or intermingling at almost every corner of our country come rain or shine." *Photo contributed by Mohammad Izhar Md Razali as part of InstaSG's photo competition.*

"The Nine Emperor Gods Festival was a much subdued affair in 2020. The finale at East Coast Beach had many restrictions with safe distancing and masks wearing strictly enforced." *Contributed by William Ong as part of InstaSG's photo competition.*

Find these photographs contributed by the public on National Library Online (https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/nlonline).


Videos from the HappyCat.黑皮猫 YouTube channel were contributed to "Singapore Makan".

## "Singapore Makan" and "Young Singapore"

With the success of "Documenting Covid-19 in Singapore", NL recently launched a new collecting project focusing on local food and youth culture, titled "Singapore Makan" and "Young Singapore" respectively, in 2023.

This two-year project aims to collect photographs, videos, social media accounts, websites, publications, posters, manuscripts and more to capture the changing food and youth culture landscape in present-day Singapore for future generations.

Phase one of the project in January 2023 targeted personalities and organisations in the food and culinary industry, such as wet market stall holders, heritage food bloggers, private fine-dining chefs and home-based cooks, as well as youths who are active in the heritage, arts and sustainability sectors. These personalities and organisations were identified for their unique services/products or the significant contributions they have made to the respective sector.

In the second phase, a call to collect materials from the general public relating to the local food and youth culture was issued in October 2023.


Tekka Online Market's website was contributed to "Singapore Makan".

People could send in their contributions via the new crowdsourcing portal, "Singapore Memories: Documenting Our Stories Together".

### Highlights from "Singapore Makan"

Social media has greatly changed and shaped the food and dining scene in Singapore.[1] Set up in 2021, the HappyCat.黑皮猫 YouTube channel creates behind-the-scenes videos documenting popular hawkers and their food.[2]

The channel contributed 25 of their most popular videos to the initiative. These include a Michelin Bib Gourmand 2019 awardee, Koh Brother Pig's Organ Soup (Teochew-style clear soup boiled from pig bones, offal and preserved mustard vegetables), established in 1955, and another Michelin-recommended stall, the Tiong Bahru Lien Fa Shui Jin Pau (dumplings with jade-like skin resembling crystal and come in three types of savoury fillings – red bean, yam and turnip), established in 1961. These videos fill gaps in the documentation of our food heritage, focusing on famous stalls and well-loved dishes that we are familiar with today before they may be gone for good.

Tekka Online Market (now closed) was an e-commerce platform for shoppers to order their products online from one of Singapore's oldest wet markets.[3] It was created by the Infocomm Media Development Authority and creative agency BLKJ so that "shop owners and customers can find new – and safer – ways of doing things during the circuit breaker period".[4]

As lockdown measures limited the number of people and the number of times people were allowed to visit wet markets, businesses in these markets were affected. The website and a promotional video were collected, capturing how groceries were purchased and sold online during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Highlights from "Young Singapore"

The study of contemporary youth culture is an emerging and ever-evolving topic. It is transient and ephemeral with every generation having its own culture. Sam See and Kevin Martens Wong are part of a new generation of youths who are actively leveraging social media to promote their causes and their work.

Sam See is an internationally known stand-up comedian who has participated in multiple international comedy festivals, including the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2022. His show, *Government Approved Sex*, was listed by *Fest Magazine* as one of "The Best of the Edinburgh Festivals".[5] He has been featured on Comedy Central Asia's *Stand-up Asia* and Singapore's comedy panel show *Ok Chope!*.[6] His Instagram account, website, posters, manuscripts and performing materials were contributed to "Young Singapore".

Kevin Martens Wong founded Kodrah Kristang (Awaken, Kristang) in 2016 to revitalise the endangered Kristang language – which is spoken by people of mixed Portuguese and Malay ancestry – through language classes, the Kristang Language Festival, an English-Kristang board game and an online dictionary.[7] Wong was the 2017 recipient of both the President's Volunteer and Philanthropy Award (Individual, Youth) and the Lee Hsien Loong Award for Outstanding All-Round Achievement.[8] His websites (Kodrah Kristang and Merlionsman) and Facebook account were contributed to "Young Singapore" , and are representative of heritage initiatives that have gone online to do their part in preserving Singapore's history.


Sam See's Instagram account, manuscripts, performing materials, posters and documents about his shows were contributed to "Young Singapore".


Kevin Martens Wong's websites and Facebook account were contributed to "Young Singapore".

## Contributing to Contemporary Collecting

The National Library welcomes everyone to be a part of the Contemporary Collecting initiative to preserve a slice of contemporary Singapore.

If you want to contribute something regarding youth culture or food, you may submit documentary materials that you own or created through the portal, "Singapore Memories: Documenting Our Stories Together" (http://www.singaporememories.gov.sg/). You may also nominate websites and content by contacting us at contemporary_collecting@nlb.gov.sg. Selected materials will be added into our national collection for preservation and research purposes. ♦

The National Library would like to thank all contributors to the initiative. Unfortunately, due to the large number of contributors, we are unable to mention everyone in this article.

