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A CENTURY OF SINGAPORE'S CINEMAS

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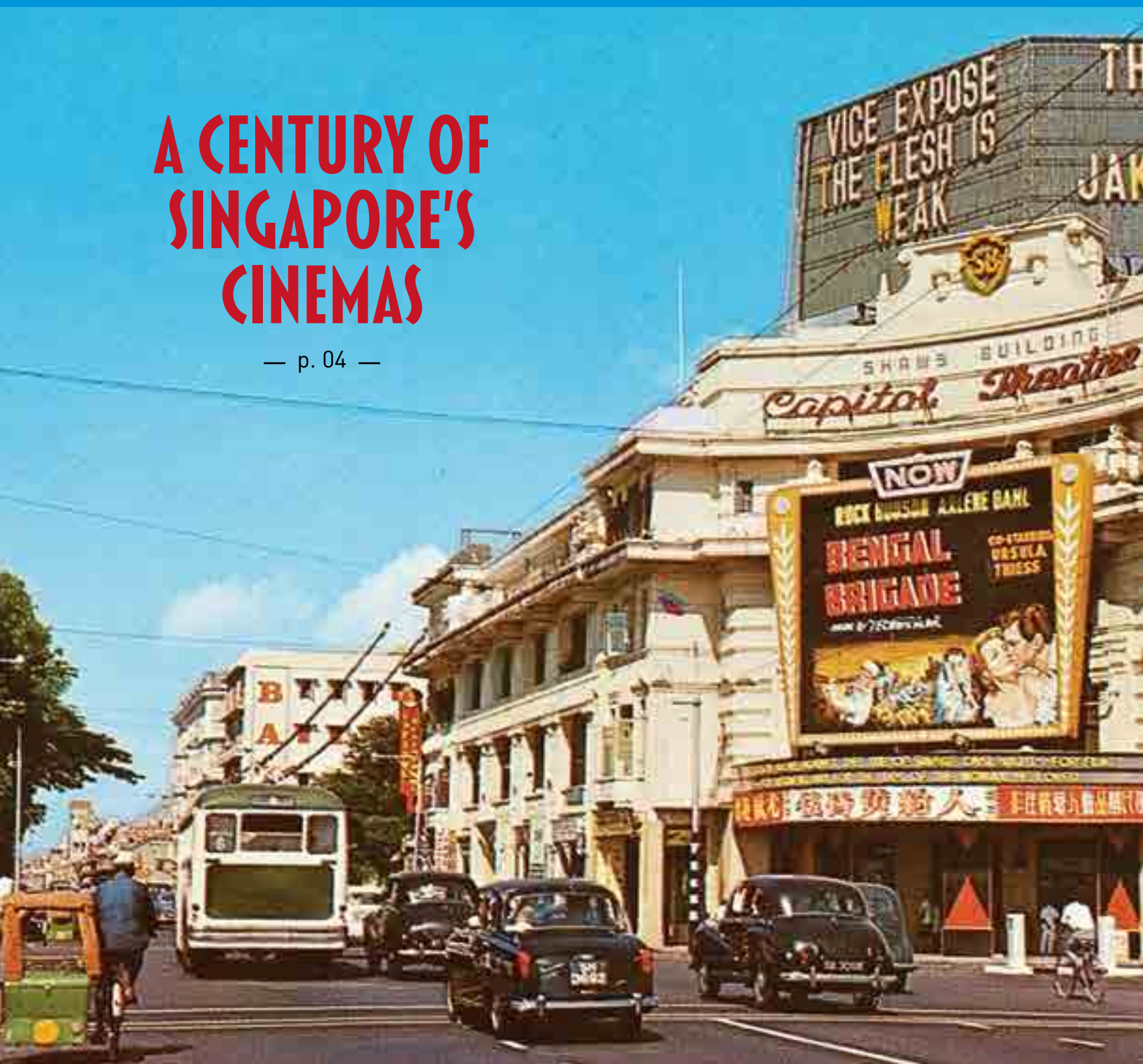

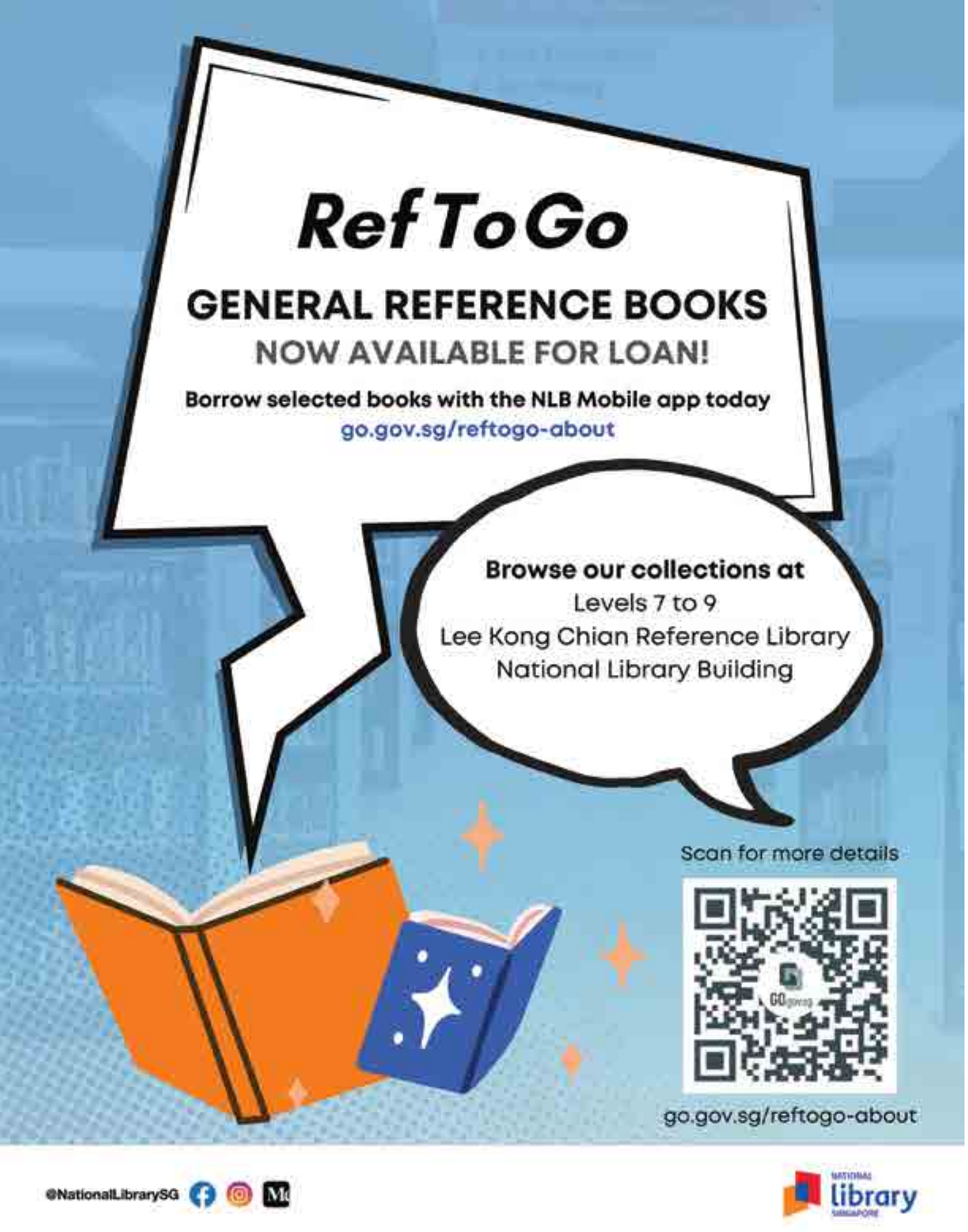

Director's Note

For many of us, going to the cinema to watch a movie was a rite of passage. But these days, we are spoiled for choice – one need not "go" anywhere to watch a flick or two with device in hand. It is thus timely that writer Alvin Tan shows us how the moviegoing experience in Singapore has changed in the last 100 years.

It is not a well-known fact, but one thing that cinemas helped usher in is air conditioning. Movie theatres were one of the first places in Singapore to get this revolutionary technology. Fiona Williamson brings us the cool story of how this process unfolded.

I used to love going to the movies and I remember eagerly turning to the newspapers to find out what was showing where. I don't do that anymore though. Newspapers have certainly changed a lot since I was a teenager. But that's to be expected. The *Straits Times* turned 180 in 2025 and you can't realistically assume something will remain unchanged over 18 years, let alone 180. To mark this momentous event, former *Straits Times* journalist Irene Hoe delves into the archives to bring us lesser-known facts about Singapore's paper of record.

The double coconut palm is an endangered tree that produces the world's heaviest – and also the world's most suggestive-looking – fruit. Because it takes 25 to 40 years to reach sexual maturity, getting these trees to reproduce is a tall order. In fact, to fertilise a female double coconut tree in Honolulu in 2011, botanists in Singapore and Honolulu had to devise a way to transport pollen all the way from Singapore's Botanic Gardens 11,000 km away. In his colourful Hawaiian shirt, Choo Ruizhi plays tour guide across history and geography.

Bata is a household name and many of us would have grown up owning a pair of Bata shoes, especially for going to school. Bata may look like a local company but it was actually founded in a town that is now part of the Czech Republic. In the old days, the company would send Czechs to cities around the world to work in Bata stores, which is how Jan Beránek's granduncle Silvestr Němec ended up in Singapore fighting the Japanese during the Second World War.

These are just some of the exciting stories that you can find in this issue of *BiblioAsia*. Kick off your (Bata) shoes, turn on the air conditioning, grab a piña colada and enjoy!

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On the cover
Capitol Theatre, c. 1958. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20080000052 - 0101).*

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A CENTURY OF SINGAPORE'S CINEMAS

Once central to Singapore's social and cultural life, cinemas went from being majestic, memorable landmarks to more utilitarian and prosaic halls housed in shopping malls.

By Alvin Tan

Capitol Theatre and the adjoining Namazie Mansions at the junction of Stamford Road and North Bridge Road, c.1950. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980005110 - 0043).*

Alvin Tan is an independent researcher and writer focusing on Singapore history, heritage and society. He is the author of *Singapore: A Very Short History – From Temasek to Tomorrow* (Talisman Publishing, 2nd edition, 2022) and the editor of *Singapore at Random: Magic, Myths and Milestones* (Talisman Publishing, 2021).

For film aficionados in Singapore, Tuesday, 19 August 2025, was a black day. That was when The Projector – Singapore's only independent cinema – announced that it would cease all operations immediately, with all screenings and events cancelled. Citing "rising operational costs, shifting audience habits and the global decline in cinema attendance", The Projector would go into liquidation with debts totalling $1.2 million.[1] This was followed by an announcement a few weeks later that Cathay Cineplexes would be wound up and go into voluntary liquidation.[2] Is this curtains for the cinema industry in Singapore?

Cinemas were once institutions that served important social, cultural, educational and economic functions. In the pre-television era, these landmark buildings provided the people with communal experiences. Today, for most people, watching a movie has gone from being a shared experience to a siloed and personalised act of private, if not solitary, consumption, on a glass screen slightly wider than one's palm. Or if one makes the effort to go to the cinema, it means traversing the many floors in a shopping mall before locating it on the uppermost floor, one option among the many offerings and services available.

Little but a Novelty?

Singapore's first enclosed cinema – the Paris Cinematograph – opened in 1904, in a section of the Malay Theatre on Victoria Street. Before this, film screenings took place in tents or in existing theatres and music halls. For the locals, the cinema added another option to the rich repertoire of street entertainment available at the time, such as Chinese opera, Javanese *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) and *bangsawan* (Malay opera).

As "talkies" (films with sound) came on the scene, *bangsawan* failed to compete and former *bangsawan* venues were converted into movie theatres. In February 1935, Theatre Royal on North Bridge Road – ostensibly the first permanent *bangsawan* venue – was modernised, renamed Royal Theatre and eventually screened Tamil "talkies" in place of *bangsawan* performances.[3]

Meanwhile, with their moving images (and eventually sound), cinemas in Singapore grew in popularity. New venues appeared, some of which became household names and geographical landmarks. In 1909, Tan Cheng Kee – the eldest son of the Melaka-born Peranakan entrepreneur Tan Keong Saik (Keong Saik Road in Singapore was named after him) – bought the Marlborough and the adjacent Alhambra theatres on Beach Road. He rebuilt the Alhambra in 1914 per the design of Eurasian architect J.B. Westerhout and reopened it to great fanfare in 1916.[4]

Theatre Royal on North Bridge Road, c. 1910. It was the first permanent venue for *bangsawan* (Malay opera) performances. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980007360 - 0033).*

The cinema was nicknamed "Hai Kee", meaning "edge of the sea" in Hokkien because of its beachfront location. The Alhambra could seat 3,500 patrons who could take in the sea view from its tea garden, which came with a live orchestra to boot.[5] These marked Tan's first forays into Singapore's cinema business. His pioneering moves predated the better-known Shaw Brothers and Cathay Organisation by more than a decade.

Tan went on to acquire the Palladium on Orchard Road in 1918 for $25,000 – way below its $60,000 construction cost. Tan remodelled this erstwhile rival of the Alhambra, renaming it the Pavilion in 1925.[6] At the same time, he rebuilt his first acquisition – the Marlborough – and equipped it with electric fans and lighting to make for a more comfortable viewer experience.

A shrewd businessman, Tan was an inveterate upgrader who willingly invested to make his cinemas relevant and appealing. In 1930, he shelled out $100,000 to update and improve the Alhambra which, together with the screening rights he obtained from major film producers Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, United Artists, Fox Film Corporation and Warner Brothers, ensured that the crowds kept coming.[7]

The late 1920s onwards saw a boom in the movie theatre industry. In 1929, Jubilee Theatre on North Bridge Road opened. It was among the first cinemas to be installed with equipment to support "talkies". In the 1950s, it was the premier theatre for Cantonese films, with bookings having to be made one week in advance.

A year later, Capitol Theatre, owned by the Namazie brothers, opened on 22 May 1930. Located at the junction of Stamford Road and North Bridge Road, it was not just another cinema. It was a high-end destination that exuded a touch of upmarket class that none of the other cinemas quite managed to replicate.[8]

Inspired by the Roxy Theatre in New York, Capitol's British architects, P.H. Keys and F. Dowdeswell, designed a building that remains an architectural landmark to this day. Capitol was in many ways a cinema of superlatives. It was the largest theatre in the Far East with its 1,600-seating capacity. It housed what was then the largest projection room in the world, built with reinforced concrete, the latest construction material. It screened its films with the world's latest Simplex deluxe projectors.

Its ventilation system, novel and innovative for its time, pumped in cooled air for the comfort of its patrons, who were decked out in their best. Most importantly, it was built and equipped specifically for "talkies", with special attention paid to its acoustic design and performance.[9]

The others were not to be outdone though. On 3 October 1939, Singapore's first skyscraper, the 16-storey Cathay Building opened at the foot of Mount Sophia. Housing a hotel, a restaurant and Singapore's first air-conditioned cinema with 1,321 seats, it was owned by the film magnate Loke Wan Tho, who established Cathay Organisation in 1935.[10]

(Above left) The Marlborough on Beach Road, 1938–39. Along with the Alhambra, it was demolished in the 1970s to make way for the Shaw Towers complex. *RAFSA Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore Media - Image no. 20170000052 - 0172).*

(Left) The 16-storey Cathay Building was Singapore's first skyscraper, c. 1970. It was appropriated by the Japanese during the Japanese Occupation. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

On 15 February 1942, the British surrendered Singapore to the Japanese after a bruising 70-day campaign that saw them retreat down the length of the Malay Peninsula. Cathay Building, which was hit by enemy gunfire, was appropriated by the Japanese during the occupation years and renamed Dai Toa Gekijo (Greater Eastern Asian Theatre). It was used as the base for Radio Syonan, and as the headquarters of the propaganda department and the military information bureau.

Postwar Recovery and Growth (1946–65)

After the war, the cinema industry underwent a period of consolidation and growth. In 1946, Shaw Brothers – founded by Shanghainese brothers Runme Shaw and Run Run Shaw in 1928, who were originally from Ningbo, China – acquired Capitol Theatre.[11] Tan Cheng Kee's cinema empire, which had divested the Alhambra and the Marlborough in the late 1930s to Shaw Brothers, exited the scene.[12]

Shaw Brothers, which became the holding company Shaw Organisation in 1988, built Shaw House at the junction of Orchard Road and Scotts Road. The 10-storey building officially opened in November 1958, and was constructed using Italian marble, specially hammered plaster and Venetian glass mosaic tiles. Lido Cinema, described as the "most luxurious theatre in Singapore" by the *Straits Times*, opened beside Shaw House in February 1959.[13]

Cathay Organisation also began expanding its cinema chain.[14] In January 1951, Cathay, after renovating and renaming the Alhambra as the New Alhambra, reopened a year later with a screening of the Western film, *Broken Arrow*.[15]

A new player also entered the market. In 1945, Goh Eng Wah, originally from Muar, Johor, partnered a friend to open and screen films in Victory Theatre at Happy World (later renamed Gay World) amusement park.[16] He subsequently acquired stakes in Happy Theatre and Silver World, both at the same location. The eponymously named Eng Wah Organisation, founded in 1946, grew to become a major player in cinemas in Housing and Development Board (HDB) estates across Singapore in the 1970s.[17] Eng Wah, together with Shaw and Cathay, eventually dominated the postwar movie theatre business.

Jubilee Theatre on North Bridge Road, 1937–38. It was demolished in the 1990s to make way for an annex to the Raffles Hotel, and today comprises shops, restaurants and Jubilee Hall. *RAFSA Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20170000052 - 0152).*

New Towns, New Lifestyles, New Cinemas (1965–97)

Singapore's independence and subsequent urban redevelopment marked the next stage of expansion for cinemas. In late 1965, two cinemas – Venus Theatre and Golden City Theatre – opened in Queenstown, Singapore's first satellite town by the Singapore Improvement Trust.[18] Located on Margaret Drive, these were followed by the dual-screen Queenstown Cinema and Bowling Centre in 1977.[19]

This reflected the ethos of HDB's town planning, that is each satellite or new town would be self-contained with a range of amenities and services that residents could access conveniently. In 1972, Toa Payoh Cinema and Kong Chian Cinema (later renamed Central Cinema) opened, bringing the cinematic experience to HDB's first new town. Other names soon appeared: Savoy in Boon Lay in 1978, Broadway in Ang Mo Kio in 1979, Empress in Clementi in 1980, Bedok Cinema in 1980, Jubilee in Ang Mo Kio in 1981, and Princess and Raja in Bedok in 1983.[20]

Over in Jurong, Cathay developed the Jurong Drive-In Cinema, which opened on 14 July 1971. The drive-in combined the privilege of car ownership and the fun of film viewing. It afforded cinemagoers a modicum of privacy and the atmosphere of a carnival, under the night sky.

Located on Yuan Ching Road, it occupied 5.6 ha of land for 900 cars, which required 259,939 cc of infill, and had a massive 14.3 m by 33.5 m screen, hanging 7.6 m from the ground. To add to the atmosphere, vendors sold ice cream and cold drinks to customers in their cars, which were hooked up with speakers. Even its location in far-flung Jurong was a draw. Hotel executive Lilian Gan recalled: "My husband and I used to go there once or twice a week. We'd go on long drives on weekends and end up there."[21]

Although many cinemas were opening in the suburbs, there were signs from the late 1970s that the movie theatre was losing its draw. Jubilee Theatre on North Bridge Road closed in 1978 due to the lack of modern facilities and declining business. Then in September 1985, Jurong Drive-In closed for good after a short 15-year existence.[22] Both the iconic Lido and the original Shaw House were demolished in 1990 to make way for the present-day Shaw House, with the theatre being integrated into the building as opposed to a standalone structure.

Standalone cinemas became an endangered species after Yishun 10, Singapore's first multi-hall cinema complex, or cineplex, showed the way. The cineplex opened on 27 May 1992 in Yishun, then the last stop on the North-South Line of the Mass Rapid Transit system. Clad in metal and red and adorned with science-fiction motifs, the building, designed by architect Geoffrey Malone, was intended to look like "a rocket ship which had landed in Yishun from outer space".[23]

Yishun 10 had scale. It spanned 3,635 sq m of floor space, with 2,552 seats across 10 movie halls. It housed popular and affordable dining options – Burger King, Milan Pizza and Long John Silver's – serving as a one-stop destination for the moviegoer. It even offered 10 movies for the price of nine through a stored-value card, allowing cashless payment. This combination of novelty, high-tech cool and convenience proved to be a hit for Golden Village Entertainment – it drew more than three million visitors by the end of 1993.[24]

Soon, other cineplexes followed suit. In September 1993, Shaw Organisation opened a four-screen cineplex in Jurong Entertainment Centre, which also housed an amusement arcade, a bowling alley and Fuji Ice Palace, an ice skating rink. And in 1997, Cathay's youth-centric Cineleisure Orchard opened at the site of the former Orchard Cinema, offering multiple screens, retail floors and dining options.[25]

The cineplex was a model that existing single-hall cinemas – whose attendance numbers fell in the 1990s – found difficult to beat. By the early 2000s, many household names had ceased operations altogether.

Lido Theatre and Shaw House at the junction of Orchard Road and Scotts Road, 1960s. Both buildings were demolished in 1990 to make way for the present-day Shaw House which houses Lido cineplex, Isetan Department Store and retail shops. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980002919 - 0084).*

From Big Screen to Small Screen (1995–2025)

While the cineplexes continued to draw crowds, the industry was facing incipient challenges from sociocultural and technological shifts that slowly but surely shaped and changed – perhaps irreversibly – the way people entertained themselves. In 1995, Singapore Cable Vision, on the back of robust financial and infrastructure support by a consortium, launched its first subscription cable television service in Tampines.[26]

Priced at $29.95 a month, cable TV promised a world of entertainment at your fingertips and in the comfort of your own home.[27] In 1996, 57,580 subscribers signed up, which tripled to 255,000 over the next five years.[28] Along with the easy availability of video cassette recorders and rampant video piracy, cinema attendance started to fall.[29]

Older cinemas began closing despite attempts at reconfiguring themselves as cineplexes. Some, such as Ang Mo Kio's Jubilee Theatre, were demolished but others were repurposed, while still others were given conservation status.[30]

In 1986, Fairfield Methodist Church acquired and refurbished the Metropole Theatre in Tanjong Pagar. The cinema, with its distinctive Modernist curves and wall-to-wall window facade, was designed by local architect Wong Foo Nam and completed in 1958.[31]

Toa Payoh's eponymously named cinema, which opened in 1972, changed hands twice and is now ERA Asia-Pacific's new headquarters. Majestic Theatre on Eu Tong Sen Street in Chinatown, a Swan & Maclaren design, was granted conservation status in 1989. It currently houses the Majestic Smart Seniors Applied Learning Centre.[32]

By the 2000s, standalone cinemas were well on their way to becoming extinct. Recognising this, the state decided to designate Cathay Building's Art Deco facade as a national monument in 2003, while the building itself was demolished and replaced by a modern steel-and-glass construction. In 2007, the same conservation status was granted to Capitol Theatre.[33]

Majestic Theatre on Eu Tong Sen Street in Chinatown, 1960s. It was designed by Swan & Maclaren in a mix of Western and Chinese architectural styles. The building today houses the Smart Seniors Applied Learning Centre by RSVP Singapore. *RAFSA Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20220000214 - 1262).*

Disruption finally and truly arrived in June 2007 when the Apple iPhone was launched. Within a decade, Singapore would be inundated by a wave of converging technological developments – mobile broadband, social media, fibre broadband and nationwide 4G coverage – enabling mobile computing that would radically transform how entertainment is consumed.[34]

Both cinemas and cable TV operators worldwide faced the prospect of freefalling viewership as content creation became increasingly social, personal and personalised. Now, you can watch a movie in the comfort of your home, watch whatever whenever you want, as many times as you wish, and rewatching whatever you've watched earlier. You can also create your own content and put it online, and wait or hope for it to go viral.

