

# biblioasia

Vol.  
**18**  
Issue  
**03**  
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04 / A Spotlight on Firewalking

16 / Hidden Histories: The Rōmusha

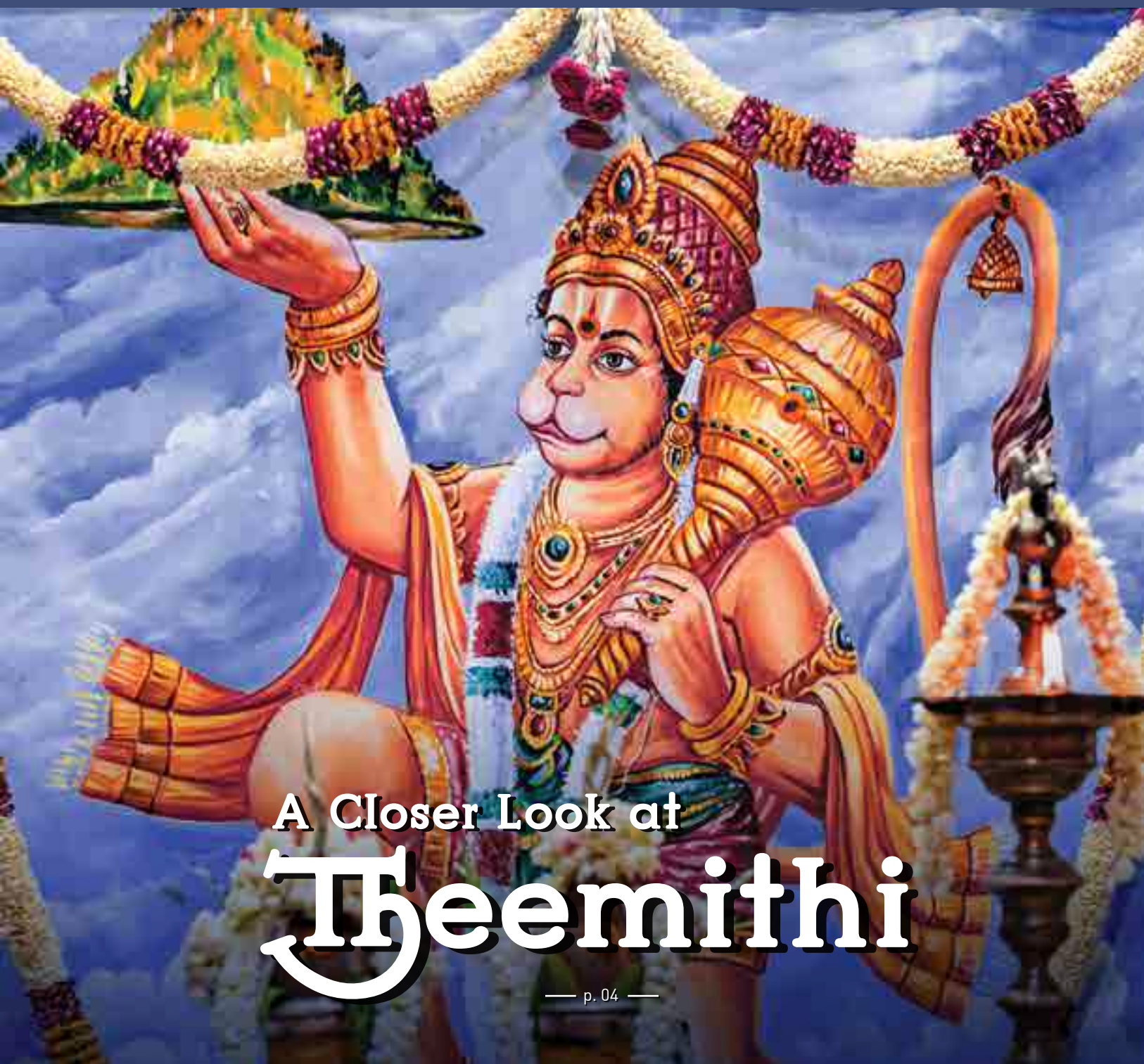
24 / Sarong Island Stories

30 / Johor at the World's Fair

36 / Family Planning

42 / How Singapore Got a Central Bank

60 / Loke Wan Tho



## A Closer Look at **Theemithi**



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# Director’s Note

One of the wonderful things about Singapore is our multicultural society which allows us to easily experience the culture of others, whether it is the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival or a Malay wedding. One of the more colourful examples is Theemithi, the annual firewalking festival held at the Sri Mariamman Temple on South Bridge Road. (It takes place a week before Deepavali, on a Sunday.)

While many people know about the firewalking, few understand its significance and or why it even takes place. For an insider’s take on Theemithi, don’t miss curator Nalina Gopal’s deep dive into the festival, accompanied by some amazing photographs.

In this issue, we continue to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the fall of Singapore, this time with an essay by writer Shirlene Noordin. This is a piece that weaves in personal history and relentless detective work to bring us a deeply moving story about how her grandfather survived working on the Thai-Burma Railway.

On a happier note, we have a quirky story about an island resort that predated Sentosa – Sarong Island. Librarian Lim Tin Seng delves into a forgotten chapter in Singapore’s history.

Another fascinating piece recounts how Johor ended up exhibiting at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. The story by former Lee Kong Chian Research Fellow Faris Joraimi about how 25 men and women from Johor spent a cold Chicago spring demonstrating sarong weaving makes for interesting reading.

If popular culture is more your thing though, don’t miss our profile on Loke Wan Tho, the man behind Cathay Cinema and a fascinating figure in his own right. The piece by former librarian Bonny Tan looks at his interesting hobbies, such as birdwatching, and features wonderful images.

Meanwhile, we also revisit the early days of family planning, the making of the Monetary Authority of Singapore, the history of Union Book, and Cold War propaganda battles.

Plenty of great reads ahead, perhaps over the long Deepavali weekend. And to all our readers who celebrate it, I would like to wish you a Happy Deepavali!

**Ms Alicia Yeo**  
Director  
National Library

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**On the cover**  
The image of Hanuman (the monkey god) on the *kodi* (flag). The *kodi* is hoisted on the *kodimaram* (flag post) during the *kodiyetram*, or hoisting of the flag, symbolising the commencement of the Theemithi cycle. *Courtesy of the Hindu Endowments Board.*

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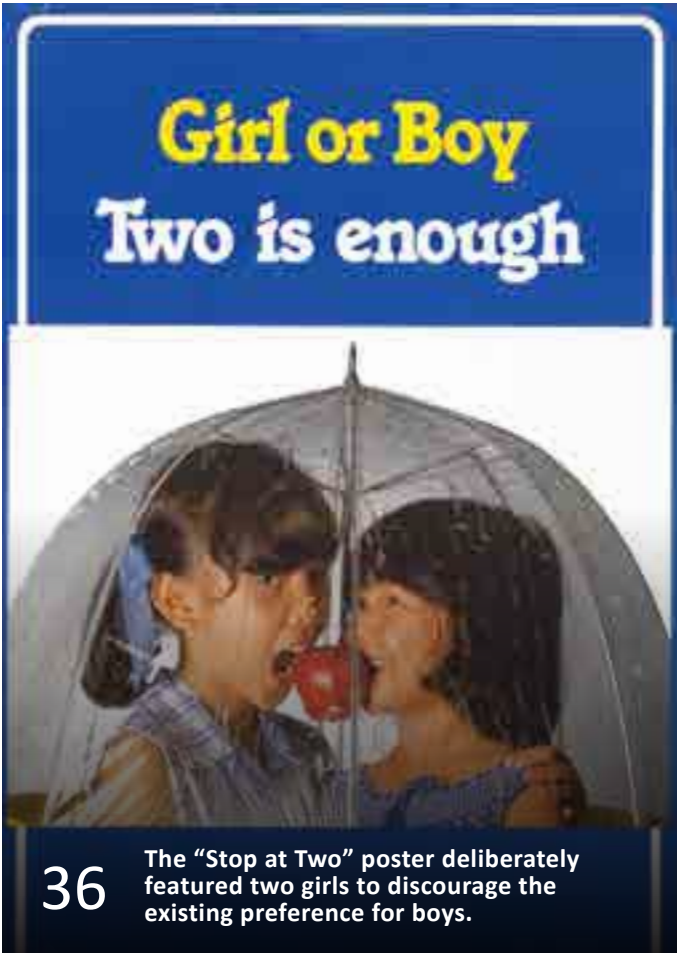
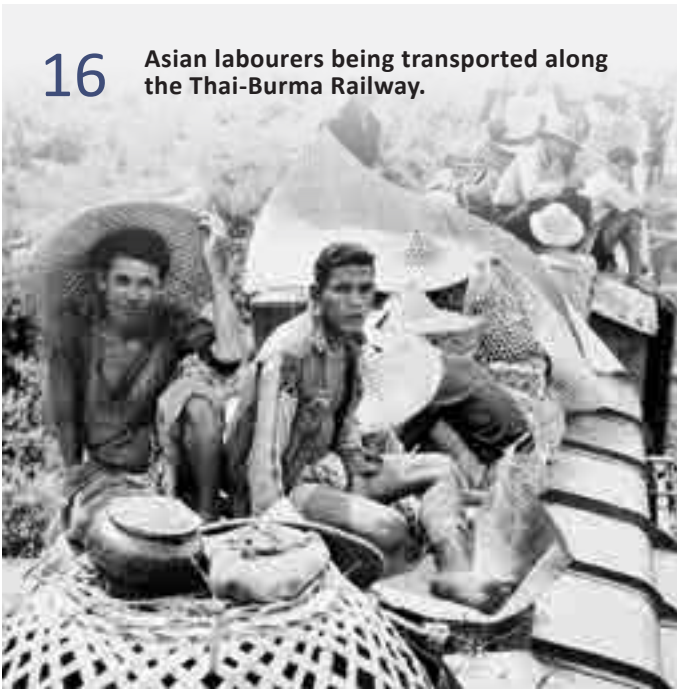
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# CONTENTS

- 01 Director’s Note
- 04 **Theemithi: A Look at the Full Cycle of Rituals Behind the Festival of Firewalking**  
Theemithi is a cycle of rituals that involves the re-enactment of events from the Mahabharatam over several months. **Nalina Gopal**
- 16 **My Grandfather Was a Rōmusha**  
Asian labourers known as *rōmusha* helped to build the Thai-Burma Railway during World War II. **Shirlene Noordin**
- 24 **From Sarong Island With Love: Singapore’s Original Tourist Isle**  
Before there was Sentosa, there was Sarong Island. **Lim Tin Seng**
- 30 **Johor at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair**  
The full story behind how Johor ended up exhibiting at the Chicago World’s Fair at the end of the 19th century. **Faris Joraimi**
- 36 **The Early Days of Family Planning in Singapore**  
Singapore’s family planning programme did not start with the “Stop at Two” policy in 1972. **Andrea Kee**
- 42 **The Making of the Monetary Authority of Singapore: How the MAS Became Singapore’s Central Bank**  
MAS took 30 years before it officially became an official central bank. **Barbara Quek**
- 48 **Union Book Stands Tall At 70**  
Located in Bras Basah Complex, the Chinese bookstore has played an important role in the development of the Chinese literary scene. **Chen Yuxin**
- 54 **Cold War Rivalries Fuel Propaganda Battle in Singapore in the 1940s and 1950s**  
After World War II, Singapore was a battleground for ideological conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States. **Chow Chia Yung**
- 60 **Loke Wan Tho: The Man Who Built Cathay**  
Loke Wan Tho was not your typical business tycoon. The film magnate behind Cathay was also an avid photographer of birds. **Bonny Tan**

Image credits, clockwise from left: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, National Archives of Singapore; Australian War Memorial; C.D. Arnold and H.D. Higinbotham, *Official Views of The World’s Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: Press Chicago Photo-Gravure Co., 1893). Project Gutenberg; Lim Kay Tong, *Cathay: 55 Years of Cinema* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1991), 11. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 791.43095957 LIM); Singapore Family Planning and Population Board Collection, National Archives of Singapore.





# Theemithi

## A Look at the Full Cycle of Rituals Behind the Festival of Firewalking

Theemithi is much more than just the firewalking festival. It is a cycle of rituals that involves the re-enactment of events from the Mahabharatam over several months. **By Nalina Gopal**

**Nalina Gopal** is an independent curator and researcher focused on South Asia and its diaspora. She is founder of Antati, a historical research and museum consultancy.

In October 1893, the manager of the Sri Mariamman Temple on South Bridge Road hired a lawyer to represent the temple in the Senior Magistrate's court in Singapore.<sup>1</sup> The man he chose was Walter John Napier, the co-founder of Drew & Napier, later the Attorney-General of the Straits Settlements. The suit? Police Superintendent Bell had filed an injunction against the temple to prevent the firewalking festival from taking place that year.

In Napier's winning defence of the right of "[Hindoos to]... practice their particular rites and ceremonies without any interference from the Government", he refers to the festival being celebrated in Singapore since 1835.<sup>2</sup> This reference puts the age of the annual festival of Theemithi to within 20 years of the establishment of a British outpost in the littoral city.

Theemithi, which means "firewalking", is observed during the Tamil month of Aipassi (mid-October to mid-November) at the Sri Mariamman Temple. Over the past decades, firewalking has taken place a week before Deepavali (on a Sunday), witnessed by thousands, including devotees and the curious.

This spectacular event has, however, eclipsed the associated cycle of rituals that take place over a three-month period before the festival. These rituals are an elaborate retelling of events from the Mahabharatam, speaking of an epic devotion kept alive in the diaspora for close to two centuries.<sup>3</sup>

### Antecedents: The Mahabharatam

To understand the events that collectively constitute the festival of Theemithi, it is necessary to turn to the Indian epic poem, the Mahabharatam (known as the Mahabharata in Sanskrit and Mahabharatam in Tamil.)

Inscriptional evidence points to the prevalence of the reading of the poem as early as the 7th century CE.<sup>4</sup> The reading of the epic is a tradition that continues to the present, particularly during the festival of Theemithi.

The goddess Draupadi (also spelled Drowpathai), whose worship is associated with Theemithi, is the deified heroine of the Mahabharatam. Draupadi is the wife

Image of Hanuman the monkey god painted on the *kodi* (flag), which is hoisted on the *kodimaram* (flag post) during *kodiyetram* ("hoisting the flag"), 2021. Courtesy of the Hindu Endowments Board.





தீமிதித் திருவிழாவின் முக்கிய நிகழ்ச்சிகள் Key Events of Firewalking Festival	
ஸ்ரீ பெரியாச்சி அம்மன் பூச்சொரிதல் Sri Periyachi Amman Poochorital	ஞாயிறு   31.07.22   Sunday 10:00 am
ஸ்ரீ பெரியாச்சி அம்மன் பூஜை Sri Periyachi Amman Poojai	ஞாயிறு   31.07.22   Sunday 6:05 pm
ஸ்ரீ திரௌபதை அம்மன் கொடியேற்றம் Sri Drowpathai Amman Kodiyetram	திங்கள்   01.08.22   Monday 8:00 pm
ஸ்ரீ திரௌபதை அம்மனுக்கு மாலையிடுதல் Sri Drowpathai Ammanukku Maalalyiduthal	திங்கள்   08.08.22   Monday 7:00 pm to 8:30 pm
ஸ்ரீ திரௌபதை அம்மனுக்கு திருக்கல்யாணம் Sri Drowpathai Ammanukku Thirukalyanam	திங்கள்   15.08.22   Monday 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm
வஸ்திராபரணம் Vasthirabbaaranam	திங்கள்   22.08.22   Monday 7:00 pm to 7:30 pm
தபசு மரம் ஸ்தபனம் Thabasu Maram Sthabaanam	வெள்ளி   09.09.22   Friday 9:30 am
அர்ச்சுனன் தபசு Arjunan Thabasu	வெள்ளி   09.09.22   Friday 7:00 pm
கீசக சம்ஹாரம் Keesaga Samharam	சனி   10.09.22   Saturday 7:30 pm to 8:30 pm
ஸ்ரீ அரவான் பூஜை Sri Aravan Poojai	திங்கள்   19.09.22   Monday 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm
ஸ்ரீ அரவான் களப்பலி Sri Aravan Kalapali	சனி   24.09.22   Saturday 7:00 pm to 8:30 pm
பக்தர்கள் விரதம் துவங்கும் சிறப்பு பூஜை Commencement of Firewalking Viratham	சனி   08.10.22   Saturday 10:00 am
சக்கரவர்த்தி கோட்டை Chakravarthi Kottai	சனி   15.10.22   Saturday 10:00 am
படுகலம் Padukalam	ஞாயிறு   16.10.22   Sunday 4:50 am
தீமிதித் திருவிழா Firewalking Ceremony	ஞாயிறு   16.10.22   Sunday 5:30 pm

(Left) Key list of events associated with Theemithi in 2022. Courtesy of the Hindu Endowments Board.

(Above) The pandaram (priest) carrying the agni kapparai (giant cauldron of fire). He is in the guise of Madurai Veeran, guardian of the goddess, at the Periyachi Amman shrine, Sri Mariamman Temple, 2021. Courtesy of the Hindu Endowments Board.

of the five Pandava brothers. Wronged by the Kauravas, the scheming cousins of the brothers, she vows vengeance. An 18-day battle – known as the Kurukshetra War – ensues, resulting in the victory of the Pandavas and the appeasement of Draupadi.<sup>5</sup>

This story, contained in 18 *parvam* or books in Tamil and other versions, unfolds through an elaborate re-enactment or ritual drama during the festival of Theemithi, from the engagement ceremony and loss to victory and coronation. (The oldest surviving copies of the Mahabharatam used at the Sri Mariamman Temple in Singapore, likely read during the proceedings of the festival, go back to the last decade of the 19th century. These are now in the collection of the National Archives of Singapore.<sup>6</sup>)

**Sri Periyachi Amman Poojai**

The approximately three-month-long cycle of rituals commences with an invocation to the mother goddess, Periyachi Amman, in the Tamil month of Aadi (mid-July to mid-August) at the Sri Mariamman Temple. This tradition, too, has precedent in the epics – an autumn prayer to the goddess Durga was performed by Rama to defeat the demon king Ravana in the Ramayana, and by the Pandavas to defeat the Kauravas in the Mahabharatam.

On the day of the prayer dedicated to Periyachi, which takes place on a Sunday in the month of Aadi, Mariamman is manifested in the *karagam*, or water vessel, embellished with margosa leaves (also known as neem leaves, and generally associated with the worship of Mariamman), flowers and lemons.<sup>7</sup>

The *pandaram*, or priest, carries the mother goddess in the form of the *karagam* on his head and a margosa stem in hand. He dances around the temple grounds, stopping from sanctum to sanctum. Once done, the priest changes his garb and adorns the attire of Madurai Veeran, the guardian of the goddess.

In a trance, with coconut flowers in one hand and a staff in the other, the *pandaram* dances before Periyachi Amman at her shrine. He is then handed a giant cauldron of fire, or *agni kapparai*, which he carries around the temple. At this point, the *agni kapparai* represents the mother goddess herself. The goddess is thus manifested through the mediums of water, fire and even the priest.<sup>8</sup>

(Right) Reading of the Mahabharatam by the chief priest at the Sri Mariamman Temple, 2021. Courtesy of the Hindu Endowments Board.