**NOTES**

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3 "Tekka Online Market," BLKJ, 1 November 2023, https://www.blkjhavas.agency/tekkaonlinemarket.

4 Audrey Tan, "Coronavirus: Wet Market Stalls Go Online to Accommodate Shoppers During Circuit Breaker," *Straits Times*, 3 May 2020, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/coronavirus-wet-market-stalls-go-online-to-accommodate-shoppers-during-circuit.

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8 Cheow Sue-Ann, "8 Individuals and Organisations Win President's Volunteerism and Philanthropy Awards," *Straits Times*, 29 November 2017, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/8-individuals-and-organisations-win-presidents-volunteerism-and-philanthropy-awards; Ministry of Education, "Lee Hsien Loong Award for Outstanding All-Round Achievement," 2017, https://www.moe.gov.sg/-/media/files/news/press/2017/annex-b---special-awards-2017.pdf.

# CONQUERING THE WORLD'S TALLEST MOUNTAIN

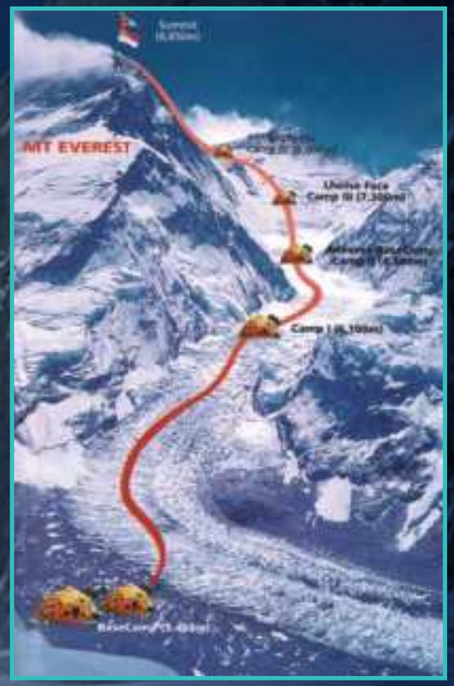
David Lim led the first Singapore expedition team that successfully scaled Mount Everest on 25 May 1998. This is an excerpt from his book, *Mountain to Climb: The Quest for Everest and Beyond.*

**By David Lim**

On 29 May 1953, New Zealander mountaineer and explorer Edmund Hillary and sherpa Tenzing Norgay made history by becoming the first people to summit Mount Everest. Straddling the border of Nepal and Tibet, the world's highest peak has borne witness to both great accomplishment and tragedy.

Standing at 8,849 m (29,032 ft), the ascent up Everest[1] requires years of preparation and training. The climb is treacherous no thanks to heavy snow, slippery slopes, strong winds and avalanches. At such high altitudes, climbers are also susceptible to serious conditions like pulmonary edema, cerebral edema, blood embolisms, frostbite and altitude sickness.[2]

In May 2023, Singaporean Shrinivas Sainis Dattatraya, 39, went missing during an attempt to climb Everest. He had reached the summit on 19 May but developed high-altitude cerebral edema and told his wife he was "unlikely to make it down the mountain". Attempts to locate Shrinivas were unsuccessful and, in an Instagram post, his wife paid tribute to her husband noting that "...he lived fearlessly and to the fullest. He explored the depth of the sea and scaled the greatest heights of the Earth. And now, Shri is in the mountains, where he felt most at home."[3]




Route to the summit. *Photo by Alan Silva.*

This event comes 25 years after mountaineer and climber David Lim led the first Singapore expedition to successfully conquer Everest.[4] On 25 May 1998, Outward Bound Singapore instructor Edwin Siew became the first member from the team to reach the summit. He was followed by systems analyst Khoo Swee Chiow half an hour later. Lim himself did not make it to the summit due to an injury sustained during the climb.