Cinema attendance fell from a peak of 22 million in 2013 to 10 million in 2023. Despite an increase in the number of cinema screens from 218 to 277 in the same period, seating capacity held steady at about 39,000 between 2013 and 2023.[35]

The numbers have only gotten worse since the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the Singapore Film Commission, cinema attendance plunged from 18.46 million in 2019 to just 8.4 million in 2024, a drop of 54.5 percent.[36]

The dominoes began falling on 11 January 2022 when Filmgarde Cineplexes announced it was shutting down its cinemas in Century Square and Bugis+. In June 2022, Cathay Cineplex at the landmark Cathay Building shuttered. This was followed by closures in Ang Mo Kio Hub, Parkway Parade, Cineleisure Orchard and West Mall over the next three years.[37]

In October 2024, Eng Wah sold its cinema operations to mm2 Asia, marking its exit from the industry after 79 years. In March 2025, Filmgarde announced on Instagram that its last remaining screen in Leisure Park Kallang would close, after 18 years in the industry.[38] These were undoubtedly business decisions driven by falling cinema attendance, tight margins, rental and cost pressures and other related factors, in particular, the economic fallout from the Covid-19 years.

The Future of Cinema

Are present developments merely a market shakeout allowing the fittest to survive or do they portend the end of cinemagoing? Shaw Organisation is certainly not throwing in the towel just yet. In fact, Shaw has announced that it is upgrading Lido with laser projectors and new screens. Full renovation works will only be completed at the end of 2025.[39]

Shaw has also taken over the cinema space in Jurong's Jem mall after the landlord terminated its lease with Cathay Cineplexes and repossessed the cinema space in March 2025. Mark Shaw, director of the Shaw Organisation Group of Companies, told the *Straits Times* that Shaw Theatres at Jem would open in stages from November 2025.[40]

While Hollywood blockbusters and big-name directors might still pull in crowds on occasion, cinema operators will have to address the larger societal and economic shifts that have eroded the spatial, visual and aural advantages that their big halls, big screens and big sound systems have traditionally enjoyed. With the shift in consumption patterns and the current preference for solitary, private viewing over communal experiences, cinemas certainly must reinvent themselves if they hope to continue avoiding the fate of the *bangsawan* theatres that they replaced a century ago. ♦

Metropole Theatre at the junction of Tanjong Pagar Road and Maxwell Road, late 1960s. The building, which has a curved facade with floor-to-ceiling windows, presently serves as the Fairfield Methodist Church. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

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What You Didn't Know About the STRAITS TIMES

The first fake news. The illegal postwar edition. Newsmen turned presidents. The *Straits Times* has had an interesting 180 years.

By Irene Hoe

The first issue of the *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce* published on 15 July 1845. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

The first issue of the *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce* (as it was originally named) rolled off the presses in July 1845. Back then, it competed with the only other English-language newspaper, the *Singapore Free Press*.

Over the last 180 years, the newspaper has accompanied Singapore's growth from colonial outpost to modern city-state. Along the way, the *Straits Times* has not simply been a witness to these changes; it has also been part of the story. Here are some facts about the *Straits Times* of which most people are probably not aware.

180 Years Ago

There has been much speculation about the origins of the *Straits Times*. According to Walter Makepeace, Gilbert E. Brooke and Roland St J. Braddell in *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, the Armenian merchant Marterus Thaddeus Apcar, of the firm Apcar & Stephens, planned to set up a newspaper in Singapore and ordered printing equipment from England. But Apcar died and fellow Armenian Catchick Moses took over the equipment and invited Robert Carr Woods, an English editor from Bombay, to be the first editor of the paper.[1]

While it has been surmised by some that Apcar had ordered the press to publish a newspaper in English, C.M. Turnbull wrote in her book, *Dateline Singapore: 150 Years of The Straits Times*, that it was more likely Apcar had planned to publish books in Armenian for the community in Singapore. However, following the collapse of Apcar & Stephens in 1845, Moses acquired the printing equipment, hired Woods and started up the *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce* at No. 7 Commercial Square, in present-day Raffles Place. The paper's first print run was far from impressive: at just eight folio pages and "printed with new type, on fine English paper", it sold for half a Spanish dollar.[2]

Woods promised somewhat grandiloquently in his opening editorial: "Convinced that the Press has a noble object for its end, believing it to be an engine of power capable of ameliorating the condition of mankind, we approach the task our new undertaking imposes on us with delicacy and diffidence."[3]

Then a weekly newspaper, which appeared only on Tuesday mornings, the *Straits Times* was not even Singapore's first. By the time the newcomer

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was first published on 15 July 1845, Singapore already had newspapers for more than 20 years. The pioneering effort was the *Singapore Chronicle*, which made its debut on 1 January 1824.[4]

In 1835, the *Chronicle* was sold, and in October that year, a rival, the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, popped up. Two years later, the *Chronicle* published its last issue on 30 September 1837, leaving the field wide open for the *Free Press* until the *Straits Messenger* appeared on 16 April 1842. But when the *Messenger*'s owner died in 1843, so did his newspaper.[5]

Within four months of the *Straits Times*' debut, it was publishing twice a week, albeit as a smaller-sized paper. But by the end of the paper's first year, Woods could not convince Moses that the *Straits Times* was commercially viable. When Moses put the paper up for sale in September 1846, there were no offers.[6]

Armenian businessman Catchick Moses (pictured here) and Robert Carr Woods, an English editor from Bombay, founded the *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce* on 15 July 1845. Woods was the paper's first editor. *Image reproduced from Charles Burton Buckley, An Anecdotal History of Singapore, vol. 1 (Singapore: Printed by Fraser & Neave, Limited, 1902.), facing p. 344. Collection of the National Library Singapore (From National Library Online).*

Fake News

Fake news likely had its beginnings in Singapore much further back in history than you would ever imagine. In fact, the first likely instance of fake news happened in the *Straits Times* not quite a year after the paper made its debut.

It was June 1846 and as Turnbull described in *Dateline Singapore*, as an American ship sailed across the harbour, several merchants paid a boy to "dash into the newspaper office dripping wet just as the paper was going to press, with a tale that he had swum ashore bearing a letter from the captain giving the prices at recent opium sales in Calcutta". This "news" was apparently meant to stir panic in the commercial sector.[7]

And the fakery? The ship had actually been on its way from Bombay, not Calcutta, and the "news" deliberately misspelled the ship's captain's name. But the story was irresistible. Woods published the "scoop" on 13 June 1846 only to discover that it was a fake.[8] He then put up a notice at the office of the *Straits Times*, offering a $50 bounty for exposing the "scoundrel" responsible.[9]

World War II

The fall of Singapore to the Japanese on 15 February 1942 led to the renaming of Singapore as Syonan-to and the disappearance of the *Straits Times* for a spell. But although the Japanese Occupation (which ended only in September 1945) put a temporary stop to publication, the lights stayed on in the offices of the *Straits Times* because the Japanese used the newsroom to publish their own English-language version of a newspaper.

They called the initial version the *Shonan Times*, with the first issue published on 20 February 1942. It was renamed the *Syonan Times* the very next day.[10] To get the wartime paper going, the Japanese employed several of the technicians who had worked for the *Straits Times* and also hired several local journalists to produce the paper in English.[11]

The publication was renamed the *Syonan Sinbun* on 8 December 1942, commemorating the first anniversary of the war, and then the *Syonan Shimbun* on the second anniversary. This name remained until the last issue on 4 September 1945.[12]

First Issue After the War

During the Japanese Occupation, the first issue of the *Shonan Times* was printed on 20 February 1942 at the former premises of the *Straits Times*. On the very next day, the paper was renamed the *Syonan Times* pictured here. The paper then became the *Syonan Sinbun* on 8 December 1942 followed by the *Syonan Shimbun* on 8 December 1943. This name remained until its last issue on 4 September 1945. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

It would not be until 7 September 1945 that the *Straits Times* would once again reappear in print. It looked neither like the newspaper of today nor the prewar version. This issue was, however, illegal as the British Military Administration (BMA; the interim administrator of British Malaya from August 1945 to the establishment of the Malayan Union in April 1946) had reserved all newsprint for the official *Malayan Times*.[13]

Undeterred by the post-surrender looting and mayhem, a team of *Straits Times* journalists and other determined technical crew members

located a working linotype machine and managed to run off 10,000 copies of the paper, in defiance of the BMA ban.[14]

The revived paper was printed in an abbreviated format. But perhaps the most consequential change was that the news, rather than advertisements, was printed on the front page. So it was that the reborn newspaper carried these main headlines: "Singapore Is British Again!" and "King's Message to Malaya: Peace, Security and Happiness".[15]

Several of the journalists then set off with copies of the paper piled high in a car commandeered for the purpose to Changi Camp. There, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Commander of the South East Asia Command, was speaking to former prisoners-of-war when Hugh Savage, one of the editorial staff, shouted, "Straits Times! Straits Times! Today's news today!" Mountbatten asked to see the paper and was delighted with it. He told the journalists that "it was a splendid effort and they should carry on with the good work". When Savage explained that "this was probably the first and last copy… Mountbatten gave orders that they should continue publication and report any interference to him".[16]

The postwar editions of the *Straits Times* survived on the efforts of skeleton staff – some almost literally skeletal after internment during the Occupation. Not before and not since have the newspaper's staff suffered this way. Seven of the paper's 16 European staff had died and many media employees died trying to escape from Singapore, or perished as prisoners-of-war on forced marches.[17]

Maria Hertogh Riots

To journalists in hot pursuit of news, the Maria Hertogh story in 1950 was the perfect story. A world war. A family torn apart. A tortured international tussle over a 13-year-old Dutch Eurasian girl renamed Nadra by her adoptive Muslim mother and then married off to prevent her from being reunited with her biological parents.[18]


COURT SITS TILL SEVEN AT NIGHT

A [illegible] left the Singapore High Court last night after Mr. Justice Brown had reserved his decision on her future, a waiting crowd of about 1,000 people broke through a police cordon and surged around her.

For seven minutes, Maria, protected by constables who [illegible] hands around her and kept the crowd away, was the centre of a noisy [illegible] scene outside a Singapore court.

Bazaar Drawn

The court had risen at seven o'clock at night—another race occurrence—and the crowd had been waiting since four o'clock to see the 13-year-old Dutch girl.

The flashes of Press photographers' bulbs as Maria came out of court on the arm of her foster-mother, Che Aminah, was the signal for the throng.

Maria Hertogh and her foster mother Che Aminah leaving the Singapore High Court on 24 November 1950. Justice Brown reserved judgement in the custody case. *Source: The Straits Times, 25 November 1950, 1 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

Incensed by news coverage in the English- and Malay-language newspapers, people took to the streets. Violence ensued. As Turnbull summed up the tragedy in *Dateline Singapore*: "Mobs roamed the streets, dragging Europeans and Eurasians out of cars, beating them up and killing them. The army was called out."[19] The violence that took place between 11 and 13 December 1950 remains an indelible stain on Singapore's history.

The terrible cost of the Maria Hertogh riots: 18 dead, 173 injured, hundreds arrested, including the rioters and members of the Nadra Action Committee formed by a radical politician who headed the Singapore Muslim League and was editor-in-chief of two newspapers. And a scar that for some had yet to heal.[20]

In the aftermath, the Commission of Inquiry set up to investigate the riots ruled on 7 August 1951 that the riots erupted as a result of the Muslim community's anger over the decision of the court to return Maria to her birth parents and the interim decision to keep the young girl in the Roman Catholic Convent of the Good Shepherd to await her return to the Netherlands. The judges also noted the instigatory contribution of the sensational press coverage and the actions of the Nadra Action Committee.[21]

Maria and her biological mother left for the Netherlands on 12 December 1950. Maria died of leukaemia on 8 July 2009, in Huijbergen, the Netherlands.[22]

Although the *Straits Times* did not directly cause the riots, it was "partly to blame for the events leading up to the riots". Sensational coverage of the custody case by English-language newspapers of the day, including the *Straits Times*, was cited as a major factor in causing the riots. In the Legislative Council, Progressive Party leader C.C. Tan berated the press for "its irresponsible manner and utter disregard of the hatred and passions which they were helping to inflame".[23]

On 18 December 1950, the *Straits Times* published a notice that it would stop printing discussion of racial and religious aspects of the case in its correspondence columns "to assist in promoting the return of a calm and normal atmosphere in Singapore". As Turnbull wrote in *Dateline Singapore*: "From that time the paper's policy was to tread warily and avoid inflaming racial or religious passions. The experience of the Hertogh riots provided a more effective and lasting lesson than restrictive legislation."[24]

Times House

Commercial Square, later renamed Raffles Place, was the birthplace of the newspaper. In 1903, the *Straits Times* moved to Cecil Street and then subsequently acquired additional premises on Anson Road. But the site most people have associated with the "moving story" of the newspaper was Times House, where the Straits Times Press office and its varied branches were housed for 44 years.[25]

Back in 1952, the newspaper's 20-year-old overworked Crabtree rotary press was printing two million copies a month. The following year, the company bought a $500,000 replacement, also a Crabtree, that could print 40,000 copies of a 24-page newspaper in an hour.[26]

By the mid-1950s, some 110 years from its unlikely and almost accidental start in 1845, the company's operations – including its printing works – had outgrown its antiquated premises on Cecil Street and Anson Road. The decision was made to move its overcrowded operations to a single site. The company bought land at the junction of Kim Seng Road and River Valley Road and in 1958, moved in and consolidated all its operations at 390 Kim Seng Road. It later had to house its magazine offshoot, Times Periodicals, on Thomson Road.[27]

By the 1970s, the company's growth necessitated the construction of an extra multistorey building which would house, among other things, the newsroom of a new financial daily, the *Business Times*, on 1 October 1976. This paper had grown out of the four-page *Times Business* section in the *Straits Times*.[28]

Times House was also the birthplace of the afternoon tabloid *New Nation*, first published on 18 January 1971.[29] The paper met its untimely end with the last issue on 13 November 1982 so that a rival, the *Singapore Monitor*, could enter the afternoon newspaper market.[30]

On 4 August 1984, Singapore Press Holdings Limited was incorporated and formed through a merger of Straits Times Press Limited, Singapore News and Publications Limited and Times Publishing Berhad. In 2002, the newspaper operations of Singapore Press Holdings moved to Toa Payoh.[31]

It was also in this "newspaper maternity ward" that the *New Paper* was born in 1988, before being reduced to a freesheet in 2016 and then, in December 2021, virtualised and reduced to a digital publication.[32] Late in October 2025, it was announced that the *New Paper* would merge with the news website *Stomp*.

Just Peter

In its 180-year history, the newsrooms of the *Straits Times* and its associated newspapers have been ruled by a plethora of editors, but none have had the impact or the longevity of Peter Lim Heng Loong and the man who succeeded him, Cheong Yip Seng. Between them, they racked up 86 years with the Straits Times Press and its successor organisations.

(Top) Staff at work in the Production Department, Times House, 1975. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

(Above) Times House on Kim Seng Road, 1977. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

Officially, Lim spent 33 years as a journalist. The telltale signs were already there as early as 1957 when he represented Singapore at the New York Herald Youth Forum. However, aviation was his first love and if he had his way, he would have stuck with the Malayan Air Training Corps and become a fighter pilot. But he was grounded by shortsightedness and got diverted into journalism.

Lim was a reporter, a noted columnist with the newspapers and, unusually, continued to report and write even from overseas while many editors would have been content to assign such work to a senior reporter or an overseas correspondent.

During most of the 1960s, Lim was an active unionist, becoming chairman then secretary-general of the Singapore National Union of Journalists. He even led workers on a strike, perhaps the first to do so, and eventually led the papers as editor-in-chief. He had also served on the employee panel of the Industrial Arbitration Court, and was named as a Friend of Labour by the National Trades Union Congress.

In the 1970s, Lim became chief editor of the *New Nation*. Then in 1978, he ascended to editor-in-chief of the *Straits Times* and a member of the board of directors. In 1987, he was named chief editor to plan and launch the *New Paper*.[33]

Lim's leadership there lasted until August 1990 when he left the corporation that had metamorphosed into Singapore Press Holdings, or SPH. He left "for a

President Wee Kim Wee (left) chatting with old press and media friends at the Singapore Press Club's pre-dinner cocktail reception at Shangri-La Hotel, 1985. He was once the editorial manager of the *Straits Times*. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no.19980006027 - 0067).*

different lifestyle", says his curriculum vitae. And what a lifestyle change it was. It included what no one – least of all, the man himself – had expected. At 80, he wed his longtime partner, Lindy Ong.

Throughout Lim's decades in the newspaper business, there was one constant. He was never "Mr Lim". Straight off, he was known simply as "Peter", perhaps deliberately to set himself apart from his polar opposite, the man he had succeeded as editor-in-chief, T.S. Khoo, who had always been "Mr Khoo".

When Cheong Yip Seng took over as editor-in-chief of English and Malay newspapers in January 1987, he also eschewed the "Mr". He was simply "Cheong".[34]

From the Press Room to the Istana

The place of the *Straits Times* in Singapore's history isn't just engraved in newsprint. How many newspapers can claim to have contributed three of a nation's nine presidents? The distinguished gentlemen are former editorial manager Wee Kim Wee, Singapore's fourth president; former executive chairman S.R. Nathan, its sixth president; and former chairman Tony Tan Keng Yam, its seventh president.

Wee dropped out of school in 1930 to join the *Straits Times* as a clerk. He got his big break in journalism when he was asked to report on sports after office hours. In 1941 he left the paper for the United Press Associations (UPA), which later became known as UPI, or United Press International.[35]

When the Japanese invaded Malaya, Wee worked in the Air Raid Precautions Unit. During the Japanese Occupation, he peddled miscellaneous goods in Kampong Bahru. After the war, it was back to journalism at UPA where he became the office manager and chief correspondent before quitting the agency in 1959 to rejoin the *Straits Times* as deputy editor.[36]

In 1966, with Malaysia and Indonesia caught up in the violent throes of Konfrontasi (Indonesia's opposition to the formation and existence of the Federation of Malaysia; 1963–66), Wee went to Indonesia to interview Lieutenant-General Suharto and broke the news that Indonesia intended to end Konfrontasi.[37]

Wee retired from the *Straits Times* in 1973 when Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam asked him to serve as a diplomat. So Wee was appointed high commissioner to Malaysia (1973–80) and then ambassador to Japan and the Republic of Korea (1980–84). He died on 2 May 2005.[38]

Singapore's sixth president has the shortest name of the nine. Everyone referred to him as SR and few ever used his full name, Sellapan Ramanathan. Still, the one with the shortest name served the longest stint as president, from 1999 to 2011.

Nathan is also Singapore's only president to have been expelled from school – twice – and also possibly the only one to have run away from home. A lengthy career in the civil service from 1955 included a spell with the National Trades Union Congress and stints in the Foreign Affairs and Home Affairs ministries. His name burst into the headlines in 1974 when he was with the Defence Ministry. In what became known as the *Laju* hijacking incident, Nathan led a 13-member delegation that accompanied the terrorists on a flight to Kuwait to secure the release of the ferry's crew and guarantee the terrorists' safe passage.[39]

In 1982, Nathan left the civil service to become executive chairman of Straits Times Press and then Singapore Press Holdings, before leaving in 1988 to serve as high commissioner to Malaysia (1988–90) and then ambassador to the United States of America (1990–96). Then came the 12 years of his presidency, and a rather hyperactive "retirement" during which he wrote several books, became a distinguished senior fellow at the Singapore Management University and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Nathan died on 22 August 2016.[40]

Tan entered politics in 1979 and held various key ministerial posts before retiring as deputy prime minister in August 2005. He was appointed executive director and deputy chairman of GIC, and later chairman of Singapore Press Holdings. In June 2011, Tan resigned from his posts in GIC and Singapore Press Holdings to contest the presidential election. He served as Singapore's seventh president between 2011 and 2017.[41]

These are not the only connections between journalism and the Istana. The first was Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Malay for "Head of State") Yusof Ishak, the first journalist to become the official occupant of the Istana. He was Yang di-Pertuan Negara from 1959 to 1965, before being installed as independent Singapore's very first president in 1965. He served until his death from heart failure on 23 November 1970.[42]

Yusof Ishak started a sports magazine, then joined the daily *Warta Malaya* before leaving in 1939 to co-found the *Utusan Melayu* daily in Kuala Lumpur. He returned to Singapore to chair the Public Service Commission at the invitation of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. His portrait still adorns Singapore's currency notes.[43]

The journalism connection with the Istana doesn't end there. Current President of Singapore Tharman Shanmugaratnam's wife, Jane Yumiko Ittogi, briefly worked as a leader/feature writer with the *Straits Times* in the 1980s before returning to law.[44]

Whither the Straits Times?

At one point in its history, the *Straits Times* strode across the media landscape in Singapore like a Colossus. As the main English-language paper, it was the paper of record, and anyone who needed to learn about what was going on in the country simply had to read the paper. As a result, advertisers flocked to the newspaper because it was, at the time, the most cost-efficient way to reach potential consumers.

The newspaper was flush with cash, and the newspaper itself, especially its Saturday edition, was so thick that they had to break the newspaper up into several discrete sections.

Those glory days are over thanks to the rise of search engines and social media, which offered advertisers an even cheaper and more targeted way to reach consumers than display ads in the daily broadsheet. Singapore Press Holdings, the parent company, has been delisted from the Singapore Exchange. The newspaper business has been transferred to SPH Media Trust, a company limited by guarantee that is privately managed.

The fate of the *Straits Times* is not unique though. Newspapers around the world are struggling due to the loss of revenue thanks to the rise of the internet. As it has done in the last 180 years, the *Straits Times* will have to adapt to new circumstances if it is to survive to see its 200th anniversary. ♦


The Straits Times

EXCLUSIVE! Suharto tells The Straits Times...