(Below) The chief priest performing prayers before the *kodi* (flag) is hoisted, 2021. Courtesy of the Hindu Endowments Board.

**Sri Draupadi Amman Kodiyetram**

Following the invocation of the mother goddess, a large flag is hoisted at the *kodimaram*, or flag post, in front of the shrine of Draupadi the following day. The *kodiyetram*, or hoisting of the flag, symbolises the commencement of the Theemithi cycle.

The reading of the Mahabharatam begins on the day the flag is hoisted, and a portion of the epic is read nightly thereafter. In the 1960s and 1970s, the reading was done by a volunteer known to all as Bharata *poosari*. According to E.V. Singhan’s account of the festival in 1976, the reader was paid more than \$160 for his efforts.<sup>9</sup> In the 1990s, the writer and radio producer M.K. Narayanan would read the epic to an audience of devotees



at the Sri Mariamman Temple.<sup>10</sup> Today, it is read by the chief priest.

The preparation of the *kodi*, or flag, is itself an elaborate process. A new *kodi* has to be made annually. The white, cotton fabric – about 45 m long and a metre across – is sourced from a textile store at Jalan Sultan by volunteers, according to a 2022 interview with Moti Lal Prasad. (Lal Prasad has been a volunteer at the

temple since 1982 when he joined the Navaratri boys group.<sup>11</sup>)

According to Prasad, “the *kodi* is then taken to a tailor in Little India to be finished, and from there, to the temple to be framed and made ready for painting. An artist known as Mr Sam then paints the image of Hanuman or Anjaneyar” (the monkey god) carrying the Sanjeevani Hill in his right hand.





Hanuman's inclusion is reminiscent of Draupadi and Bhiman's (one of the Pandava brothers) encounter with the deity in the Mahabharatam.

The painting of Hanuman spans only about 1.2 m by 1 m of the enormous flag. After it is painted, it is removed from the frame. On the day of the flag hoisting, the *kodi* is decorated with silk and flowers. Following rituals, the flag is then hoisted and remains on the flag post till the end of Theemithi. The taking down of the flag marks the end of the festival. The flag is then cut and the painted portion kept in storage, while the unpainted portion is discarded.<sup>12</sup>

In the Mahabharatam, Draupadi is "won" by the Pandava prince Arjunan at a *swayamvaram* (competition for prospective grooms). He brings her home to his mother Kunti, who orders him to share his winnings with his four brothers. Thus, she comes to be married to all the five Pandava brothers.

In the Tamil renditions of the epic – and indeed in the Draupadi cult as well as during Theemithi – Draupadi, Arjunan and the god Krishnan are situated as the divine triumvirate with unparalleled powers. (In other versions

of the Mahabharatam, this trio is not considered the central triad.)

#### **Sri Draupadi Ammanukku Malaiyithudal**

During Theemithi, a unique retelling of the epic unfolds that places Draupadi as the central character. It commences with Draupadi's engagement ceremony. Called Malaiyithudal, the ritual marks the betrothal of Arjunan and Draupadi and is held on the Monday just after the flag is hoisted. The processional images of the two are dressed, adorned with fresh flower garlands, and decorated. *Ubhaya-karar* (patrons) represent the groom's and bride's families during the rites.

After the rites are performed by priests, the polychrome figures are carried by volunteers in circumambulation within the temple, together with the processional images of Krishnan and Virabadran, the latter being a *munodi deviam* or front-running guardian of Draupadi.

#### **Sri Draupadi Ammanukku Thirukalyanam**

On the Monday after Malaiyithudal a week later, Thirukalyanam, or the wedding of Draupadi, is held.

The Thirukalyanam comprises a series of ostentatious marriage rites that include a ceremonial dance by two garland-bearing priests, who go on to exchange the garlands before draping the garlands on the processional icons of Arjunan and Draupadi. Following this, a *thali* (wedding pendant) is tied around Draupadi's neck to symbolise her married status.

#### **Sri Draupadi Vasthiraparanam**

The ritual that takes place a week after Thirukalyanam is perhaps the one that involves the fewest number of people. Priests, temple staff, volunteers and a small number of devotees witness the unbearable humiliation of Draupadi: Draupadi Vasthiraparanam. This is the disrobing of Draupadi in an open court after the eldest Pandava brother, Dharma-*maraja*, loses to the Kauravas in a game of dice. However, Krishnan comes to her rescue and prevents her humiliation.

The episode is relived ceremonially; the *pandaram* covers the red sari worn by Draupadi's processional image with a yellow one and unties her bound hair.<sup>13</sup> These actions signify her vow to seek vengeance against those who have wronged her.

The processional icons of Draupadi and Arjunan decorated elaborately for the Malaiyithudal, or engagement ceremony, at the Sri Mariamman Temple, 2021. Courtesy of the Hindu Endowments Board.



#### **Arjunan Thabasu**

From this point onwards, elements of ritual theatre come to the fore. These are rooted in the *Bharata koothu* tradition of ritual performances held in Draupadi temples in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu during the lead-up to the firewalking festival.<sup>14</sup> A volunteer takes on the role of the hero Arjunan, portraying his ascetic efforts to receive a weapon called *pasupastra* from the deity Siva. Undisturbed by the many distractions sent his way by his devious cousin Duryodhanan, Arjunan achieves his goal.

Called Arjunan Thabasu, this event takes place on a Friday, a few weeks after Draupadi Vasthiraparanam. It involves Arjunan climbing the *thabasu maram*, which represents a bael tree in the Himalayas, where he meditates to receive the weapon. The *thabasu maram* is installed in the morning, and in the same evening the re-enactment takes place.

The *thabasu maram* – the most elaborate of ritual props used in the cycle of events – is a seven-metre-high pole painted dark brown like a tree trunk with 11 steps and a platform at the top. The platform is decorated either with flowers, or at times with cotton applique cloth, and four *thombai* (hanging decoration).

The volunteer in the role of Arjunan ascends the pole after reciting an invocation in Tamil. The proceedings conclude with a circumambulatory procession around the temple grounds, which ends at the shrine of Draupadi.

In the 1970s, the re-enactment of Arjunan Thabasu took place after the sacrifice of Aravan, during the battle of Kurukshetra between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, a central element in the Mahabharatam.<sup>15</sup> It is not known when this ritual was moved to earlier in the cycle, to reflect Arjunan's penance occurring before the battle.

#### **Keesaga Samharam**

At this point, the episode from the Virata Parvam (the fourth book of the Mahabharatam that sees the Pandavas living incognito in exile) is read and included in the cycle. In the episode, the Pandava brother Bhiman vanquishes the army commander Keesaga of the kingdom of Virata for making advances on Draupadi.

(Above and right) Arjunan Thabasu at the Sri Mariamman Temple, 2021. The ritual involves Arjunan climbing the *thabasu maram* (which represents a bael tree) where he meditates to receive a weapon called *pasupastra* from Siva. Pictured here is the volunteer Kumaran, who has assumed the role of Arjunan for around four years now. Courtesy of the Hindu Endowments Board.





(Facing page) Processional icon of Aravan at the Sri Mariamman Temple, 2019. The piece of white cloth placed around the neck of Aravan has been smeared with *kungumam* (vermillion) representing the blood of the sacrificed Aravan. Courtesy of the Hindu Endowments Board.

### Aravan Poojai and Aravan Kalapali

A distinctive mythology of Aravan (also known as Nalaravan and Koothandavar), the son of Arjuna and the Naga maiden Ulupi, was established in the 9th century CE *Bharatam*.<sup>16</sup> Aravan is not only a central figure in the Theemithi cycle of events, he also commands a cult of his own. Aravan has a temple dedicated to him at Koovagam village in the Kallakurichi district of Tamil Nadu. In Singapore, the Sri Mariamman Temple has a permanent shrine dedicated to him, which is located southeast of the Draupadi shrine.

In the epic, Aravan is sacrificed to Kali to attain victory for the Pandava brothers. In the Theemithi cycle, this sacrifice is symbolically performed by the *pandaram*. Aravan Kalapali (battlefield sacrifice) takes place on *amavasai*, or “new moon day”, in the Tamil month of Purattasi (mid-September to mid-October), at least 18 days before the firewalking.<sup>17</sup>

For this, small heaps of rice mixed with *kungumam* (vermillion) are placed on a white cloth adorning the neck of Aravan’s processional image, together with quarters of *poosani* (white pumpkin) smeared with vermillion, representing the blood of Aravan. The 32 heaps of rice symbolise the self-mutilated pieces of Aravan’s flesh and hallmarks of perfection, or *purusha lakshanam*, which Aravan is said to have sacrificed to Kali.

Before he is sacrificed, Aravan asked Krishnan for three boons – to get married, to die heroically on the battlefield, and to witness the entire war and its outcome. He is granted the first when Krishnan takes his female form as the enchantress Mohini and marries him. Aravan’s severed head – present in processional and immovable forms at the temple – witnesses the events of the war leading up to Theemithi.

Aravan Poojai (ritual prayer) is offered to Aravan before his shrine and takes place on the Monday before Aravan Kalapali. Muthala Raja (better known in Tamil Nadu as Muthala Ravuttan, the Muslim shrine guardian), the guardian of Draupadi, is also revered at his shrine located northeast of Draupadi’s. The processional image of Aravan is then carried around the temple by volunteers, almost like a final celebration of his life before his self-sacrifice.

On the day of Aravan Kalapali, a pair of temple volunteers assume the roles of Draupadi and Krishnan. They re-enact the scene of Krishnan convincing Draupadi that the sacrifice of Aravan is essential to guarantee the victory of the Pandava brothers. Draupadi then carries a *soolam*, or trident, decorated with a yellow cloth, around the temple, and plants it like a battle flag in the ground near Aravan’s shrine, marking the start of the Kurukshetra battle.

Sambasivam Paikirisamy, a volunteer, recalled that in the 1960s, Aravan Poojai used to be less elaborate and involved fewer people. The group of volunteers who handled matters relating to Aravan registered a *visesha poojai* (special prayer) from 1975 to make it officially part of the cycle of events. The volunteers aided the conduct of Aravan Poojai and Kalapali rites, including *anna danam* (distribution of free food). He also recalled that in the 1960s and 1970s, Aravan’s form was seen as fiercer than it is today, and women were asked to keep a distance during Kalapali.<sup>18</sup>

Balakrishnan Veerasamy Ramasamy, a volunteer who assumed the *vesham* (role) of Draupadi for about 20 years from the early 1980s, recalled being cautioned by his mother that the role play was not a game. She also warned him that he might be teased by his friends for dressing like a woman. Balakrishnan, however, felt that it was a rare opportunity and blessing to serve Draupadi. He was 25 when he was asked to do so by the temple’s chairman, P.G.P. Ramachandran. Balakrishnan recalled the shock he felt when he first took on the role of Draupadi during Aravan Kalapali and experienced going into a trance.<sup>19</sup>

### Chakravarti Kottai

Chakravarti Kottai, or the wheel fort incident, occurs the day before the actual firewalking. This ritual pertains to the entrapment of Abhimanyu (one of the sons of Arjuna) on the battlefield. Unable to escape the wheel-like concentric formation of soldiers, Abhimanyu dies during the war. The Chakravarti Kottai is installed in the form of a multi-coloured, three-dimensional mandala and fortress-like structures constructed with sand, flowers and rangoli powder.





Positioned in front of Aravan's shrine, volunteers take the lead in this ritual.<sup>20</sup> Four sword-bearing volunteers go down on one knee, each on one side of the square mandala, while the fifth sword-bearer positions himself adjacent to the mandala. Then three whip-wielding volunteers stand in a straight line in front of the mandala and swirl the whips in the air in a circular motion.

A volunteer representing Abhimanyu lies down on a thin, white fabric and is completely wrapped in the cloth by other volunteers on standby. As this is done, the volunteers positioned around the mandala run across the carefully constructed wheel fort, thus obliterating it, and the entire group moves to the sanctum of Draupadi. It is believed that the volunteer who is wrapped in the white cloth loses consciousness during the transit to Draupadi's shrine and is revived when he is placed before Draupadi.

#### Padukalam

Padukalam marks the last day of the Kurukshetra battle and takes place on the morning of the firewalking event. It brings to an end the cycle of epic-based re-enactments explaining the root legends for the cult of goddess Draupadi. Padukalam, which means "dying/lying down on the battlefield", is an elaborate re-creation of battlefield rituals that focuses on Draupadi, who has to decide if the Pandava and



(Above) Chakravarthi Kottai, 2021. This ritual pertains to the entrapment of Abhimanyu, one of the sons of Arjuna, on the battlefield. Courtesy of the Hindu Endowments Board.

(Below) On Padukalam day, an enraged Draupadi (with Krishnan beside her) kicks the effigy of Dushasan that is lying down on the battlefield, 2021. Courtesy of the Hindu Endowments Board.

Kaurava casualties of war should receive salvation or damnation.

Volunteers construct five effigies made of sand mounds around the battlefield representing five fallen warriors. Volunteers playing the roles of Draupadi and Krishnan go to each of the effigies. Draupadi asks that the souls of the first three – that of Abhimanyu, Bhishma and Karnan – be allowed to go to heaven. She sprinkles turmeric on them and gently expunges their faces with her hand.

The fourth effigy represents Dushasan, the one responsible for

her dishonour. For this, Draupadi consigns him to hell. She kicks his effigy, breaking it down. At the last effigy, Draupadi discovers that it is Duryodanan, the one who shamed her, and she is incensed. Volunteers quickly lay a white cloth on the effigy; a volunteer lies on it and is wrapped in the cloth and carried away to the shrine of Draupadi where Duryodanan is consigned to the netherworld.

Her vow of vengeance achieved, Draupadi combs her hair and ties it. Volunteers quickly assist the priests to do



the same for the processional image of Draupadi. Her yellow sari is changed to red, and her hair knotted into a bun.<sup>21</sup> It is only after these rituals are completed that the preparations for the firewalking can begin.

How does all this relate to firewalking? Born of the fire during a *yagnam* or fire ritual,<sup>22</sup> Draupadi is believed to protect whoever takes the vow to walk through the fire by making the coals as cool as flowers.

In the various Tamil versions of the epic, four different pre- and post-battle origin myths involve Draupadi walking on fire. These include her proving her chastity after marrying the five Pandava brothers, after her encounter with Keesaga (who makes advances on her), and a post-battle purification. The fourth is one that suggests the ritual's association with the revival of Draupadi's sons who are sacrificed during the war.<sup>23</sup>

#### Walking on Coals

Throughout the day, volunteers at the Sri Mariamman Temple help to build the firepit. Over the years, the width of the pit has changed to take into consideration safety measures.<sup>24</sup> Currently, the pit is around 18 feet (5.5 m) in length, in reference to the 18 days of the Kurukshetra battle. In the morning, the chief *pandaram* conducts a ritual during which margosa leaves and burning firewood chunks brought from the shrine of Draupadi are used to light up the pit.

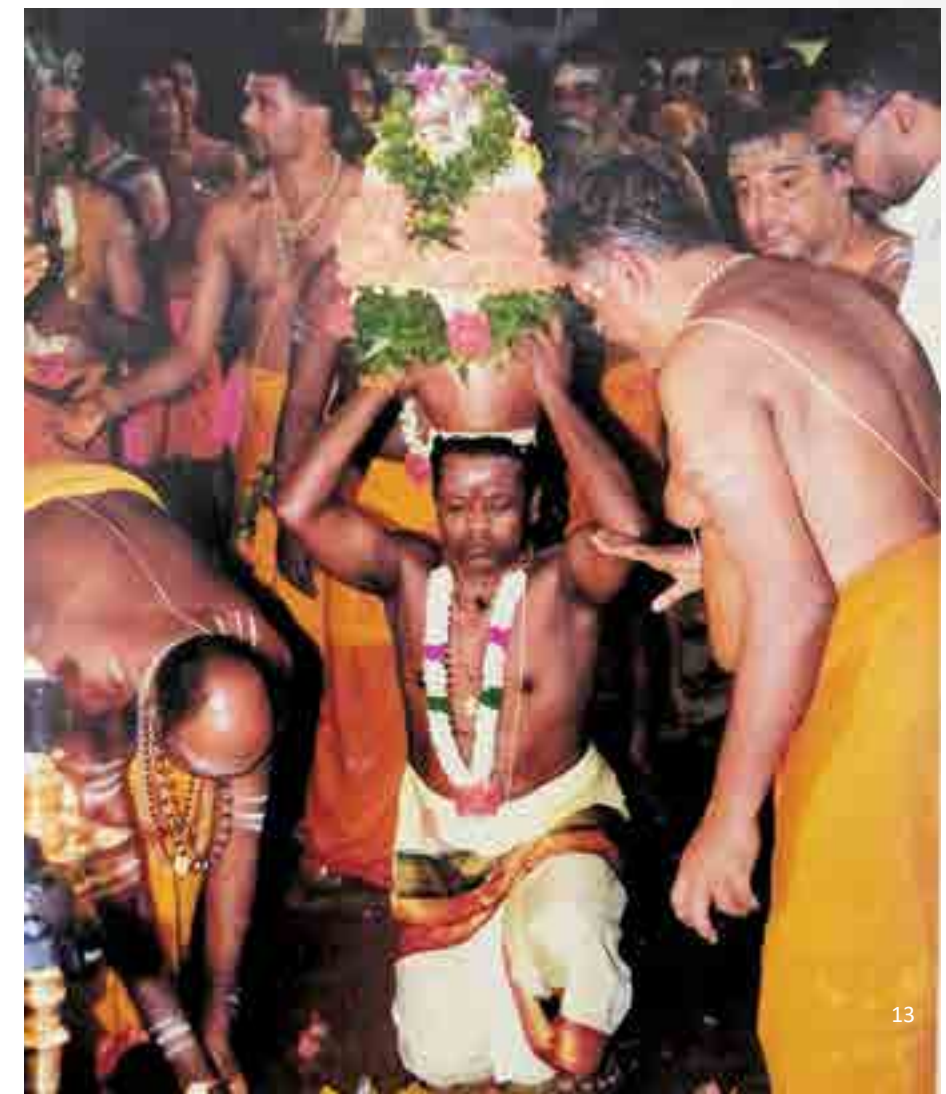
(Above) Draupadi in procession after the fulfilment of her vow, about to mark out the firepit, 2021. Courtesy of Balakrishnan Veerasamy Ramasamy.

(Right) Chief *pandaram* K. Swaminathan placing the *karagam* on his head ahead of the foot procession to Sri Mariamman Temple, early 2000s. The *karagam* is a consecrated vessel embodying the mother goddess at Amman temples. Courtesy of Balakrishnan Veerasamy.

At about 6 pm, the *karagam* would be constructed at the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple on Serangoon Road, and at around 7 pm, the five-kilometre-long foot procession to Sri Mariamman Temple commences. The procession is led by the chief *pandaram* carrying the *karagam* on his head, followed by the 2,000 or so devotees. As the group approaches Sri Mariamman Temple, a temple official sprinkles jasmine flow-

ers in the fire pit and throws lemons on the embers.

The firewalking starts at around 8.30 pm with the chief *pandaram* being the first to walk across the fire pit. Thereafter, the five sword-bearers of Draupadi will be among the first devotees to walk the fire. Wearing jasmine garlands and carrying margosa leaves, devotees typically run across the pit. When they reach the other end, the devotees would dip







Devotees walking across the fire pit at the Sri Mariamman Temple during Theemithi, 1983. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

their feet in a milk pit before proceeding to the shrine of Draupadi to offer the margosa leaves. Once the last devotee has crossed the pit, the flames are put out with milk from the same milk pit and with running water. The whole event ends at around 2.30 am.