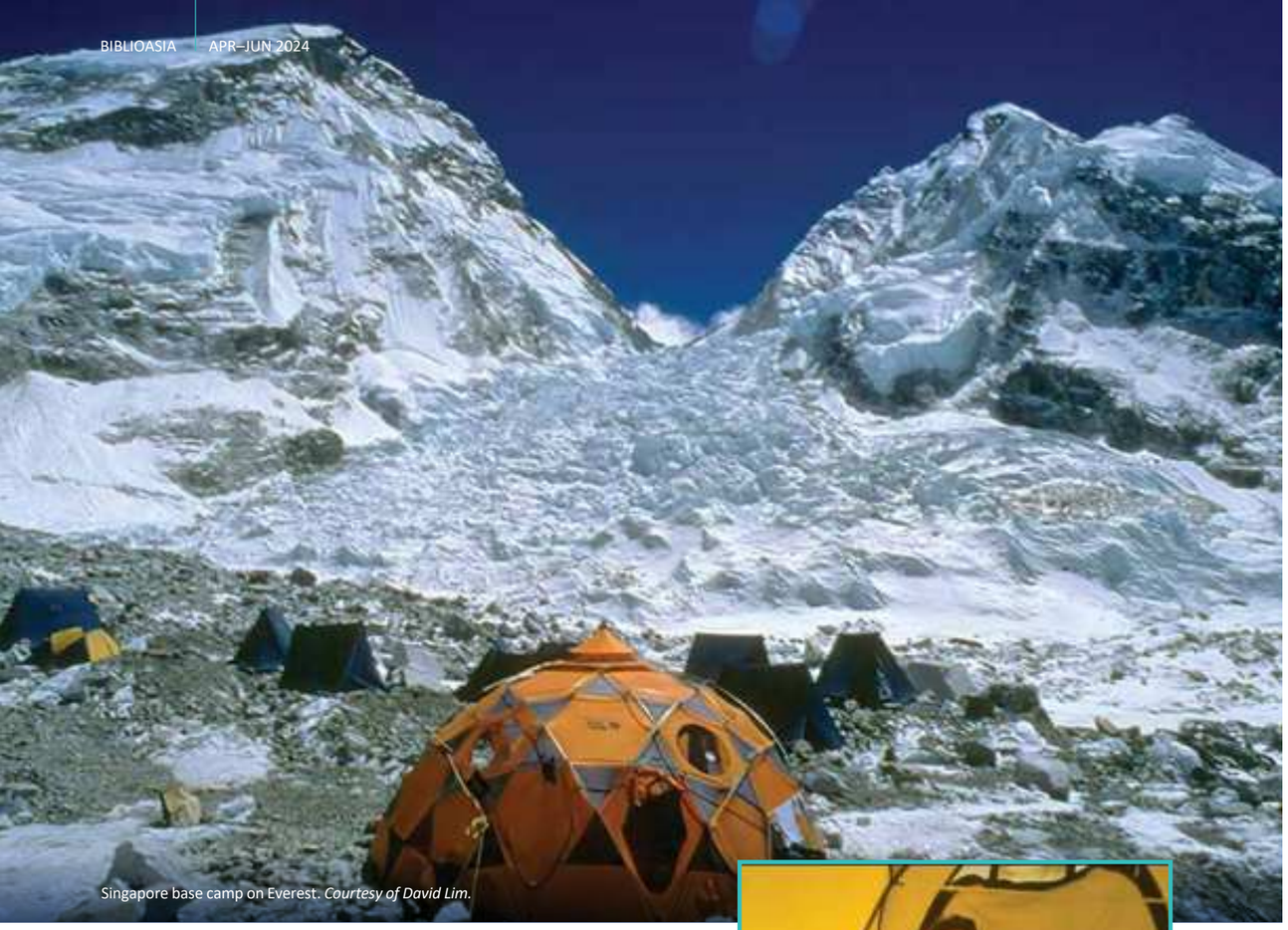
Unfortunately, one week after the team's return, Lim was stricken with Guillain-Barré syndrome, a rare nerve disorder. Within days, his limbs were paralysed and his respiratory system shut down. Unable to speak, move or breathe, Lim endured 42 days in intensive care before his condition stabilised. He then spent six months recuperating in the hospital, where he had to relearn basic skills such as writing, dressing himself and walking. Undeterred, Lim returned to mountaineering and has led more than 15 climbing expeditions since 1999, including the first all-Singaporean ascent of Aconcagua (6,961 m) in the Andes Mountain range in Argentina.

In 2023, Lim donated 140 items to the National Library Board, comprising mostly raw footage of the first Singapore Mount Everest expedition, the Singapore-Latin America expedition and various other climbs. He also donated a set of curated digitised footage extracted from the raw footage of the 1998 expedition.

Among the donations is a signed copy of his book, *Mountain to Climb: The Quest for Everest and Beyond* (1999). The book is a personal account of the Singapore team's quest to climb Everest, including the failures, heartbreak and sacrifices. To mark the 25th anniversary of the Everest climb, *BiblioAsia* is publishing an extract of Chapter 19 of the book. In it, Lim recounts the events immediately leading up to the team's first attempt to summit Everest on 19 May 1998.

**David Lim** is a veteran of more than 70 alpine ascents and expeditions, having climbed the French, Swiss and New Zealand alps. His company, Everest Motivation Team, provides leadership and change management consultancy services. David is also a motivational speaker and writer. He read law at Magdalene College, University of Cambridge, and worked in the media industry for more than a decade.

In the Western Cwm with Lhoste dominating the far end of the valley. *Courtesy of David Lim.*



Singapore base camp on Everest. *Courtesy of David Lim.*

I met up with Michael Strynoe, the Dane who was climbing unsupported on Everest. With him was Thomas Sjogren, a wealthy Swedish paper magnate, who was climbing Everest with his wife. They had had two previous unsuccessful attempts on Everest. As smaller, independent parties, they were reliant on larger teams to kick in a trail to the top and to fix the route. Everything depended on the weather. We promised to radio Thomas later that night with a weather update. The afternoon air was fairly frigid and I began to have a prolonged coughing fit. Retiring to my tent for some rest, I awoke to an excruciating pain on my left side. It was 6 pm and the Emir's [referring to Colonel Bruce Mackenzie Niven, the Singapore team's base camp manager] voice came over the airwaves. I reached for the radio near my left thigh but could not reach it. The slightest effort sent sharp stabbing pains into my back. The pain radiated from my back and fanned outwards. It was as though someone had stuck a knife in my side and was twisting the blade back and forth.