Peace: The sooner the better

'We want to end it today, not tomorrow if possible'

In April 1966, Wee Kim Wee secured an exclusive interview with Lieutenant-General Suharto where he announced his intention to end Konfrontasi. The interview was published in the *Straits Times* on 2 May 1966. *Source: The Straits Times, 2 May 1966, 1 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

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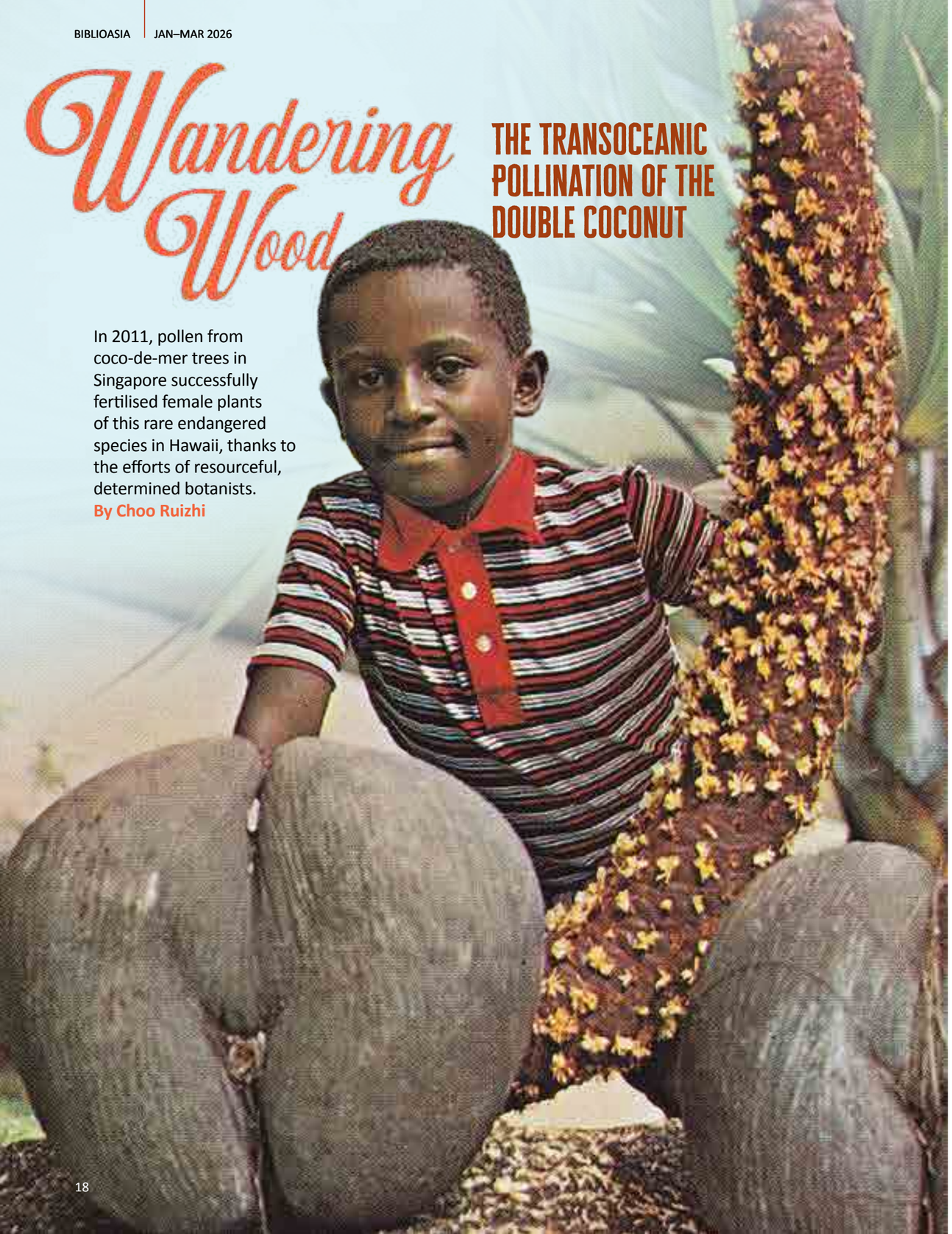
Wandering Wood

THE TRANSOCEANIC POLLINATION OF THE DOUBLE COCONUT

In 2011, pollen from coco-de-mer trees in Singapore successfully fertilised female plants of this rare endangered species in Hawaii, thanks to the efforts of resourceful, determined botanists.

By Choo Ruizhi



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On the afternoon of 31 May 2011, about five days after they had been dispatched from Singapore's Botanic Gardens, pollen from a rare and endangered palm species, the double coconut (*Lodoicea maldivica*), made landfall in Honolulu, Hawaii. Having travelled nearly 11,000 km, the grains were immediately applied to female flowers of the palm at the Foster Botanical Garden, a garden within the network of the Honolulu Botanical Gardens. Although many of the flowers "were already... past optimal time for successful pollination", the fertilisation was successful; weeks later, a single fruit began to develop.

It was a historic accomplishment, marking the culmination of numerous unsuccessful pollination attempts since 1984. Working together, botanists from Honolulu and Singapore had devised techniques to collect and ship pollen from a palm, native to Seychelles and propagated in Singapore, to fertilise another specimen across the Pacific Ocean.[1]

The double coconut is a remarkable plant. It is named for the two distinct rounded lobes on its fruit that resemble two coconuts joined together, a provocative shape that has aroused comparisons to other parts of the human anatomy. Each fruit can weigh up to 45 kg, the heaviest and largest in the plant kingdom. They often contain one seed, or nut, also the heaviest in the plant kingdom, weighing up to 25 kg.

Geographical Distribution and Characteristics

The double coconut tree is a tall, straight-trunked palm that can grow up to 25 m. It occurs in the wild on only two islands in the Seychelles archipelago: Praslin and Curieuse. The palm is one of the slowest-growing plant species, taking 25 to 40 years to reach sexual maturity and about a century to reach full size. The oldest individuals are estimated to be over 200 years old.[2]

The palm is a dioecious plant, meaning that it bears male and female flowers on separate trees. Male flowers are small and borne on distinctive sausage-like stalks (or "inflorescences") up to 2 m long, while female flowers grow out of thick, bulbed stalks. Once fertilised, the female flower takes six or more years to fully mature into a single fruit.[3]

(Facing page) A Seychellois boy at Vallée de Mai, Praslin, Seychelles, early 1970s. The fruit of the double coconut has two lobes and loosely resembles a woman's pelvis. The male flowers are borne on sausage-like stalks that can grow up to 2 m long. Photo by Dino Sassi - Marcel Fayon, Photo Eden Ltd. *From Wikimedia Commons*.

By the time Western observers first encountered it in 1563, the double coconut was already highly esteemed for its medicinal properties in localities along the coastlines of the Indian Ocean, and as far afield as Indonesia, China and Japan.[4] Yet their means of reproduction remained a mystery. Because they also washed up regularly on the shores of Sri Lanka and the Maldives during the monsoon season, these nuts were widely believed to grow on mythical submerged trees, a persistent legend that resulted in the moniker "coco-de-mer", or coconut of the sea.

When the plant species was first incorporated into Western scientific taxonomies, the botanist Johann Gmelin had assumed the plant originated in the Maldives and accorded it the species name *maldivica*. Although Gmelin's perspectives were later proven false, the rules of scientific nomenclature required that the first valid species label be retained. The double coconut's scientific designation thus reflects earlier Western perceptions of the tree. It was only in 1768 that the nut was finally traced to Praslin in the Seychelles archipelago by a French expedition helmed by the explorer Marc-Joseph Marion du Fresne.[5]

In its native environment, the coco-de-mer is a keystone species and supports many endemic animals like the Seychelles black parrot (*Coracopsis nigra*), Seychelles bulbul (*Hypsipetes crassirostris*) and the endangered Seychelles tiger chameleon (*Archaius tigris*). Due to the year-round flowering of male trees, the coco-de-mer's pollen is also an important food source for many vertebrate and invertebrate species.[6]

One of the female double coconut palms at the Foster Botanical Gardens in Honolulu, 21 September 2024. Fruits on the tree indicate that this individual was successfully pollinated. *Photo by Choo Ruizhi*.

The Allure of the Nuts

To humans, however, it is the coco-de-mer's gigantic nuts which have been most coveted. Partly due to its suggestive shape, which loosely resembles a woman's pelvis, the nut was long believed by many cultures to possess great medicinal value, serving variously as an aphrodisiac, an antiscorbutic (cure for scurvy), a cure for venereal disease and an antidote against poisons. The French naturalist A.M. Rochon recorded that the nuts were "in so much request all over Asia, that it was not uncommon, about the year 1759... to see them sold for upwards of four hundred pounds sterling each".[7]

The coco-de-mer became entangled with the British Empire in the 19th century when Britain became the world's preeminent industrial, commercial and imperial power.[8] Living nuts first arrived at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in 1827, although efforts to germinate them in Britain were consistently unsuccessful even up to 1890.[9]

Germination attempts in other British botanical gardens around the world were more successful where the double coconut had been sent to be studied and cultivated for its potential economic and horticultural value.

A young female double coconut palm at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, 9 January 2025. *Photo by Choo Ruizhi.*

One of these localities was the Singapore Botanic Gardens (SBG). Colonial scientists first attempted to raise the double coconut in Singapore in 1875. Although this individual did not survive, several more attempts were made to cultivate the coco-de-mer over the years.[10]

For instance, perusing more than a century of the Gardens' publications, Felix Merklinger, horticulture manager at the SBG between September 2014 and February 2017, notes that a juvenile coco-de-mer was pictured in I.H. Burkhill's *The Botanic Gardens, Singapore: Illustrated Guide* (first published in 1900).[11]

The plant was featured in the SBG's 1955 annual report when it mentioned that two coco-de-mer trees had died: one killed by red stripe weevils (*Rhynchophorus schach*); the second cut down after being severely damaged by the falling branches of an adjacent tree. Fortunately, the SBG was able to obtain four more double coconut seeds directly from Seychelles that same year for cultivation.[12]

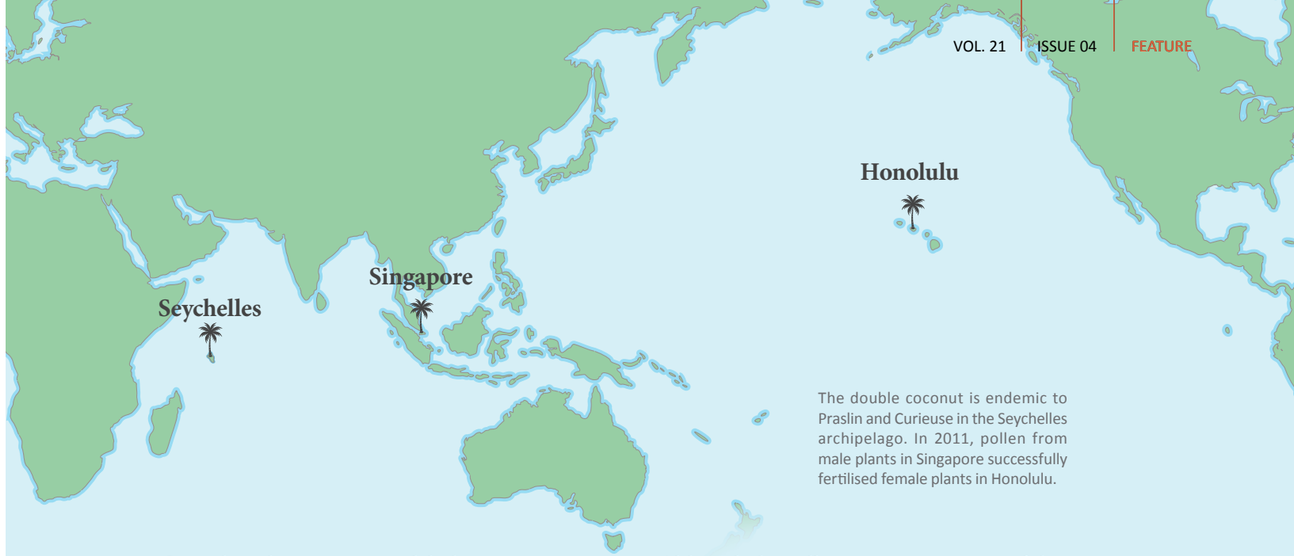
In 2012, *Gardenwise*, the SBG's magazine, reported that the Gardens possessed "three mature double coconuts, one female and two males, plus several younger trees". The mature individuals likely stemmed from the 1955 planting. SBG staff have since successfully pollinated the female tree using pollen from the male plants on several occasions, resulting in a growing number of young palms and developing fruits.[13]

Conserving Unruly Giants

Efforts to propagate the coco-de-mer have become more urgent since 2007 when the palm was categorised as "Endangered" in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species.[14] In the wild, there are only three natural populations totalling about 8,200 mature individuals on the Praslin and Curieuse islands in the Seychelles archipelago, making them highly vulnerable to sudden, catastrophic events like earthquakes and tsunamis.[15]

The palm is primarily threatened by the overharvesting of its nuts for tourist and commodity markets. Depending on size and symmetry, it was reported that in 2010 a single polished specimen could fetch up to US$400 (about US$593 today), while the kernels, extracted from harvested nuts and also exported to Asia, sold for at least US$65 per kg (around US$96 per kg today).[16]

The problem is compounded by the plant's slow reproductive frequency, which prevents populations from regenerating faster than they can be harvested. Moreover, the sheer mass of the nuts limits how far they can spread by themselves since they sink in water and cannot be dispersed by wind or animals.[17]



The double coconut is endemic to Praslin and Curieuse in the Seychelles archipelago. In 2011, pollen from male plants in Singapore successfully fertilised female plants in Honolulu.

Given their characteristics and the long-running fascination with them, there have, unsurprisingly, been significant efforts to cultivate the double coconut. In addition to Singapore, the coco-de-mer was also grown in tropical botanical gardens such as those in Sri Lanka and Zanzibar. Since then, specimens have been successfully raised in gardens in Bogor (Indonesia), Edinburgh (Scotland) and Honolulu (Hawaii), among other localities.[18]

But because pollination – the transfer of pollen grains from the double coconut's male flowers to fertilise cells in its female flower – is necessary for the coco-de-mer to reproduce, the long-term conservation of the endangered species also requires the successful pollination of female trees. Such a condition becomes challenging for gardens possessing trees of only a single sex.

The two sexually mature specimens at the Foster Botanical Garden in Honolulu were both female trees planted in 1937. But without a male palm producing pollen-bearing flowers, there had been no way for the Hawaiian double coconuts to bear fruit and reproduce. Prior efforts to propagate more coco-de-mer in Hawaii hence centred on obtaining pollen from other botanical gardens.

Between 1984 and 2007, at least three pollination attempts were made using pollen from palms in Sri Lanka (1984), Seychelles (1996) and Singapore (2000). All of these attempts, however, had failed due to the long transit: by the time they arrived in Honolulu, the pollen in the flowers had grown mouldy and were no longer viable.[19]

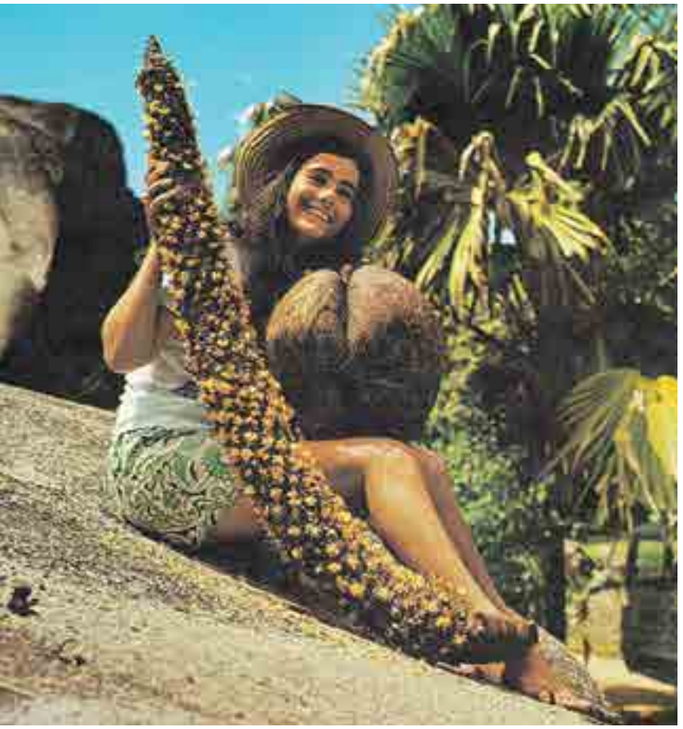
But these failures were meaningful too. The pollination attempt in 2000 had only occurred because Winifred Singeo, director of the Honolulu Botanical Gardens (HBG), had first initiated discussions about pollinating their double coconuts with Chin See Chung, director of the SBG, on the sidelines of the World Botanic Gardens Congress in June 2000.[20]

Although the pollination was unsuccessful, it established the basis for future cooperation between the two botanical gardens. In 2010, the two institutions decided to attempt a fourth pollination. This time, after consulting palm biologists like John Dransfield, head of palm research at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, about more reliable palm pollination methods over long distances, HBG staff chanced upon a 1979 paper by Robert W. Read describing techniques for sending palm pollen through the post.[21]

Read's approach involved the artificial drying of pollen from palm species native to desert regions. Dehydrating the pollen, it was thought, would simply mimic processes such pollen already naturally underwent. The method had since been employed successfully for shipping the palm pollen of species from drier climates across long distances. It was not clear, however, if such techniques would work for palm species from "the ever-wet tropics".[22] Nonetheless, after making adjustments to Read's techniques, HBG and SBG staff then prepared for the next occasion when pollination would become viable: although male double coconuts produce pollen throughout the year, female inflorescences were less common.

They did not have to wait too long. The two female trees in Hawaii have been flowering annually for nearly 30 years. In late May 2011, they bloomed again, setting a whole chain of events into motion. In Singapore on 26 May, a crane truck employed for routine maintenance work was used to collect flowers from the male double coconut tree situated in the Palm Valley of the SBG. Using the pollen from these flowers, staff then hand-pollinated the Gardens' female tree that very same day. It is not known whether this attempt was successful.

Extra male flowers were passed to the SBG's herbarium where their pollen was subsequently extracted and dried over a low heat. The desiccation took two days and by the afternoon of Friday, 27



A woman holding a double coconut and a sausage-like stalk of male flowers at Vallée de Mai, Praslin, Seychelles, early 1970s. Photo by Dino Sassi - Marcel Fayon, Photo Eden Ltd. *From Wikimedia Commons*.

May 2011, three vials of pollen grains were ready to be dispatched.[23] Because some of the materials Read had recommended in 1979 (like gelatin capsules) for shipping the dried pollen were no longer commonly available, SBG staff had to improvise.

The grains were packed in cotton-stoppered vials, placed in a fibre tea bag and stowed in a small resealable plastic sandwich bag. About three teaspoons of silica gel beads were poured into the bag, which was then partly closed to allow air to circulate. The bag was placed into a padded mailing envelope and handed over to an overnight shipping company.[24]

Although the courier service had guaranteed the parcel's delivery to Honolulu within 48 hours, holidays, work schedules and other unforeseen delays jeopardised the pollen's transit. By the time the pollen arrived at the HBG on the afternoon of 31 May 2011 (Honolulu time), 120 hours had elapsed.[25] The pollen was inspected on arrival, and found to be "a light yellow color, dry and powdery, with no sign of mold [sic]".[26]

This was the first parcel of uncontaminated coco-de-mer pollen the HBG had received since it first attempted these transoceanic pollinations in 1984. Two vials were kept in reserve for future pollinations. To maintain their desiccated state, more silica gel, this time in the form of cat litter crystals from a nearby convenience store, was added to the resealable plastic bag sent from the SBG. The package was then immediately refrigerated at 1.1°C and stored for future pollinations.

Meanwhile, one entire vial of pollen was applied to the female flowers at the Foster Botanical Garden. Although they were "already dry at the tips and appeared to be past optimal time for successful pollination", HBG staff proceeded with the pollination. Using a small, pointed paintbrush moistened with tap water, the HBG's plant propagator, Romel Silva, applied the pollen from Singapore to the tips of each of the 10 female Honolulu flowers. The effort proved successful. Several weeks later, one of the pollinated flowers began to swell, developing slowly into a fruit.

In late July 2011, two months after the initial pollination, giant day geckos (*Phelsuma madagascariensis grandis*) in the Foster Botanical Garden began congregating around a second inflorescence. One of the female coco-de-mer trees had put out another 10 flowers. Exuding a strong scent and a sticky mucus, which had enticed the lizards in the first place, the flowers were ready for pollination. Noting these developments, HBG staff prepared for a second pollination attempt. Using the two remaining vials of pollen from Singapore, Silva hand-pollinated all 10 flowers three times over the next few days. This second pollination effort was far more successful: eight of the ten flowers began swelling and developing into young fruits weeks later.[27]

After 27 years, the HBG had finally succeeded in pollinating its female trees on the fourth attempt. The Honolulu double coconuts were nearly 75 years old at the time of pollination; still young, nonetheless, by the timescale of their species.

Wandering Wood

The successful pollination of the Honolulu coco-de-mer arguably appears less exceptional when situated in the longer historical context of plantation agriculture in Singapore. As the historical efforts to cultivate coffee, rubber and oil palm locally demonstrate, colonial scientists have been experimenting with transplanting foreign, potentially profitable plant species to Singaporean soil since the 1800s.[28] Moreover, the desiccation techniques utilised by scientists at the SBG and HBG, the logistical systems that conveyed the pollen to Honolulu and even the communication technologies which allowed plant specialists to coordinate the pollination have all existed for decades.

What perhaps sets this story apart are the reasons for which these significant resources were mobilised and the actors involved. Unlike earlier efforts at economic botany in the 19th and 20th centuries where cash crops had been cultivated in the ceaseless search for profit often by European empires or corporations, the 2011 pollination of the Honolulu coco-de-mer had been conducted in the name of saving a charismatic and endangered palm species.

The success of this relatively simple pollen transfer technique opened up new possibilities for the conservation of the coco-de-mer. Botanical gardens with isolated male or female plants could now exchange pollen with other gardens across long distances, significantly expanding the gene pool and improving the prospects of the double coconut's survival in the 21st century.

Additionally, the collaboration had been researched, coordinated and conducted entirely by non-state actors, i.e., between two institutions of botanical research. Personal relationships between the staff of the SBG and HBG played a crucial role in these conservation efforts, following long-established traditions of cooperation between botanical gardens. For instance, the HBG credited the enthusiastic support of Alan Tan Chye Soon, deputy director of the SBG – who had obtained his Bachelor of Science in Tropical Horticulture at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa – for facilitating the collaboration.[29]

Over the past two centuries, the intense fascination for the coco-de-mer's unique qualities ironically contributed to its decline. Yet such qualities had also allowed these curious trees to be spread outside their native range, initially for economic and then for conservation purposes.

The double coconut's unique qualities had so captivated humans that they devised new ways to disperse and propagate these plants across vast expanses. Human desire, curiosity and ingenuity transformed the coco-de-mer into wandering wood, allowing the tree to thrive unexpectedly in islands and gardens far beyond its natural habitat.

In Seychelles, there is a legend about how the palm reproduces: on stormy nights, male trees are believed to uproot themselves, wandering the forest to mate with female trees. In the rainswept darkness, the distinct sound produced by the leaves of the palm rubbing against one another is said to be the sound of trees mating. Witnessing such an event, however, was believed to result in blindness, or even death for unfortunate observers.[30]

In many respects, these transoceanic pollinations of the coco-de-mer are even more extraordinary than the old Seychellois legends of walking trees, for woven into them, too, is a story of charismatic plants – and the resourceful, determined botanists who worked across international boundaries to save them from extinction. ♦

NOTES

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24 Staples and Singeo, "Dessicating Palm Pollen," 48.

25 Honolulu (GMT-10) is 18 hours behind Singapore (GMT+8). The package was only successfully delivered on the morning of 1 June, Singapore time.