Two days after the firewalking, the festival finally concludes with the coronation of Dharmaraja, the eldest of the Pandava brothers, and the Manjal Neerattu, a celebration of victory involving the splashing of turmeric water. Thereafter, the *kodi* is taken down, and all ritual objects and the Mahabharatam stored away.

**Theemithi and the Sri Mariamman Temple**

The cult of Draupadi and her shrine at the Sri Mariamman Temple are attributed to a community of caulkers, or boat workers, who came from the village of Vadakku Poigainallur in Nagapattinam district.<sup>25</sup>

The temple’s association with littoral communities goes back to its very foundation. Naraina Pillai was a native of the Coromandel Coast, and he is described as such in a letter written by Resident of Singapore William Farquhar in December 1822.<sup>26</sup> Pillai was the driving force behind the establishment of the Sri Mariamman Temple – not only providing the funds for the purchase of the temple site but also installing the main deity when the temporary structure was completed in 1827.<sup>27</sup>

Some overlaps in the cults of Mariamman and Draupadi are evident in the festival. For instance, in the 1960s and 1970s,<sup>28</sup> devotees would fulfil their vows to Mariamman by carrying *kavadi*, reminiscent of a Mariamman thiruvizha festival, like the one still held in Melaka known as Sembahyang Dato Charchar. Today, devotees in Singapore no longer carry *kavadi* during Theemithi.

During firewalking, it is also the *vepilai karagam* (the consecrated vessel) associated with Mariamman that is carried by the chief *pandaram* across the firepit. The Sri Mariamman Temple is a syncretic space accommodating shrines of other gods and goddesses, including Draupadi.<sup>29</sup> The highest respect, however, is always accorded to Mariamman.

As the accounts above show, Theemithi celebrations have changed over the years in Singapore. In fact, while the festival is closely associated with the Sri Mariamman Temple now, during parts of the 19th century, the firewalking used



A devotee being whipped to prepare himself for the firewalking at the Sri Mariamman Temple, 1990. Whipping is no longer carried out today. Singapore Tourism Board Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

to take place on Albert Street earning the street the Tamil name Theemithi Thidal (“open field”).<sup>30</sup> The engagement of John Napier by the temple in 1893 shows that the practice had long migrated to the temple by the late 19th century.

And while the firewalking today is a male activity, in the 19th century, women too walked over the coals and did so up to the early 20th century. In fact, Police Superintendent Bell’s case was lodged in 1893 after hearing about a female devotee who had fallen into the firepit. We do not know when or why women stopped walking across the pit, but today, someways women participate in the ceremony include lighting the *maavilakku* (a lamp made of rice flour), performing *kumbuduthandam*<sup>31</sup> (“repeated kneeling down and touching the floor with the head around the temple”), or carrying out *angapradakshinam* (“rolling on the ground”).

Of course, the rituals have changed as well over time. Some have become more elaborate, such as the Aravan Poojai, while others are no longer carried out, such as the ritual slaying of goats and the whipping of devotees.

The space accorded for change has kept Theemithi a living one. Moreover,

the festival has forged together an ever-renewing, inter-generational community of volunteers, families and practitioners who keep strong the tradition of this epic devotion.

Theemithi is both public yet widely misconstrued. While the act of walking on fire itself has consumed the attention of observers for close to two centuries, the participants’ account of the almost three-month-long festival clearly belies that singular focus on the spectacular.

It is a festival rendered invisible not by the lack of, but by the excess of light or exposure. It is like that old and overexposed photograph in a photo album that has only one detail in focus, the rest washed out because the aperture setting and shutter speed were out of sync. The oldest paradox of prejudice is that it renders its subject at once invisible and overexposed.<sup>32</sup> ♦

I am grateful to Balakrishnan Veerasamy Ramaswamy, T. Kavindran and T. Rajasegar of the Hindu Endowments Board for their support of my requests for images and audio interviews in the course of research for this essay.

**NOTES**

- 1 The Hindoo Religious Ceremony,” *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, 24 October 1893, 6. (From NewspaperSG)
- 2 “Hindoo Religious Ceremony.”
- 3 The Mahabharata, one of the two great Indian epics originally written in Sanskrit (the other being the Ramayana), is thought to have been composed between 400 BCE and 400 CE, and to a shorter period by Alf Hiltebeitel dating from the mid-2nd century BCE to the start of the Common Era.
- 4 Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadi, Volume 1: Mythologies: From Gingee to Kurukshetra* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 14.
- 5 In the Mahabharata, the core narrative revolves around warring cousins, the Kauravas (the sons of King Dhritarashtra and the heirs of the lineage of the clan’s ancestor and great king Kuru) and the Pandavas (the five sons of king Pandu). Their antagonistic relationship results in the battle of Kurukshetra, an epic battle that is thought to have taken place around 1200 BCE on the basis of archaeological evidence discovered in the modern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. More recent excavations have raised questions of the possibility of an earlier dating for the epic-related events.
- 6 Cinkappur Sri Mariyamman Kovil, *Mahaparatham*, private records, 1896 (From National Archives of Singapore, microfilm no. NA1984); Cinkappur Sri Mariyamman Kovil, *Hindu Religious Book Vol.1 Mahaparatham*, private records, 1897. (From National Archives of Singapore, microfilm no. NA1982)
- 7 The water vessel is filled with approximately 5 kg of rice, a gold coin and one lemon. A stick is anchored in the rice and margosa leaves attached to the vessel. Once secured, *malli* and *mullai* (both are different varieties of jasmine) flowers are wrapped around the structure. The *mukham* or silver image of the face of the mother goddess, Periyachi Amman, is attached to the front demonstrating that the *karagam* personifies the goddess.
- 8 Indira Arumugam, “Migrant Deities: Dislocations, Divine Agency, and Mediated Manifestations,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 64, no. 10 (2020): 1463, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764220947763>.
- 9 E.V. Singhan, *Timiti Festival* (Singapore: EVS Enterprises, 1976), 8. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 294.538 SIN)
- 10 Balakrishnan Veerasamy Ramasamy, interview by author, 13 July 2022.
- 11 Moti Lal Prasad, interview by Tharmalingam Kavindran and author, 5 June 2022.
- 12 Prasad, interview.
- 13 Lawrence A. Babb, “Walking on Flowers in Singapore: A Hindu Festival,” *Eckistics* 39, no. 234 (May 1975): 333. (From JSTOR via NLB’s eResources website)
- 14 M.D. Muthukumarasamy, “Trance in Fire Walking Rituals of Goddess Tiraupati Amman: Temples in Tamilnadu” in *Emotions in Rituals and Performances: South Asian and European Perspectives on Rituals and Performativity*, ed. Axel Michaels and Christoph Wulf (New Delhi: Taylor & Francis, 2012), 140–42.
- 15 Singhan, *Timiti Festival*, 20.
- 16 Hiltebeitel, *Cult of Draupadi, Volume 1: Mythologies*, 15.
- 17 Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadi, Volume 2: On Hindu Ritual and the Goddess* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 287.
- 18 Sambasivam Pakirisamy, interview by Tharmalingam Kavindran and author, 5 June 2022.
- 19 Balakrishnan, interview.
- 20 This group of volunteers is called the SLP group. S.L.P or S.L. Perumal was the son-in-law of B. Govindasamy Chettiar, the owner of the Indian Labour Company, which supplied

- labour to the Singapore Harbour Board. A representative of the S.L. Perumal family officiates this ritual.
- 21 Balakrishnan, interview.
- 22 “The Hindoo Religious Ceremony.”
- 23 Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadi Volume 1 Mythologies: From Gingee to Kurukshetra*, 440–41.
- 24 Balakrishnan, interview.
- 25 Lawrence A. Babb, *Walking on Flowers in Singapore: A Hindu Festival Cycle Issues 26–34* (Singapore: Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, 1974), 3.
- 26 Raffles Museum and Library, “Letter from William Farquhar to Lieutenant L.N. Hull,” *L11: Letters to and from Raffles* 111, no. 7 (December 1822): 63. (From National Archives of Singapore)
- 27 Nalina Gopal, “A Sea of Change, An Ocean of Memories,” in *Singapore Indian Heritage*, ed. Rajesh Rai and A. Mani (Singapore: Indian Heritage Centre, 2017), 149. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 305.89141105957 SIN)
- 28 Babb, “Walking on Flowers in Singapore: A Hindu Festival,” 334.
- 29 Soundara Rajan, oral history interview by Kartini Lim Chiwen, 17 December 1987, transcript and MP3 audio, Reel/Disc 16 of 23, 30:09, National Archives of Singapore (accession no. 000845), 176–78.
- 30 H.T. Haughton, “Native Names of Streets in Singapore,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 42, no. 1 (215) (July 1969): 205. (From JSTOR via NLB’s eResources website)
- 31 “Weird Ceremony. Strange Behaviour at A Hindu Festival. Fire-walking and Its Objects,” *Straits Budget*, 14 June 1906, 10. (From NewspaperSG)
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# My Grandfather Was a RŌMUSHA

During World War II, forced civilian labourers known as *rōmusha* were used by the Imperial Japanese Army for hard labour. They helped to build the Death Railway.

By Shirlene Noordin

Growing up, I used to listen to the adults speak about my grandfather who had gone away during the war. I also heard stories from my grandmother about waiting, day after day, for her husband to return home.

For a while, I thought my grandfather had been a soldier who had gone off to fight in the war. Later, I realised that the war he had fought in was not on the battlefields. He was not part of any army and he didn't carry a weapon. The war he – and so many others like him – fought was set on a treacherous strip of land stretching from Thailand to

Burma. Armed with nothing more than shovels and pickaxes, they confronted their enemy: the Imperial Japanese Army and the inhumane conditions the workers were forced to live in.

These people were *rōmusha* – forced civilian labourers recruited by the Japanese military to perform hard manual labour – who built the Thai-Burma Railway. My maternal grandfather, Kosman Hassan, was among the thousands from Singapore, Malaya, Burma and Java who toiled on the railway that is known today as the Death Railway.

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The Death Railway has been immortalised in the movie, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, but this Hollywood version of the story focuses on a group of British prisoners-of-war (POWs) and the *rōmusha* received scant attention. Even beyond the film, the history of the *rōmusha* is little known and they remain largely invisible in the accounts of the Death Railway.



The writer and her grandfather, Kosman Hassan, at the back of the Chai Chee Secondary School canteen on Sennett Road, c. 1971. Photo courtesy of Shirlene Noordin.

The Thai-Burma Railway is a 415-kilometre railway stretching from Ban Pong, Thailand, to Thanbyuzayat, Burma (now Myanmar).



In fact, there were many more *rōmusha* working on the railway than there were POWs. It is estimated that there were 200,000 Southeast Asian civilian labourers in contrast to 60,000 Allied POWs on the railway. By the end of the war, more than 90,000 of the *rōmusha* had perished compared to 16,000 deaths among the POWs.<sup>1</sup>

Alongside British, Australian, Dutch and some American POWs, these Asian *rōmusha* did the impossible – they constructed a 415-kilometre railway line which passed through the most difficult of terrains to connect Ban Pong in Thailand to Thanbyuzayat in Burma in a mere 12 months, all in the name of the Japanese war effort. The railway was constructed to “avoid having to transport supplies by dangerous sea routes from its South East Asian territories to the front in Burma,

and ultimately to link Bangkok in Siam and Rangoon in Burma”.<sup>2</sup>

### Remembering the Forgotten

Yet, at the end of the Second World War in Southeast Asia, there appears to be no official records of these civilian labourers. No lists of their names or where they were from were compiled and no death records were ever kept that I could find. In the official retelling of the tragedy of the Death Railway, the *rōmusha* are faceless and voiceless.

In recounting my grandfather’s story of his time on the Thai-Burma Railway, I hope to give a voice, a face and a name to the hundreds of thousands of *rōmusha* like him who worked on the railway, for which many paid with their lives.

Several accounts about the Thai-Burma Railway were recorded by the



(Above) The writer’s grandfather Kosman Hassan. Photo taken in the 1950s. Photo courtesy of Shirlene Noordin.

(Below) Asian labourers sitting on the roof of a truck on a stretch of the Thai-Burma Railway at Wampo approximately 114 km north of Nong Pladuk, 1945. Trucks identical to these were used to transport prisoners-of-war from Singapore to Thailand for the construction of the railway. Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial, accession no. 122303.



POWs of the Allied Forces in their personal diaries and later published in books by those who survived. Whatever little we now know of the *rōmusha* has been gleaned from these POW accounts. In the diary of British POW Robert Hardie, a former plantation manager in Malaya, he mentions the *rōmusha* camps, where there were “frightful casualties from cholera and other diseases” and the brutality of the Japanese. He wrote: “People who have been near these camps speak with bated breath of the state of affairs – corpses rotting unburied in the jungle, almost complete lack of sanitation, frightful stench, overcrowding, swarms of flies. There is no medical attention in these camps, and the wretched natives are of course unable to organise any communal sanitation.”<sup>3</sup>

The *rōmusha* themselves do not appear to have left any written accounts. Many of them were recruited from remote villages and plantations and were most likely illiterate. Given the high mortality rate, their personal stories of hardship would have perished along with them.

My grandfather, whom I called Bapak, was among those fortunate enough to have survived. What I know of his experience on the railway is from the rare stories he told us, but even then, these were told in a stoic, quiet fashion, without regret, sadness or heroism. It

was as if the Death Railway was just an episode he had to go through.

Bapak never really explained to us, his grandchildren, what had exactly happened to him on the Thai-Burma Railway. He would mention in fleeting conversations that he had worked for the Japanese soldiers in the jungles of Thailand during the war. He spoke about the dense jungles full of mosquitos that brought disease and how hard it was to find food. One of his stories that remains with me to this day is about the kindness of the local Thai population whom he came into contact with, and how they gave him food and taught him local cures for his ailments.

It was probably through his interactions with the locals that my grandfather learnt Thai, a language he continued to speak long after the war. The local help he received, I believe, was crucial to his survival.

I didn’t think to ask more questions when my grandfather was alive. I was too young then to understand the significance of his experience but looking back I wish I had.

### Early Life

Bapak was born on 8 November 1914 in Singapore. His father Hassan and his father’s brother Majid sailed to Malaya from a village near the town of

Pekalongan in Central Java, long known for its batik production and trade.

My great-grandfather, Hassan, eventually travelled south to Singapore, while Majid settled in Kuala Lumpur. In Singapore, Hassan ended up in the Kampong Jawa area and married a Javanese lady living there. My great-grandfather passed away when Bapak was only a young boy and his mother remarried. Bapak grew up in the Kampong Jawa area. He must have gone to a Malay school in Singapore as he was able to read and write in Malay, and could even speak and read English. As a young adult, he worked as a car mechanic.

Bapak married my grandmother, Rokiah Rais, whom I called Mak, just before the war. She was the sister of his friend who was also a mechanic. Bapak was her second husband. From her first husband, she had five children, so upon marrying her, Bapak had an instant family.

Bapak was also a volunteer with the British military. From his collection of medals that I inherited, I was able to trace (with the help of Jonathan Moffat, an archivist for the Malayan Volunteers Group) his service in the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force before the Japanese Occupation.

Bapak’s name appears on the roll of Singapore Fortress Company, Malay section, between 1938 and 1940. According to family stories, my grandfather also

(Below) The writer’s former family home on Sennett Road, c. 1975. Photo courtesy of Shirlene Noordin.



(Above) The writer’s great-granduncle Tok Dick (right) ran a car workshop business on St Thomas Walk in the River Valley area. The lady is the writer’s great-grandmother. Photo taken in the 1950s. Photo courtesy of Shirlene Noordin.



served in the Royal Artillery unit. Before the Fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942, he had been stationed on Pulau Blakang Mati (Sentosa today). (This family account may not be entirely accurate because from my research I found out that pre-1945, the Royal Artillery was an exclusively European unit, making it very unlikely that my grandfather was a part of it before 1945.)

Bapak was 28 at the time when he was sent to Thailand, though he need not have gone at all. We were a family of car mechanics, living on Sennett Road on the east coast of Singapore at the time. My great-granduncle Tok Dick (whose real name was Sadali but was nicknamed Dick by his British customers) and granduncles ran a car workshop business on St Thomas Walk in the River Valley area that serviced the many British families in the vicinity before the Japanese Occupation.

When the Japanese military started recruiting local men for the construction of the Thai-Burma railway, Tok Dick and one of his mechanics were called up as the Japanese needed experienced mechanics to work on the railway. Bapak volunteered to take Tok Dick's place. Being younger and fitter, my grandfather probably thought that he was better suited to the job than my great-granduncle who was about 20 years older than my grandfather.

At the time, nobody knew about the conditions that awaited these men; the Japanese said the workers would receive fair wages, and even promised lodging and food. This could not be further from the truth.

### Off to Thailand

I don't know when exactly my grandfather first set off for Thailand but we

know that construction of the railway got underway in July 1942. When he left Singapore, Mak was pregnant with my mother, their first child. She was born on 17 April 1943 without her father present.

From Singapore, Bapak was put on a northbound train to Thailand. My grandfather later told his sons that the train made a stop in Kuala Lumpur where he met up with his Uncle Majid who lived there. Majid passed him a parcel of food for his onward journey. That was probably the last contact my grandfather had with family until after the war.