Cursing at this turn of events, I gave up trying to reach for the radio. Justin [Lean], who held another radio, picked up the call. I shared the tent with Edwin [Siew] that night, he looked quite concerned as I

David Lim journaling at Everest base camp. *Courtesy of David Lim.*





lowered myself into my sleeping bag, wincing at the severe pain. It was many times more painful than any of my "cracked rib" incidents. At dinner, I laid out the options. It was important that the team be in a high enough position to push for the top, given the very small weather window. Confirmation of the storm would still allow them to retreat back to BC [Base Camp] in time. So, it was important that the summit team go up to C3 [Camp 3]. It might be the only chance. Using the popular American saying, I quipped:

"The game ain't over until the fat lady sings."

I lay in my tent, sleepless for most of the night, thinking about how that afternoon's coughing fit had either torn a ligament or a cartilage. A full dose of Voltaren painkiller was ineffectual. I awoke the following morning, May 16, hoping for the best. Another stab of pain doubled me over. I sat up, holding my side and turned to Edwin.

"Edwin, you should get prepared. You're going up."

On the afternoon of May 17, I met up with various team leaders at [Bob] Hoffman's C2 [Camp 2] mess tent. Hoffman had had the luxury of small folding chairs (we used rocks) and the issue of the weather was discussed. The snowfalls we had experienced were local conditions and not easily captured on the weather reports which focused on larger areas. Big mountains like Everest and K2 can and did influence weather patterns within their area of influence. The weather forecast from [a specialist in] Bracknell was based on a large amount of information fed into a computer which then ran simulations. This was done twice a day: once at 0600 GMT and another time at 1800 GMT. The more times this was done, the more accurate the prediction became.

It was a fairly tense meeting, punctuated only by some jokes between Michael, the Dane, and members of Hoffman's American team. Hoffman's team was incomplete and members were still trickling in. At the table was Mark Cole, Bob Hoffman and PY Scaturro, Hoffman's lead climber. Our radios served as tools to allow for the conference. Other representatives were Andy Lapkass from Henry [Todd]'s team, Dave Walsh, head guide for the Himalayan Kingdom's team and Inaki Ochoa, the Basque soloist, who, like Michael, was climbing unsupported. lnaki had hoped to make a quick ascent of Lhotse, Everest's rarely climbed neighbour. He was climbing alone and had made two previous attempts in the preceding weeks. Saying his stamina was pretty good was an understatement.

Henry's crisp, upper-crust voice came over the radio. The news was not encouraging. I imagined Henry, far away at BC, reading the crucial fax from Bracknell.

"The cyclone over lndia is holding steady over Madras but it may move north. If it does so, it will reach us in 72 hours. Bracknell have said that if it does, we will have 48 hours' notice before it hits. It will either head directly for us or swing to the right into Bangladesh and Thailand."

Henry had been asking for any additional help worldwide. Our own Singapore Met information was added to a growing body of information. What was difficult was the actual interpretation of the data. It was a critical moment for all the teams on the mountain.

**It was important that the team be in a high enough position to push for the top, given the very small weather window.**

Discussions followed. The 48 hours' notice was crucial. It was the minimum amount of time needed to evacuate the mountain. Teams began to get mobilised. This looked like the only summit window of the whole season. From C2, climbers needed a day to get to C3 and then another day to get to C4 [Camp 4] at South Col [*col* is a Welsh term referring to a saddle or pass between mountains]. At the rate our lads were doing, they would reach South Col on May 18, the following day. Hoffman was more circumspect. He was gambling that the good weather would hold. In any event, his team was only assembling on May 17. It was unlikely that

Mohd Rozani Maarof climbing up Lhoste Face to South Col, 18 May 1998. *Courtesy of David Lim.*

Mok Ying Jang on the fixed ropes (right) and inching down rickety ladders (below) at Khumbu Icefall, Everest. *Courtesy of David Lim.*

they would make the summit on May 19. Most of the other teams had also come to the conclusion that a May 19 summit day was the best chance of success and avoiding the cyclone. Bad weather on a mountain like Everest was a deadly serious event. A huge dump of snow would end the season. The accompanying winds would also rip our tents apart and the icefall would be a chamber of horrors.

The game was on and I had to balance the risks of the team being stuck up high and keeping our resources together should a second attempt be required. But there was not a snowball's chance in hell I would have jeopardised any member unnecessarily for the sake of a summit. The 48 hours' notice would give them time to retreat to BC even if they were on South Col. The team made good progress to C3 and we settled in for another long night.

The radio report on the morning of May 18 from the summit team showed that all had gone smoothly. They had slept using some bottled oxygen and were now en route to the Col with an oxygen tank each. The LSE bottle would provide a modest flow of oxygen and have enough left over to use as an aid to sleep. At C2, Mok [Ying Jang] and I bid the sherpas a safe climb. The sherpas would climb, in a single day, to South Col. They never slept at C3. They wore smiles, but their eyes, darting left and right, reflected what they really felt. I had had that feeling before – the palm-moistening sensation as a summit push began.