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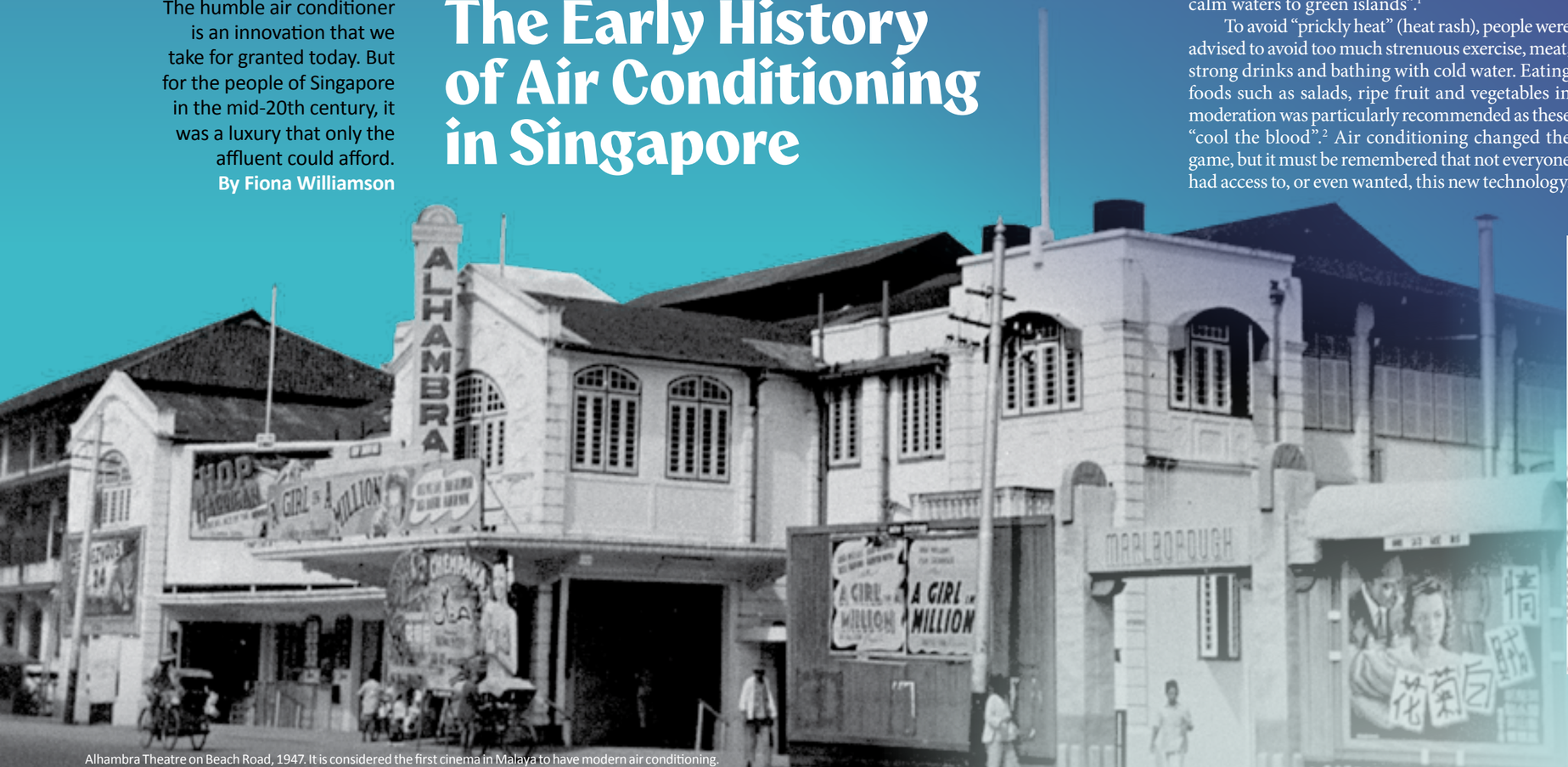
PLAYING IT COOL

The Early History of Air Conditioning in Singapore

The humble air conditioner is an innovation that we take for granted today. But for the people of Singapore in the mid-20th century, it was a luxury that only the affluent could afford.

By Fiona Williamson



Alhambra Theatre on Beach Road, 1947. It is considered the first cinema in Malaya to have modern air conditioning. *Tan Kok Kheng Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no:.20050001019 - 0036).*

Fiona Williamson is Professor of Environmental History in the College of Integrative Studies and Associate Dean (Undergraduate Education) at the Singapore Management University. She is interested in the history of climate, meteorology and extreme weather in Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong.

Before the advent of air conditioning in Singapore, staying cool meant being creative and, ideally, well-off. The bungalows of the colonial elite, Chinese and Europeans alike, would be situated on higher ground with ample gardens to generate maximum exposure to breezes and cooling vegetation.

When the heat became too oppressive, these wealthy inhabitants had the means to relocate. After the arrival of the motorcar, the wealthy could circumnavigate the island, visiting the coastline or a swimming club. The beaches at Pasir Ris, Tanah Merah and Pulau Ubin were especially popular for swimming and relaxing. Government-owned beachside bungalows were let to civil servants for holiday rentals where one could "escape" to a "shady verandah, [with] lofty cool rooms, looking over calm waters to green islands".[1]

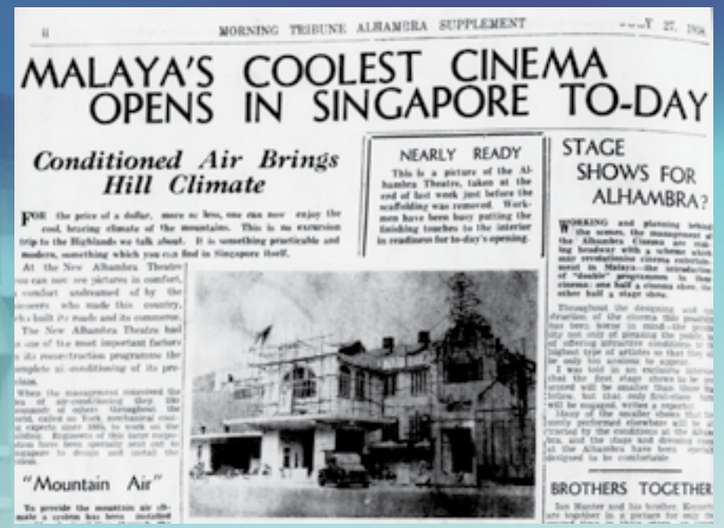
To avoid "prickly heat" (heat rash), people were advised to avoid too much strenuous exercise, meat, strong drinks and bathing with cold water. Eating foods such as salads, ripe fruit and vegetables in moderation was particularly recommended as these "cool the blood".[2] Air conditioning changed the game, but it must be remembered that not everyone had access to, or even wanted, this new technology.

Benefits of Air Conditioning

Air conditioning first came to Singapore in the 1920s and the largest supplier of the technology during the inter-war era was the Carrier Air Conditioning Company of America. Carrier entered the Asian market in the early 1930s, subsequently setting up a regional headquarters in Singapore alongside Tokyo, Hong Kong and Sydney.[3]

The company operated locally through United Engineers Limited which employed Singapore-based contractors for all types of government and commercial air conditioning installations of that era, among other electrical work. As trade picked up from 1936, Carrier appointed a separate marketing representative for Singapore, and the company eventually spread north to Kuala Lumpur (1948) and Penang (1952).[4]

Air conditioning fits a futuristic vision of modernity and progress, and the technology was closely aligned with ideas of health as much as simply staying cool. Air conditioning was hailed as an invention that would not only provide comfort but better health, as influenced by new concerns about industrial pollutants, motorcar fumes and dust in the rapidly growing town. In 1936, for example, a *Morning Tribune* staff writer concluded: "Singapore may be a beauty spot and its strategic position superb, but its climatic conditions have always been a moot point with residents and medical men alike. Its humidity or dampness is



MORNING TRIBUNE ALHAMBRA SUPPLEMENT

MALAYA'S COOLEST CINEMA OPENS IN SINGAPORE TO-DAY

Conditioned Air Brings Hill Climate

FOR the price of a dollar, more or less, one can now enjoy the cool, bracing climate of the mountains. This is no excursion trip to the Highlands we talk about. It is something practicable and modern, something which you can find in Singapore itself.

At the New Alhambra Theatre you can now see pictures in comfort, comfort ordained of by the pioneers who made this country, who built its roads and its commerce. The New Alhambra Theatre had as one of the most important factors in its reconstruction programme the complete air-conditioning of its premises.

Where the management received the services of air-conditioned theatres, equipped on York mechanical engineers' experts since 1935, to work on the plans. Engineers of this latest equipment have been specially sent out by engineers to design and install the plant.

"Mountain Air"

To provide the mountain air climate a system has been installed

NEARLY READY

This is a picture of the Alhambra Theatre, taken at the end of last week just before the scaffolding was removed. Workmen have been busy putting the finishing touches to the interior in readiness for to-day's opening.

STAGE SHOWS FOR ALHAMBRA?

WORKING and planning behind the scenes, the management of the Alhambra Cinema are making broadcast with a scheme which may revolutionise cinema entertainment in Malaya—the introduction of "stage" programmes in the cinema, one half a cinema show, the other half a stage show.

Throughout the designing and construction of the cinema this possibility has been borne in mind—the possibility not only of presenting the usual type of cinema entertainment, but also of offering attractive conditions to a higher type of artiste so that they might be induced to appear.

I was told in an exclusive interview that the first stage shows to be presented will be smaller than those to follow, but that only first-class talent will be engaged, writes a reporter.

Many of the smaller shows that are currently performed elsewhere will be presented by the management of the Alhambra, and the stage and dressing rooms of the Alhambra have been specially designed to be comfortable.

BROTHERS TOGETHER

Ian Hunter and his brother, Kenneth, are together in a picture for next

A supplement in the *Morning Tribune* on the reopening of Alhambra Theatre in July 1938. It was described as "Malaya's Coolest Cinema". *Image reproduced from the Morning Tribune, 27 July 1938, 2. (From NewspaperSG).*

the sore point, but the marvels of modern science and invention can transform the air condition of the interior of Singapore's buildings to the most delightful and healthiest obtaining anywhere."[5]

The benefits to workplace productivity were also frequently cited by the press. In December 1937, the *Malaya Tribune* wrote: "Air conditioning has come as a boon to humanity. It had made it possible for men to work in places where the temperature previously rendered it impossible for them to carry out their employment." The newspaper added that the technology reduced the incidence of tuberculosis, then a major scourge for Singaporean inhabitants, and also contributed to increased efficiency among workers.[6]

Two years later, a study on air conditioning in the tropics was published, which praised its "valuable contribution" in improving mortality outcomes in hospital surgeries and in infant nurseries, due to reducing the effects of outdoor air pollution by cleansing indoor air.[7]

In June 1938, the *Morning Tribune* explained that the main purpose of air conditioning was not to cool but to remove the excess moisture which was considered dangerous to health. "[I]n Singapore, we have too much moisture in the air. The relative humidity is high. We become uncomfortable and suffer because perspiration and body heat are not removed fast enough," the newspaper wrote. "Air conditioning, therefore, is called upon to remove the excess moisture and lower the relative humidity."[8]

(Below) In 1940, Capitol Theatre underwent a major refurbishment during which a new, modern air conditioning system was installed. *Source: The Straits Times, 31 January 1940 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

(Bottom) Capitol Theatre at the junction of Stamford Road and North Bridge Road, c. 1970. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

Air-Conditioned Capitol Has 1,000 New Seats

WITHOUT closing for a single day, the Capitol Theatre, which was opened ten years ago—an event which was described as epoch-making in the history of the theatrical and cinema world of Malaya—has adopted a new dressing which will be introduced to the Singapore public to-morrow.

$50,000 SPENT ON WORK

Seats Improved

(Above) The New World amusement park advertising its new air-conditioned Dance Palace. *Image reproduced from the Morning Tribune, 28 July 1938, 7. (From NewspaperSG).*

(Above right) The entrance to the New World amusement park at Jalan Besar, 1945. *David Turner Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no.20060000528 - 0005).*

Air Conditioning in Singapore

Mechanical air ventilation systems for entertainment spaces in Singapore were the first iteration of the transition to modern cooled and healthy buildings.[9] The new Capitol Theatre, for example, which opened in May 1930, incorporated a mechanical air cooling system in which air was circulated around the theatre from a suction fan in the basement passed through a ventilation system, which filtered, purified and "washed" the air before it was electrically charged in an Ozonair machine and pushed out into the theatre through air vents "with all the freshness of a cool breeze".[10] Within a decade, however, this cooling system was becoming obsolete.

The Alhambra cinema on Beach Road is believed to have been the first movie theatre in Malaya to have modern air conditioning.[11] When it reopened as the New Alhambra in July 1938, it had a new bar, seating and decor but it was the cool air which dominated the discussion at the VIP opening ceremony.

"Entertainment in the East is controlled for the most part by the problem of weather. It is a remarkable fact that the idea of installing an air conditioning plant has not been thought of before," noted the *Morning Tribune*. "There is no doubt that the air conditioning is a huge success – all through the evening there was a pleasant sense of cool dehumidified air. It was perfectly cool and there was no suggestion of any intolerable heat that can so often ruin an evening's entertainment."[12]

Before long, other entertainment spots in Singapore began incorporating air conditioning into their design as a marketing ploy. In 1938, the New World amusement park, which had opened in 1923, advertised its air-conditioned Dance Palace where patrons could "Dance in Perpetual Coolness".[13] Costing $48,500, the *Straits Times* wrote that the "air-conditioning plant has been designed to give the cool and refreshing atmosphere of a hill station, even when there are more than 1,000 people inside".[14]

The *Morning Tribune* said that the dance and cabaret hall was "destined to be the most modern and luxurious in the whole of Malaya" and could "comfortably hold 1,500 people who can dance in a cool, dehumidified building".[15]

Not to be outdone, almost 10 years after Capitol Theatre first opened, the premises underwent a $50,000 refurbishment during which a new, modern air conditioning system was installed – all without closing the theatre. Completed in January 1940, the work involved a massive structural redesign, removing fans and ventilation shafts as well as adding a cooling tower in the roof to remove heat. Like many systems of the era, it was also designed to extract the vast amounts of cigarette fumes generated by public smoking, replacing the stale air with around one ton of new cooled air every minute. This was equivalent to melting 125 tons of ice per day.[16]

These entertainment venues were not the only places to install the new technology. Some other early beneficiaries of air conditioning in Singapore were the Singapore General Hospital, which installed air conditioning in two wards and the operating theatre in 1938, and the Singapore Dairy Farm, which introduced air conditioning for its cattle sheds on the basis that the cows would produce better milk. Dairy Farm cattle were imported Friesians whose native habitat is northern Europe.[17]

MAY 15, 1938

SINGAPORE'S LATEST CABARET

The New World Is Air-conditioned

LARGE OCTAGONAL FLOOR; RISING, REVOLVING STAGE

SINGAPORE'S first air-conditioned cabaret, the large new building constructed for the New World at a cost of $350,000, will be opened next Saturday.

After Mr. W. Burley, president of the Municipal Commission, has cut the red ribbon stretched round the edge of the 4,300 sq. ft. sprung dance floor with a pair of gold-handled scissors at the beginning of the 6.30 p.m. tea dance, cabaret enthusiasts in Singapore will dance for the first time in the cool, "manufactured" atmosphere of a hill station.

With seating accommodation for 1,200, the cabaret is 180 ft. long and the roof has the largest clear span of its type in Malaya.

In the centre of the fully sprung octagonal dance floor, a rising and revolving stage has been installed so that cabaret turns and tableaux can easily be seen without patrons having to crowd to the edge of the dance floor.

Installed at a cost of $45,500, the air-conditioning plant has been designed to give the cool and refreshing atmosphere of a hill station, even when there are more than 1,000 people inside.

The air is slightly cooled and dried by the removal of excessive moisture. Although on entering the cabaret the air feels much cooler, the actual temperature is only a few degrees lower than that outside.

The sensation of comfortable coolness is principally due to the lower humidity of the air forced in under pressure at ceiling level. There will be a complete change of air in the cabaret about every 25 minutes.

In the dehumidification process, moisture of water is extracted from the air every minute, by refrigeration which is equivalent to the melting of 200 lb. of ice every minute or the simultaneous working of about 1,200 domestic refrigerators.

Remembering that large halls often have voices and music, special attention was paid to the acoustics of the building in construction. Acoustical corrections prevent echoes and reverberations, ensuring clear, crisp dance music.

A public address system, the same as that used in the Governor House cabaret in London, has been installed to increase the sound level for the cabaret of such big dimensions.

Although the imposing main entrance is within the grounds of the New World amusement park, patrons wishing to enter only the cabaret will have an entrance from the spacious new car park, accessible from Jalan Besar and Petain Road.

At one end of the building there is a tastefully decorated restaurant, where both European and Chinese food will be served.

Another of the cabaret girls.

One of the dance hostesses

pretty girls in an attractive cottage-dance hostesses waited at a table at the new premises of the New World Cabaret which opens next Saturday.

(Left) The new cabaret of New World amusement park was air-conditioned and "designed to give the cool and refreshing atmosphere of a hill station". *Source: The Straits Times, 15 May 1938 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

(Below left) An advertisement by United Engineers Limited for its Carrier air conditioners. *Image reproduced from the Straits Times, 21 May 1937, 8. (From NewspaperSG).*

Selling the Future

In May 1938, the *Sunday Tribune* reported on a speech given by an electric company official in the United States. Selling the potential of electricity – from powering futurist domestic appliances to germ-destroying ultraviolet rays – the company representative said that by the 1960s, people could "live in a house lighted, cooled, humidified and air-conditioned by electricity".[18]

This was the late 1930s, and there was already a sense that science and technology were not only part of the future but also of the present. This idea of a steady march of progress into a technological future, where cities would be fed by filtered air and artificial sunlight, had penetrated into the heart of the tropics, even if such futurism had been scoffed at earlier that decade.[19]

These technological innovations would be coupled with new styles of architecture "more suitable to the tropics", the *Straits Times* wrote in March 1938, with "modern, flat roofed, reinforced concrete Singapore homes". According to architects, air conditioning can be applied more easily to these homes, dispensing with mosquito nets and natural air flow.[20] Such hyper-modern homes, in stark contrast to the very functional and elegant architectural cooling solutions of the 19th century, epitomised the future of housing in Singapore.

However, domestic air conditioning was beyond the reach of most low-income households. The price of the unit, its installation and running costs were considerations, but there were also many inconsistencies in the electrical infrastructure in colonial Singapore.

When it came to adopting air conditioning back in the 1930s, a press article from 1937 suggested that although the technology had been around for a decade, most people had not bought units for their homes or offices, which the writer blamed on "conservatism". However, the story also noted the cost – around $600 per domestic installation – which was likely the real reason. To put this into perspective, a skilled labourer's earnings were approximately $1.40 per day in 1939.[21]

This technological inequality is put into stark perspective by a story in the *Singapore Free Press* from 1926, when a heat wave saw "hundreds of Asiatic residents from the town districts… spending their nights in the open, the Esplanade having been the centre of unusual crowds during the evenings and nights for the past few days". It was so hot that the newspaper reported it was "impossible to get a cold bath without the addition of ice" because only warm water came out from the taps.[22]

Likewise, in 1948, another heat wave sent people scurrying to the beaches in Katong and Changi and "while town dwellers who were fortunate enough to have a roof garden spent the night on camp beds in the open, others spent the night on five-foot ways, verandah and balconies".[23]

Even for major commercial ventures and government institutions, air conditioning was unevenly appropriated. Not all cinemas were air-conditioned until the 1960s, for example, and many schools lacked any form of cooling technology, even fans in some cases.[24]

Brother Joseph Kiely, for example, had moved to Singapore from Ireland in the 1950s to work and live at the newly built brothers' quarters of St Joseph's Institution. He recalled how only the community room had air conditioning and as there were no fans in their individual quarters, he spent a great deal of time in the community room.[25]

Recollecting his time in Singapore from 1962 to 1965, Royal Air Force officer David Penberthy spoke of how air conditioning barely existed in Singapore. Until one acclimatised to the humidity, the only way to get to sleep was to have "two or three pints of Tiger", he wryly noted. He could not recall air conditioning in "any of the private homes that [he] knew of, with perhaps one or two exceptions in the newer luxury apartment blocks that were going up at that time". "In other words, we lived in exactly the same way as the local population lived – without air conditioning," he said.[26]

Penberthy's recollections suggest that the borders of who had, or had not, adopted this cooling technology were not clear. Indeed, according to Carrier's records of the Far East, government ministries and embassies were the main beneficiaries of large-scale Carrier installations. Most restaurants, hotels, shopping malls and public housing projects started installing air conditioning only from the late 1970s or early 1980s onwards.[27]

Chan Thye Seng, a public servant who had been involved in expanding Singapore's library service in the 1970s, recalled that even newly built libraries of that era did not have air conditioning. Instead, they had a high-ceiling design to assist in air flow within sections that were not artificially cooled.[28]

The early uptake of air conditioning in Singapore was patchy and often circumstantial. Sectors where air conditioning had evident benefit – such as at hospitals, dance halls or supermarkets – were early adopters, but for everyone else the transition was less clear.

In 1999, while Singapore's first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, famously credited air conditioning with having "changed the lives of people in tropical regions" by enabling people to do useful work in offices despite the heat and the humidity outside,[29] it would take some time before the benefits of air conditioning trickled down to the majority of people. ♦

This essay is adapted from Chapter 7, "Regulating Heat, Controlling Urban Airs", from *Imperial Weather: Meteorology, Science, and the Environment in Colonial Malaya* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2025) by Fiona Williamson. The book is available for sale at online bookstores and for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library (call no. RSEA 959.503 WIL).

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IN SEARCH OF

SILVESTR

Sparked by a box of old family documents, Jan Beránek embarked on an eight-year quest that brought him from a small Czech village to modern Singapore to uncover the life of his granduncle who died during the Japanese invasion of Singapore.

By Jan Beránek

Jan Beránek is a Czech environmentalist and energy expert. He currently lives in Amsterdam, working for Greenpeace International as the Director for Organizational Strategy and Development. In his free time, Jan is a keen astronomer and astrophotographer. In 2017, he became curious about his family's roots and began his search for his missing granduncle Silvestr Němec.

In 2017, my mother showed me a box of old family documents. Among them was a bundle of papers relating to Silvestr Němec – my granduncle. Within those pages lay parts of the story of my granduncle's life. Silvestr was from a small Czech village in central Europe and was sent thousands of miles away to Singapore by his employer, the Bata Shoe Company, on 31 December 1938. Three years later, during the Japanese invasion of Singapore in 1942, he went missing and was presumed dead at the age of only 22.

My family never learnt what happened to him, and I decided to find out more. Thus began my eight-year quest, driven by curiosity and the desire to gain some closure over Silvestr's fate.

(Facing page) Silvestr Němec, February 1938. *Courtesy of Jan Beránek*.

(Below) The steamroller used to modernise the main road of Vémyslice. The house on the left is Silvestr's home, and the man on the far right is Silvestr's father. Silvestr is very likely the boy in the hat on the extreme right. *Courtesy of Jan Beránek*.

Thanks to a dedicated blog I set up, I received useful tips and made new contacts. I joined the Malayan Volunteers Group, an association of the descendants of volunteers in British Malaya. Through searches in archives across several cities and countries (such as London, Prague, Znojmo, Zlín and Singapore), helped by historians from all over and the descendants of Silvestr's colleagues and friends, I gathered an incredible amount of insight and information on the life of my granduncle.

One of the most amazing online resources I used was NewspaperSG, a digitised archive of Singapore newspapers by the National Library Singapore, dating back to 1827. The National Library also holds some truly unique documents within its collections such as the book, *Bata 1931–1951: 20 Years of Progress in Malaya*.[1]

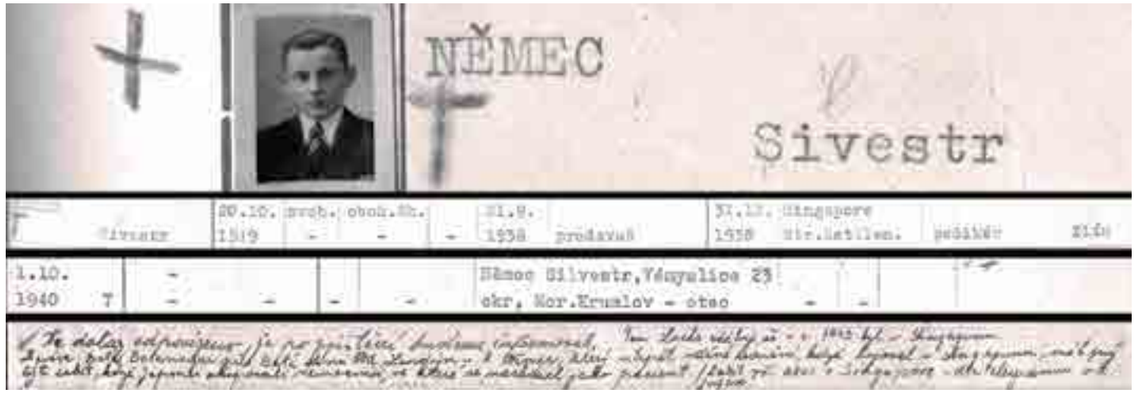
When I pieced all the disparate information together, a fascinating, colourful and detailed picture emerged, not only of Silvestr's own life and death, but of a whole community of over a hundred Czechoslovaks who lived and worked in Singapore during the 1930s, the Second World War and the postwar years. I put all this together in my book, *In Search of Silvestr* (Landmark Books, 2025).

The Bata Shoe Company

My granduncle Silvestr went to Singapore at a very young age, with a mission to establish and develop the business of the Bata Shoe Company in Southeast Asia. It was registered in Singapore in 1931 and opened its flagship store at Capitol Theatre in February that same year. Many might mistake Bata for a Malayan company, but it started as a family business in Czechoslovakia in 1894.