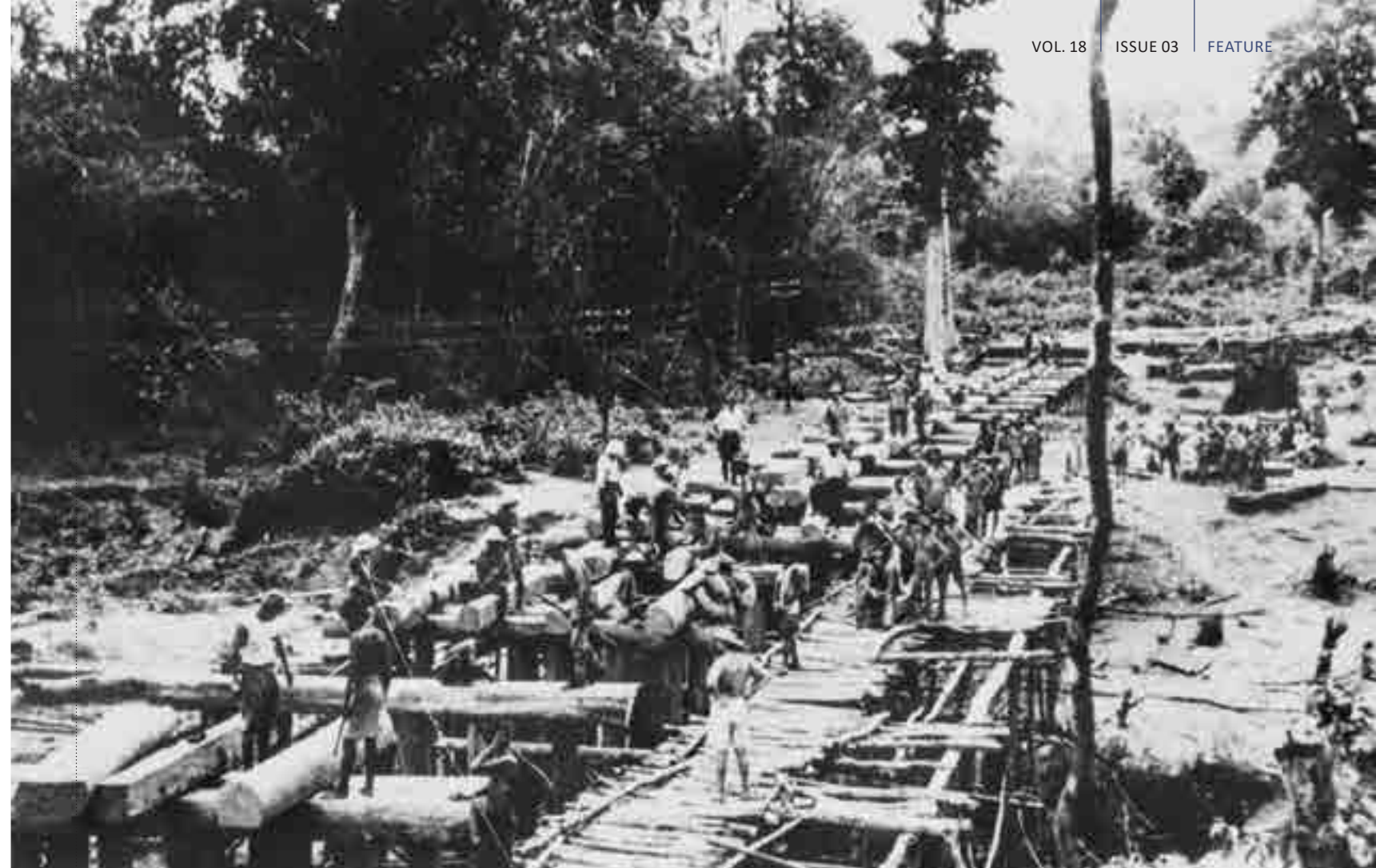
According to one of my uncles, Ghazaly (Ally) Kosman, my grandfather was put to work on engines and locomotives while he was in Thailand. It is possible that my grandfather ended up in Ban Pong, a town and district in Thailand's western province of Ratchaburi.



**(Left)** Asian labourers working on a bridge at Ronsi, Burma, along the Thai-Burma Railway, c. 1943. Ronsi is approximately 60 km south of Thanbyuzayat, or 354 km north of Nong Pladuk. *Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial, accession no. P00406.036.*

**(Below)** Allied prisoners-of-war in their quarters, which is an open-sided attap hut, 1944. The camp was in Kanchanaburi, which is 55 km north of Nong Pladuk, or 364 km south of Thanbyuzayat. *Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial, accession no. P01502.006.*

**(Facing page)** Allied prisoners-of-war building a bridge at Ronsi, Burma, along the Thai-Burma Railway, c. 1943. *Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial, accession no. P00406.035.*



In his autobiography *The Railway Man*, British POW Eric Lomax wrote that there was a camp outside Ban Pong which had a workshop "staffed by Japanese mechanics and engineers".<sup>4</sup> (Lomax's story of imprisonment, torture and subsequently forgiveness of his torturers was made into a 2013 movie also called *The Railway Man* starring Nicole Kidman and Colin Firth.)

Bapak never mentioned the location of his camp, but I recall that he talked about the town of Kanchanaburi, 48 km north-west of Ban Pong town. Perhaps he was in one of the camps around Kanchanaburi (also called Kanburi by the POWs).

My grandfather was good with languages. In addition to Malay and Javanese, he also spoke Hokkien and English. Being conversant in English made it possible for him to communicate with the Japanese soldiers and POWs. He also picked up Japanese and Thai while working on the Thai-Burma Railway. His linguistic skills and his experience as a mechanic undoubtedly shielded him from the worst of what the

Death Railway had inflicted on the POWs and Asian labourers.

As a mechanic, Bapak probably did not have to perform the backbreaking manual labour of the other workers who were pickaxing through limestone hills, hauling away heavy debris in baskets, cutting through thick jungle and laying tracks across dangerous ravines and rivers. The further up the line they went, the worse the situation became as the country got wilder, denser and more hilly and where food was even scarcer.

While I speculate that Bapak may have escaped the harshest of work conditions, I can never be sure. What I am certain of, hearing him tell his stories, was that conditions at his camp were extremely rudimentary. He had to fashion a bed out of bamboo, a mere few centimetres off the bare ground. He told us of his encounters with snakes slithering across his body as he slept.

The meagre diet meant that my grandfather was always hungry. Fortunately, he was allowed to leave the camp occasionally to go to the nearby village

where he could get food. Being unpaid, I don't know how he procured the food but being a sociable and friendly person, my grandfather would have definitely made friends with the local Thais.

Bapak also spoke about the many diseases such as malaria, cholera and dysentery that ravaged the labourers and POWs. Death among his fellow labourers was rampant. As he was also responsible for burying the dead, he recalled that he was not even able to give proper burials as these were hastily done. He said that he would have liked to give the Muslims among the deceased *rōmusha* the proper burial rites, but he was unable to.

The Thai-Burma Railway was finally completed in October 1943 but despite this, the ordeal of the surviving POWs and the Asian labourers was far from over. They were confined in the camps for another two years until the Japanese surrender in 1945. The constant bombings of the railway by the Allied forces required frequent repairs by the POWs and labourers. Bapak was among the labourers who were tasked with felling





(Far left) The writer and her grandmother in the living room of their Sennett Road house, 1974. Photo courtesy of Shirlene Noordin.

(Left) In 1949, the Efficiency Medal was awarded to Kosman Hassan for his long service with the Singapore Royal Artillery. Photo courtesy of Shirlene Noordin.

(Below) The medals awarded to Kosman Hassan for his part in the war. Photo courtesy of Shirlene Noordin.

1945 in Thailand, as the repatriation of Allied prisoners of war got underway, a small group of Malayan and Straits Settlements Volunteer Force members took the selfless decision to stay behind to locate and repatriate to Malaya the surviving 27,000 Asian labourers...

"These Volunteers, all of whom spoke Malay and Tamil, considered this task a debt of honour. Among them was Richard Middleton Smith... Formed in two groups, they left Bangkok Railway station on August 28th 1945 to locate the labour camps from Kanchanaburi to 185 Kilo Camp where Richard had ended his time as a POW.

"He recalled 'At every camp the labourers seemed overjoyed to see us and meet those of us who could speak to them in their own language. In a number of camps they seemed unaware the war was over. Their first wish was to get back to Malaya and see their relatives'."

Bapak was among the *rōmusha* who were free but did not know how

trees in the jungle for timber to repair tracks and bridges, all while food rations got smaller.

### Return to Singapore

When the Japanese surrendered in August 1945, the POWs and *rōmusha* suddenly found themselves free. While the POWs were able to quickly organise themselves, the *rōmusha*, who did not have the same military structures in their camps and did not have any leadership, struggled initially.

According to a report from 1946 (courtesy of Jonathan Moffat's research), "approximately 26,000 Malaysians remained as labourers, scattered along

the length of the railway... Those who survived would have been abandoned by the Japanese and were actually told in many cases, that they could find their own way back to Malaya. They were in a terrible state of malnutrition and disease, and very few were capable of making even the journey to Bangkok".<sup>5</sup> A group of Malayan British POWs, who were former planters and part of the volunteer forces, helped to repatriate the Malayan labourers from Kanchanaburi and Bangkok.

In an obituary for Richard Middleton Smith, a former POW working on the Thai-Burma Railway, we get an insight into the state of the Asian labourers at the end of the war: "In September



to get back home on their own. According to his son Ally, Bapak met a certain "Major Pink" whom he had known in Singapore before the war. "Major Pink" and some of the British POWs helped Bapak find his way to Bangkok in the back of a truck and from Bangkok, he was repatriated to Singapore. I have not been able to unearth precise information about "Major Pink". I subsequently found out that that there was a Johor planter manager named Pierrepont C.H.F. (Cyril Horace Frederick) 'Pink' who was a POW in Thailand. He could have been the "Major Pink" my grandfather encountered and received help from.

Bapak returned to Singapore in late 1945 or early 1946. My grandmother recalled how he just appeared at the front door of the family home one day. Despite not receiving any news at all from him from the time he left Singapore in 1942, my grandmother had waited patiently for his return. Perhaps, deep inside her she knew that he was alive and would make his way home to see his first-born child, Asiah Kosman, my mother, whom he had never met.

Remarkably, Bapak continued to volunteer with the British military upon his return. On 6 May 1949, Lance Bombardier K.B. Hassan (Kosman bin Hassan), service no. 49067 of the Singapore Royal Artillery, was awarded the Efficiency Medal for his long service. For his part in the war, he was also presented with other medals: the War Medal 1939–1945, the Pacific Star, 1939–1945 Star and the Defence Medal.

Following his return to Singapore, Bapak became a driver for the Dutch Lady company delivering milk to households all over Singapore. In the relative calm of the post-war years in Singapore, my grandparents went on to have four more children – three boys, Ally, Latif and Fadilah and another daughter, Rubiah. Bapak continued to work as a driver until after Singapore's independence. In 1969, he started a drinks stall in the canteen of newly opened Chai Chee Secondary School next to the family home on Sennett Road.

Like many of his generation who had experienced the war in a very personal way, Bapak never really liked to talk about his time on the Death Railway. He would mention the railway in passing, maybe when certain things triggered a memory. Whenever he encountered people from Thailand, he would be happy to break into



The writer with her grandparents, 1991. She is their first grandchild to graduate from university. Photo courtesy of Shirlene Noordin.

Thai. But Bapak never consciously sat us down to tell us about the Death Railway. He never lectured us on the lessons that it taught him, answering questions only when asked. And he apparently never harboured any ill-feelings towards the Japanese; I have never heard him say a harsh word against them.

In spite of what he went through and maybe because of it, Bapak was a very steady, patient man. He never got angry, never shouted. There was always such a quiet strength about him and he was always ready to help anyone who needed him, be it family, friend, colleague or stranger.

He had such a strong belief in community, in the kindness of people and in humanity. From the early years of Singapore's independence until his death in 1992, Bapak was an active grassroots member at the Siglap Community Centre. For his community service, he received the Grand Award for Community Service medal. Bapak had witnessed the best and worst of humankind on the Death Railway. But rather than choosing to hate, he chose to forgive. We were lucky to have gotten him back alive; many other families in Malaya, Java, Sumatra and Burma where the *rōmusha* had been recruited from were not so lucky.

In June 1992, Bapak and Mak were in Kuala Lumpur to visit Uncle Ally and his family when he fell seriously ill. Despite the gravity of his illness, Bapak insisted on being driven back home. His last wish was to spend his final days in Singapore. On 1 July, not long after returning to Singapore, Bapak passed away at the Singapore General Hospital with me and my cousin Alfie by his side.

It is now exactly 30 years since Bapak's passing, and reflecting on his life has brought on both tears and smiles as I remember a grandfather who lived life to the fullest, in the best and worst of times. ♦

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Singapore's  
Original  
Tourist Isle

Before there was Sentosa,  
there was Sarong Island.  
By Lim Tin Seng

For many people, Sentosa is a leisure and tourist destination with a tropical getaway vibe (indeed, it now bills itself as “Singapore’s Island Getaway”). However, before there was Sentosa, Singapore had another tourist isle that was marketed as a getaway from the busy city. A print

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advertisement from 1967 beckoned people to:

“Come to the island...  
across calm and moonlit waters,  
to look at beauty...  
guarded by white marble carved into  
serene eyes and silent lips,  
that speak only to our inner hearts.”<sup>1</sup>

This island was Sarong Island, a place where one could “dine, dance, watch floor shows or just sip a drink and watch a breathtaking view of Singapore

harbour and the great ships that pass in and out day and night”. There, you could see “over a hundred varieties of tropical trees and flowers, many species of wild birds, occasional visits of groups of chattering monkeys... [and] the rare sight of a giant monitor lizard basking in the sun”.<sup>2</sup>

Sarong Island was a piece of land about the size of three football fields (190,575-square-foot; 1.8 ha) that used to sit just off the northern coast of Sentosa. The island was near the former Sentosa Ferry Terminal before it was reclaimed and

merged with Sentosa. Dubbed “Singapore’s first tourist isle”, Sarong Island was given its name by its former owner, the late Christina Lee (1923–2009), and was even referred to as the “Shangri-La” of Singapore.<sup>3</sup>

An Island for Sale

Before the war, the main feature of the island was a three-bedroom bungalow perched on top of a hill. Known as the “White House”, the bungalow was built by Frank Blackwood Sewell who served as Senior Superintendent of Surveys of the Straits Settlements from 1927 to 1932. In 1947, Sewell sold the house to E.J. Bennett, who left Singapore on board the HMS *Grasshopper* on 14 February 1942, one of the last vessels to evacuate during the Battle of Singapore.<sup>4</sup>

After Bennett died in 1950, the house and the island – which was connected to Pulau Blakang Mati (now Sentosa) by a footbridge – were put up for sale by the Chartered Bank Trustee Limited in 1957 for \$95,000 (Malayan dollars) “or [a] reasonable offer”. At the time, the island still had 89 years left on its lease and the White House was described to be “in good repair and has electric light, telephone, water and modern sanitation”. But the sale, which was advertised several times, failed to attract buyers except for the Jesuits who wanted to turn the island into a retreat. However, they could not afford it and the deal did not materialise.<sup>5</sup>

In the end, the island and bungalow were purchased by well-known socialite

(Facing page) Christina Lee taking a stroll on Sarong Island, 1965. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission.

(Below) A poem extolling the beauty of Sarong Island was published in the press. Image reproduced from “Page 5 Advertisements Column 1,” *Straits Times*, 14 October 1967, 5. (From NewspaperSG).

(Bottom) Detail from a 1966 topographical map shows the White House on a green patch of land off the northern coast of Pulau Blakang Mati (now Sentosa). Pulau Selegu is shown northwest of the White House. Singapore, 1966, M2016\_000173\_SD, Survey Department, Singapore, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.







(Above) Sarong Island opened on 22 September 1967. Image reproduced from R. Chandran, "All Set for Opening of Sarong Island," *Straits Times*, 20 September 1967, 7. (From NewspaperSG).

(Right) Christina Lee's photograph of a white-collared kingfisher boring a tunnel-nest into a mudbank on Sarong Island. Image reproduced from the *Straits Times Annual* for 1964 (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 1964), 39. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 959.5 STA).



Christina Lee, the second wife of cinema magnate Loke Wan Tho. In an oral history interview in 2001 (by then she was married to Indian psychiatrist and businessman Dadi Balsara),<sup>6</sup> she recalled that it was her brother who brought the island to her notice.

"My brother rang me one day. He told me, 'I want you to come and see a piece of land with me.'... and then he took me in a car and went to the pier... we went into a boat and then five minutes later, we landed on an island. We walked up the hill and there was this house called the 'White House'... It was so beautiful, and I really fell in love with it."<sup>7</sup>

Lee was supposed to purchase the island together with her brother. However, he ended up buying land elsewhere and had no money leftover, so she became the sole owner towards the end of the 1950s.

The island's pristine, natural environment was home to many species of wildlife, and Lee started exploring the island, documenting its fauna, particularly its birds, with her camera. A number of her photographs were reproduced in the 1964 issue of the *Straits Times Annual* in "Birds of Pulau Selegu", an article by former Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia Malcolm MacDonald (1948–55). (Before it was renamed Sarong Island in 1967, the island was widely referred to as Pulau Selegu, even though Pulau Selegu was the name of a different, though nearby, island).<sup>8</sup>

Lee was a skilful wildlife photographer, recognised as a "first-rate photographer of birds" and even "The Secretary [of] Birds". Her photographs of birds such as the white-collared kingfisher and the yellow-breasted sunbird were described as "stunning" and "impossible to describe [without] an exaggeration of eulogy".<sup>9</sup>

### Becoming Sarong Island

In the early 1960s, Lee decided to live in the White House after she separated from Loke Wan Tho. Living on the island had its challenges and she recalled: "I had to do all my shopping in Singapore... my brother also came to stay with me with his two children... we [had] to shuttle to and from the whole time in sampan...". There were advantages though. "It was so beautiful at night looking at the sea and the ships coming in. And sometimes some of the captains knew me and they would hoot their horns!"<sup>10</sup>

The walk from the sampan to the White House was also a bit of a journey, as



Christina Lee entertaining guests at a cocktail party on Sarong Island, 1968. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission.

the *Straits Times* noted when it reported how Lee's guests had arrived on the island for a party in 1962. After stepping out from the sampan as gracefully as they could, the guests had to "climb a steep hillock through a winding cemented pathway to reach the house. Some of the lady guests, who had been there before, were armed with an extra pair of low-heeled shoes. Those invited for the first time had the experience of walking like an acrobat on a tightrope." It was worth it, though, said the paper. "The cool breeze, the beautiful scenery, the far-away lights, and the moon throwing its soft radiance on passing shops... make Christina's 'White House' like Shangri-La."<sup>11</sup>

In 1964, Lee decided to turn the island into a "pleasure island" that she wanted to call Pulau Chantek (meaning "Beautiful Island" in Malay). This was later changed to Sarong Island because as Lee's then husband, the film actor and producer Jeffrey Stone, explained in 1967, "the word sarong is known throughout the world. And it is a word which is easy for Westerners to remember."<sup>12</sup>

Lee had ambitious plans to turn the island into a tourist resort. The multi-million-dollar project called for the construction of numerous amenities,

including a seawater swimming pool, bowling alleys, a floating restaurant, a night club for members only and 50 chalets each equipped with "a sitting room, a kitchenette and a bedroom with bathroom". These chalets were for tourists who wanted to spend the weekend or longer on the island. To attract tourists, "a fleet of small ferry boats operating round-the-clock to provide a 30-cent four-minute ride to and from Jardine Steps" was put in place.<sup>13</sup>

According to Lee, Law and National Development Minister E.W. Barker helped her to make Sarong Island happen. "I knew his wife and we used to play mahjong together...," she said. "[So] I invited him and his wife to the island. And he liked it very much as he thought it was beautiful... and I asked Eddie Barker to help me, and he did. Soon after that I got the approval to turn it into a restaurant."<sup>14</sup>

### Sarong Island Opens

Sarong Island was declared open on 22 September 1967 by Barker, an event that was witnessed by several hundred guests. They arrived by sampan to the island amid "brilliant lighting effects" from Clifford Pier and Jardine Steps, and

were "entertained to a dinner of local dishes" and "a multi-racial show".<sup>15</sup>

The Sarong Island of 1967 was a scaled-down version of Lee's original vision. The main focus was the restaurant (the White House), though it also had an open-air amphitheatre for dance performances, an outdoor patio to hold events, a gift shop, a proper pier, and artworks from Lee's private collection adorning the flight of steps leading from the jetty to the restaurant. The entire island was also wired for music and lighting.