By 10 am, we saw a line of about 50 ant-like figures crossing the Lhotse face headed towards the Geneva Spur and the Col. Mok became concerned about the risk of bottlenecks on summit day. He made a bad joke about his services being needed if the events of 1996 were repeated. [Our] climbers would pair up with the sherpas for the summit climb – [Man Bahadur Tamang, or MB] with Justin, Lhakpa [Tshering] with Robert [Goh], Dawa Tshering with [Rozani], [Khoo Swee Chiow] with Kami Rita and Edwin with Fura [Dorje]. At South Col, Pasang Gambu and Nawang [Phurba] would be sipping on oxygen, ready to respond to any emergency. Dorje [Phulilie] and Phurba would spearhead the rope laying of the route on summit day.

The day was eventful. At about noon, long after the snake-like queue of climbers had disappeared from view, a sherpa ran up to our camp, asking for medical supplies. He was from the commercial group, Himalayan Kingdoms. A sherpa of their group had been injured on the face. All he could say was that the sherpa had sustained a cut on the head, so Mok obliged with some dressings. The sherpa disappeared over the horizon quickly.

Then the weather report came in. It said that the winds over the summit for the next few days would remain favourable for a summit attempt with low wind speeds. The cyclone sighted earlier was now moving slowly to the north. However, it was also veering in a slightly more easterly direction. We would receive a dusting of snow although the winds would be pretty much dissipated by the time it reached the Himalayas. We all sighed in relief.

But by 2.30 pm, it was clear that the situation with the sherpa was more serious than was earlier reported. A disjointed radio call from the face indicated that the sherpa had been hit by either a rock or an ice boulder and was suffering from a suspected broken femur. He was incapacitated near C3 and in great pain. Rob Morrison and Robert Boice from Hoffman's team had assisted the sherpa over a number of hours to the campsites. It was a combination of butt hauling and dragging, quite an effort at those altitudes. Sundeep Dhillon, a client from the Himalayan Kingdoms, was a doctor and he, too, went to the sherpa's aid. I said it was no problem for them to spend the night in one of our tents and the spare oxygen could also be used if it was needed. At base camp a sled was being organised to evacuate the sherpa to BC. Our team radioed in at about 2 pm saying all was well and they would be resting up for the summit bid. They were ecstatic when I broke the good news to them about the weather. The gamble looked like it would pay off.

Mok and I were in no condition to head up to C3. There was also a great deal of frustration at C2 and BC. C2 was largely deserted except for Hoffman's sherpas and there was not a soul at the tents of Himalayan Kingdoms. We began rummaging through their site for the special splints needed for the sherpa. After searching several tents, we found them. Most of the commercial team's radios had been fried when connected to a faulty electrical appliance so the group was hamstrung in terms of communications. The deputy guide, Jim Williams, had raced up to C3 to assist and was not at C2 either. Apa Sherpa, the eight-time summitter, refused to help further. It was understandable. He and his sherpas were saving their energy for their push up to the Col with Hoffman's team. Hoffman was gambling that he could summit with his team on May 20.

**They were ecstatic when I broke the good news to them about the weather. The gamble looked like it would pay off.**

At about 4 pm, the clouds had come in and most of the Cwm [Welsh term for a valley] below C2 was a mass of dirty, yellow clouds. At Whittaker's camp, Mok and I found Tom Whittaker lying on his back. He had just come up, hoping to beat the cyclone. But he was late. He was a full day behind Hoffman and two days behind the main body of climbers. He looked exhausted and his voice was raspy. There was also a watery cough. He mentioned how he was going to rest a little and then climb directly to South Col from around 3 am the following morning. He would then be able to attempt the summit on May 20. Mok and I exchanged glances. Later I shared my views with Mok.

### MEMBERS OF THE 1998 SINGAPORE MOUNT EVEREST TEAM

**Singapore**

David Lim Yew Lee, 33, leader/climber (multimedia executive)
Justin Lean Jin Kiat, 25, climber/communications (student)
Khoo Swee Chiow, 33, climber (systems analyst)
Leong Chee Mun, 33, climber (teacher)
Edwin Siew Cheok Wai, 28, climber (outdoor activities instructor)
Mok Ying Jang, 30, climber (physician)
Robert Goh Ee Kiat, 33 (defence engineer)
Mohd Rozani Maarof, 30 (service technician)
Shani Tan Siam Wei, 39, team doctor (anaesthetist)
Johann Annuar, 23, communications officer (student)
Bruce Mackenzie Niven, 63, base camp manager (consultant)

**Nepal**

Man Bahadur Tamang (*sirdar*)

**Climbing sherpas**

Kunga Sherpa (deputy *sirdar*)
Dorje Phulilie
Pasang Gambu
Kami Rita
Nawang Phurba
Phurba Sherpa
Fura Dorje
Dawa Tshering
Lhakpa Tshering
Dawa Gyalzen
Lila Bahadur Tamang

**Other base camp staff**

Urke Tamang
Sonam Lama
Pralhad Pokharel (liaison officer)
Thal Bahadur Adhikari (Badri)
Birbahadur Tamang
Gun Bahadur Tamang
Yula Tshering

"That guy's going to kill himself if he tries that," I said, unimpressed with Tom's health and his ambitious climbing schedule.