Tomáš Baťa, its founder, had visited Singapore on a business trip in January 1932. During that trip, he announced his vision "to serve Malaya's five million pairs of feet".[2] In 1934, Bata Shoe Company purchased a rubber plantation in Bukit Tiga in Johor, and three years later launched a large factory in Klang. In 1939, it opened another factory in Singapore and inaugurated its own modern building (which hosted a shoe store, offices and accommodation for Bata workers) on North Bridge Road in 1940. By 1941, Bata was running 150 stores, distribution centres and service points across British Malaya and Singapore.[3] I had no idea that the Bata Shoe Company had been so successful globally.

I found the idea of Czechoslovak people driving Bata's expansion compelling. One of the reasons for the global success of the Bata Shoe Company was that it created unique and innovative ways of working, including building a strong culture that extended beyond work and which was incorporated into the personal lives of its employees as well. This loyalty and adherence to company culture continued in Singapore.



(Left) Bata's flagship store at Capitol Theatre in 1934. *Courtesy of Jan Beránek.*

(Below) Silvestr's entry in Bata's "List of Employees" compiled in Zlín in 1944. *Courtesy of Jan Beránek.*

The Czechoslovak Community and the Second World War

One of my unexpected findings was that the Czechoslovak community in Singapore was painfully divided. Confidential Czech government reports – only recently declassified – documented how several factions were fighting each other, fuelled by differences in backgrounds and loyalties. My granduncle Silvestr was no exception. I believe that one of the contributing factors of this schism was the huge stress caused by the occupation of their home country by Nazi Germany from 1938. While there was still peace in British Malaya at the time, the Czechs would have regularly read about the brutal repressions in Czechoslovakia in the local press.

As the war spread through Europe, some young men – including Silvestr's colleagues and friends from Bata – left Singapore to join the Czechoslovak army in France to fight for their country, alongside the French and British. Most, however, stayed in Singapore.

Those that remained were not idle. The Czechoslovaks supported the Allied war efforts in many different ways, such as organising charity events and contributing to war funds. Many local newspaper articles mentioned the Bata Shoe Company and also named individuals, including Silvestr.

Most of the Czechoslovak men who remained in Singapore joined the Singapore Volunteer Corps: either the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force (SSVF) or the Local Defence Corps. Silvestr had quite an unusual assignment as he served with the Armoured Cars Company, which was attached to the First Battalion of the SSVF. I found rich details in local newspapers, SSVF yearbooks and several personal diaries about the volunteers' training, preparations and even some personal reflections in diaries and letters.

One of the hot topics of the day was the difference in pay received by British and European volunteers versus Eurasians and Asians. Such racial discrimination, also observed during training, was an alien concept and puzzling to the Bata Czechoslovaks with their egalitarian ethos.

The Japanese Occupation

As the Japanese attacked Malaya, the war eventually reached what had been painted by the British as the "impregnable fortress of Singapore". In February 1942, 12 Czechoslovak volunteers, my granduncle Silvestr among them, participated in the historic battle on Pasir Panjang Ridge, alongside Second Lieutenant Adnan Saidi and the Malay Regiment. This was where my granduncle was last seen, and where we lost his tracks. He was most likely wounded and taken to Alexandra Hospital, where he would have fallen victim to the infamous massacre carried out by Japanese troops on defenceless patients and medical staff.[4]

After the surrender of Singapore, the Japanese were unsure how to treat the Czechoslovaks. Were they allies because Nazi Germany now occupied their country? Or were they, as an active part of the British colony, Japanese enemies? Eventually, those who did not manage to evacuate and evade capture were rounded up in December 1943 and locked up in Changi and Sime Road internment camps until they were liberated when the Japanese surrendered.

Inside a Bata shoe store in British Malaya, c. 1935. The slogan "Our Customer – Our Master" is one of the most famous credos that people in the Czech Republic still recall today. *Courtesy of Jan Beránek.*

During the Japanese invasion and subsequent occupation, no fewer than 10 Czechoslovaks in Singapore lost their lives.

I never thought that my personal quest to discover the fate of my granduncle would bloom into a much larger and richer story of Bata Shoe Company, the Czechoslovak community and the volunteer forces in Singapore. My search had begun in the small market town of Vémyslice in the South Moravian Region of Czechoslovakia and spanned the globe, ending in Singapore where Silvestr lived and probably died. ♦

Jan Beránek's book, *In Search of Silvestr: Unravelling My Granduncle's Fate, Bata, Czechoslovaks and World War II in Singapore*, is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library (call no. RSING 305.8918605957 BER) and for loan at selected public libraries (call no. SING 305.8918605957 BER), the culmination of eight years of research and writing. It is also available for sale at physical and online bookstores.

Listen to "Searching for Family in the Shadows of War", the BiblioAsia+ podcast by Jan Beránek where he talks about his search for his granduncle Silvestr Němec.

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A poster designed in conjunction with the 1981 National Seat Belt Campaign portraying a female driver wearing the three-point lap-shoulder seat belt. *Singapore Registry of Vehicles Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19990005279 - 0003). [The Singapore Registry of Vehicles became a part of the Land Transport Authority in 1995.]*

PLEASE FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELTS

How crash tests, mangled cars and grieving families drove Singapore's battle to protect motorists' lives.

By Sharon Teng

Sharon Teng is a Senior Librarian with the National Library Singapore. She is part of the Arts and General Reference team, and manages the Social Sciences and Humanities Collection.

Most race car drivers attempt to avoid collisions. On 4 June 1977, however, race car driver Nick van Nugteren decided to deliberately crash into a stationary vehicle while driving at 52 kph. Fortunately, van Nugteren emerged unscathed, though the same cannot be said for the passenger in the front seat, a human-size scarecrow with a watermelon for a head. The impact threw the "passenger" against the dashboard and his watermelon head split into two.

The reason that the outcome for van Nugteren was so different was that while van Nugteren was wearing a seat belt, his passenger was not. "I could feel the belt tugging me backwards. Had it not been for it, I would not have been so lucky to have escaped unhurt," said van Nugteren.[1]

"I have been racing for 11 years and have been involved in enough accidents to know the value of seat belts. There is a tendency among drivers to panic and lose control in an accident. Having a seat belt on in such circumstances, can not only prevent unnecessary injuries but save one's life as well," he added.[2]

The reason for this unorthodox stunt was to persuade a dubious public in Singapore to don seat belts, which was particularly necessary because there was no legal requirement to wear a seat belt while in a car at the time. It was only in 1983 that it became mandatory for people in the front seat of cars to belt up, while the rule that passengers in the back had to do so came into existence nine years later.

Making Front Seat Belts Mandatory

Seat belts themselves are a relatively recent phenomenon. Prior to the 1950s, seat belts were not a standard feature in motor cars. The modern seat belt was patented in 1955 and major manufacturers began installing them as standard equipment from the late 1950s. To increase the survival rate of motorists during accidents, the Automobile Association of Singapore recommended in 1963 that new cars be fitted with front-seat "safety harnesses". In 1967, the National Safety First Council of Singapore also pushed for all motorists to wear safety seat belts.[3]

It would take more than 10 years after that before the government stepped in. In September 1977, the government announced that from 1 January 1978, all new cars and station wagons registered on or after this date would be installed with front seat belts: the three-point lap-shoulder version found to be the most effective in restraining the upper and lower parts of the body. The use

One of 30 drivers stopped by the National Safety First Council for a spot check in conjunction with the National Seat Belt Campaign, 1977. Seat belts had been fitted to the front and back of her car, and her children were safely strapped in their seats. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

of front seat belts was made mandatory from 1 January 1983. Exemptions, however, were granted on medical or psychological grounds for those with physical abnormalities, the elderly, people with disabilities and pregnant women.[4]

Speaking at a May 1977 press conference on the use of seat belts, Senior Minister of State for Communications Ong Teng Cheong declared that seat belts were indispensable to reduce the incidence of death and severity of injuries in car accidents. "Proper use of seat belts prevents a driver and his front seat passenger from flying through the windscreen or from being thrown against the steering wheel and dashboard, and from being hurled through open doors in an accident," he said.[5]

At the time, only around 20 percent of cars and vans in Singapore were fitted with seat belts, and only between 2 and 5 percent of drivers and passengers actually used them.[6] To educate the public, the government launched the inaugural National Seat Belt Campaign from 10 September 1977 to 18 January 1978. As part of the campaign, a week-long Seat Belt Exhibition displaying various models of government-endorsed seat belts was concurrently held at the Victoria Memorial Hall.[7]

Naturally, people resisted changing their behaviour. Motorists considered seat belts "inconvenient", "troublesome", an "infringement of personal freedom", "sissy" and even a potential "death trap". Some also believed that it was "safer to be thrown out" of a vehicle during an accident.[8]

Then there were others who argued that Singapore was too small and driving distances too short to be worth the effort. "I assume everyone knows the risks involved in not wanting to strap on a belt, but then in Singapore, where the travelling distances are generally short, I suppose motorists find it too much of a bother to use a safety belt," motorist Henry Soh told the *Straits Times* in July 1976. Another motorist, Benny Ang, claimed that "without a belt, [the driver] can perhaps crawl out of his car and if he is thrown out by the impact of the crash he may stand a better chance of surviving".[9]

English and Chinese versions of the brochures designed for the 1977 National Seat Belt Campaign aimed at increasing awareness of the importance of wearing seat belts. *Images reproduced from National Seat Belt Campaign (Singapore: Singapore National Printers Pte Ltd, 1977). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS EV76).*

Rear Seat Belts Became Mandatory

While front seat belts became mandatory in 1983, it would take another nine years for similar regulations to apply to the back seat. From 1 October 1992, rear seat passengers were required to belt up and passengers above 16 years and drivers who failed to comply would be fined $120, with drivers receiving an additional three demerit points. Additionally, cars registered on or after 1 January 1993 were required to have rear seat belts installed.[10]

The risk of fatal injuries and the penalty of a $120 fine did little to change motorists' habits though. Between 1993 and 1994, 540 summons each year were issued to back-seat passengers who did not use seat belts.[11]

When interviewed by the *Straits Times* in May 1996, Alen Lee, a 31-year-old administrator, said of his rear seat passengers: "When the rule was implemented, I kept telling them to put on the seat belts. But they refused to, saying it was uncomfortable. After a while, I gave up asking." Yeo Teng Seng, a 42-year-old taxi driver, echoed this helplessness: "I would advise them to put on their seat belts, but some ignore me. I cannot force them. If traffic police stops us, then got problem."[12]

The fine was increased to $150 in 2019 to ensure that the heavier penalty acted as a deterrence to breaking the law. If charged in court, offenders could be fined up to $1,000 or jailed for three months.[13]

Seat Belt Rule for Children in Cars

In addition to getting adults to use seat belts, there was also the related problem of getting kids to belt-up. The issue for children is complicated by the fact that young children, especially, do not like being restrained, and that normal seat belts are designed for adult proportions.

A *Straits Times* survey in 1990 revealed that while many parents recognised the importance of restraining their children in a moving vehicle, few practised this as it was not mandated by law. Many believed that it was sufficient for young children to use seat belts designed for adults. Some parents even felt that children should be given freedom to move around, while others believed that front seats would act as a sufficient barrier during crashes.[14]

Sometimes, parents would be belted up while their children simply sat on their laps. This, however, is quite unsafe. "The child being held in the front seat becomes a cushion in case of an accident and the child in the back seat could be thrown out like a missile with the force of an accident," said Professor Chao Tzee Cheng, vice-president of the National Safety Council and medical director of Forensic Medicine at Singapore General Hospital.[15]

These attitudes persisted despite cases of children getting injured or killed in accidents because they were unrestrained. The *Straits Times* reported that in June 1990, a five-year-old boy in the front seat on his father's lap was thrown out of the van when it swerved and skidded to avoid hitting a pedestrian. The boy was the only casualty among the 11 passengers in the van.[16]

To increase public awareness of the use of child restraints, the government launched the "Belt Up for Life" campaign in May 1992. A commercial was also aired on television showing a mother and a child in her lap being thrown through their car windscreen when the vehicle jerked to a stop.[17]

On 1 July 1992, the seat belt rule for children was implemented in Singapore, requiring children under eight to be belted up or harnessed when seated in the front of motor vehicles. Children below 1.5 m had to use child safety belts, while taller ones should use the installed seat belts. From 1 October 1992, children in the back seats of cars were also covered by this rule.[18]

Having new traffic rules was one thing. Getting parents to belt up their kids was something else altogether. Zainaba Mohamed, managing director of a travel company, confessed to the *Straits Times* in May 1995: "When I'm going to the provision shop nearby, I don't put my children in their child seats. It's just a short journey, they'll feel uncomfortable." Wong Ah See, a tutor, added:

A staged "accident scene" greeting visitors at the Victoria Memorial Hall where the week-long Seat Belt Exhibition was held to inaugurate the first National Seat Belt Campaign in Singapore. *Image reproduced from "Ong: Why Seat Belts Are 'Must'...," New Nation, 10 September 1977, 2. (From NewspaperSG).*

"My boy cries when I put him in the child seat. He hates it. He wants to look out of the window. I try to force him, but sometimes I cannot be bothered to do so." It would sometimes take an accident to persuade parents to change their thinking. "[A] taxi cut into my lane and I had to jam on my brakes. My son, in the front seat, banged his head on the dashboard," said housewife Ellice Ng. Her son ended up with a bruised forehead but that was enough to scare her into buying a child seat.[19]

On 1 January 2012, the seat belt requirements for children were revised with the age criterion replaced with a height requirement. Children shorter than 1.35 m were required to use age-appropriate child restraints, booster seats or adjustable seat belts, while those 1.35 m and above, irrespective of age, had to wear seat belts.[20]

Taxis were exempted from the new regulations as street-hailing made it impractical for them to be equipped with various child seat configurations at all times. But anyone below 1.35 m would not be allowed to sit in the front passenger seat of taxis unless the person used a child restraint or booster seat to supplement the seat belt.[21]

Seat Belts for School Buses

The issue of whether buses ferrying schoolchildren should be equipped with a seat belt for every seat was first raised in Parliament in 2006 by Nominated Member of Parliament Ong Soh Khim. Minister for Transport Yeo Cheow Tong said that the Land Transport Authority (LTA)

An advertisement reminding motorists to ensure that children sitting in the front seat are placed in car seats with child restraints. *Image reproduced from the Straits Times, 22 June 1992, 22. (From NewspaperSG).*

would consult the Traffic Police and stakeholders, and review passenger-control measures, accident trends and statistics, as well as the cost impact on parents.[22]

The unfortunate death of eight-year-old Russell Koh, who was flung out from the rear door of a minibus after it was hit by two cars on 24 April 2008, reignited calls from parents for minibuses to be installed with seat belts.[23]

The Singapore School Transport Association, however, argued that installing seat belts would reduce passenger capacity and significantly cut drivers' income, while school bus operators said that they would have no choice but to increase fares. Although some schools insisted that school buses be equipped with seat belts, others believed that bus assistants could be relied on to ensure that the children remain seated.[24]

Parents were also divided. While some parents were adamant about making seat belts compulsory for school buses, others were disinclined to continue with the school bus service if fares were to increase. Lye Bee Lian, a homemaker who was paying $120 a month for her two primary school-going sons on a school bus, said she may let them take public transport instead. "The price of everything has gone up. If I have to pay another $60 a month, I might just have to find a cheaper alternative," she said.[25]

In 2008, Senior Minister of State for Transport Lim Hwee Hua announced in Parliament that the LTA would mandate seat belts in all new small buses (with a capacity of 15 passengers or fewer). School buses had to be retrofitted with retractable three-point seat belts by 2011 while smaller buses had until 2013.[26]

The Situation Today

Today, four decades after they were first made mandatory, the problem with getting people to use seat belts still exists. Statistics from the Traffic Police revealed that in 2023, there were 3,559 violations for failing to wear either front or rear seat belts. The good news is that this was a drop from 5,863 in 2021. However, although the number of violations has dipped, there has been an increase in the number of severely injured unbelted passengers admitted to the National University Hospital, Tan Tock Seng Hospital and Khoo Teck Puat Hospital between 2022 (20 patients) and 2023 (25 patients).[27]

In recent years, the rise of private hire services had brought new challenges, particularly with parents attempting to travel with young children. Private hire drivers frequently encountered parents with young children trying to board without the required booster seats. In response, ride hailing operators Grab and Gojek have advised drivers to decline such bookings, directing customers instead to child-friendly services like GrabFamily which provide appropriate seats for young children, or GoCar Kids and GoCar XL Kids offered by Gojek.[28]

When journalist Steve Chia went undercover with the Traffic Police during a *Talking Point* episode in July 2024, an interview with two private hire drivers revealed that only around 40 percent of passengers took the initiative to wear rear seat belts and some would be unhappy if asked to do so. Passengers sitting in the back middle seat were also shown in studies to be the least compliant when wearing seat belts, making it the most dangerous place to be in the vehicle when unbelted.[29]

In a letter to the *Straits Times* in May 2025, private-hire driver Wilbert Wong shared that child passengers who are two or three years old did not like to be restrained by seat belts. "The adults often have to hold the child to keep him quiet. Though I am aware of the law for children to be properly belted up, I have no choice but to drive more slowly and safely, and stay alert to avoid the risk of accidents," he said.[30]

In another letter, Cyril Seah Chen Chuan said: "I often see children in private cars (especially) sitting on adults' laps, either in the back or worse, in the front passenger seat, or standing between the two front seats or sitting and kneeling in the back seat without being safely secured." He urged the authorities to take sterner action against law breakers and "punish adults who put children at risk, knowingly or otherwise".[31]

By now, the jury is in on the necessity of wearing a seat belt. "The chances of an unbelted patient getting to a hospital alive after a bad crash is close to zero," said Teo Li-Tserng, director of the Tan Tock Seng Hospital Trauma Centre and regional director of the Central Region Trauma Services under the National Healthcare Group. "Those who wear a seat belt may still get injured, but their injuries are usually not as immediately life-threatening," he added. "This gives them time to be transported to a hospital where they can be treated".[32]

Anecdotally, most drivers and front seat passengers these days will have their seat belts on. The same, however, cannot be said for passengers in the back. Rear seat belt reminder systems, which detect unbuckled rear seats and provide visual and audible alerts to the driver, are currently not required under the older internationally recognised standards. However, the LTA is considering making rear seat belt reminders mandatory for all seats in new cars, taking into account the lead time needed for car manufacturers to implement the changes.[33] ♦

NOTES

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We Do

Mass Weddings in Singapore

Initially inspired by the "New Life Movement" in China, couples in Singapore would opt for mass weddings to save money.

By Seow Peck Ngiam and Benita Lim

Group photograph of newlyweds at the seventh mass wedding organised by the Singapore Mayfair Musical and Dramatic Association in Great World City on 16 January 1949. *David Ng Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980005713 – 0067).*

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For most couples, their wedding is a special moment, a major milestone shared with friends and family, but with the couple firmly in the spotlight. However, in the late 1930s, some couples in Singapore did things a little differently: they began opting for mass wedding ceremonies, where multiple couples got married at the same time.

The appeal? Cost. "Old-fashioned Chinese weddings which cost from $1,000 up have no appeal for the modern Malayan Chinese," the *Straits Times* reported. "Thrifty grooms prefer to spend the money on their new homes, while brides prefer white satin, orange blossoms and a veil to elaborate dress and the heavy gold jewellery of tradition."[1]

The Novelty of Mass Weddings

Mass weddings in Singapore were inspired by the "New Life Movement" in China which advocated for simpler and more frugal lifestyles. This movement, which involved mass weddings in Shanghai, resonated with the Chinese community in Singapore who sought more affordable alternatives to traditional extravagant weddings.

"There has been much discussion among local Chinese about following the example of Shanghai by adopting the system of mass marriages, the advantages of which, some believe, are that it may do away with expensive Chinese customs connected with marriages; it saves parents from the burden of having to provide dowries for marriageable daughters; and it will eventually bring about a uniformity of marriage customs among the local Chinese including the local-born community," noted the *Straits Times*.[2]

A wedding involving 10 couples at the Great World Cabaret on 1 February 1937 is believed to be the first mass wedding in Singapore. It was sponsored by Great World, where each couple paid less than $40 for non-sponsored items such as the bridal attire. The ceremony was officiated by the Chinese Consul-General in Singapore, Kao Ling Pai. "Mass marriages are very wise in cases where the parties are not wealthy," he said in Mandarin. "They are economical and convenient and it means young couples being able to begin their married life without making heavy expenditure."[3]

A mass wedding on 18 May 1980 organised by Siakson Tours and Nanyang Siang Pau Travel Department at the Neptune Theatre Restaurant in Mandarin Hotel. *Courtesy of Tan Li Kheng.*

The event, which drew over 2,000 spectators, began with brides in white satin cheongsams and headdresses and grooms in matching dark suits entering the hall during the "Wedding March", then taking their seats with brides on one side and grooms on the other. After the Chinese National Anthem was played, the gathering bowed before the national and Kuomintang flags and the portrait of the late Sun Yat Sen.