The restaurant served "curry buffet with added European dishes" for lunch on Sundays, and "air-flown steaks, imported capon chicken and whole rock lobster" for Saturday-night dinners amid music and dance performances by local groups.<sup>16</sup>

Among those who performed on the island was Santha Bhaskar, who would later become a Cultural Medallion recipient. She danced with her group on the island and recalled the allure of the place in an oral history interview in 2009: "[W]e used to go to Sarong Island by boat... It [had a] very nice setting, you know, very beautiful setting at Sarong Island... Christina's husband was very artistic. So he decorated the place in such a way that tourists [would] come. It is like they are in a magic world you know."<sup>17</sup>



Pianist and singer Danny Koh had also performed on Sarong Island. In a 2015 oral history interview, he vividly recalled how “romantic” and “special” the place was. His band played at the restaurant and the guests were all big spenders. “[T]hey were locals, those who liked to party around who liked to have dinner and all these things,” he said.<sup>18</sup>

The island could also be rented out for events ranging from private and company functions to graduation and award-giving ceremonies. The public could also use it for weddings and fashion shows.<sup>19</sup>

Lee initially continued living in the White House but eventually moved to another house on the island. “I built a little house right [by] the sea... I could open the windows and... see the next island. That small island now... with the pillar for the cable car [Pulau Selegu],” she recalled.<sup>20</sup>

A Short-lived Venture

To promote Sarong Island, advertisements ran in the press with taglines such as “From Sarong Island with Love”, “Singapore’s Finest Tourist Attraction”, and “Go Where the Beautiful People Go”. Guests were also promised gifts and prizes.<sup>21</sup>



Notice announcing the closure of Sarong Island. Image reproduced from “Page 6 Advertisements Column 1,” *Straits Times*, 9 August 1968, 6. (From NewspaperSG).

THE MYSTERY OF SARONG ISLAND’S REAL NAME

In the 1950s and 1960s, the island that became known as Sarong Island was regularly referred to as Pulau Selegu in press reports. However, Pulau Selegu was actually the name of another island, while Sarong Island originally did not have a name. For instance, a 1966 topographical map of Singapore shows that Selegu Island was located northwest of an unnamed island sitting along the northwestern coast of Sentosa (or Pulau Blakang Mati at the time). This unnamed island has a structure labelled “White House” in the map.

A 1979 survey map of the area also states that the lot and *mukim* (“district” in Malay) number for Sarong Island is “Lot 52 Mukim XXXIV”, which is the same as the one published in the 1971 acquisition notice in the Government Gazette. Pulau Selegu had a different lot and *mukim* number: Lot 196 Mukim XXXIV.

While these provide evidence that Sarong Island and Pulau Selegu were not the same island, we still do not know the original name of what was subsequently termed Sarong Island. A possible explanation could be that Sarong Island was a tidal island, a piece of land that is connected to the mainland at low tide and submerged at high tide. As such, it was not given a name and could be seen by surveyors as part of the bigger Blakang Mati (Sentosa) island.

In 1978, Law, Environment, and Science and Technology Minister E.W. Barker asked Parliament to approve a \$7 million reclamation plan to link Sarong Island and Pulau Selegu to Sentosa, thus showing a distinction between the two islands. “The area proposed for reclamation is an eyesome at low tide when muddy flats, mangrove swamps and flotsam are exposed. The reclamation will join up Pulau Selegu and Sarong Island with Sentosa Island which will not only improve the visual impact on visitors, but will also create more land for future development,” he said.

The reclamation works that merged Pulau Selegu and Sarong Island with Sentosa were completed in 1980.

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One problem with beckoning people to Sarong Island “across calm and moonlit waters” was that the waters were not always calm, especially during the monsoon season. As Lee recalled: “[D]uring the end of the year when it rained, I realised that a lot of people would book the place... [But] they would not come because they had to come in a sampan. They would have to walk up the hill which was not sheltered... I realised those were the things that stopped people from coming.”<sup>22</sup>

To mitigate this problem, Lee promised to provide visitors with “complete shelter” from the jetty to the restaurant with the use of umbrellas and “Sarong Island straw hats”. However, it soon became clear to Lee that Sarong Island was difficult to sustain as a tourist attraction and a going business concern.<sup>23</sup>

In August 1968, a little less than a year after the island’s opening, a humorous notice was published in the newspapers to announce the restaurant’s closure. It said:

“We’re not weather experts, but from past experience we expect a similar weather pattern at this time of year as last time. And... ‘boy does it rain!’ Therefore, the management and staff of Sarong Island would like to thank all customers and friends for their patronage and support. We also wish to take this opportunity to announce that the Sarong Island Restaurant will cease operation until further notice.”<sup>24</sup>

In 1971, the government issued a notice in the Government Gazette that it would be acquiring Sarong Island, along with a plot of land on Sentosa that was also owned by Lee. Amounting to a total 217,800 sq ft (2 ha), the acquisition came as the government revealed its plan to develop Sentosa into a tourist resort island.<sup>25</sup> Lee was shocked and disappointed by the news.<sup>26</sup>

Joining Up with Sentosa

After acquiring Sarong Island, the government combined it with Sentosa via

Detail from a 1992 nautical chart shows that both Sarong Island and Pulau Selegu are now part of Sentosa. The two islands were reclaimed in the late 1970s. Singapore, *Nautical Chart 60 “Keppel Harbour and Cruise Bay”*, 18/03/1992, HC000490, Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

a land reclamation scheme. Announced in 1978, this \$7 million project, which also included the nearby Selegu Island, took about two years to complete and added some 170,000 sq m (17 ha) of land to Sentosa.<sup>27</sup> Today, Hard Rock Hotel Singapore occupies the land where Sarong Island once stood.<sup>28</sup>

Although Sarong Island no longer exists, the island and Sentosa once shared the same destiny as a “tourist isle of Singapore”. In fact, back in the 1960s, Lee already had an inkling that her island would inspire the transformation of Pulau Blakang Mati into the island resort of Sentosa. “I had gardeners who looked after [my island] very well. In fact, somebody told me that when Lee Kuan Yew [then the prime minister of Singapore] visited Blakang Mati, he found that it was overgrown with grass... he looked across and said, ‘What is that?’ They said, ‘Oh that is Sarong Island.’ He said, ‘It is so beautifully kept so why can’t we do it?’”<sup>29</sup> ♦

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# Johor

## AT THE 1893 CHICAGO WORLD'S FAIR

The story of how Johor ended up at the Chicago World's Fair is an unexpected twist in Malaya's colonial past.

By Faris Joraimi

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My favourite boyhood novel was Jules Verne's classic, *Around the World in 80 Days*, which captured the scientific wonder of the late-19th century. European conquest of much of the world opened it up to travel by steam and rail, but many Asians were also active participants in that age of acceleration. The growth of the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, enabled by steamship services, made Singapore a global hub in a modern Islamic network.

Intellectuals from Cairo to Tokyo urged their societies to join the West in a future limited only by the bounds of Man's genius and imagination. (Often literally men's, as women's contributions were frequently overlooked.) That ideal was elaborately dramatised in the world's fairs: spectacles showcasing the latest inventions and gathering humanity's shared intellectual and artistic advances in one place.

These world's fairs had theatrical scale and encyclopaedic scope. The 1851 Great Exhibition in London—or more marvellously in full, the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations—counted the flushing toilet among its premieres. Electricity and engineering enthralled visitors to the

**(Below)** The Johor bungalow in Midway Plaisance, 1893. Image reproduced from C.D. Arnold and H.D. Higinbotham, *Official Views of The World's Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: Press Chicago Photo-Gravure Co., 1893). Project Gutenberg.

**(Bottom)** Visitors at the great reflecting pool of the White City, the heart of the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, 1893. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.





1889 Universal Exposition in Paris, where they were introduced to phonographs, telephones and the Eiffel Tower.

One of the most impressive world's fairs was the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, which featured a little Southeast Asian state that few in the West had heard of: Johor. Encountering this story through fragmentary blog posts and cursory mentions in academic studies, I decided to dig deeper. How did Johor – which Singaporeans today know little about besides being a place for cheap fuel and groceries – end up on this international stage when few other Asian states did? As it turns out, the obscure episode embodied the contradictions of the late 19th century, its dream of progress built on nightmarish exploitation. It exemplified minor players using colonial media like the world's fairs to manoeuvre and survive as the threat of European conquest closed in.

### Dramatis Personae

During the 19th century, Johor was transformed from a traditional Malay polity into a modern state by Abu Bakar (1833–95), the sultan and a dynamic reformer. His grandfather, Temenggung Abdul Rahman, was the Malay lord who facilitated Stamford Raffles' fateful meeting with Tengku Hussein in 1819, leading to the establishment of a trading post in Singapore.

Inheriting the large territory of Johor in 1862, Abu Bakar expanded its Teochew plantation economy and created a bureaucratic government to manage its revenues. He modelled the capital Johor Bahru after European cities and adopted English tastes and habits. A friend of Queen Victoria and regular visitor to European capitals, Abu Bakar cultivated the image of an enlightened Eastern ruler.

The sultan was among the prominent non-European leaders of the time who travelled to form strategic international connections and gain prestige; others included King Kalakaua of Hawai'i and King Chulalongkorn of Siam (now Thailand). Their tours sought to prove that the land they held sway over were – contrary to European beliefs – cultured and progressive, and therefore fit to govern themselves.

So effective was Abu Bakar's "advertisement" of his administration that it only accepted British suzerainty in 1914. Before that, Johor enjoyed membership in the family of "civilised" nations. By 1893, Johor had fixed its borders, gained British

(Facing page) A bird's-eye view of the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, 1893. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.

(Right) Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor. Portrait by Alexander Bassano, 1886. Courtesy of the Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2022.

(Below) Rounseville Wildman in the frontispiece of his book, *Tales of the Malayan Coast*. Image reproduced from Rounseville Wildman, *Tales of the Malayan Coast: From Penang to the Philippines* (Boston: Pothrop Pub., c.1899). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RRARE 398.2 WIL).



recognition of its independence, and was about to implement its own constitution.<sup>1</sup> Joining a world's fair affirmed its stature.

Enter Rounseville Wildman (1864–1901), an American reporter-turned-diplomat. His first appointment was as United States (US) Consul-General to Singapore, starting in 1890.<sup>2</sup> In his account *Tales of the Malayan Coast* (1899),<sup>3</sup> Wildman conjured up the picturesque Malaya as Western officials saw it: a timeless landscape with inhabitants cast in specific roles. Sultan Abu Bakar, at least, impressed him. At a palace banquet Wildman attended in Johor Bahru, the sultan served an international menu and chided Westerners with wit and humour for thinking Malays were savages.<sup>4</sup>

Wildman and Abu Bakar's relationship must have been cordial; the latter even lent Wildman his personal yacht for sailing trips around Singapore and the Melaka Strait, playing Robinson Crusoe.<sup>5</sup> No surprise then that when Wildman suggested to Abu Bakar that Johor participate in the Chicago World's Fair, the latter placed his trust in the American.

Both men had something to gain. In preparing for the fair, the US tasked its overseas consuls to persuade their host countries to join. The Singapore

government wanted nothing to do with it, a decision that the *Straits Times* criticised, saying that "the Colony does not understand the value of judicious advertising", especially since the US was the city's largest importer after England.<sup>6</sup> Wildman thus turned to Johor to show that he was fulfilling his responsibility to contribute to the fair. Johor, an emerging market for mining and agriculture, saw the economic value of its presence in Chicago.

By July 1892, a year before the fair, the Singapore press confirmed Abu Bakar's pledge to send an exhibit to Chicago, consisting of a model kampong, actual Malay men and women at work, cultural artefacts and commercial products.<sup>7</sup> The sultan himself would also travel to Chicago.

News of the impending visit soon crossed the Pacific, and American newspapers printed colourful introductions about Abu Bakar and Johor, its size and population. One described him as "one of the most intelligent of the Eastern sovereigns".<sup>8</sup> But as the talents of an "Oriental" could only be attributed to European guidance, another called him "a good representative of what a Malay of superior caste and education can be when gifted with the opportunities of civilized life".<sup>9</sup>

Arriving in New York in January 1893, Wildman continued building public anticipation for "the only independent Malay kingdom".<sup>10</sup> Plans for the exhibit and Abu Bakar's tour had grown more ambitious. He would visit Washington with an entourage of Malay princes and a troupe of dancing girls, staying for four months. The exhibit would boast a village of 100 Johoreans making sarongs, and even include tigers from the sultan's private collection.<sup>11</sup>

A pair of commissioners were appointed to oversee the Johor exhibit in Chicago: Harry Lake, an English engineer who was also Abu Bakar's secretary, as well as Abdul Rahman Andak, one of Johor's most influential statesmen.<sup>12</sup> Confident, eloquent in English and a shrewd negotiator, Abdul Rahman was not popular with Singapore's British governors, who were uncomfortable with Johor's autonomy. He was just the man for this intricate mission.

### From Johor to Chicago

In late February 1893, Abu Bakar and his entourage comprising 30 "native princes", Abdul Rahman and Harry Lake steamed out of Singapore, headed for Europe.<sup>13</sup> Abu Bakar would sojourn in the German spa-town of Carlsbad (Karlovy Vary in the Czech Republic today) to nurse his declining health. The plan was to visit the US and join Wildman in June. Abdul Rahman and Lake continued across the Atlantic and reached New York in April, accompanied by six Malay

artisans who would build the kampong at the exhibit. Later, the two men went to Washington to meet the secretary of state and US president Grover Cleveland.<sup>14</sup>

The American press was busy milling tall tales about Abu Bakar as an extravagant Asiatic despot. Plenty were perpetuated by Wildman himself, who had become Johor's spokesman. He painted for American readers a fantastic Johor worth "\$10,000,000 diamonds" and other luxuries in the New York magazine, *Harper's Weekly*.<sup>15</sup> This line was repeated by newspapers across the country.<sup>16</sup>

One letter to the *Singapore Free Press* mocked the depictions as "bunkum",<sup>17</sup> and Abu Bakar was so annoyed by the "ridiculous" statements that he threatened to cancel his visit to the US.<sup>18</sup> The Singapore newspapers pulled no punches. The *New York Herald* may be a top US paper, "but its geographical knowledge is slender", noted the *Free Press*.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, the US' knowledge of the world had not caught up with its status as a rising power in the Pacific.

Meanwhile, on the shores of Lake Michigan, thousands of workers toiled to raise the monumental campus of the Chicago World's Fair. A railroad terminus connected visitors from the city's Grand Central Station to Jackson Park, the fair's bustling core. Leaving the station, a visitor was struck by the gleaming neoclassical facades of the "White City" where the Administration Building, Agricultural Building and Manufactures Building surrounded a vast pool.

A network of canals connected the pool to lagoons and ponds in the north, where imposing structures housed exhibits dedicated to horticulture, women, the fine arts, and others. It was a city within a city. Designed by leading American architects, the fair proclaimed the US as an heir to the glories of Europe. Among the national pavilions surrounding the North Pond were the only Asian countries represented: Siam and Japan. But where was Johor?

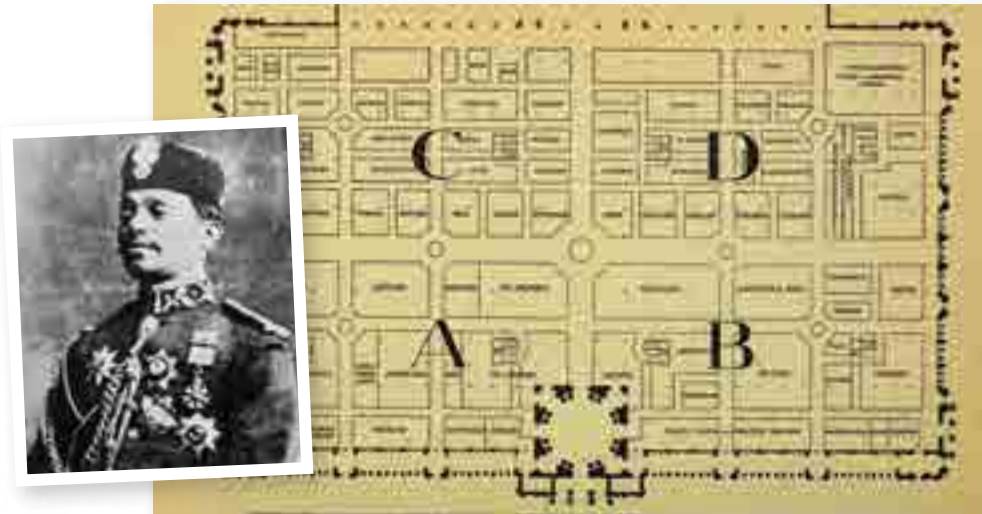
An official catalogue of the fair lists Johor under "No. 12, Oceanic Trading Company" located in "Midway Plaisance", a long field just outside the main exhibition.<sup>20</sup> Johor shared the exhibit space jointly with Samoa, Fiji and Hawai'i. On the souvenir map, No. 12 is mislabelled as "Dutch Settlement".<sup>21</sup>

Johor's village included a main bungalow and attap-roofed booths selling Johor-grown tea, pineapple juice ("the national drink") plus Malay and Chinese trinkets.<sup>22</sup> About 25 Malay women and men at a time managed the exhibit. In the bungalow was a royal bed, an eating throne and a loom for weaving sarongs, alongside a collection of krises, agricultural tools, game objects, timekeeping devices and coins, Chinese "curios", Johor woods, animal hides, and stuffed birds. There were also photographs of Johor landscapes specially produced by the famous Singapore studio, G.R. Lambert & Co.<sup>23</sup>

Newspapers also mentioned a "permanent exhibit" in the Agricultural Building







(Far left) Abdul Rahman Andak, the Dato Seri Amar Diraja of Johor. Image reproduced from Ahmad Fawzi Basri and Hasrom Haron, *Sejarah Johor Moden, 1855–1940: Satu Perbincangan Dari Pelbagai Aspek* (Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Negara, 1978). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. Malay R959.5142.FAW).

(Left) Map of the Agricultural Building. Johor’s exhibit is on the lower right, between Japan and Argentina. Image reproduced from *Plans and Diagrams of All Exhibit Buildings in the World’s Columbian Exposition Compiled from the Official Catalogues Showing the Location of Exhibits* (Chicago: W.B. Conkey, 1893).

which was not part of the original plan. That exhibit was dedicated to Johor’s tea culture, then centred on an 800-acre estate by the Skudai River growing the Assam hybrid.<sup>24</sup> Planting had begun in 1882 and Johor was trying to promote tea as the next big cash-crop after demand for its chief exports, gambier and pepper, had declined.

On 1 May 1893, the fair opened in a formal ceremony. Abdul Rahman represented Johor, “a noticeable figure, dressed in black with a purple apron tied about him, and with an Oriental wealth of insignia across his broad expanse of shirt front”.<sup>25</sup> The man was undoubtedly in Malay dress, the “apron” being his *samping* (hip-wrapper). All the fanfare, though, belied the twists and turns of an underhanded scheme by Rounseville Wildman to take advantage of the ambitious Johoreans.

Rounseville Wildman’s Scheme

In a report that appeared months later, the *Singapore Free Press* accused Wildman of exploiting Johor for his own advantage. According to this story, Wildman had begged Abu Bakar to contribute an exhibit at the fair, tempting him with the “glory” it would bring. With his “Western genius”, Wildman made Abu Bakar sign an unfair contract.<sup>26</sup>

The terms entailed Johor providing Wildman with materials to build the village on Midway Plaisance and reimbursing him for all expenses incurred for arranging for Johor’s exhibit there. The American consul sweetened the prospects for Abu Bakar by presenting Midway Plaisance as the main stage where “all foreign nations will exhibit”.<sup>27</sup>

Conveniently, Wildman was transferred from his Singapore post to Germany

soon after the agreement was sealed. The story fast forwards to Harry Lake and Abdul Rahman Andak’s arrival in Chicago, expecting a spot in the main show like other independent nations and ready to pay the exhibitor’s fee that Wildman’s contract had stipulated. A fair official told the Johor party that no fee was required, and that Midway Plaisance was “the showman’s quarter and not the main part of the Fair”.<sup>28</sup> The American consul had wheedled Johor into paying to join what was in reality an amusement park.