The next morning was a bright day, and the usual C2 chill dissipated with the sun. After breakfast all three of us waited impatiently as the climbers progressed. Radio calls to Bruce the Emir reported nothing new. The last call from Swee at about 6 am reported that they had passed the Balcony and were en route to the South Summit. He sounded lucid and strong. There were few calls from the others and I hoped that they were well and had tuned in to our calls.

The plan would be for our climbers to drop off a half-used bottle of Poisk [oxygen] on the Balcony. They would make a switch to the black LSE and breathe on that until the South Summit. I knew they had done this already. Swee reported that there was quite a bit of snow and the route was packed with the 40-plus climbers and sherpas. A slight breeze had picked up at C2 but the weather up high still looked pretty clear. Despite the loss of our own summit chances, we are all pretty excited at C2 and hoping for a big success.

At about 9.15 am, we heard Swee's unmistakable voice. They had reached the South Summit. Mok, Leong [Chee Mun] and I let out a big cheer. It meant that they were well inside the turnaround time of noon and would bag the summit over the next hour. From the South Summit, the fresh bottle of Poisk that had been carried by their sherpa would be used. A higher flow-rate of 3-4 litres could be enjoyed for the hour long section negotiating the last problem, the Hillary Step. On returning to the South Summit after summitting, the LSE bottle would be retrieved (it would still have a few hours of oxygen left in it) by the climber and the descent to the Col would continue. The half-empty bottle left there earlier in the morning on the Balcony would provide enough oxygen until they reached the tents at South Col. And they had plenty in reserve and the oxygen sequencing seemed to be going nicely.

Swee came on the radio again.

"We have a problem. There doesn't seem to be any rope left," he said.

Too pleased with the imminent success to absorb what he said, I replied, suggesting that they wait for it to be fixed. It was, after all, just a short section to the Hillary Step; probably not needing more than a hundred metres of fixed line or so.

"You don't understand," he said calmly but firmly. "The situation is more serious than you think. There is just no more rope left."

At about 9.30 am, Swee radioed again, saying that they were turning back. The disappointment cut us to the bone. I radioed the team and asked for positional updates as they descended. Above, a small cloud had descended over the summit area and a steady breeze blew at C2. The three of us at C2 just kept shaking our heads and speculating as to why everybody had turned around. What had gone wrong with the fixed rope?

"Four years of hard work – I can't believe it!" I said.

The first Singapore Everest expedition team at base camp, 1998. From left: Johann, Bruce, Shani, Justin, Robert, Swee Chiow, Mok, Edwin, Leong, David and Rozani. *Courtesy of David Lim.*

If there was a time profanities were in order, this was it. The weather was reasonable and the team was fit. And they were only 100 vertical metres away from the summit. The long straggling crowd of climbers picked their way slowly down the summit ridge. I kept tuning into the other channels to check if more information could be gleaned about the situation. Then in the late morning, I heard Mick's [Crosthwaite from Henry Todd's team] voice on the radio. Since everyone had turned around, I assumed that Henry's team, which included the British army lads, and Alan Silva were also descending to South Col.

"Henry, this is Mick. We've found Alan. He's in a bad way. He's out of oxygen. Can we use some oxygen around here?"

Henry's calm voice came over the airwaves. But this time, there was a strained edge to the plummy accent.

"Whatever you do, do not use oxygen belonging to other teams," he said.

At that point, I broke into the conversation. I offered a partly used bottle from our Balcony cache if Mick and his team could find it. As our team had not pushed for the summit, they would not need the half-empties that had been left there earlier in the morning. Alan seemed to be in a deadly situation, half-comatose on the summit ridge. The situation resolved itself as Henry's sherpas arrived on the scene and more oxygen was found for Alan.

I received one brief radio call from Roz at about noon but little was heard from the others until 2.30 pm when everyone had descended safely. ♦

Edwin Siew on the summit of Everest, 25 May 1998. *Photo by Bernardo Guarachi.*

Postcript: Six days later, on 25 May 1998, Edwin Siew and Khoo Swee Chiow, accompanied by four Nepalese sherpas, successfully summited Mount Everest. It was the team's second attempt. The Singapore Mount Everest team was conferred the Singapore Youth Award (Sports and Adventure) by the National Youth Council in July 1998, as their "exemplary dedication, discipline and determination to be the first Singapore team to conquer Mount Everest serve[d] as an inspiration to all Singaporeans".[5] *Mountain to Climb* is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected branch libraries (call nos. RSING 796.522092 LIM and SING 796.522092 LIM).


**NOTES**

1 Mount Everest is known as Chomolungma by the Tibetans and Sagarmatha by the Nepalese, which mean "Goddess Mother of the World" and "Goddess of the Sky" respectively.