Each couple then walked up in turn to Kao where they exchanged rings, bowed to each other and signed marriage certificates. The parents, or guardians, the "introducers" and Kao also put their signatures on the documents. Kao then presented each couple with their marriage certificate as well as booklets in Chinese and English titled "Outline of the New Life Movement". After a photo session, the couples embarked on a celebratory city tour as newlyweds before proceeding to their homes.[4]

Building upon the success of the inaugural mass wedding, the Great World Cabaret hosted a second mass wedding ceremony on 19 December 1937 for another 10 couples, including one from Johor Bahru. It was quite similar to the first event except that this time around, the occasion also served as a fundraiser for the China Relief Fund which required each couple to pay $10.[5]

The marriage certificate of Guo Zhenchuan and Chen Jinyu on the 24th day of the 8th lunar month, 1960. Prior to the Women's Charter in 1961, which mandated legal marriage registration at the Registry of Marriages, Chinese clan associations solemnised marriages among the Chinese. *Image reproduced from 郭振川与陈进玉结婚证书 [Marriage Certificate of Guo Zhenchuan and Chen Jinyu], 1960. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RRARE 929.35957 MAR). Donated by the Singapore Lam Ann Association.*

Mass Weddings Gain Traction

For non-Christian Chinese couples in the late 1930s, mass weddings offered one of the most cost-effective marriage options available. Alternative locations like the Chinese Consulate, clan associations and schools charged around $15 just for the venue. While registration at the Singapore Marriage Registry ($5) or having a church wedding ($10) were cheaper options, these were restricted to Christian couples.[6]

Following the principles of the "New Life Movement", the Chinese Consulate began sponsoring and organising monthly mass weddings from 1939 onwards.[7] Besides cost-effectiveness, participating in these mass weddings was a way for non-Christian couples to legitimise their marriage, which often involved prominent leaders in the Chinese community officiating the union.[8]

Ang Keong Lan, then 19, and his wife, Aw Ah Kim,[9] were one of 32 couples who participated in a mass wedding organised by and held at the Chinese Consulate on 1 October 1939; it was witnessed by Consul-General Kao Ling Pai. "There were two marriage certificates – one for the bridegroom's family and the other for the bride's," recalled Ang, who later became an entrepreneur and philanthropist. "All the marriage certificates were signed by the Consul as witness and by the respective guardians of the married couples as persons approving the marriage."[10] On top of the mass wedding, Ang's family still hosted a traditional wedding feast for relatives and friends.[11]

Efforts to establish mass weddings as a sustainable social practice in Singapore were disrupted by the Japanese Occupation. Although the Malai branch of the Nanpo Kaihatsu Kinko (Southern Development Bank) and the Savings Encouragement Department attempted to organise a mass wedding for Malay couples at the Sultan Mosque in February 1944, this initiative failed to materialise.[12]

After the war, the Singapore Mayfair Musical and Dramatic Association revived the practice of mass weddings. The association organised the first postwar wedding ceremony on 12 January 1947. Officiated by the Chinese Consul, the ceremony was followed by a celebratory car procession through the city streets.[13]

Between 1948 and 1950, at least 12 mass weddings were held, attracting couples from across Malaya. The fifth ceremony on 16 May 1948 saw a record-breaking 42 couples, where each couple paid $30. Lim Boon Keng, a prominent member of the Chinese community, officiated at the signing ceremony. He congratulated the couples and advised them to view marriage as "sacred".[14]

After the association was dissolved in 1950, the Chinese Young Men's Christian Association took over the responsibility of organising mass weddings. Couples, however, needed to register separately with the Registrar of Marriages to legalise their marriage as this was not part of the mass wedding ceremony.[15]

Unlike previous mass weddings which were sometimes fully sponsored, couples now had to contribute a nominal fee of $30 which covered a range of expenses, including decorations and a tea reception for the couple and their parents.[16]

From 1952, Chinese clan associations got into the act as well. The Khek Community Guild held a mass wedding on 28 December 1952. It also sought to attract members from other Chinese dialect groups by offering their facilities to non-Khek couples.[17] Eventually, this initiative inspired other Chinese clans such as Chin Kang Huay Kuan and Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan to offer themselves up as venues.[18]

The Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan conducted 17 mass wedding ceremonies between 1956 and 1960. These ceremonies attracted couples from all walks of life, including hawkers, clerks, tailors and shop assistants, as well as couples from other dialect groups.[19] A mass wedding on 2 February 1958 drew international attention, with a camera crew from the United States flying to Singapore to capture footage of the event at the Hokkien Huay Kuan for an American television documentary.[20]

No to Mass Weddings

Not everyone was enamoured with the idea of a mass wedding though. In particular, the English-speaking Chinese were not keen on the concept, according to the *Singapore Free Press*. Bachelor Goh Seng Lim was adamant about not getting married in a mass wedding. "Pride keeps most of us away from mass weddings. Only a small percentage of the Chinese would like to go through this form of marriage," he said. Neoh Teik Hong was similarly against mass weddings. "Those who can afford single marriages will definitely prefer it," he noted.[21]

The concept also faced significant resistance in other communities. In a letter to the *Straits Times* published on 10 July 1948, Endra Rassip wrote that the idea of mass marriages for Muslims in Malaya as a way to reduce expenses was "impracticable" as it was "not only against the precepts of Islam but also against Muslim custom". She suggested holding the wedding on only one day instead of over several days, and that only close friends and relatives be invited.[22]

In a debate organised by the Young Men's Muslim Association on 19 August 1949, 15 participants disapproved of mass weddings while only three voiced support. Those in favour said that "mass weddings were economical, and would eliminate 'bad customs' associated with Muslim marriages". The rest who disagreed were concerned with the un-Islamic practices.[23]

Media, Modernity and Mass Appeal

The first televised mass wedding for 50 couples in Singapore took place on 31 May 1969 and attracted over 300 applications from people of diverse backgrounds, including Tamil couples and a Malay couple. This affair was fully sponsored by Radio and Television Singapore and covered all expenses, including a reception for guests, and entertainment. (It did not cover wedding attire though.)

For many couples, participating in this televised mass wedding was a novel and exciting experience. "It was curiosity that made us do it," said 25-year-old teacher Lim Kok Meng. "Years after, we

The second mass wedding organised by Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan in 1956. The clan association organised 17 mass weddings between 1956 and 1960. *Image reproduced from 新加坡福建会馆珍藏: 集体结婚照片 [Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan Collection: Photographs of Mass Weddings]. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 395.22095957 XJP-[HHK]). Donated by the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan.*

will be able to think back to the time when we were part of this unusual event." For Raymond Chan, also 25, the opportunity to appear on television was the main draw. Another participant, Nancy Chen, 35, said that she would not be as nervous with other brides present. "I decided to join in because with so many other couples I would be less conspicuous." As an added incentive, the Asia Commercial Banking Corporation presented each couple with a $20 banking account.[24]

The telecast created a major business opportunity and commercial entities, particularly travel agencies and airlines, quickly capitalised on mass weddings by offering wedding-honeymoon bundles throughout the 1970s and 1980s. One notable example occurred on 30 September 1973 when a mass wedding for 150 Singaporean couples was jointly organised and sponsored by the People's Scholarship Fund Projects Committee, C&E Tours Pte Ltd, Singapore Airlines, Asia Commercial Banking Corporation and *Nanyang Siang Pau*.[25]

Beyond the ceremonial occasion, the event also raised funds for the government-established People's Scholarship Fund, which supported tertiary education for promising Singaporeans. Another unique feature of the event was the simultaneous ceremonies in Malaysia and Hong Kong, each involving 60 couples.[26]

After the mass wedding, participants embarked on what the media dubbed a "jumbo" honeymoon – a reference to both the scale of the event and the thrill of flying on a jumbo jet as part of the experience. Destinations included Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Genting and Hong Kong.[27]

Such wedding-honeymoon packages became increasingly popular across the region in subsequent years.[28] They were no longer seen merely as economical alternatives but were embraced for their convenience, novelty and shared celebration. Travel agencies expanded their offerings, providing comprehensive arrangements that covered not only logistics and ceremonies, but also coordinated entertainment, media coverage and travel itineraries that extended beyond Southeast Asia.[29]

Even as late as the 1980s, couples were still choosing to get married at mass wedding ceremonies. On 18 May 1980, Tan Li Kheng, now 71, and her husband Lee Chun Ho were married at the Neptune Theatre Restaurant in Mandarin Hotel at one such wedding. The event was organised by Siakson Tours and the Nanyang Siang Pau Travel Department and involved more than 80 couples. "Mass weddings were fashionable in those days," she recalled. "I paid $2,800 that included the wedding ceremony, one table for guests for the lunch reception, and the 19-day honeymoon trip to Bangkok, Tokyo, Seoul, Taipei and Hong Kong. At each location, we had photo sessions and a dinner, and also received lots of souvenirs." Tan found the entire experience memorable.[30] The event was reported by *Nanyang Siang Pau*.[31]

In the late 1980s, government agencies, including the Registry of Marriages (ROM) and the People's Association, jumped on the bandwagon and organised several mass weddings in collaboration with private operators.

On 8 August 1988 (08/08/88), a date widely regarded as auspicious, ROM anticipated a spike in demand for marriage solemnisation and partnered with Oxley Travel Service to stage its first large-scale wedding ceremony at the Neptune Theatre Restaurant.[32] A year later, on 24 September 1989, the People's Association Social Development Section organised its debut mass wedding with Oxley at Shangri-La Hotel for 60 couples.[33]

Tan Li Kheng and her husband Lee Chun Ho participated in a mass wedding organised by Siakson Tours and Nanyang Siang Pau Travel Department at the Neptune Theatre Restaurant in Mandarin Hotel on 18 May 1980. *Courtesy of Tan Li Kheng.*

Decline of Mass Weddings

Newspaper reports of mass weddings became noticeably fewer in the 1990s, likely reflecting a shift in public preference towards more personalised and intimate weddings. Computer analyst Cassandra Koh, 25, told the *Straits Times* that she would rather "do my own shopping and hunt around for the best bridal boutique, a florist who will deliver his goods, and decide for myself what design I want for my invitation cards".[34]

Couples were still willing to walk down the aisle en masse if that meant they could do it on popular dates. On 20 September 2009 (20/09/2009), the Singapore Botanic Gardens hosted a mass wedding for 168 couples as part of its 150th anniversary celebrations. The following year, on 10 October 2010 (10/10/2010), the People's Association, in collaboration with *Lianhe Zaobao* and Sentosa Leisure Group, organised a large-scale ceremony for 118 couples who exchanged vows on Sentosa.[35]

As wedding customs and practices continue to evolve alongside social values and cultural trends, the era of mass weddings remains a distinctive chapter in Singapore's matrimonial landscape. ♦

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The 1918 Influenza Pandemic in Singapore

When influenza hit Singapore in 1918, many were sickened, hospitals were overwhelmed and everyday life was disrupted.

By Sean Hoh

A second-class ward in the Singapore General Hospital, 1926. During the 1918 influenza pandemic, 12 of the 19 nurses at the hospital fell ill concurrently, causing a severe staffing shortage. *Lee Kip Lin Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980005123 - 0081).*

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"Illness in Singapore". "The Mysterious Malady". "Disease Gradually Spreading in Singapore". These are not newspaper reports on the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Instead, these are headlines that appeared over a century ago in local newspapers about the influenza pandemic, which gripped Singapore and the world in 1918.[1]

Between 1918 and 1919, the world was besieged by an influenza pandemic so deadly that approximately 1 in 20 died from the pandemic within the first two years. The illness affected more than 500 million people out of an estimated 1.8 billion world population.[2]

The disease was commonly known as the "Spanish flu", although this term is a misnomer given that the virus did not originate from Spain. The first reported case of this strain of the influenza virus can be traced to a military base in Kansas in the United States in March 1918. However, news about the high infection rate of the influenza virus was suppressed in the countries that constituted the Allied Powers during World War I (1914–18), including the United States.[3]

In contrast, there was relatively greater freedom of the press in Spain during the war as it remained neutral. Consequently, the virus took on the name "Spanish flu" because Spain was one of the few countries that reported it.[4]

A Colony in Crisis

Like most of the world, Singapore was not spared the devastating effects of the virus outbreak. The influenza pandemic in Singapore was short but acute,[5] and it took the lives of at least 2,780 individuals.[6] The spread of the virus was rapid: it had arrived in Singapore with wartime troops in June 1918 and quickly spread throughout the Straits via maritime and land routes.[7]

After the first wave of the pandemic from June to July 1918, Singapore was hit again by a second wave from October to early November 1918. Thankfully, the outbreak was controlled by November 1918, unlike in other parts of the world that endured a recurrence of the disease in early 1919.[8]

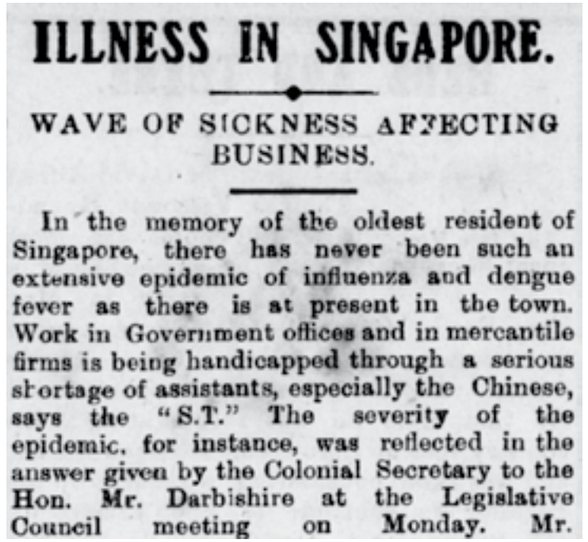
One of the key reasons for the swift transmission of the influenza virus across Singapore was the unpreparedness of the British colonial administration. Responsibility for the control of infectious diseases was shared between the Straits Settlements government and the Municipal Commission. There had been established medical infrastructures such as quarantine camps and an epidemiological regime that covered the early detection of infectious diseases from foreign ports. However, influenza had not been included in the administration's list of reportable contagious diseases during the early stages of the pandemic.[9]

Red Cross volunteers making white gauze face masks, which became mandatory in many public situations in the United States during the 1918 influenza pandemic. Mask-wearing was, however, not mandatory in Singapore at the time. *From Shawshots/Alamy.*

This oversight can perhaps be attributed to a lack of understanding about the influenza virus at the time as well as the fact that the British were preoccupied with World War I. The colonial administration, therefore, missed early signs of the outbreak, which allowed the virus to spread rapidly throughout Singapore. Indeed, this ignorance about the virus in 1918 led to ineffectual governance. To address the outbreak, the Municipal Health Officer had suggested that patients simply rest in bed until they recovered.[10]

As the virus outbreak grew increasingly severe, there was a growing understanding of the virus, albeit on a limited scale. An article in the Chinese newspaper *Lat Pau* (Le Bao; 叻報) on 30 October 1918 warned against panic and the risk of misdiagnoses driven by fear of the influenza virus. By November 1918, the Royal College of Physicians in London publicly acknowledged that the virus was poorly understood and that no cure existed – a statement that was subsequently published in Singapore by the Municipal Commission.[11]

The unpreparedness of the colonial administration can also be seen in the disruptive impact that the pandemic had on Singapore's healthcare centres: many hospitals and clinics were overwhelmed by the sheer number of infected patients who needed medical attention. For example, Tan Tock Seng Hospital had to hire six additional dressers (healthcare professionals who assist in wound cleaning, and provide other basic medical



ILLNESS IN SINGAPORE.

WAVE OF SICKNESS AFFECTING BUSINESS.

In the memory of the oldest resident of Singapore, there has never been such an extensive epidemic of influenza and dengue fever as there is at present in the town. Work in Government offices and in mercantile firms is being handicapped through a serious shortage of assistants, especially the Chinese, says the "S.T." The severity of the epidemic, for instance, was reflected in the answer given by the Colonial Secretary to the Hon. Mr. Darbishire at the Legislative Council meeting on Monday. Mr.

An article in the *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* emphasising the unprecedented severity of the 1918 influenza pandemic in Singapore. *Image reproduced from "Illness in Singapore," Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle, 5 July 1918, 3. (From NewspaperSG).*

support and treatment) to help staff manage the sudden surge in patients during the first wave of the pandemic.[12]

During the second wave, when the pandemic reached its height, the hospital had to erect a large temporary ward and hire a temporary assistant surgeon as the hospital saw 547 patient cases. Of these, 210 patients died, reflecting the severity of the outbreak. Similarly, the quarantine camp on Moulmein Road had to rapidly expand its capacity beyond the intended 172 beds to cope with the abrupt rise in the number of sick patients. The Kwong Wai Shiu Free Hospital set up by the Chinese community was also reported to have been filled with influenza patients.[13]

Exacerbating the predicament, staff in the hospitals also fell sick. For instance, 12 of the 19 nurses at the General Hospital fell ill concurrently, causing serious manpower constraints. Under these conditions and faced with a bed crunch, the hospital struggled to attend to patients suffering from influenza, which totalled 314 cases in 1918, many of whom were already seriously infected upon admission. Attempts to isolate these patients from other patients were futile: the virus spread rapidly throughout the hospital, leading to deaths from resulting complications.[14] Indeed, nearly all healthcare centres in the colony faced enormous strain.

The *Straits Echo* attributed the "abnormal death rate" to the perceived incompetence of healthcare professionals. The paper observed that the Medical Department was "too short-handed in doctors" and mockingly wrote: "There used to be a belief that the cure for an abnormal death rate was for the senior medical officer of the Municipality to go on leave, and immediately the death rate fell. On his return there was full work in an increasing death rate." As healthcare providers struggled with overcrowding and understaffing, the colonial administration eventually had to depend on supplementary support in the form of private or consolidated community efforts.[15]

By the second wave of the pandemic in October 1918, the colonial administration realised the severity of the disease and introduced a series of hygiene measures to contain the spread of the virus. Little was still known about the virus, but the widespread infections and deaths had become undeniably apparent. The administration increased the frequency with which the streets in Singapore were washed, incurring "an average $400 a day on disinfectants".[16]

The infected were advised to self-isolate, while the public was cautioned to avoid crowded places. "Command orders" were also published, which included instructions on how to disinfect the nose and throat. Additionally, at the orders of the Principal Civil Medical Officer, hospital visits were regulated through special permits that only "friends of patients [of the] seriously ill" could obtain.[17]

Gradually, after the introduction of these measures, the pandemic subsided in Singapore. While the second wave was severe, it did not persist over an extended duration. According to newspaper reports, many previously infected individuals had returned to work by 28 October 1918. And by the following month, the pandemic was over in Singapore. In fact, Singapore somehow managed to evade a third wave of the influenza, which had spread to most temperate countries by early 1919.[18]

In November 1919, the colonial administration introduced more stringent measures to better prepare for another pandemic. For instance, an amendment to the Quarantine and Prevention of Disease Ordinance (Ordinance 34 of 1919) stated that "the Health Officer of the district may detain any person who is found… to be suffering from an infectious disease… until such a time as the disease is no longer communicable to other people". Evidently, the 1918 pandemic had cast a dark shadow over Singapore's early medical history.[19]

Living with the Pandemic

The pandemic was a time of worry, frustration and confusion for many who resided in Singapore. From their perspective, the colonial administration's actions appeared to be lacking and they shared their views in the local newspapers. On 24 October 1918, a reader of the *Straits Times*, who went by the pseudonym, "A Patient Sufferer", wrote: "Would you kindly permit me… to draw the attention of our City Fathers to the present disgraceful condition of the River Valley and Oxley Roads. The dust being allowed to accumulate on them is several inches deep." He added: "[W]hen the Spanish 'Flu' is making such heavy inroads on the health of our population, the consequences arising by the air being thickened by the germ-producing dust are so potent that it is not necessary to over-draw the picture."[20]

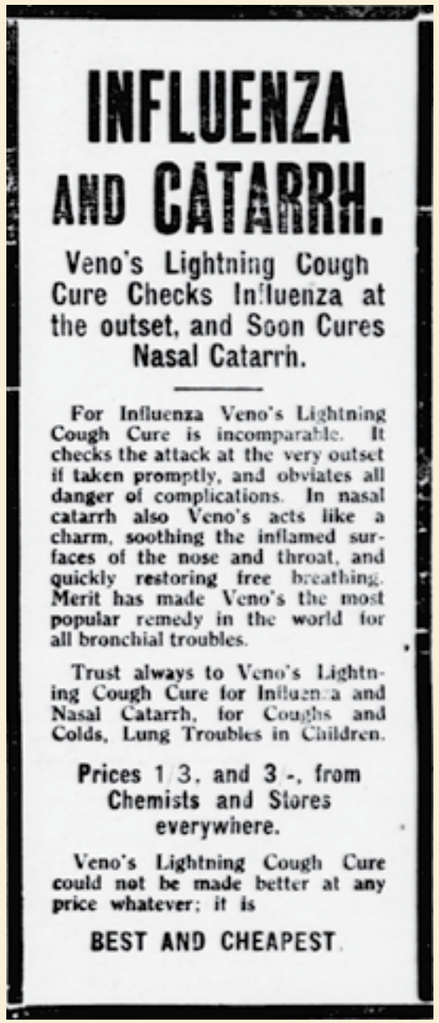
Two days later, another reader who used the moniker, "Another Sufferer", added his comments to the earlier letter. "May I add my quota to the remarks of 'Patient Sufferer' on the hideously dusty condition of River Valley and Oxley roads. I do not think these roads have been watered this year – except by rain. They are of laterite or laterite mixed, and the clouds of dust are appalling, and daily one may see a diligent road-sweeper sweeping up clouds of this dust which pours into the houses alongside."[21]

Another cause for concern among the people was that public spaces in Singapore could facilitate the spread of the influenza virus (places that we now refer to as "virus hotspots"). On 17 October 1918, a *Straits Times* reader questioned why the colonial administration had not closed schools in Singapore and asserted that the administration should be proactive in closing schools instead of waiting for cases to be reported among students before reacting.

"We have all seen the warnings issued indirectly by the Legislative Council and directly by the Municipality regarding the present influenza epidemic, but it must be confessed that very little assistance is to be obtained therefrom in preventing the spread of the disease… the authorities might move first and do what would be obvious to any ordinary layman, and that is to immediately close all the schools." The writer added that "the daily close association of scholars is an ideal way to spread infection over a wide area in the least possible space of time".[22] Following this, schools in Singapore were closed by 22 October 1918,[23] while theatres and cinemas did the same by 23 October.[24]

The pandemic affected different communities in vastly different ways. The Europeans lived mainly in the town area, led privileged lives and therefore experienced low death rates, while communities that lived in rural kampongs (villages) suffered greatly as they saw far higher fatalities than those living in urban areas. Indians, especially migrant workers, endured much hardship and were hardest hit by the virus outbreak. This led to the ignorant belief that Indians harboured a "racial weakness" which rendered them more vulnerable to diseases.[25]

View of Hill Street from the junction of River Valley Road and Hill Street, c. 1920. Letters to the *Straits Times* included complaints about the dusty conditions of River Valley Road during the 1918 influenza pandemic. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980006552 - 0104).*



INFLUENZA AND CATARRH.

Veno's Lightning Cough Cure Checks Influenza at the outset, and Soon Cures Nasal Catarrh.

For Influenza Veno's Lightning Cough Cure is incomparable. It checks the attack at the very outset if taken promptly, and obviates all danger of complications. In nasal catarrh also Veno's acts like a charm, soothing the inflamed surfaces of the nose and throat, and quickly restoring free breathing. Merit has made Veno's the most popular remedy in the world for all bronchial troubles.

Trust always to Veno's Lightning Cough Cure for Influenza and Nasal Catarrh, for Coughs and Colds, Lung Troubles in Children.

Prices 1/3, and 3/-, from Chemists and Stores everywhere.

Veno's Lightning Cough Cure could not be made better at any price whatever; it is

BEST AND CHEAPEST.

Veno's Lightning Cough Cure was advertised as a remedy that could "[check] Influenza at the outset". This marketing tactic leveraged people's desperation to find a cure for influenza. *Image reproduced from Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser, 6 November 1918, 7. (From NewspaperSG).*

Among the Chinese, there was a general resistance to Western medicine and the edicts of the colonial administration. This is evidenced by complaints that the Chinese flouted the hygiene measures imposed by the administration.[26]

The Municipal Commission published notices advising infected patients to self-isolate, which the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce translated into Chinese. However, the framing of these precautions through the lens of Western medicine alienated the Chinese. Consequently, the Chinese sought alternative cures such as a mixture of boiled pumpkins, potatoes and coriander leaves, which became so popular that the price of potatoes rose due to the surge in demand. Many Chinese coolies, who lived mainly in cramped and poorly ventilated shophouses, also succumbed to the virus as the unsanitary living conditions enabled it to spread more easily.[27]

Businesses were also heavily disrupted in Singapore. "Work in Government offices and in mercantile firms is being handicapped through a shortage of assistants, especially the Chinese," reported the *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* on 5 July 1918. As the first wave of the influenza epidemic took its toll, the Post Office put up a notice that it was "necessary to curtail somewhat the postal deliveries in town and suburban areas" and "there will, unfortunately, be some delays" due to "a great deal of sickness among the postal employees". Similarly, there was a "disturbance [to the] normal efficiency" of telephone services as the epidemic had "hit the staff of the Telephone Company very hard". Socialising became a challenge as well because interactions inadvertently risked the transmission of the virus.[28]

Perhaps most sobering of all were accounts that corpses on the street and funerals had become a part of everyday life in Singapore during the pandemic.[29] Obituaries dedicated to individuals who had lost their lives to influenza became common.

The Pandemic and Falsehoods

The chaos of the pandemic was exacerbated by misinformation and disinformation that spread throughout Singapore with a virulence akin to that of the influenza virus. There was much speculation about the virus which created an air of paranoia throughout the pandemic. Some of these falsehoods were even printed in the local newspapers.

An article in the *Straits Times* on 18 June 1918 linked the virus outbreak to "the irregularity of the weather".[30] On 27 July 1918, another article blamed the viral outbreak on the durian: "It is said that the illness is brought about by eating 'durian' fruit, but, strangely enough, it does not appear to affect Chinese or Malays."[31]

Opportunistic companies took advantage of the widespread fear and uncertainty among the people to frame their products as cures for symptoms of influenza and related illnesses in newspaper advertisements. Prior to the pandemic, Veno's Lightning Cough Cure had only been marketed as a remedy for coughs. However, an advertisement in the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* on 6 November 1918 proclaimed that "Veno's Lightning Cough Cure Checks Influenza at the outset".[32]

Remembering the "Forgotten Pandemic"

A little more than a century has gone by since the 1918 influenza pandemic. In the decades that followed, the pandemic faded from public memory. But while most people may have forgotten about the incident, subsequent outbreaks throughout the 20th century prompted medical professionals and historians to recognise the importance of the 1918 pandemic.