More than carnival rides, however, Midway Plaisance – George Ferris’ original “Ferris Wheel” first debuted there – was also an ethnographic gallery, with exhibits such as a “Cairo Street” and “Turkish Village”. The Midway was intended to display humanity’s supposed order of civilisation, from the most advanced (European) societies at one end to the lowest (Africans and Pacific Islanders) at the other.

Such ethnographic galleries, which made their debut at the Paris Exposition in 1889, were typical of the world’s fairs. Together with the museum, zoo, or botanical garden, they shared the colonising function of collecting and bringing back objects from distant environments for observation and education. Colonial empires vied to display and debase their captive colonies.<sup>29</sup> “Natives” were shipped over far from their homes, dressed in traditional attire to perform “occupations” for the amusement of onlookers. Away from their accustomed climate, many died.<sup>30</sup>

Like other Americans, Julian Hawthorne (son of the famous novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne) found Midway Plaisance the most entertaining section

of the Chicago fair, calling it “The World as Plaything”.<sup>31</sup> A playable world, a world without consequences, where people were reduced to toys without agency and sorted into boxes labelled “civilised”, “half-civilised” and “savage”: such was the cost of modernity.

Racism saturated Chicago’s “Columbian Exposition”, whose very name commemorated 400 years since Christopher Columbus brought “the torch of civilisation” to the New World, never mind his pivotal role in the violent colonisation of Native American lands. The US intensified this process in what it considered a sacred duty to subdue the “wild” frontier in a divine plan called Manifest Destiny. In that vein, the Chicago World’s Fair displayed Native Americans as a vanishing race.<sup>32</sup>

The fair’s organisers also excluded Black Americans from the main exhibits and ignored calls for a “Coloured Exhibit” despite African-American contributions to the US (including having built its wealth through their enslaved labour).<sup>33</sup> Johor’s leaders, themselves opportunists who made use of the fair as a medium for self-promotion and legitimacy, could not escape the hierarchy and certainly were not considered equals to the Europeans exhibiting in Midway Plaisance.

Without a place in the main section, a furious Abdul Rahman planned to leave the exhibit’s materials with the US government and return home. Then Honduras unexpectedly withdrew from its slot in the Agricultural Building just a few days before the opening.<sup>34</sup> With the space available, Johor now had a permanent exhibit all to itself. However, Wildman had transferred rights to the Johor exhibit to the Oceanic Trading

Company, whose representatives asked Abdul Rahman to hand over the materials. He defied them and wrote to Wildman demanding an explanation.

Stationed in Germany, Wildman met Abu Bakar and framed Abdul Rahman as negligent, refusing to build the village while living large “in that fast and godless city of Chicago”.<sup>35</sup> Wildman asked Abu Bakar to make him Johor’s commissioner instead to sort out matters in Chicago.

The tide turned when Harry Lake travelled to Carlsbad to personally explain matters to Abu Bakar. Wildman, defeated, went to Chicago to negotiate a new agreement between himself, Oceanic Trading and Johor. The Johoreans agreed to give Wildman the exhibit’s unsold surplus, while he paid to build the village at Midway Plaisance. He also agreed to give a portion of the proceeds to the fair, the company and Johor.

“If there is a moral attached,” the *Singapore Free Press* reported, “it is that the business methods of the West are not always appreciated by the people of the East, and that when a Westerner tries to get the better of the simple and slothful Oriental he does not always come out ahead”.<sup>36</sup> The further truths of the matter

is that the “Orientals” had been neither simple nor slothful.

History from the Margins

As the Chicago World’s Fair drew to a close in October 1893, Johor was congratulated for an exhibit on par with its “more mighty neighbours”.<sup>37</sup> Abu Bakar himself never made it to Chicago though.<sup>38</sup> He remained in ill health and died of pneumonia two years later in London. Abdul Rahman remained a loyal servant of Johor until British pressure ousted him in 1909. Wildman went on to serve terms in Hong Kong before getting involved in the Philippine-American War as a friend of the Filipino leader and revolutionary Emilio Aguinaldo. Wildman’s eventful career was cut short in 1901 when he and his family went down with their ship off San Francisco.

Chicago remained an achievement for Johor. In Haji Mohamed Said’s chronicle of Abu Bakar’s reign, the writer credited the exhibit for “raising the fame” of Johor in the eyes of the world.<sup>39</sup> Johor belonged to a wider story of marginal peoples rising to the challenge of modernity, despite colonial structures of exclusion.

Malayan responses to the American press proved that Asians not only knew but also resisted how Westerners character-

ised them. To adapt, they may have been complicit in the imperial scheme, but given that the colonial order left them with few viable options, reinventing themselves for a new international system was radical in its own way. Japan, for instance, played the game well by becoming an industrial and military power. Lacking the same capabilities, Johor resorted to diplomacy and trade. Sovereignty was a shifting mirage in the jungle of geopolitics, given substance and legitimacy through rituals of recognition such as the world’s fairs.

Growing up in a society where too often, the discourse around Malays relegates the community to a minimal role in the modern past and present,<sup>40</sup> I was thrilled to find a Malay state demanding a place on the stage of history, to have a share in its making. It is in retrieving and rewriting such stories back into wider consciousness that we truly appreciate history as a grand movement of the small and forgotten. ♦

I wish to thank Martyn Low and Marcus Ng for pointing me to some important archival material, and Yu-Mei Balasingamchow for comments on the draft.

NOTES

- Johor’s borders had been cemented in the 1855 Anglo-Johor Treaty. Its sovereignty was legally established in a case involving Sultan Abu Bakar and Englishwoman Jenny Mighell, who sued him for breaching a marriage contract, but lost because the Foreign Office recognised Abu Bakar as a “foreign ruler” and therefore fell outside the jurisdiction of British courts. The Johor Constitution, or *Undang-undang Tubuh Kerajaan Johor*, was introduced in 1895.
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- The names of the “natives” brought to Chicago for the Johor village and the much-larger Javanese village have not surfaced in my research. However, we do know of one Malayan who died after being sent to the British Empire Exhibition of 1924. This was Halimah Abdullah, a woman from Johor and master-weaver. She contracted pneumonia and died on 7 May 1924, aged 60. See Erika Tan, “The Forgotten Weaver,” accessed 12 July 2022, <http://theforgottenweaver.blogspot.com/>.
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# The Early Days of FAMILY PLANNING in Singapore



Staff at the Singapore Family Planning Association, 1962. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Singapore's family planning programme did not start with the "Stop at Two" policy in 1972, but goes back even earlier to 1949. **By Andrea Kee**

Mention "family planning" in Singapore and the poster of two girls sharing an apple under an umbrella with the slogan, "Girl or Boy, Two Is Enough", invariably comes to mind. The "stop at two" campaign, which began in 1972, blanketed Singapore with the message on posters and bus panels, in magazines and in

advertisements, and even on television and in cinemas.<sup>1</sup>

However, family planning in Singapore actually goes back even earlier than 1972. Organised attempts to reduce family sizes here date to the immediate postwar era when the Singapore Family Planning Association (SFPA) was set up in 1949.

## The Work of Volunteers

Postwar Singapore was plagued with hardship and poverty. The Japanese Occupation period resulted in a shortage of many things, but most urgent of these was food. To feed the hungry, the Social Welfare Department set up volunteer-run food centres to supply free meals. However, the volunteers soon realised that simply providing free food and education to those seeking help was not enough.

"We thought this is not the way how to tackle [the issue]," recalled Hena Sinha, a volunteer with the department, in an oral history interview. "Must teach them not to have so many children, how to space them. Not stop them. Have enough. That's how it first started, from voluntary nursing, feeding the poor children, teaching them. Suddenly, we realised we must teach the parents not to have so many children," she said.<sup>2</sup>

In July 1949, a group of volunteers, doctors and social workers came together to establish the SFPA, with the objective of providing contraceptive services and information to the masses so that women could plan their births and improve their own and their children's welfare.<sup>3</sup> The association set up family planning clinics where women could get contraception help and subsidised supplies, as well as seek minor gynecological treatments.<sup>4</sup>

Sinha, who later became the association's chairman, recalled that many poor women visited the clinics crying that they did not want any more children as they lacked money. In one case, a woman who had been pregnant 22 times "begged the doctors 'to do something to stop it all'", according to Goh Kok Kee, the president of the association. The woman already had 20 children and her husband was unemployed.<sup>5</sup>

Male attitudes were not helpful, as a 1950 *Malaya Tribune* article noted about a woman who had six children, two of whom had already been given away. "Her husband's attitude was that he didn't mind how many more children she had – they could always be given away, and she came begging that something could be done to prevent her having to have more children only to give them away."<sup>6</sup>

Demand for the SFPA's services was high and between 1949 and 1965, they grew from three clinics to 34. In those 16 years, almost 10,000 people sought and accepted family planning advice from the association. They could have possibly reached more women but being a non-profit private organisation, the association had limited resources and funds to keep up with demand.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the groundwork was laid for the next stage of family planning in Singapore.

## Reaching Out to the Masses

By 1957, the SFPA struggled to cope with demand for its clinical services and appealed to the government for



A mother with her five children, 1952. Large families were common in postwar Singapore. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

help. However, it was not until September 1965 when the *White Paper on Family Planning* was published that a national policy on family and population planning was instituted.<sup>8</sup>

The paper announced the launch of the first five-year family planning programme with the slogan, "Family Planning for All". It also revealed the twin objectives of improving the health and welfare of mother and child, and accelerating fertility decline to benefit the socioeconomic development of Singapore.<sup>9</sup>

In 1968, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew connected the issues of family planning, the growing population problem and the overall development for newly independent Singapore: "If we are to raise our standard of living, get away from poverty, filth and squalor, we must not only use modern science and technology to build the things we want. But also to prevent us from dragging ourselves to the ground by having too many in the family to care for."<sup>10</sup>

In January 1966, the Singapore Family Planning and Population Board (SFPPB) was

established to carry out all family planning and population matters in Singapore. It took over the family planning clinics managed by the SFPA, the majority of which were located within Maternal and Child Health (MCH) centres, and launched the National Family Planning and Population Programme that aimed to make family planning advice, supplies, and clinical services known and accessible to all.<sup>11</sup>

The family planning message was amplified through the mass media. Articles on the topic were published in magazines and newsletters, forum debates were televised, and publicity materials such as coasters, booklets, key chains and car stickers were distributed. Exhibitions held in the city and rural areas were "free and frank, including anatomy, physiology and methods of contraception for all to see". There were no restrictions on age, sex, or marital status, and everyone was free to attend. Trained medical workers educated and counselled women on family planning methods at the MCH centres and government hospitals, as well as the women they visited at home for postnatal treatments.<sup>12</sup>

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Changing the mindsets of people towards family planning was a challenge. An early project aimed at getting women to accept intra-uterine devices (IUDs) as the main contraceptive method met with little success due to misconceptions that the device could be lodged in the lungs or travel to the mouth. Thus, instead of going to hospitals and family planning clinics for family planning advice, these women were now heading there for IUD removals. The Family Planning Board then changed tactics by offering women a “menu card” of contraceptives to choose from, which proved more favourable. Besides IUDs, options included contraceptive pills, sterilisation, diaphragms, vaginal tablets, condoms and even the rhythm method.<sup>13</sup>

While family planning involved both the husband and wife, it was often left to the wife to bear the responsibility. But she was not always allowed to make decisions about this on her own. Uma Rajan, a clinical doctor at a MCH centre, recalled having to help women in such situations in the 1960s. She said: “Most of the men did not like to use contraceptives of any kind, so it was left to the women.” “If the husbands found that [a] method [was] not suitable, they must be prepared to change even if it was comfortable for the woman,” she added. Women also had to consider the demands of her in-laws for more children, especially sons.<sup>14</sup>

Besides contending with prevailing social and gender norms, medical staff had to also educate perplexed patients on how to use certain contraceptives. Midwife Mary Hee once attended to a woman at a rural clinic who explained that her husband complained of discomfort when using condoms. The midwife eventually found out that it was because the man was wearing the condom the entire day.<sup>15</sup>

While family planning counselling sessions could sometimes be frustrating, both for the medical officers and the women seeking advice, these sessions were also an opportunity for women to confide in midwives privately about issues they faced. Hee recalled counselling a patient who eventually revealed her husband’s sexual abuse.<sup>16</sup> For some women, these family planning clinics not only offered family planning advice but were also a sanctuary where they could seek solace and help.

#### Yet, Birth Rates Continue to Rise

Although birth rates decreased from 29.5 to 22.1 births per thousand from 1966 to 1971, there was no celebrating yet as the number of women in their early 20s would more than double from 1966 to 1975, resulting in more births.<sup>17</sup>

The National Family Planning and Population Programme’s second five-year plan, spanning 1971 to 1976, now targeted newlyweds and married women from low

socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as promoted sterilisation as the best family planning method for families with at least two children.<sup>18</sup>

While sterilisation was legalised in 1970, the procedure was liberalised with the Voluntary Sterilisation Act of 1974. Applicants could now opt for sterilisation at an affordable price of \$5 if they had at least two living children instead of three.<sup>19</sup> They also no longer had to be interviewed by the Eugenics Board – a five-member team constituted under the Voluntary Sterilisation Act to authorise sterilisation treatments – before undergoing the procedure, and the waiting time was shortened.<sup>20</sup>

The push to promote sterilisation faced some backlash. A number of family planning nurses were “accused of using tactless tactics” when persuading eligible mothers to undergo the procedure. As one mother told the *New Nation*: “It can be very annoying and embarrassing – when one has not fully recuperated – to have a nurse who keeps on harping on the advantages of sterilisation.”<sup>21</sup>

Medical staff had the challenging task of being the messenger of government policies that encroached into citizens’ private lives. Sumitera Mohd Letak, a midwife in the 1970s, recounted in an oral history interview: “I have colleagues who have been really abused for that. [Patients would say] ‘Hey, who are you to tell me? Who are you to tell me that I can’t



(Above) A National Day float encouraging the people to have only two children by the Singapore Family Planning and Population Board, 1975. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Right) The now-iconic poster promoting the two-child family, 1978. The poster deliberately featured two girls to discourage the existing preference for boys. The girls also had a visible age gap to encourage parents to space out their children. Singapore Family Planning and Population Board Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



afford to feed my baby and all that’. So the choice of words is very important.”<sup>22</sup>

Despite the difficulties, family planning services continued with the addition of a convenient and confidential telephone information service. Additionally, abortion, first legalised in 1969, was made more accessible with the Abortion Act of 1974.<sup>23</sup>

A new SFPPB Training Unit, set up in 1972, was tasked with training new and existing staff to be adept in more “sophisticated” motivation techniques in a bid to reduce birth rates.<sup>24</sup> As former training education officer Jenny Heng explained, the staff motivating patients were nurses, midwives and doctors, whose primary training was in medicine. The new Training Unit brought sorely needed communication and sociological perspectives that would make the process of encouraging women to accept family planning more friendly or appealing.<sup>25</sup>

#### Two Is Enough

In 1972, the two-child family norm was pushed for the first time and publicity became a year-round affair rather than during specific campaign periods.<sup>26</sup>

Instead of slogans like “Singapore Wants Small Families”, the message now said “Girl or Boy, Two Is Enough”, and was blasted through all forms of mass media and emblazoned on collectibles. The Family Planning Board even launched two songs, “Will You Find Time To Love Me” and “It’s No Joke”, encouraging couples to delay marriage, delay having their first child and to space out their children.<sup>27</sup>

One of the benefits put forth by the government for having no more than two children was so that each child would get a “bigger share of the pie”. This was a message that struck home for many. In a study on population policies conducted by researchers between 1974 and 1976, a housewife who was interviewed explained in simple and clear terms how fewer children meant more food for each of them: “If you have only one child, you buy one dollar’s worth of liver for him, and he’ll get one dollar’s worth of liver. If you have two children, each will get only fifty cents’ worth of liver!”<sup>28</sup>

Existing social policies got a boost, and new social disincentives were introduced to change people’s atti-

tudes towards having large families. For instance, maternity leave was further restricted, with paid maternity leave granted only for the first two children. From 1973, the primary school registration process was also changed, resulting in the fourth child and beyond having lower priority in the queue for the school of their choice – unless one of their parents was sterilised.<sup>29</sup>

Tax relief for mothers was also reduced and allowed only for the first three children compared to the previous five. However, the most impactful disincentive, especially for lower income families, was the increase in delivery fees. From August 1973, a system of progressive charges was introduced, with fees increasing at different rates based on ward class. By 1975, fees for class C patients had increased much more compared to those in class A or B wards. For the fourth child, for example, patients in class C wards had to pay \$120 more compared to their third child, while

A maternal and child health centre in Buona Vista, 1957. The majority of family planning clinics were located within such centres. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



those in class A and B wards only had to pay \$60 more.<sup>30</sup>

However, studies have shown that that economic penalties and disincentives had a limited effect on families from the low-income working class who tended to have large families. According to researchers, a history of occupational insecurity led them to want more children as “children may prove to be their main security in the future”. These families also did not relate to the aspirations of social mobility that the two-child family concept promoted. When asked about the occupation or trade they wished for their children to pursue, one respondent interviewed

replied: “I can’t afford to think of the future. I just live on and see.”<sup>31</sup>

And Then There Were Three

In 1975, less than a decade since the SFPPB was formed, the fertility rate dropped to replacement level in Singapore. Between 1966 and 1983, the birth rate decreased from 29.5 per thousand to 17.1.<sup>32</sup> Experts and those involved in the family planning programme have cited multiple factors for this successful decline, including close cooperation among other government agencies in the implementation of family planning policies, improvements in socio-economic conditions and the increased participation of women in the labour force.<sup>33</sup>

In the early 1980s, there was an attempt to reverse this trend of falling fertility but in a very targeted way by focusing on particular groups of women. In his 1983 National Day Rally speech, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew highlighted what he saw as the problem of a declining quality of Singapore’s future labour force since well-educated women were having fewer children than their less-educated counterparts.<sup>34</sup>

“[W]e shouldn’t get our women into jobs where they cannot, at the same time, be mothers...,” he noted. “You just can’t be doing a full-time heavy job like that of a doctor or engineer and run a home and bring up children. It is tough... women, 40 years and over... unlikely to marry and have children.”<sup>35</sup>

This was the prelude to a significant change in family and population planning in Singapore: the introduction of pro-natalist policies specifically targeted at well-educated women only. The controversial Graduate Mothers Scheme was introduced in 1984, which included giving priority to the children of university-educated mothers who had three or more children during the primary school registration exercise. These mothers would also enjoy more tax deductions. However the scheme was rescinded a year later as many women expressed unhappiness over the discriminatory policies.<sup>36</sup>

Its work done, the SFPPB closed in 1986. That year, Singapore’s total fertility rate (the average number of births per women) fell to 1.42, well below the replacement level of 2.13. The board had done its



Newlyweds attending a family planning talk. Couples getting hitched at the Registry of Marriages were invited to attend such talks, where they were taught different contraceptive methods and encouraged to stop at two. Image reproduced from Singapore Family Planning and Population Board, *Annual Report 1973* (Singapore: Singapore Family Planning and Population Board, 1973), 47. (From National Library, Singapore, call no.: RCLOS 301.426 SFPPBA).

work a little too well. The continued falling birth rates became a cause for concern for the government, prompting the establishment of the Inter-Ministerial Population Committee in 1984 to review the existing population control programme.<sup>37</sup>

In a 1986 ministerial speech at Nanyang Technological Institute, First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong spoke about Singapore’s declining birth rate problem and its consequences for the nation’s economic growth and security. He also highlighted the “grave problem” of an ageing population. “You may say that your children can support you, but bear in mind at the rate we are going, many Singaporeans will have only one or even not a single child in their life time...,” he said. “Singapore has no natural wealth.