2 Freddie Wilkinson, "Want to climb Mount Everest? Here's What You Need to Know," *National Geographic*, 29 October 2022, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/article/climbing-mount-everest-1.

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4 David Lim, *Mountain to Climb: The Quest for Everest and Beyond* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 1999). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 796.522092 LIM); David Lim, *Mountain to Climb: The Quest for Everest and Beyond* (Singapore: South Col Adventures, 2006). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 796.522092 LIM)

5 Daisy Ho, "Everest Team Bags Award," *Straits Times*, 30 June 1998, 23; "Who Reached the Summit First?," *Straits Times*, 28 May 1998, 31. (From NewspaperSG)

# ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF Martial Arts

## A HISTORY OF THE SINGAPORE CHIN WOO (ATHLETIC) ASSOCIATION

The Singapore Chin Woo (Athletic) Association donated its collection of photographs and materials to the National Library, Singapore, in 2023. Find out more about the history of one of Singapore's oldest martial arts associations.

By Seow Peck Ngiam

Fans of Bruce Lee (李小龙) will remember the 1972 movie *Fist of Fury* (精武门) with Lee starring as Chen Zhen (陈真), whose skills as a martial artist helps restore Chinese self-respect and honour. Set in Shanghai during the early 20th century, the movie depicts Lee as a student of a great martial arts master, Huo Yuanjia (霍元甲).[1]

While Chen Zhen only existed in the movie, Huo was a real person. He is associated with the founding of the Shanghai Chin Woo (Athletic) Federation (上海中央精武体育总会), one of the early public martial arts institutions in China, and which still exists today.[2]

Chin Woo members during a mass martial arts workout at the association's athletic field in Tanjong Pagar (Duxton Plain Park today) in the 1950s. *Donated by Singapore Chin Woo (Athletic) Association. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.*

**Seow Peck Ngiam** is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. Her responsibilities include selection, evaluation and management of materials for the Chinese and donor collections. She also conducts research and writes on collection highlights for the library.

### Branching Out to Singapore

After its founding in Shanghai in the early 20th century, the federation expanded, setting up branches around China. In 1920, representatives from the federation travelled to Southeast Asia to encourage the overseas Chinese to set up martial arts schools in their own communities. In Singapore, the delegation was warmly welcomed by prominent Chinese leaders such as Lim Boon Keng, Eu Tong Sen and Lim Nee Soon. Martial arts performances and documentary screenings were held, which were well received by the Chinese community.[3]

Inspired by the visit, Cai Jinglin (蔡景麟), a Singapore-based martial arts instructor with links to Shanghai Chin Woo, teamed up with Yang Zhaozhen (杨兆桢) and led a founding committee that included businessmen like Lim Nee Soon. The Singapore branch of the federation was established in 1921.[4]





Since its founding in 1921, the Chin Woo Association had moved a few times before relocating to its current premises at 90 Neil Road in 1940, where it remains to this present day. *Donated by Singapore Chin Woo (Athletic) Association. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.*

About a year later, on 9 August 1922, it was officially registered by the colonial government as the Chinese Chin Wu (Athletic) Association (星洲中国精武体育会).[5] (In 1960, the organisation assumed its current name, the Singapore Chin Woo [Athletic] Association.[6]) The association's objectives are to impart martial arts, strengthen the body and mind, and instil "wisdom, benevolence, courage" ("智、仁、勇") in its members, as embodied in its emblem of a shield with five pointed edges.[7]

In 1953, the association mooted the establishment of a federation comprising the various Chin Woo athletic associations in Malaya (南洋中国精武会总会). The purpose was to "unite Chin Woo associations in Singapore and all over Malaya, encourage each other, jointly promote Chin Woo, improve the level of martial arts, enhance the efficiency of administration, contribute to the economy, and sponsor charitable and public welfare undertakings".[8] The Chinese name of the federation was changed to 马来亚精武体育会总会 (Malaya Chin Woo Athletic Association Federation) when it was registered in 1954.[9] (The federation has also been referred to as 南洋马来亚精武体育会总会 [Nanyang Malaya Chin Woo Athletic Association Federation].[10])

### Martial Arts and Lion Dancing

Singapore Chin Woo teaches a variety of traditional Chinese martial arts, originating mainly from the Yellow River, Yangtze River and Pearl River regions of China. Its core curriculum revolves around 10 basic sets of martial arts forms (基本十套拳), namely Tai Tui (潭腿), Gong Li Quan (功力拳), Da Zhan Quan (大战拳), Jie Quan (节拳), Qun Yang Gun (群羊棍), Ba Gua Dao (八卦刀), Wu Hu Qiang (五虎枪), Jie Tan Tui (接潭腿), Tao Quan (套拳), Dan Dao Chuan Qiang (单刀串枪), as well as various forms of Tai Ji (太极).[11]

The association also became particularly well known for its lion dance troupe in Singapore. The troupe was founded in 1934 after a pair of northern lions were brought to Singapore by Wei Yuan Feng (魏元峰), a pioneer martial arts instructor who was formerly with Chin Woo in Shanghai.[12]