Lessons gleaned from the 1918 influenza pandemic contributed to a better understanding of subsequent influenza outbreaks, such as the 1957 influenza outbreak in East Asia that eventually spread to the rest of the world. A decade later, an outbreak first recorded in Hong Kong in 1968 also spread worldwide, adding to the growing interest in the 1918 historical episode.[33]

In 1952, the World Health Organization (WHO) set up the Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System to foster international cooperation and safeguard against influenza outbreaks.[34] Twice a year, in February and September, the WHO makes recommendations on the strains of viruses to be included in the influenza vaccines for the northern and southern hemispheres respectively.[35]

Currently, health authorities are closely monitoring the avian flu situation and watching for signs of the virus spilling over into cattle and other mammals.[36] While certain animal influenza viruses can and have infected humans, the greater concern is that the viruses may mutate even further and become highly transmissible among humans and thus trigger another widespread influenza pandemic. The 1918 pandemic continues to cast a long shadow. ♦

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FRIDGE MAKER FREEZES STOCK MARKET

Pan-Electric Industries started out as Singapore's fridge maker. However, its aggressive expansion and questionable practices led to enormous debts that caused a three-day closure of the Singapore and Kuala Lumpur stock markets in 1985.

By Joanna Tan

1st Copy

BUSINESS TIMES

M.C. (P) No. 99/1/85 MONDAY, DECEMBER 2, 1985 75 CENTS

Call Wayfoong at 737-7977 for a fast decision on your loan

Statements by Tan Koon Swan and Grand United; profiles of companies in the Pan-El crisis, Page 13

A re-examination of all the rules has become necessary

By HOCK LOCK SIEW

The impediment which killed plan to save company

By ALAN LEE, Companies Editor

SES suspends all share trading

PAN-ELECTRIC

Pan-El's four-month long trauma

Details of the Nov 23 agreement

THE ARTS

Between 2 and 4 December 1985, the Stock Exchange of Singapore was closed and all trading was suspended. *Source: Business Times, 2 December 1985, 1 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

Joanna Tan is a Senior Librarian with the National Library Singapore, and works with the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection. Her responsibilities include collection management and providing reference and research services.

In a move that the *Business Times* called "unprecedented… to buy time and prevent a possible collapse of the stock market", the Stock Exchange of Singapore (SES) announced that all trading on the stock market would be suspended from Thursday, 2 December 1985, until further notice.[1] The stock markets, both in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, were shut for three days.

What caused the shutdown was the collapse of Pan-Electric Industries, or Pan-El, leading to economic, social and reputational costs to Singapore. This was a watershed in Singapore's financial history.

The suspension was described as a "foregone conclusion" as it was predicted that if trading had continued, at least half a dozen stockbroking firms would be badly hit which would have a domino effect, affecting other broking firms, financial institutions, and anyone or any institution with significant equity investments.[2]

Pan-El had earlier raised funds through a loan stock issue to finance its expansion and development, but in the year before Pan-El's collapse, its loans had ballooned to $260 million, with almost $140 million repayable by 1985, prompting the company to seek extra funding. On 27 September 1985, the company announced a proposed rights issue (when a company offers shareholders the chance to buy additional shares at a reduced price) to get shareholders to contribute $64 million to help pay debts.[3]

On 18 November, Pan-El defaulted on an instalment payment of $7.5 million of a $75 million bank loan. The company then requested a trading suspension of their shares on both the SES and Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange on 19 November. On 21 November, as Pan-El announced finalised plans for a rights issue to raise $80 to 95 million, it was discovered that the company had borrowed $453 million from 35 banks, of which $283 million was unsecured.[4] Banks immediately stopped giving credit to Pan-El as well as to brokers dealing in the company and its subsidiaries.[5]

Mounting Debts and Payment Defaults

It was subsequently revealed that Pan-El and its subsidiaries had entered into $160 million worth of forward contracts (buying or selling shares at an agreed price in the present on a specified date in the future), with $140 million in Supreme Corporation Berhad and Grand United Holdings Berhad, and had paid out a $40 million deposit.[6]

Both companies were controlled by businessman Tan Koon Swan, who was also president of the Malaysian Chinese Association. He had built his wealth from the stock market in the 1970s and owned a stake in Pan-El through Sigma International, an associated company of Grand United Holdings.[7]

While the banks and Pan-El's directors frantically discussed a rescue plan, the Commercial Affairs Investigation Department began their investigations into Peter Tham Wing Fai, a former director of Pan-El, and his relationship with Tan.[8]

Tham and Tan were selling shares to brokers, to be bought back six months later using forward contracts. They assumed that Pan-El's share prices would appreciate at buyback time, but prices fell such that they had to "manipulate and artificially push up the flagging share prices so that they could at least break even and then sell the shares again to unsuspecting investors for another six months". This continued and involved many parties in the stockbroking industry.[9]

It also emerged that banks had lent to stockbroking companies that "were heavily exposed to the Pan-El group and its associated companies, with exposures to Pan-El reported at $140 million and total forward contract exposures estimated at around $600 million". There were concerns that these brokerage houses might go bust.[10]

Rescue negotiations to save Pan-El failed and the company went into receivership on 30 November 1985 (receivership is when a bank or other financial institution appoints a receiver to manage the company's assets and recover funds). The banks appointed Price Waterhouse as receivers to provide "orderliness and sound financial management as well as to examine the long-term viability" of Pan-El.[11]

A Stock Market Crisis

To prevent the widespread panic selling of Pan-El shares and further losses by the brokerages as well as to gain time to come up with a solution to the risks faced by the stockbroking industry, the committee of SES – after consultation with the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), DBS Bank, Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation, Overseas Union Bank and United Overseas Bank (the Big Four banks in Singapore) – made the decision to close the SES and suspend trading from 2 to 4 December 1985. "It is to cool off the market and for the public to digest the news (of receivers being appointed at Pan-El)," said SES chairman Ong Tjin An. (Trading on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange was also suspended.)[12]

At a press conference on 3 December, J.Y. Pillay, managing director of MAS, said there was a need to "restore confidence in the stockbroking industry, to assure banks and the investing public that all will be well". "It was a difficult decision [to suspend trading on the SES] as the damage to the SES and Singapore's reputation was recognised," said Minister for Finance Richard Hu in a ministerial statement to Parliament on 10 January 1986.[13]

The crisis "led to scores of failed businesses and half a dozen stockbroking firms here being swept into bankruptcy". Pillay later recounted in his 1995 oral history interview that the SES was closed as they did not know how many brokerage and security firms were solvent. "So we had to close the Exchange for a period of time in order to figure out which of the brokerages really could survive. Most of them could not. And what to do with all their debts," he said.[14]

The sudden closure impacted all investors, even those who did not hold any Pan-El stocks, inviting harsh criticisms from the foreign press. Singapore's reputation as an international stock exchange took a hit and confidence in its trading centre was shaken.[15]

Pan-El's collapse also affected employees financially and emotionally. "We are angry because all this is not our fault," said a long-time employee of subsidiary Selco. "We don't even know if we will be paid… There are men whose wives are not working." He added that some of the workers had just bought houses after working for 10 to 15 years. [16]

Over at Pan-El, a number of men cried. "Some of them have wives who do not work, with children still at school and other commitments," said an employee who had been working in Pan-El for 15 years. She was more concerned for her older colleagues. "They don't have the paper qualifications the younger people have. They will be hard hit when they go out to look for a job."[17]

Minister for Finance Goh Keng Swee being shown a Pan-Electric refrigerator by Ernest E. Kahlenberg during the foundation stone laying ceremony of the company's factory on Kampong Arang Road, 1964. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980000398 - 0052).*

Lifeboat Fund and New Legislation

To address short-term liquidity problems and restore public confidence, a $180 million lifeboat fund was announced on 3 December and established as a credit line from the Big Four local banks to stockbroking firms affected by the Pan-El crisis.[18]

Former Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong, then a corporate lawyer with Shook Lin & Bok, helped MAS draft the lifeboat fund agreement. "The survival of the stockbroking industry was under threat," he told the *Straits Times* in 2008. "The occasion was very sombre and tense for the stockbrokers who were assembled in another room waiting to sign the agreement."[19]

Any firm intending to use the credit line was subject to stringent conditions though. Hu emphasised that the fund was "not meant to bail out individual stockbrokers who have become insolvent through their own imprudence". "Rather, the 'lifeboat' is there to ensure that the obligations of the members of the exchange are fulfilled," he said, and "any drawdowns against this fund have to be repaid with interest by SES member-firms individually or collectively".[20]

Tan Koon Swan was arrested on 21 January 1986 and jailed for two years while Tan Kok Liang, the financial director of Pan-El, was sentenced to 15 months of imprisonment which was later reduced to six months. Peter Tham was given a higher jail term of eight years for 36 counts of forgery such as fraud, which concerned the commercial and financial institutions of a country, affecting a wide range of people and institutions, according to Senior District Judge Errol Foenander.[21]

Additionally, Singapore's securities regulatory framework was tightened, leading to the new Securities Industry Act 1986 which took effect on 18 August, repealing the earlier 1973 act. The new legislation and the accompanying regulations gave the MAS greater control over the management of the securities industry. Corporate governance standards, which were not as developed as today, were raised and acknowledged as "crucial and fundamental" in the running of a company.[22]

A Domestic Refrigerator Industry

Today, Pan-El is best known for causing the closure of the Singapore and Kuala Lumpur stock exchanges. Less well known is the fact that Pan-El was, at one point, one of Southeast Asia's biggest electrical, engineering, marine supplies and salvaging companies.

Before independence, Singapore had few industries to boast of. Those that existed prior to 1961 were "mainly manufacturers of consumer products such as food and drinks, footwear and other bare essentials of life", but these could hardly provide jobs for the growing population.[23] Faced with a high unemployment rate and rapid population growth, Singapore launched an industrialisation programme in the 1960s to attract foreign investment and establish labour-intensive factories.

A key component was the pioneer industry status scheme, under which an enterprise or entrepreneur with a pioneer certificate was exempted from income tax for up to five years.[24] Pan-El was among the first to capitalise on this scheme, obtaining a pioneer certificate for manufacturing domestic refrigerators. This contributed to the government's industrialisation programme that created jobs for the people.

Refrigerators were uncommon in most Singapore homes before the war, with fewer than 2,000 units imported in 1940. During the Japanese Occupation, severe food shortages made people realise how valuable refrigeration could be. After the war, every unit which arrived was quickly snapped up, and not even doubling import numbers could satisfy the demand. Prices ranged from $725 to $815 for the 7 cu ft size, while a 9 cu ft unit cost between $840 and $995.[25]

At the time, most household refrigerators came from the United States or the United Kingdom, while some were from European countries like France. Climate Engineering Pte Ltd was one local company that imported French-manufactured refrigerators into Singapore.[26]

Origins of Pan-El

Formed in 1956, Climate Engineering was a subsidiary of import and export company Metal Agencies Ltd. established in 1954 by the Berlin-born Ernest E. Kahlenberg who came to Singapore at Alan Waugh's invitation. The latter was the son of Henry Waugh of Henry Waugh Ltd., which was later acquired by Jardine Matheson & Co Ltd.[27]

Kahlenberg and Alan Waugh set up Metal Agencies but they subsequently parted ways due to different business philosophies. Kahlenberg then formed Climate Engineering and began importing electrical appliances, including the French-manufactured Frimatic refrigerators, marketing them throughout Southeast Asia.[28]

Pan-Electric factory staff working on the Permadoor model of refrigerators in an assembly line. *Image reproduced from The Pan Electric News: A Pan-Electric Industries Ltd. Staff Journal, vol 1, no. 1 (Singapore: Pan-Electric, [1979]–), 3. (From PublicationSG).*

Kahlenberg's vision was to eventually produce refrigerators locally, an idea that possibly came about during Frimatic's chief engineer and director Pierre Charles Bray's study visit to Singapore in August 1961. Bray was "interested to learn of the efforts being made to enlarge the existing restricted markets in the area", which "was an essential basis for large mass production industries". He was "very satisfied and impressed with the efficiency and technical skill here" after visiting the Singapore Polytechnic, which he described as comparable to technical colleges in Europe. Bray promised that the locally made refrigerators would be "produced to the same standard as those manufactured by the parent company".[29]

Shortly after Bray's visit, Kahlenberg announced in October plans to "make a certain brand of refrigerator now being imported from France" by Electric Industries Ltd, of which he was the founder and a director. The company had, by then, obtained the Pioneer Certificate for manufacturing refrigerators and was later renamed Pan-Electric Industries Ltd. "When we developed the idea of manufacturing, we wanted our own entity and Pan Electric was our choice. I coined the name Pan Electric to cover the range of electrical products," Kahlenberg explained.[30]

Kahlenberg estimated that if every household in Singapore, Malaya and Borneo had a refrigerator, $15 million worth of food wasted would be saved yearly. He also said that Singapore was chosen as the site for the French company's first overseas manufacturing plant because of its central location and good supply of artisan labour, and that French personnel would train local staff in the initial period. Every part of the refrigerator would be made in Singapore except for the compressor.[31]

The Singapore government supported the idea of manufacturing refrigerators locally. "I remember Dr Goh Keng Swee [Minister for Finance] said he

A 1974 Pan-Electric advertisement for its new range of Permadoor refrigerators that were built with rust-proof, scratch-resistant and easy-to-clean materials. The refrigerators also came in a range of colours. *Source: The Straits Annual, 1 January 1974, 150–51 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

was happy with the project to bring refrigerators here as it helped to give employment to an increasing number of school leavers," said Kahlenberg in an interview with the *Business Times* in 1983.[32]

However, a year later, Frimatic was reportedly in financial difficulties following a crisis in the French domestic refrigerator industry.[33] Pan-El was not affected though. In 1964, Goh laid the foundation stone for the company's factory on Kampong Arang Road in the Tanjong Rhu industrial estate. "[T]he factory when completed will have established the foundation for a new and important type of industry in Singapore," Goh said in his speech.[34]

The factory began operations in 1965 with 120 workers. "Pan-El, in those days, served [the Economic Development Board] very well because it was shown to overseas investors as an example of what could be done in Singapore," said Kahlenberg. "We were always very glad to have visitors from abroad since those early days."[35]

Production went into full swing in 1966, churning out 6,000 units of refrigerators that year. Within three years, this jumped to 20,000 units, with capacity for 40,000 units if necessary.[36] By 1967, Pan-El's markets for refrigerators had expanded to 10 Asian countries, with exports accounting for 30 percent of sales, making it "Southeast Asia's largest refrigerator factory".[37]

By the time of its public listing in August 1968, Pan-El was already "one of Singapore's most successful export-oriented industrial plants", delivering refrigerators to Hong Kong, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Kahlenberg's aim at the time was to increase exports "to a point where at least one refrigerator will leave for overseas markets for every one sold in Singapore".[38]

In 1969, the company presented its 50,000th unit to the Singapore government. It was also awarded the largest contract from Australia worth $694,000 for 1,500 refrigerators.[39]

The Boom Years

As more Singaporeans moved into high-rise apartments, the demand for modern home appliances grew, with refrigerators becoming one of the most sought-after appliances in the 1970s. This boom was reflected in Pan-El's production milestones. In 1972, after less than a decade in operation, the company presented its 100,000th unit to the Singapore Boys' Home.[40]

"[This] is significant not only because this marks an important milestone in the production achievement of the Company, but also because it is indicative of the economic achievements of the Republic," said Chan Chee Seng, Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Social Affairs in his speech at the presentation ceremony.[41]

Building on its success, Pan-El expanded its range of household goods to include electric and gas cookers, washing machines and even furniture, acquiring a 64 percent stake in Ecko Wood Products, a local manufacturer of kitchen furniture and fittings.[42]

Kahlenberg's "appetite for expansion" extended beyond product diversification and securing more export markets. He became interested in the oil drilling industry and ventured into marine services through the purchase of Selco, a group of companies across Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Bermuda engaged in marine engineering and technology, which had facilities at Pulau Samulun and Kallang Marine industrial estate.[43]

The decision proved prescient for Pan-El as it rode on the global shipping boom of the 1970s, as well as the opportunities to search for new deposits of crude oil following the oil crises of 1973 and 1979 when oil prices surged.[44]

Between 1973 and 1975, Pan-El achieved "record-breaking performances" with pre-tax profits increasing from $236,000 in 1972 to $15.73 million in 1975. In 1973, the company made inroads into property development by acquiring Vanguard Realty and Development Pte Ltd, which "paid off handsomely through the years".[45]

In 1976, Pan-El underwent reorganisation and became a holding company with its activities carried out by wholly owned subsidiaries. The electrical appliances business came under Pan-Electric Appliances (PEA), which merged with Acma Electrical Industries Ltd, another well-known local appliance maker, in 1981. According to Kahlenberg, there was "a pressing need for manufacturing and service industries in like fields to get together and group themselves into large units".[46]

With the merger, Pan-El announced that they would no longer be directly involved in the domestic appliance manufacturing business. In May 1982, Peter Tham, a partner of stockbroking firm Associated Asian Securities, joined Pan-El as a director, while Kahlenberg resigned and left in January 1983 which he said was due to family commitments.[47]

Under new management, Pan-El pursued opportunities in the hotel and property sectors, including an industrial estate project along Tagore Avenue, and acquiring an 80 percent stake in Orchard Hotel and a 64.5 percent stake in developer F L Investments. The company further expanded into marine services, buying an energy company, erecting the world's largest desalination plant and acquiring controlling interests in a shipyard, financing such ventures with bank loans.[48]

As the first domestic fridge maker in 1965, Pan-El had contributed to Singapore's economic progress during its nation-building years. At the time of its collapse in 1985, Pan-El was a large investment holding company with no fewer than 60 subsidiaries and 10 associate companies.[49]

Although the stock market eventually recovered, the same could not be said for the company which was ordered to be wound up on 9 October 1986. The Pan-El brand also disappeared from the market when Acma stopped using the name on its refrigerators and air conditioners in 1986.[50] By then, the brand was so tainted that no one would have wanted to own any appliances bearing the Pan-El name. ♦

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A Pioneering Philanthropist

The Life of Mrs Lee Choon Guan

One of Singapore's first women philanthropists, Mrs Lee, née Tan Teck Neo, supported a wide range of charities.

By Yu-lin Ooi

Yu-lin Ooi is a historian and anthropologist who chronicles social change in Singapore, especially among women. She has documented 200 years of philanthropy in Singapore for the National University of Singapore initiated by the Mrs Lee Choon Guan Trust fund, available online at https://www.ccsgp.comp.nus.edu.sg/applied-research.

"Wherever there is useful social work to be performed, and it can be performed by ladies, you will find Mrs Lee Choon Guan well to the fore. She is one of the leading spirits of the Children's Aid Society, and has played an important role in all the recent developments which have as their aim the emancipation and education of Chinese woman [sic] in Singapore."[1]

This was what the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* wrote in their series, "Personalities of Singapore", in January 1934. The newspaper added that Mrs Lee Choon Guan was the first woman to ever be featured in the series, and the only Chinese woman in Malaya who had so far been honoured by His Majesty the King.[2]

Mrs Lee was no stranger to the limelight. The media frequently wrote about her – from her fashion choices to her mission to improve the lives of Singapore women. This was not the first time she had made the news, and it would certainly not be the last.[3]

A Woman of Change

The press's fascination with Mrs Lee may be attributed to the fact that she was one of a handful of local women living a new and modern way of life in early 20th-century Singapore when most of her contemporaries were still bound by societal rules, norms and expectations.

When Chinese and Peranakan (Straits Chinese) women were still confined at home and described as "quite out of touch with the society of men",[4] Mrs Lee was not only frequently seen in public with her husband, but also out and about with friends. When education was thought to be wasted on girls, she was not only literate, but fluent in English and also well travelled. When Chinese women as a whole had no formal economic status, she personally gave money to various causes and was recognised for doing so, both by colonial society and the local press.

More importantly, Mrs Lee was one of very few women able to bridge the gap between Singapore's British leaders and the general population, at a time when there was mostly mutual incomprehension. In the early decades of the 20th century, she created a link between Western and Asian sensibilities. For instance, she adopted new ideas from the West such as education for girls, social welfare and philanthropy, and introduced these in her unique and understandable way to Singapore society. She was not a dour do-gooder, but led by example with such glamour and style that the trends she set were eagerly followed by others.

Scion of an Influential Family

Mrs Lee's unusual mindset was the product of an unusual childhood. Born Tan Teck Neo in Singapore in 1877, she was the third daughter of the Melaka-born Peranakan entrepreneur Tan Keong Saik. He had moved to Singapore when it became a crown colony under direct British control in 1867. Tan Keong Saik soon became a prominent leader of the new Chinese community, a member of the Chinese Advisory Board and a Justice of the Peace.[5]

Tan Keong Saik was a far-sighted man who believed that an English education would be advantageous not only to his sons, but also to his daughters. This was revolutionary as respectable families at that time confined their girls to the home. In 1885, a solution presented itself in the persons of Methodist missionary William Oldham, his wife and fellow missionary Sophia Blackmore. They had come to Singapore from missions in India.

Oldham happened to meet Tan Keong Saik, who asked Oldham to be his personal tutor. He also persuaded the Oldhams to start a boarding school for his sons, which later became the Anglo-Chinese School.[6]

Blackmore was invited to teach Tan Keong Saik's daughters at home, which was how the young Tan Teck Neo learnt English, mathematics and history in the 1880s. She became a fluent and intelligent conversationalist "on all matters of interest" without breaking convention, while her peers were forbidden from learning anything but the domestic arts.[7]

Tan Keong Saik also supported gender equality, becoming one of the first members of the newly formed Po Leung Kuk – the Society for the Protection of Girls and Women established by the Chinese Protectorate in 1888. The society was a refuge for slave girls and victims of forced prostitution, whose work Tan Teck Neo continued to support after her marriage.[8]

Stepping into High Society

In 1900, Tan Teck Neo married Lee Choon Guan, a Straits Chinese businessman established in shipping and banking, and an esteemed

(Facing page) Portrait of Mrs Lee Choon Guan, 1920s. She was made a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 1918 for her charity work and contributions to the British Red Cross during World War I. The medal is pinned on her blouse. *Lee Brothers Studio Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980005527 - 0086).*

member of the Chinese community.[9] In Mr Lee, Tan Teck Neo found not only a wise and cosmopolitan husband, but also an ally and partner.

Lee Choon Guan and his late wife had had four children together, and now with his marriage to Tan Teck Neo, two more children joined the Lee family: son Pang Soo and daughter Poh Neo. The family subsequently moved into Mandalay Villa at 29 Amber Road, built by Lee Choon Guan's father Lee Cheng Yan as a holiday bungalow.[10]

Mandalay Villa, by the Katong seaside, came to play an important part in Mrs Lee's life, for it was here on its beautiful grounds that she gradually established herself as a peerless hostess. The Lees held what became fabled parties and balls for family, friends, high society and charity at the villa. Mrs Lee served drinks on the verandah overlooking the sea and lined the expansive lawn with rows of tables of sumptuous food from the finest local restaurants.[11]

Mr and Mrs Lee Choon Guan dressed to meet King George V and Queen Mary at Buckingham Palace, 1920. *Courtesy of Mrs Alice Chua*.

When Mrs Lee's brother Tan Cheng Kee acquired The Alhambra on Beach Road in 1909,[12] its famous live orchestra often provided entertainment at these gatherings, playing the latest dance music alternating with *ronggeng*, a popular local Malay dance form.