The only way for the Government to raise the required revenue to take care of the older population is to levy more taxes on those who are working. And they will squeal.”<sup>38</sup> Hence in 1987, the “Stop at Two” slogan was replaced by “Have three or more, if you can afford it”.<sup>39</sup>

Since then, Singapore has been trying to get the birth rate up. Baby bonuses, tax rebates, childcare subsidies, earlier access to Housing and Development Board flats, and childcare leave and paternity leave are just some of the measures in place today to encourage Singaporeans to have more children.<sup>40</sup> But Singapore’s total fertility rate has continued to trend downwards over the decades. In 2021, it was 1.12.<sup>41</sup>

The falling birth rate continues to be a matter of concern, engendering issues

of not just a rapidly ageing population but also issues of immigration in recent decades, which have created tensions in the social fabric. It remains to be seen if the pro-natalist policies can achieve anything approaching the level of success as the anti-natalist National Family Planning and Population Programme of the 1960s and 1970s. ♦

The author would like to thank Dr Jenny Soon, former head of the Training Unit at the Singapore Family Planning and Population Board, and Ms Jenny Heng, a former training education officer with the Training Unit, for sharing their thoughts on this topic.

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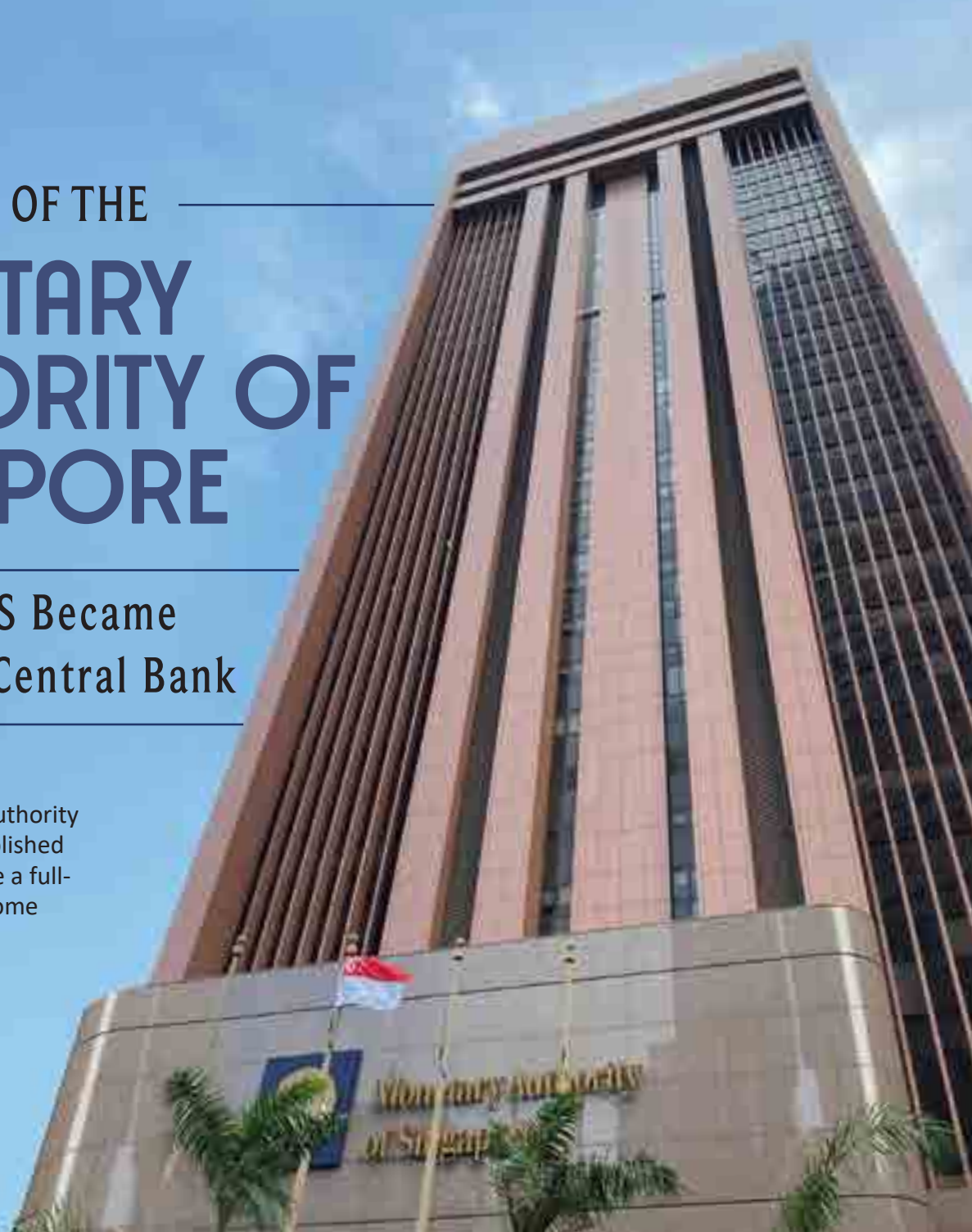
# THE MAKING OF THE MONETARY AUTHORITY OF SINGAPORE

## How the MAS Became Singapore's Central Bank

While the Monetary Authority of Singapore was established in 1971, it only became a full-fledged central bank some 30 years later.

By Barbara Quek

The Monetary Authority of Singapore building at 10 Shenton Way. Photo by and courtesy of Jimmy Yap.



“We are tired of being referred to as the de facto central bank all the time. Go ahead and call us the central bank henceforth,” an official from the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) told the *Straits Times* in August 1998.<sup>1</sup>

It is a curious fact that for a little more than half its existence, the MAS, which was set up in 1971, was regularly referred to as Singapore's de facto central bank. It was only in October 2002 that the MAS became the country's official central bank following its merger with

the Board of Commissioners of Currency, Singapore (BCCS). With the merger, the MAS was finally able to issue currency, the one major function it did not have when it was formed 51 years ago.

In September 1970, during the reading of the bill to set up MAS, then Finance Minister Hon Sui Sen explained that “as a result of historical factor, the various monetary functions normally associated with a central bank are currently being performed by a number of government departments”.<sup>2</sup>

At the time, while the Currency Board issued currency, the Commissioner of Banking and the Commissioner of Finance Companies were responsible for the regulation and supervision of banks and finance companies. The Exchange Control Department handled all foreign exchange matters, while the Department of Overseas Investment looked after the government's external assets. Then there was the Accountant-General who was responsible for the sale of Treasury bills to banks and financial institutions, the

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raising of domestic loans and the management of the clearing house system.<sup>3</sup>

Hon's predecessor at the Finance Ministry, Goh Keng Swee, described Singapore's monetary system as “an untidy system of units that grew up ad hoc in course of time in response to urgent requirements”.<sup>4</sup> To coordinate all the various departments, Goh would have weekly meetings with staff of the different departments on Monday mornings and additional meetings on Thursdays and Fridays if necessary.

To streamline the decision-making for such an important institution, it was logical that these different bodies should be brought together and in September 1970, the Monetary Authority of Singapore Bill was passed in Parliament.

Nonetheless, at the setting up of MAS, the ability to issue currency was deliberately left out. The BCCS was established in 1967 following Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965, and the agreement that the two countries would issue their own separate currency. The role of the BCCS was to maintain the currency board system (practised since the colonial era) that “fixed the exchange rate between the Singapore dollar and a specified foreign currency, allowed domestic notes and coins to be fully convertible at the relevant fixed exchange rate, and backed the Singapore currency fully by foreign assets or gold”.<sup>5</sup>

Hon explained in his 1970 speech in Parliament that the BCCS was kept separate from MAS because the “automatic mechanism of the Currency Board with its 100 percent external assets backing has been and will be of great psychological importance in maintaining confidence in the Singapore dollar”.<sup>6</sup>

In the commemorative book published by MAS on its 40th anniversary in

2012, the writers explained that “the aim of keeping currency issuance separate from MAS was to assure Singaporeans and foreign investors that the central bank would not freely print money according to its whim. Instead, every Singapore dollar issued by BCCS would be fully backed by gold and foreign assets under the currency board system”.<sup>7</sup>

As Elizabeth Sam, then the chief manager of the Department of Investments and Exchange Control at the MAS, explained: “I think the whole objective was really confidence – that people would have confidence in a Singapore dollar that was one hundred percent backed by foreign reserves rather than this concept of a central bank with money creating capabilities.”<sup>8</sup>

Added Tang Wee Lip, then manager of the Banking Department at the MAS: “After the British colonial system began to pull back, there were several countries in Africa and Asia that became independent. At that time, a lot of African countries were also setting up central banks and some

had a reputation of printing money. We didn't want to fall into the same group.”<sup>9</sup>

### Becoming a De Facto Central Bank

Although MAS did not have the ability to issue currency at its inception, there was a plan for it to eventually do so. As early as 1974 when the MAS was under the chairmanship of Hon, the government had given its in-principle approval for the MAS and the Currency Board to merge according to internal MAS documents.<sup>10</sup>

By the late 1970s, the newspapers were publishing stories about an impending merger. In May 1979, a front-page story in the *Straits Times*, citing unnamed sources, said that the government was expected to announce the establishment of a central bank in July or August that year and that this institution would combine the functions of the MAS and the BCCS. This did not come to pass and eventually, in October 1980, in another front-page story, the *Straits Times* reported that the central bank plan had been put off, pending a new appraisal.<sup>11</sup>



People queuing at the Board of Commissioners of Currency, Singapore to exchange new Singapore currency, which was issued to banks and the public in 1967. Image reproduced from Ignatius Low, Fiona Chan and Gabriel Chan, *Sustaining Stability: Serving Singapore* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2012), 65. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 332.11095957 LOW).



The plan to merge the two had been developed while Hon was chairman of both the MAS and BCCS. But when Goh succeeded Hon on 1 August 1980, Goh was against the idea of bringing the two institutions together.<sup>12</sup>

However, while Goh favoured the arrangement of using BCCS to issue currency, over time, the relevance of the separation was questioned. In October 2002, the MAS and the Currency Board finally became one entity.

Speaking in Parliament in July 2002 during the reading of a bill to amend the Currency Act to allow the merger, then Second Minister for Finance Lim Hng Kiang explained that when the Currency Board was set up in 1967, the system had three main features: the exchange rate was

fixed between the domestic currency and a specified foreign currency, Singapore notes and coins were fully convertible at the fixed exchange rate, and the domestic currency was fully backed by gold or foreign assets.<sup>13</sup>

However since 1967, there had been a number of significant changes, Lim pointed out. Singapore had moved away from the fixed exchange rate after the currency was floated in 1973. And in 1982, the convertibility of domestic currency notes and coins into gold and other foreign currencies on demand was repealed. What then remained from the currency board system was that the currency in circulation would still be fully backed by external assets. This was required under the Currency Act and had contributed to confidence in the currency, he said, and this feature would not change after the merger.<sup>14</sup>

Lim also highlighted that in addition to being backed by external assets, confidence in the Singapore dollar exchange rate was “derived from the consistency and soundness of our mon-

etary and fiscal policies, as well as our foreign reserves”. The merger, he said, would “enable us to rationalise common functions and realise efficiency gains, without compromising the overriding objective of managing the currency and maintaining confidence in the Singapore dollar. MAS will become a full-fledged central bank”.<sup>15</sup>

Behind the scenes, the move to merge the two institutions had picked up pace since the late 1990s. In 1997, in an exchange of letters with the BCCS, MAS raised the issue of whether the discipline of currency board was still relevant. While BCCS constrained the printing of physical currency, the government could issue bonds or use its foreign exchange reserves. The MAS also noted that confidence in the Singapore dollar was due to the country’s policies rather than the Currency Board. In addition, by 1997, the notes and coins in circulation made up less than 10 percent of the money supply. This meant the MAS had much more influence over the supply of money than the Currency Board did.<sup>16</sup>

(Left) The government was expected to announce the establishment of a central bank in either July or August 1979. Image reproduced from Paul Wee, “Central Bank ‘in July or August’,” *Straits Times*, 23 May 1979, 1. (From NewspaperSG).

(Below) Finance Minister Hon Sui Sen, 1971. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Chairman of the Monetary Authority of Singapore Goh Keng Swee (second from left) at a board meeting. Seated next to him are J.Y. Pillay (extreme left) and Richard Hu (third from left). Image reproduced from Ignatius Low, Fiona Chan and Gabriel Chan, *Sustaining Stability: Serving Singapore* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2012), 15. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 332.11095957 LOW).

These arguments undoubtedly formed part of the thinking to merge the two bodies. The wheels were set in motion to combine both institutions and after the necessary legislation was passed, the BCCS and the MAS became one in October 2002. The joint entity took on the latter’s name and the MAS finally became a full-fledged central bank with the ability to issue banknotes and coins.<sup>17</sup>

The merger took place without much fanfare. Recalled J.Y. Pillay, former deputy chairman and managing director of MAS: “I was in the UK at that time... it may well be that somebody, if not an MP, an NMP or someone would say: ‘What’s happening? Are we going to loosen our monetary policy? Is this a sign of incipient price instability?’ But at that time, not a squeak from anywhere and not even remarked upon in the international media.”<sup>18</sup>

### Overcoming Crises and Challenges

With or without the ability to issue currency, the MAS has played a vital role in Singapore’s economic development over the last 50 years.

The MAS has kept inflation low, maintained healthy official foreign reserves, established a sound financial sector which is resilient against shocks, and built up a vibrant international financial centre that adds value and creates jobs.<sup>19</sup>

Over the last five decades, the MAS has weathered numerous storms. Many

of these were external, such as the collapse of the Bretton Woods Agreement that led to the end of the system of fixed exchange rates, as well as the oil shocks of the 1970s. As Singapore is a small open economy, the MAS has had to deal with the consequences of these and many other global events. However, there were also some specific to Singapore or Southeast Asia that required the MAS to respond. One of the most severe was the Pan-El crisis of 1985.

### Pan-Electric Industries Crisis

On 30 November 1985, Pan-Electric Industries Limited, a company listed on the Stock Exchange of Singapore, collapsed and was placed under receivership. A marine salvage, hotel and property group, it had amassed huge debts of \$453 million owed to 35 banks and \$160 million worth of unfulfilled forward contracts.<sup>20</sup>

In an unprecedented move, the stock exchange was closed for trading from 2 to 4 December 1985 in a bid to stabilise the market and mitigate against any contagion effect and fallout on the heavily leveraged stockbroking firms. The closure was considered a drastic move and in doing so, “Singapore had to pay the price in terms of economic, reputational and social costs”.<sup>21</sup>

The MAS stepped in with a bail-out plan by setting up an emergency “lifeboat” fund consisting of a \$180-million line of credit underwritten by the “Big Four”

local banks, accompanied by a three-month moratorium on the recall of loans to stockbrokers. The fund was designed to prevent the wholesale and systemic collapse of the stockbroking industry, and to restore public confidence.<sup>22</sup>

The system of forward contracts, in which shares are resold before their purchases have been settled, was the crux of the Pan-El crisis. With forward trading, a whole chain of parties was linked via promises of sale and purchase to the same lot of stock. A domino effect was created by defaults down the chain. Given the massive number of forward contracts it had entered into, Pan-El was unable to fulfill them and was plunged into insolvency.<sup>23</sup>

Following the incident, the MAS “restricted the trading of forward contracts and toughened insider trading rules”. They also introduced measures to ensure that Singaporeans remained cautious and prudent with their money and investments.<sup>24</sup>

### Collapse of Barings

A decade later, MAS had to deal with the collapse of Barings Bank, Britain’s oldest merchant bank, triggered by events in Singapore. Nicholas William Leeson, better known as Nick Leeson, was a derivatives trader and the general manager of Barings Futures Singapore. His excessive trading in Nikkei index futures chalked up great losses and saddled the bank with a huge debt. By the time of the bank’s collapse





on 26 February 1995, it had accumulated losses amounting to \$2.2 billion.<sup>25</sup>

The MAS was alerted and immediately swung into action by clearing the trades and closing up positions to safeguard the reputation of the Singapore International Monetary Exchange (SIMEX) and to restore public confidence in Singapore’s standing in the market. This became an internationally high-profile case that dominated headlines around the world. Fortunately, the losses incurred by Barings Futures Singapore and the consequent collapse of its parent bank in London did not have an adverse effect on the reputation of Singapore’s financial sector.<sup>26</sup>

Explained Richard Hu, then chairman of the MAS: “When Barings happened, of course, Koh Beng Seng [then deputy managing director] and his team were very quick to act. They went immediately to Barings, took the books and discovered

how the sequence of events took place. And it was very clear. Leeson was mainly speculating in Nikkei-225 futures and reporting profits which did not exist. As far as the home office was concerned, this unit in Singapore was making money and they provided more funding to increase the size of its business.”<sup>27</sup>

The incident led to the amendment of the Futures Trading Act, which came into

(Left) Following the Pan-Electric Industries crisis, the Singapore Stock Exchange was closed for two days to prevent panic selling by shareholders. Image reproduced from Conrad Raj, “SES Suspends All Trading,” *Straits Times*, 2 December 1985, 1. (From NewspaperSG).

(Below) Nick Leeson was extradited from Frankfurt to Singapore on 23 November 1995. He pleaded guilty to two charges of fraud and forgery, and was sentenced to six-and-a-half years in prison in Singapore. Image reproduced from Alphonso Chan, “Nick Leeson Back to Face Charges of Fraud and Forgery,” *Straits Times*, 24 November 1995, 1. (From NewspaperSG).



force on 1 April 1995, and enabled the MAS to monitor the trading of futures contracts more closely. Measures were also introduced to strengthen the regulatory framework of futures trading under SIMEX.<sup>28</sup>

### Asian Financial Crisis

Soon after the collapse of Barings, the MAS had to deal with the Asian Financial Crisis, which erupted following the collapse of

the Thai baht on 2 July 1997 when it depreciated by 15 percent. The contagion spread rapidly to other Southeast Asian currency markets, including Singapore, and caused the Singapore dollar to weaken against the US Dollar.