**(Top)** The second batch of graduating students with the instructors, Zhao Liancheng (赵连城) (third from left) and Liu Qinggui (刘清溎) (fourth from left), who were sent to Singapore by the Shanghai Chin Woo (Athletic) Federation, 1928. *Donated by Singapore Chin Woo (Athletic) Association. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.*

**(Above)** Queen Elizabeth II being greeted by a Golden Lion Dance performance by the Chin Woo lion dance troupe during her visit to Tanjong Pagar Conservation Area, 1989. *Donated by Singapore Chin Woo (Athletic) Association. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.*

The heads of the lions, however, were heavy and uncomfortable and so Wei, together with another instructor Fang You Chang (方又昌), decided to remake them. Instead of mud and sand, they used bamboo for the lion's head, which was decorated with golden paper and golden yellow wool. They also made a cape for the lion's body using golden yellow Manila hemp, a strong fibrous material from the Philippines.[13] Thus was born the association's distinctive golden lion.

The period between the 1960s and the 1980s was the peak of the lion dance troupe. In 1976, the image of the association's lion was printed on Singapore's $10 note. Today, the Golden Lion dance is a signature of the association and integrates gongs, drums and the *suona* (唢呐), a Chinese wind instrument.[14]

The troupe eventually also began performing the Southern Lion dance after He Shun (何顺), a famous Southern Lion Dance practitioner joined the association in 1953. Through his efforts, as well as those of other teachers, the troupe won the Southern Lion Excellence Award at the 7th National Pugilistic Competition in 1984.[15]

Chin Woo's membership increased as Singapore rebuilt its society and economy after the Japanese Occupation (1942–45). This record, dating back to 1946, documents the association's plans for expanding its athletic field in Tanjong Pagar. It also lists all donations sought for the expansion of the training ground and for expenses such as rent for the land and other miscellaneous purposes. *Donated by Singapore Chin Woo (Athletic) Association. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.*

## Chin Woo's Donation of Materials to the National Library

In 2023, the association donated 150 items to the National Library. The donated materials comprise both physical and digital photographs as well as records and publications produced by Chin Woo, including a digital copy of their 100th anniversary publication.

One interesting record dates back to 1946 and documents the association's plans for expanding its athletic field which was used for regular training sessions. Chin Woo had leased a 4,880 sq ft (453 sq m) space from the government and money was needed to fund its refurbishment, rent and other miscellaneous expenses.

The association managed to raise more than a thousand dollars, and this document records all the donations. The largest single donation was $700 and came from Nanyang Hwa Pek Thung Hsiang Hoey (南洋华北同乡会), a clan made up of members from provinces in northern China. It had been founded by Wei, the martial arts instructor with Chin Woo.

Chin Woo's award-winning lion dance troupe was often invited for performances. This lion dance was performed at the opening ceremony of the Primary Production Department's exhibition booth at an agricultural show in Kallang Park in September 1965. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was the guest of honour. *Donated by Singapore Chin Woo (Athletic) Association. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.*

**(Top)** When Singapore was proclaimed a City of the British Commonwealth by a royal charter on 22 September 1951, Chin Woo was part of the procession from Lau Pat Sat to Shenton Way to celebrate the event. *Donated by Singapore Chin Woo (Athletic) Association. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.*

**(Above)** Chin Woo's Peking opera troupe was established in 1959 and performed notable martial arts-related works such as *Xin Tie Gong Ji* (新铁公鸡) and *San Cha Kou* (三岔口). Shown here is a stage scene of *San Cha Kou* in the 1960s. *Donated by Singapore Chin Woo (Athletic) Association. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.*

A view of the completed Chin Woo athletic field in Tanjong Pagar. A steel sign that reads "Chin Woo (Athletic) Association Athletic Field" in Chinese is visible at the entrance, c. 1940s. *Donated by Singapore Chin Woo (Athletic) Association. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.*

Today, the Singapore Chin Woo (Athletic) Association is one of the oldest Chinese martial arts associations in Singapore.[16] In addition to martial arts, lion dance and flag dancing, Chin Woo conducts Chinese language classes and bookkeeping classes. They also have a choir and a Peking opera troupe, and offer recreational and fitness activities such as football, basketball, wrestling, dance and yoga.[17] ♦

The Singapore Chin Woo (Athletic) Association collection will be made available at the National Library and online in due course. Find more materials in the collection from our catalogue (https://search.nlb.gov.sg/onesearch/) and website (https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/nlonline).

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"Ge de Jingwuhui dai biao ji yi shang jue zu lianhe jigou ding ming wei Nanyang zhongguo jingwuhui zonghui tong guo zhang cheng xu chu chang wu wei yuan ji ge bu zhi yuan" 各地精武会代表集怡商决组联合机构定名为南洋中国精武会总会通过章程选出常务委员及各部职员 (Representatives of Chinese martial arts associations from various states met in Ipoh and decided on the formation of Nanyang Zhongguo Jingwuhui Zonghui), 南洋商报 *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 6 May 1953, 9. (From NewspaperSG)

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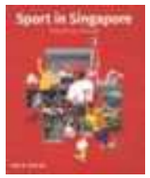


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