Each year on Mrs Lee's birthday on 18 December, the residents of Kampong Amber would hold a parade in her honour to thank the family for letting them live in the kampong almost rent-free and providing them with work as house staff running Mandalay.[13] These parades were part of the glittering annual birthday balls for Mrs Lee that became highly anticipated events in Singapore's social calendar. Frequent guests included the sultan and sultana of Johor, the chief justice, and the governor and his wife. Mandalay Villa became a special place for many, including a young Lee Kuan Yew (later prime minister of Singapore), who proposed to Kwa Geok Choo on its grounds after a party there.[14]

The Lees travelled frequently. In 1914 when they set sail for Europe, they took an entourage with them, including two of their children and Mr Lee's trusted cousin Lee Chim Tuan, delighting in adventure and discovery.[15] It would be the start of a lifetime of travel for Mrs Lee, who eventually sailed around the world twice.

The Lees were abroad at the outbreak of World War I. Mrs Lee went to England where she volunteered with the British Red Cross to help the wounded. For her wartime efforts and charitable acts, Mrs Lee was made a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 1918 by King George V, becoming the first Chinese woman to receive the honour. She and Mr Lee were even summoned to a Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace in June 1920 where she had the "honour of a personal conversation with Their Majesties the King and Queen" and where the King "expressed the pleasure it gave him to see Mrs Lee Choon Guan in Chinese attire, which he much admired".[16]

Mrs Lee was also the first Chinese woman in Singapore to get her driver's licence, a testament to her independence.[17]

Sometime around 1915, the press started to document the novel appearance of Chinese women at local society functions. Mrs Lee was frequently present at these events with her husband. News reports described dinners with the governor,[18] appearances at talks and attendance at the races in Farrer Park. Mrs Lee quickly became a favourite topic for readers, who were fascinated by descriptions of her fancy attire and the way she mingled comfortably with wives across ethnic groups.

The Lees were often invited to dine with Governor Arthur Young and his wife Lady Evelyn Young, and they reciprocated with invitations to Mandalay Villa. These led to cordial friendships between the two women, and Lady Evelyn began to call upon Mrs Lee to help steer women's committees. For instance, Mrs Lee represented Singapore women, along with wives of leaders in other local communities, in the consultation with Lady Evelyn on what they should give Queen Mary for her Silver Wedding Day in June 1918.[19]

Formidable Friends

Mr Lee Choon Guan was a member of the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA), which had been formed in 1900 and some of whose members were English-educated.[20] The association was a vocal force for social transformation in Singapore. It was through her husband's connections with the SCBA that Mrs Lee met other like-minded and educated wives like herself.

Such ladies included Mrs Lim Boon Keng from China, the wife of Lim Boon Keng, a successful entrepreneur, doctor and advocate of social and educational reform in Singapore; Lady Helen Song, wife of Sir Song Ong Siang, a lawyer and reformer also known for his contributions to developing Singapore civil society; Lee Choo Neo, Singapore's first Chinese lady doctor; and Wong Bee Ho, who co-founded Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital with her father. Others in their social circle were ladies who had studied in Hong Kong, Macau and Japan, making up a group of cosmopolitan, educated and modern-minded women who became the leading edge of local English-speaking Chinese society in Singapore.

These ladies blazed new paths in their own ways, but it was Mrs Lee who captured the hearts of the press. Her every move was noted – what she wore, where she was going, with whom she met and what she did were all described in detail to eager readers.

Mrs Lee was not an activist as such, but it was through the influence of these new friends that she would start a lifetime of fundraising. When Helen Song sought funds during World War I as part of a Malaya-wide drive to aid the Allied Forces, Mrs Lee helped raise $6,000 which went towards the purchase of a warplane, christened "Women of Malaya No. 27".[21] It was a proud moment for local women. For the first time, names of women appeared in newspapers, formally acknowledging their contributions in long lists of donors from across Malaya.[22]

In 1915, Mrs Lee and 23 women established the Chinese Ladies' Association (known as the Chinese Women's Association today). Created "for the general improvement of young Chinese ladies", it conducted classes focusing on domestic skills but whose main objective was to encourage girls from different families to meet outside their homes. Mrs Lee became its first president and

Mandalay Villa in 1968. It was built in 1902 as a holiday resort by Peranakan businessman Lee Cheng Yan, the father-in-law of Mrs Lee Choon Guan. She lived there until her death in 1978. *Lee Kip Lin Collection, National Library Singapore.*

(Above) Friends and founding members of the Chinese Ladies' Association, c. 1917. (From left) Mrs S.Y. Wong, Mrs Lee Choon Guan, Mrs S.K. Wong and an unknown gentleman. *Courtesy of Mrs Ivy Kwa.*

(Above right) Mrs Lee Choon Guan at her 100th birthday celebration, 1977. *Collection of the Peranakan Museum of Singapore. Gift of the Lim Family.*

hosted everyone at Magenta Cottage on Killiney Road. It was the first association that allowed girls to mingle outside their family compounds. The association subsequently became a powerful peer network where information was shared, from the latest fashion trends to news of turmoil in China.[23]

In 1916, the SCBA held a charity bazaar to raise money for the Red Cross and St John's Ambulance. Charity bazaars, which had evolved under Queen Victoria, were simple and effective events. Some people sold items to raise money while others bought tickets to attend. Mrs Lee ran a tea stall that was extremely popular and sold tea again at subsequent SCBA fundraisers.[24]

The *Straits Times* noted that "this was the first time that Chinese ladies have come forward to assist in a public charity or other function of the kind".[25] This was a watershed. Women across Singapore soon adopted the charity bazaar as their preferred form of fundraising.

Supporting Local Causes

In the following years, the Lees were involved in many high society occasions, becoming well known as generous hosts and donors. They enthusiastically supported charitable causes and Mrs Lee often turned fundraising events into grand social occasions.

Among other causes, they gave to the Children's Aid Society, the YWCA Building Fund and St Andrew's Mission Hospital. Mrs Lee laid the foundation stone of the hospital in August 1922, donating funds towards its completion.[26] Mr Lee was passionate about developing local education and he financially supported the building of schools. In 1919, he gave a generous $60,000 to start Raffles College, which was established in 1928.[27]

On 27 August 1924, however, everything came to an abrupt halt. Mr Lee suddenly died just aged 56. Mrs Lee was only in her forties. Of Mr Lee, the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* wrote: "The influence of his death will be very widely felt for he was a man of many activities and interests, having been for a very large number of years a warm supporter of all movements which had for their purpose the betterment of the Chinese in the country." The newspaper described Mrs Lee as "a most enthusiastic supporter of all her husband's social and public activities".[28] After his death, Mrs Lee withdrew from society and nothing was heard about her in the press for some time.

A Different Singapore

It would take a few years before Mrs Lee reappeared in society, accompanied by family and stalwart friends, and still found much to do. The Qing dynasty had ended, schools for girls were on the rise and suffrage was in the air. But she felt that social infrastructure for women and children in Singapore was still inadequate, so she focused on improving social welfare.

Mrs Lee was appointed to the Committee of Ladies under the Women and Girls Protection Ordinance in 1930, oversaw maternity care at the Kandang Kerbau Hospital (present-day KK Women's and Children's Hospital), encouraged women to train as midwives by giving them scholarships and hosted fundraisers for the Po Leung Kuk at Mandalay Villa for rescued girls to enjoy the seaside.[29] She continued to aid the Child Welfare Society, an organisation that provided critical intervention for local children before any form of social welfare existed in Singapore.[30]

Mrs Lee also returned to hosting grand parties at Mandalay. Her beloved annual birthday balls resumed in 1930, and were attended by governors, judges, royalty and social luminaries who toasted their hostess, decked out in jewels and medals, while fireworks exploded in the skies.[31]

But everything would change again. Singapore fell to the Japanese on 15 February 1942 and the Lees escaped to India. Now it was Mrs Lee's granddaughter Alice who picked up the baton and volunteered with the Red Cross.

Leaving a Legacy

Mrs Lee was 68 years old when she returned to Singapore in 1945. Mandalay Villa was in shambles and Singapore was now looking away from the British towards independence. The Peranakans, at their zenith in a British colonial world, were disappearing as a distinct group, absorbed into the growing Chinese community.

Mrs Lee restored what she could of the villa and continued to support welfare-related activities, involving her grandchildren in the family's generous ways. She celebrated her 100th birthday on 18 December 1977 and died just two months later on 27 February 1978.[32]

Today, Mrs Lee's philanthropic work carries on through the Mrs Lee Choon Guan Trust Fund, established in 1984, and the Mrs Lee Choon Guan Fund set up by her great-grandson Keith Chua with the Community Foundation of Singapore in 2011.[33] Her great-grandchildren continue to look for new ways to help society. For her contributions to advancing the welfare of women and supporting women's causes, Mrs Lee was inducted into the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame in 2018.[34] ♦

NOTES

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17 Conversations between Yu-lin Ooi and the family of Mrs Lee Choon Guan, 2015.
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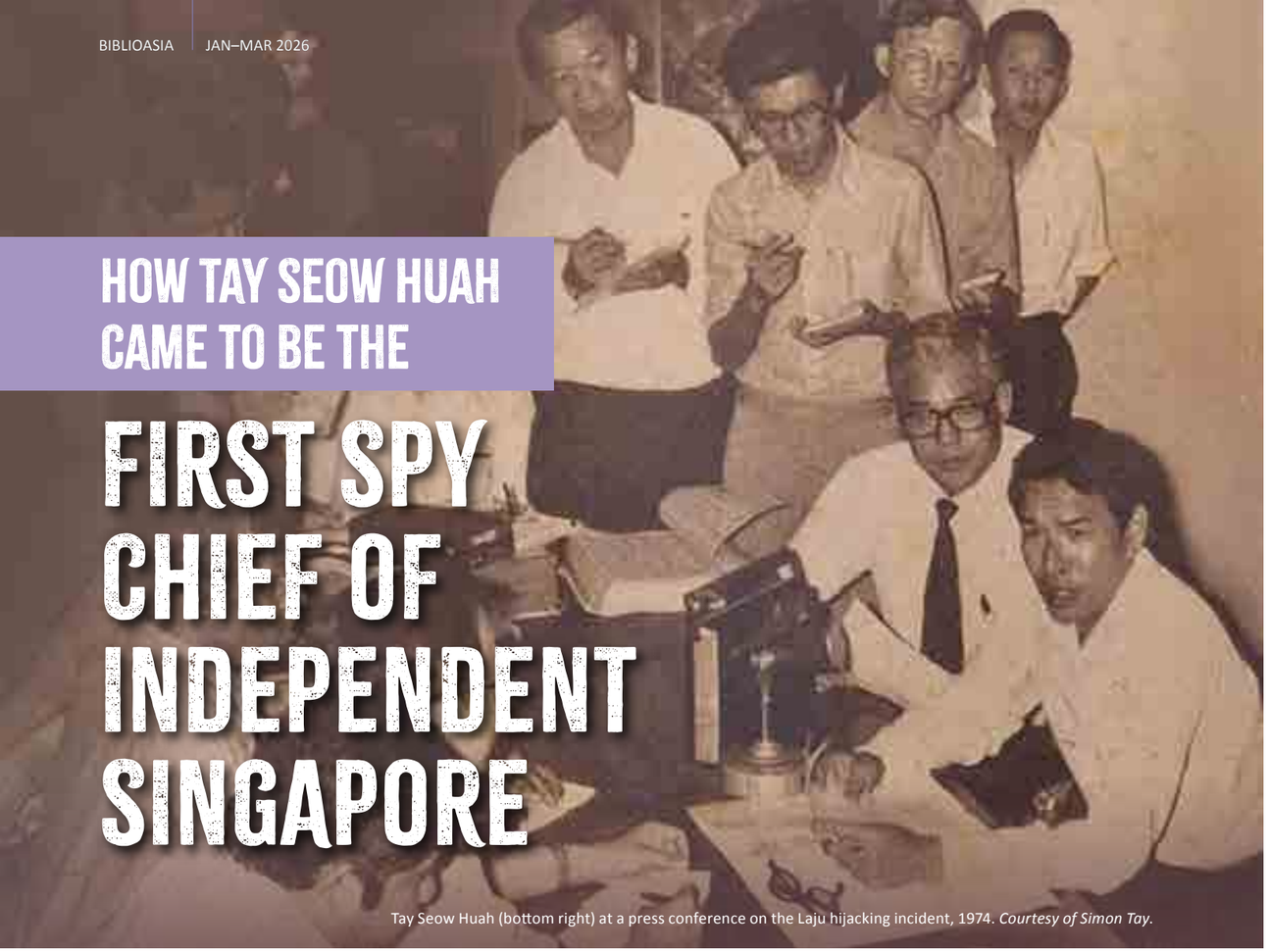

HOW TAY SEOW HUAH CAME TO BE THE FIRST SPY CHIEF OF INDEPENDENT SINGAPORE

Tay Seow Huah (bottom right) at a press conference on the Laju hijacking incident, 1974. *Courtesy of Simon Tay.*

In a BiblioAsia+ podcast episode, Simon Tay – lawyer, academic and winner of the 2010 Singapore Literature Prize – tells us how his Penang-born father came to play a giant role serving a newly independent Singapore.

Tay Seow Huah, then Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Home Affairs, helmed Singapore's response to the 1974 Laju hijacking. This was when four terrorists tried (but failed) to destroy Shell's oil infrastructure on Pulau Bukom Besar and subsequently took five hostages.

Little is known about Tay, who was the founding Director of the Security and Intelligence Division. *BiblioAsia* Editor-in-Chief Jimmy Yap interviews Tay's son Simon, who has written a memoir about his father titled *Enigmas: Tay Seow Huah, My Father, Singapore's Pioneer Spy Chief.*

Simon Tay: My father in 1965 got a call from Mr Lee Kuan Yew at the helm of the newly independent republic, and basically got told to head the Special Branch. Why him? Well, prior to this, he was the port manager at the Singapore Harbour Board, today the Maritime & Port Authority [of Singapore] and in between that, the Port Authority of Singapore.

How did a port manager in charge of human resources get entrusted by Mr Lee to head the Special Branch? And that's where a lot of the writing about [my father's] pre-Laju career began, and where I have to sort of delve and in a way speculate. One of the speculations was that he was involved in politics of the highest order. At that time, the port and the unions were riddled with leftists, and there was huge tension. A strike or closure of the port would have been ruinous for Singapore.

Jimmy: Right.

Simon: The port is in the ward of Tanjong Pagar, which is the heart of Lee Kuan Yew's constituency. When Mr Lee met the Port Union workers, the only civil servant in the room as far as the records show, was my father. I think that trust in handling highly politically dangerous situations grew between Mr Lee and my civil servant father. My father was not a politician. And then when this Special Branch evolved, my father was entrusted to split the Special Branch into two parts. The Security Services Division (in charge of external issues) and the Internal Security Division (to deal with internal issues) at that time were under a single ministry, the Ministry of Interior and Defence. And my father, therefore, headed both agencies.

I think that gave a lot of background to his experience as being, as the title of the book suggests, the pioneer spy chief of Singapore. And so in 1974, he was the man that Mr Lee called.

Jimmy: What struck me was the youth of all the main protagonists: Mr Lee and your father. How old was your father at the time?

Simon: He was 41. The founding generation was thrown into the deep end, right? They had to make Singapore succeed, or there would be no turning back. And my father felt this strongly because he had come down to Singapore for university. He was actually born in the north of Malaya. And he had a choice, I guess, of joining Malaysia or Singapore, but he opted to be here. They were awfully brave because they really had not many choices.

Jimmy: Your account of the hostage situation your father was dealing with was very detailed. I was just reading Mr [S.R.] Nathan's biography, and he has some information. Presumably the press would have covered what they could see and what they were told. I always felt like you had an insight into what he [Tay Seow Huah] was doing in that office in Kallang. I'm sure the security agency wasn't anxious to open their file for you.

Simon: There is a lot of information, but the information on Laju is scattered and sometimes needs to be reconciled. So Mr Nathan's book was a good resource for me. I knew Mr Nathan when I was a child. My father and he were friends from the first years of civil service. When I grew up, I called him Uncle Nathan. And I would ask his family and speak to his son, who's about my age, about what he could remember.

And Mr Nathan's book went into great detail. Of course, the newspapers covered it. And not just the Singapore newspapers and the *New York Times*, but also Japan's side because the Japanese terrorists who were in the Red Army were involved. And of course, the archives [National Archives of Singapore] had the transcripts of all the press statements.

Jimmy: We know that President Nathan was part of a team of Singaporeans who accompanied the four hijackers to Kuwait to guarantee their safety. And I think your father was or was perhaps possibly one of those people who was supposed to have gone on, but didn't. In your book, you talked about that.

Simon: My father had come out of [the] Istana, and the first person he called was Mr Nathan. Mr Nathan was then in charge of security intelligence, which was outward looking. And the internal security person seems to have been the more logical person to choose. But I think going back to what I said about my father and Mr Nathan having worked together before, and when you face a crunch – think it is a good instinct of the pioneers, and we shouldn't give it up – you turn to people you know and trust. ♦

Scan the QR code to listen to the full interview with Simon Tay on the BiblioAsia+ podcast, "First Spy Chief of Independent Singapore, Tay Seow Huah".

Simon Tay: lawyer, academic and winner of the 2010 Singapore Literature Prize. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

REMEMBERING JOHN NORMAN MIKSIC

The "Indiana Jones" of Singapore archaeology died on 25 October 2025, aged 79.

By Kwa Chong Guan

The pioneering archaeologist John Miksic never thought of archaeologically investigating Fort Canning Hill until the invitation to do so came from the old National Museum (later Singapore History Museum and now National Museum of Singapore) in 1983. He was focused on Indonesian archaeology, having excavated port settlements along the Deli River valley in northeast Sumatra. His doctoral thesis to Cornell University's Department of Anthropology was about his excavations, which won the Lauriston Sharp Prize for best doctoral thesis in 1979.

Miksic accepted the invitation to archaeologically investigate Fort Canning and, against the odds, in a 10-day investigation of the top of Fort Canning from 18 to 28 January 1984, recovered *in situ* 1,346 pottery shards weighing a total of 14.31 kg dating back to the 14th century. The report he produced of his investigations set the standard on the conduct and reporting of future archaeological excavations in Singapore.

Both Stamford Raffles and John Crawfurd, the second Resident of Singapore, had reported remains of an ancient settlement on Fort Canning. But the summit of Fort Canning had been levelled and excavated three times in the intervening 165 years since. The archaeological team was hoping against hope that there might still be some intact artefacts buried on the hill, confirming the stories in the *Sulalat al-Salatin* (Genealogy of Kings), or *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), that Fort Canning was the seat of government of Sang Nila Utama (Sri Tribuana), the mythical prince of Palembang who founded the city of Singapura on the island of Temasik (Temasek) around 1299.

Miksic's successful finds stimulated public interest in the potential for archaeology to recover more about Singapore's deep past. The National Parks Board offered him a consultancy on further archaeological investigations and the History Department at the National University of Singapore (NUS) recruited him to its staff in 1987. In 1991, Miksic joined the newly formed Southeast Asian Studies Programme at NUS, which became the Department of Southeast Asian Studies where he remained until he retired as emeritus professor in 2019.

Miksic's interest in archaeology dates back to his undergraduate student days at Dartmouth College (Hanover, New Hampshire) where he graduated with a BA in anthropology in 1968. He then served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Malaysia from 1968 to 1972, helping to set up a farmers' cooperative and developing an irrigation system in the Bujang Valley in Kedah, before returning to the United States to earn an MA from the Department of International Affairs, Ohio University (Athens, Ohio), in 1974.

It was at Bujang Valley that Miksic became aware of and developed an interest in the early history of Southeast Asia. This led him to work for another MA and PhD in Cornell University's Department of Anthropology. Upon obtaining his PhD in 1979, Miksic accepted a job as a Rural Development Planning and Management Adviser in Bengkulu, Sumatra, under a project for the United States Agency for International Development. As said, he had two career lines: one as a rural development adviser and the other an archaeologist.

It was the archaeologist which won when, in 1981, Miksic moved to Gadjah Mada University (Yogyakarta, Indonesia), joining the Department of Archaeology with support from the Ford Foundation and Asian Cultural Council. The invitation to relocate to Singapore in 1987 came at a fortuitous time when his programme to teach at Gadjah Mada University was ending.

(Top) John Miksic at the Fort Canning archaeological dig, June 1997. *Source: Berita Harian © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

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

From 1988 onwards, Miksic participated in every major archaeological excavation on Fort Canning and its environs to check if there were any 14th century artefacts before the area was redeveloped. He was also asked to check the site of the new Parliament House Complex before its construction in late 1994 and at Empress Place in 1998 before its restoration as the Asian Civilisations Museum.

In early 2003, the Singapore Cricket Club allowed Miksic to excavate a corner of its cricket pitch. The artefacts recovered confirmed the Padang as a potentially large archaeological site. St Andrew's Cathedral also allowed him to excavate its grounds in late 2003 before the construction of an extension to the cathedral.

All these excavations were done with volunteers comprising not only university undergraduates, junior college students and friends of the museum, but also a widening circle of Singaporeans interested in recovering Singapore's deep past.

Somehow, Miksic managed to persuade these volunteers that slowly brushing away the soil on Fort Canning to reveal the fragment of a Ming dynasty jar can be therapeutic and exhilarating. He mentored his volunteers to collect everything they unearthed, whether it was the fragment of a Ming vase or local earthenware pot, and record exactly where they excavated it. He got the volunteers to then sift the soil they had brushed and check if there were other artefacts that they had missed.

The volunteers recovered tiny, minute glass beads and fragments of glass bangles from this sifting of soil, which provided us a detailed view of life on 14th century Fort Canning that would have been otherwise lost. In 1997, these artefacts were displayed at an exhibition at the Singapore History Museum, which he co-curated and audaciously titled *Singapore's 700th Anniversary*.

Miksic carefully stored the accumulating tons of artefacts excavated in storerooms in the old British military building on Fort Canning which he had persuaded the National Parks Board, supporting his work, to open up for him. He also enlisted more volunteers to slowly wash and sort out tons of recovered artefacts.

When the storage space on Fort Canning ran out, Miksic got the Department of Southeast Asian Studies to take over an old staff bungalow from NUS that he proudly converted into the NUS Kent Ridge-Fort Canning Archaeology Laboratory. Here, he continued to persuade students and others to volunteer to clean and sort the artefacts. Upon his retirement as emeritus professor from NUS, he transported the artefacts to Nanyang Technological University (NTU) where he was offered a fellowship.

Miksic was also the founding Head of the Archaeological Unit, which supports the work of the old Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute on Southeast Asia's historical interactions between South and East Asia. He summed up his 40 years of archaeological research on Singapore – which established 14th-century Temasek as the best archaeologically documented port-settlement in the Straits of Melaka – in his book, *Singapore & the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300–1800* (NUS Press, 2013). The book won the inaugural Singapore History Prize in 2018 and is the standard reference on archaeology in Singapore.

For his stellar services to furthering archaeology in Singapore, Miksic was awarded the Public Service Medal (Pingat Bakti Masyarakat) at the National Day Awards 2023 for not only his academic contributions but also his role in fostering public appreciation for Singapore's deep historical roots. The citation reads in part: "His work has helped integrate archaeology into national narratives and museum exhibitions, influencing both scholarship and heritage policy."

It was not only in Singapore that Miksic's yeoman service to archaeology and heritage had been recognised. The Indonesian National Archaeology Research Centre acknowledged his contributions to the development of Indonesian archaeology, as did the National Museum of Indonesia for the catalogues he had edited of their collections. From the Sultan of Solo, Miksic received a royal title for his work in cataloguing the collections of the palace.

Miksic also served on the board of the Center for Khmer Studies in Cambodia from 2000 until 2016, advising them on their research projects at Angkor. Additionally, he worked with Assoc Prof Goh Geok Yian, Associate Chair (Faculty), School of Humanities at NTU, running a series of workshops in Bagan on archaeology and cultural resource management during the years when Myanmar was opened to foreign scholars.

Miksic was committed to archaeology to the end, and continued to read and write until the last weeks of his life. His legacy is not just in what he unearthed, but in how he transformed Singapore's historical consciousness, proving that archaeology could speak powerfully in forging a national identity. ♦

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