Central banks in the region raised interest rates and imposed capital controls but failed to restore stability in the currency markets. Various Southeast Asian countries sought help from International Monetary Fund programmes to help their economies tide over the crisis. In mid-January 1998, the Malaysian ringgit, Thai baht and Philippine peso fell to historic lows against the US dollar.<sup>29</sup>

What started as a currency crisis had impacted the wider economy and the rest of the region. Although Singapore was not directly hit, the country suffered the spill-over effects of the economic slowdown and entered a recession in the second half of 1998.<sup>30</sup> GDP growth plunged from 8.4 percent in 1997 to 0.4 percent in 1998. But the banks stood firm and Singapore companies did not go under.

Singapore’s strong economic fundamentals, including MAS’s healthy buffer of official foreign reserves and its prudent management and monitoring of the exchange rate, helped to ensure that the Singapore dollar maintained its value. It capped the degree to which the Singapore dollar weakened against the major reserve currencies of the US, Europe and United Kingdom, and protected the Singapore dollar from depreciating to the same extent as other regional currencies.

Cost-cutting measures were also implemented to support the economy. In November 1998, the government introduced a \$10.5-billion cost-reduction package that included a 10-percentage point reduction in employers’ Central Provident Fund contributions, a wage cut of 5 to 8

percent, and further cuts in government rates and fees.<sup>31</sup>

By early 1999, the Singapore economy had begun to show signs of recovery and returned to positive growth in the first quarter of that year. Singapore’s low foreign debt, huge foreign exchange reserves, large budget surpluses, high savings rates, low inflation and a sound financial system had helped it to overcome the crisis.<sup>32</sup>

### Global Financial Crisis

Some 10 years later, the MAS had to deal with an even larger crisis when the world was plunged into the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s.<sup>33</sup> The slowdown and contraction of developed economies were particularly sharp in the last quarter of 2008 following the collapse of America investment bank Lehman Brothers in September, and the near-collapse of American International Group, the world’s largest insurer. By the end of 2008, the major economies had slipped into deep recession and this exacted a heavy toll on Asia’s trade-reliant economies.

Singapore was not immune and slipped into a recession as well. In response to these events, the MAS immediately acted to ensure the stability of the Singapore dollar and the banking system. To ease pressures on the Singapore dollar market activity, MAS kept a higher level of liquidity in the banking system. It also reassured financial institutions that it would continue to anticipate the market’s funding needs and consider any unique liquidity needs of individual banks on a case-by-case basis.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, as early as the start of 2007, when signs of the impending crisis first began brewing, the MAS had already stepped up their supervision of foreign banks in Singapore. MAS drew up contingency plans to safeguard the interests of depositors and investors in

case any foreign bank in Singapore failed because of problems back home. It also announced a guarantee for all Singapore dollar and foreign currency deposits in banks, finance companies and merchant banks licensed in Singapore.<sup>35</sup>

Due to MAS’s quick thinking and sound policies, Singapore’s financial sector was not greatly impacted and in August 2009, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced that “the worst is over for the Singapore economy” and that “the eye of the storm has passed”.<sup>36</sup>

### The Next 50 Years

In October 2021, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted that the monetary policies and management of official reserves by MAS had “sustained macroeconomic stability and confidence in Singapore. Its regulation and supervision of financial institutions [had] created a safe and internationally trusted financial system”.<sup>37</sup>

He attributed these achievements to caution and creativity on the part of the MAS. “It adhered to sound economic principles, while creatively adapting policy frameworks to suit Singapore’s context,” he said. “It set high regulatory and supervisory standards, while taking a facilitative and risk-proportionate approach. It ensured financial stability, while promoting innovation and seizing opportunities.”<sup>38</sup>

Today, the world is being roiled by events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Inflationary pressures threaten global economies while the consequences of climate change loom increasingly large on the horizon. Now, more than ever before, the MAS will need to bank on its guiding principles of caution and creativity to help Singapore navigate safely through an uncertain and unpredictable future. ♦

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# Union Book

## Stands Tall At

Chinese bookstore Union Book has seen many changes over the last seven decades. **By Chen Yuxin**

(Left) In 1952, Union Press set up an office on the second floor of International Bookstore opposite Clifford Pier in Singapore. Courtesy of Union Book.

(Right) Union Book on the third floor of Bras Basah Complex, 2022. Courtesy of Jimmy Yap.

It has been seven decades since the Hong Kong publisher Union Press (友联出版社) set up an office on the second floor of International Bookstore (国际书店), opposite Clifford Pier, in Singapore in 1952.

Union Press was established in Hong Kong the year before. Its founders had fled the outbreak of the civil war in China between the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party. In 1952, they began publishing *Chinese Student Weekly* (中国学生周报) with editions produced for Singapore/Malaya, Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar and Vietnam.

To facilitate the distribution of the Singapore/Malayan edition of *Chinese Student Weekly*, Union Press set up an office in Singapore in 1956 called Union Book (友联书局). And although Union Book was mainly a publisher of books and newspapers, it also had a retail storefront.

In the 1950s, left-wing influence was strong in Singapore and bookstores that sold publications from main-

land China – such as Zhonghua Book Company, The Commercial Press and Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House – were immensely popular. However, Union Book was able to carve a niche for itself because Nanyang University (which had been founded around the same time as Union Book) favoured reading materials from Taiwan. According to retired employee Cai Mingying (蔡明英), who joined Union Book in 1966, the store was always packed on weekends. Most of its customers were Nanyang University students who needed to buy reference books.

Besides selling books, Union Press also produced teaching materials and published magazines. Its most notable publication was the literary magazine *Chao Foon* (蕉风), which was first published in Singapore in 1955 (the magazine's headquarters moved to Kuala Lumpur in 1959).

*Chao Foon* had a profound impact on literature in Singapore and Malaysia,

and continues to be influential today. In the last few years, two books that explore its importance to the local literary scene have been published. In 2021, Lim Choon Bee (林春美) wrote *Chao Foon and the Non-leftist Mahua Literature* (蕉风与非左翼的马华文学),<sup>1</sup> while *Cold War, Localisation and Modernity* (冷战、本土化与现代性), which was edited by Tee Kim Tong (张锦忠), Ng Kim Chew (黄锦树) and Lee Soo Chee (李树枝), was published in 2022. A compilation of essays on *Chao Foon* titled *Banana, Coconuts and Hornbill* (蕉风·椰雨·犀鸟声), edited by three Japanese researchers, was also published at around the same time.

To commemorate the 70th anniversary of Union Press, *A Look Back – Commemorative Book for the 70th Anniversary of Union Book in Singapore* (回望—新加坡友联书局70周年纪念特刊) was launched at the Singapore Book Fair on 4 June 2022. Penned by former journalist Zhong Hongzhi (钟宏志), the



(Left) The first issue of *Chinese Student Weekly* published in 1952. Image reproduced from 钟宏志, 回望: 新加坡友联书局70周年纪念特刊 (Singapore: Union Book, 2022), 24.

(Below) The first volume of *Chao Foon* published in Singapore in 1955. Image reproduced from 钟宏志, 回望: 新加坡友联书局70周年纪念特刊 (Singapore: Union Book, 2022), 95.

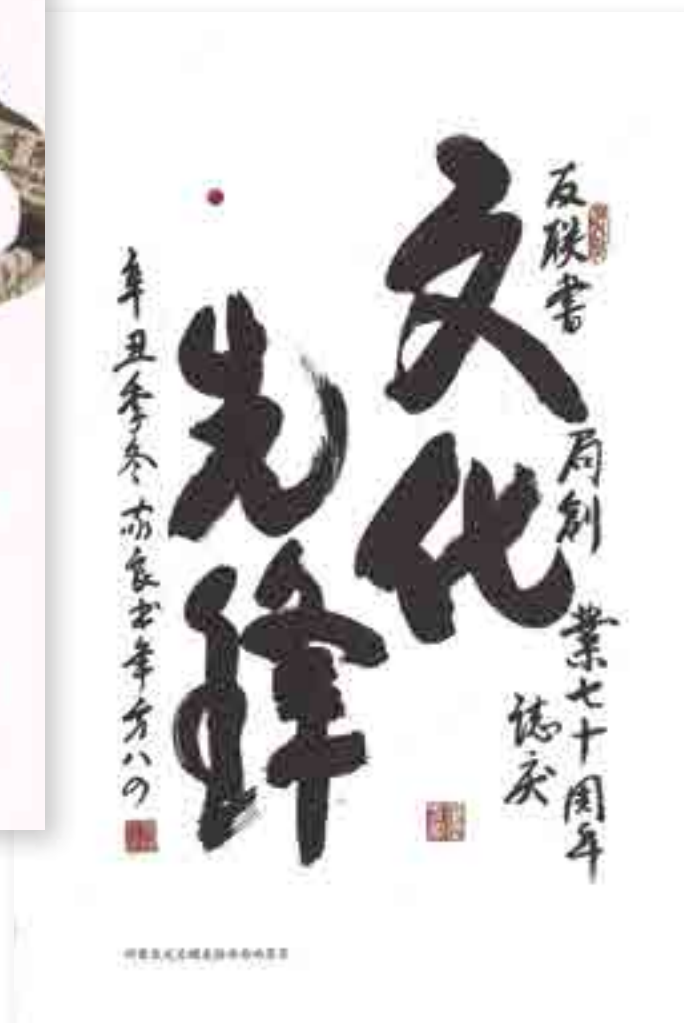






(Above) The commemorative book published in conjunction with Union Book's 70th anniversary in 2022. Courtesy of Union Book.

(Right) The calligraphy by He Jialiang (何家良) for Union Book's 70th anniversary. The calligraphy appears in the commemorative book. Courtesy of Union Book.



book traces the history of Union Press and discusses the place of Union Book in the development of Singapore's society and culture.

Zhong has always been interested in the history of Chinese bookstores in Singapore. She drafted a dissertation proposal on this topic 10 years ago, but her PhD plans were put on hold when she moved to Hong Kong. When the opportunity came up to commemorate Union Press's 70th anniversary, Zhong was invited to work on the book.

She soon realised, however, that there were numerous challenges. Information about the bookstore was sparse and many of its key figures, including

former managing director Chow Li Liang (周立良) and former vice-chairman Yu Dekuan (徐德宽), had passed on. But Zhong was able to interview other people, like former general manager Wang Jianwu (王健武), and Xi Huizhang (奚会璋), the former president of *Chinese Student Weekly*. Unfortunately, some things they brought up could not be verified and had to be left out of the book.

#### Support from the United States

The Union Press in Hong Kong received funding from the Asia Foundation,<sup>2</sup> making it part of the United States' anti-communist efforts. However, because it was a bookstore that stocked literary

books, many academics referred to the store as a "third force" that was not heavily influenced by politics.

The fact that the bookstore accepted financial support from the US for publications like *Chinese Student Weekly* made it a target of criticism though. From her interviews, Zhong learned that while many youths purchased books from Union Book out of necessity, they personally preferred to visit the local left-wing bookstores. "Some of the older interviewees told me that they would try to steer clear of Union Book because 'progressive students' at the time saw a visit to Union Book as something disgraceful."

Zhong believes that Cold War sensitivities could be a reason why Union Book did not retain many documents from that period compared to other local bookstores. In addition, most people who were involved chose to avoid talking about these issues, which made Zhong's work even more challenging.

However, she does not feel that Union Book was too political, which she attributed to the fact that the people in charge of the bookstore were more akin

to scholars than warriors. This group of intellectuals included Chow Li Liang, whom many interviewees described as a refined gentleman. Margaret Ma, the current managing director at Union Book who had worked with Chow, described him as a businessman with Confucian values.

At the book launch, Zhong mentioned that when she interviewed the US-based Xi Huizhang, the latter suggested that she speak with Professor

Yu Ying-Shih (余英时) as he had been the editor-in-chief of *Chinese Student Weekly*. However, just 10 minutes after her conversation with Xi, Zhong received a notification on her phone that Professor Yu had just died.

"Life is unpredictable," Zhong mullied. "Just like that, I missed the chance to interview Professor Yu. I missed the opportunity to find out about the connection between him and Union Book. This is a great regret." Nonetheless, she still believes that it is not too late to do more research and she plans to conduct a more in-depth study in the future.

#### The Bookstore and the Historical Context

Zhong believes that the history of the bookstore mirrors the larger historical context. The evolution of Union Book – from being strongly right wing in the 1950s and 1960s, to being much less ideological in the 1970s, before eventually becoming non-ideological – was closely related to the development of Singapore society. However, the commemorative publication does not delve into ideological issues in the store's history as Zhong believes that such a discussion might not be fair to the Union Book of today.

At the book launch, Zhong talked about the joys and challenges of research, while Lee Huay Leng (李慧玲), the editor-in-chief of the Chinese Media Group at SPH Media Limited, discussed the relationship between Union Book and the Chinese reading ecosystem in Singapore. Others who spoke at the event included retired employee Cai Mingying; Yu Hailin (徐海琳), the daughter of Yu Dekuan; Singaporean writer You Jin (尤今); and Tan Chee Lay (陈志锐), the deputy head of Asian Languages & Cultures at the National Institute of Education.

#### Three Phases in Union Book's History

Zhong divided the history of Union Book into three phases. The first phase, from 1952 to 1977, was when Union Book maintained close ties with Union Press, its parent company in Hong Kong. Phase two, from 1977 to 2005, covers the period when Chow Li Liang took over the helm of the bookstore. Chow bought over all the shares of Union

(Below) Management and staff of Union Book at 303 North Bridge Road during its official opening, 1968. Courtesy of Union Book.

(Bottom) Cai Mingying (holding bouquet) with staff of Union Book at the at bookstore's 65th anniversary dinner in 2017. Courtesy of Union Book.





(Right) Chow Li Liang in the Union Book office in Bras Basah Complex, 2012. He was the managing director from 1977 to 2005. *Courtesy of Union Book.*

(Below) Union Book moved to the third floor of Bras Basah Complex in 1981. Daren Restaurant (大人餐厅) is located one floor down. *Courtesy of Union Book.*

Book from Union Press in 1996, making that year an important watershed. From then on, Union Book was officially separated from Union Press and became a fully independent entity. The last phase began in 2005 when Margaret Ma took over the running of the bookstore.

The Union Book of today is very different from its predecessor. While the bookstore used to be known for its Taiwanese books, these days, the bookstore also sells books from mainland China, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore.

The new generation of employees at the bookstore include Yap Chia Wei (叶家维), who has been working in the store and purchasing books for Union Book for 17 years, as well as newer staff such as Wu Wangyuan (吴王原) and Loke Kwan Howe (陆冠豪).

In addition to selling books and attending to walk-in customers, the staff take turns to host live streams every Friday to share new books and engage in storytelling for younger viewers. They have also created a brand-new programme titled *Children's Paradise*.

Other than curating books, Union Book has also been creating engaging supplementary materials, such as maps and timelines, that complement a particular book. Through these efforts, the staff hope to provide different reading



Margaret Ma became the managing director of Union Book in 2005. *Courtesy of Union Book.*

experiences for young readers. “Today, running a bookstore means providing services,” noted Yap.

Bookselling has changed in other ways as well. In 1995, when Ma joined Union Book, she single-handedly sold \$600,000 worth of books. These days, the bookstore would be lucky if its entire annual revenue hits this number. “That was really an age of reading,” marvelled Loke. “Seeing these numbers definitely piled on the stress.”

### The Uniqueness of Union Book

Union Book moved into its current location on the third floor of Bras Basah Complex in 1981, one floor above Daren Restaurant (大人餐厅). Chow Li Liang was also one of the shareholders of the restaurant. Because of its proximity to the bookstore and the link with Chow, the restaurant became part of the Union Book experience. Ma recalled that when she was working for Chow, the two of them would often have *zhajiang* noodles (炸酱麵) at the restaurant. Many Chinese literary groups and intellectuals also enjoyed meeting at the restaurant in its heyday. According to

Ma, they had originally planned to build a staircase to connect the restaurant and the bookstore but were unable to convince the authorities to do so. (Daren Restaurant eventually shuttered in 1998.)

By the time the bookstore moved to Bras Basah Complex, Nanyang University had been merged with the University of Singapore and the Chinese bookstore scene had begun to become less vibrant. However, there were still many teachers and parents who frequented the store on weekends. Singaporean writer Yeng Pway Ngon (英培安) was one of the regulars at Union Book. (On a side note, Yeng met his future wife, Goh Beng Choo, at a Union Book event.)

Interestingly, Union Book also ran a bookstore in CHIJ St Nicholas Girls’ School from 1968 to 2003. Union Book veteran Cai Mingying was in charge of the campus store throughout this time, making her a part of the St Nicholas family.

Ma said she did not fully understand the historical significance of Union Book in Singapore until the commemorative book was published. However,

she did not feel oppressed by the past. “History is history. It should not carry too much baggage. I believe that the Chinese community in Singapore is bogged down with too much historical burden which, in my opinion, is not necessary. Why weigh ourselves down this way?” Ma said she is focused on ensuring that Union Book remains relevant so that the store can look forward to its 100th year anniversary. ♦

This is an edited and translated version of 走过70年 本地友联另类且低调, written by Chen Yuxin (陈宇昕) and published in *Lianhe Zaobao* (联合早报) on 13 June 2022.

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### NOTES

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- 2 Headquartered in San Francisco, the Asia Foundation is a non-profit international development organisation committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia-Pacific.



## Cold War Rivalries Fuel

PROPAGANDA  
BATTLE IN

## SINGAPORE

in the 1940s and 1950s

**STARTS TODAY!** **REX** 11, 1.45, 4.  
6.30, 9.30

STORY OF  
MALAYA'S  
FIGHT  
AGAINST  
TERRORISTS

Dialogue  
in Malay



Filmed  
by ACE  
AMERICAN  
CAMERAMEN  
in MALAYA

Dist. by  
Shaw Bros

**"KAMPONG SENTOSA"**

WITH A CAST OF MALAYS & CHINESE

In the post-World War II period, Singapore was a battleground for ideological competition between the Soviet Union and China on one side, and the United States and United Kingdom on the other.  
**By Chow Chia Yung**

On 10 May 1953, the *Straits Times* ran a story about a film titled *Kampung Sentosa*,<sup>1</sup> which had premiered in Singapore at the Rex Theatre. In Malay with an all-local cast, the film tells the story of a village in Malaya which was being terrorised by bandits in the surrounding jungle during the Malayan Emergency (1948–60). The story has “love interest and enough suspense to draw Malay-speaking audiences”.<sup>2</sup>

This, however, was no ordinary film. Declassified archival materials reveal that *Kampung Sentosa* was actually secretly funded by the State Department in Washington.<sup>3</sup> This was

(Facing page) An advertisement for *Kampung Sentosa*. The film premiered at the Rex Theatre in 1953. Image reproduced from “Page 4 Advertisements Column 2,” *Straits Times*, 12 May 1953, 4. (From NewspaperSG).

part of a global Cold War effort led by the United States (US) to roll back against the spread of communism.

In the post-World War II era, the world was riven by great superpower rivalry, with the US and its allies on one side, and the Soviet Union and its allies on the other. Apart from the nuclear standoff, the conflict was also an ideological one with both sides attempting to win the battle for hearts and minds.

#### Soviet Cultural Offensive

“Soviet social system has proved to be a more viable and stable than the non-Soviet social system, that the Soviet social system is a better form of organisation of society than any non-Soviet social system.”<sup>4</sup>

— Soviet Union Premier  
Joseph Stalin, 1946

Film is a very powerful medium, and some of the earliest efforts by the

Soviet Union relied on the power of film. In 1947, Director of Malayan Security Service John D. Dalley informed the Colonial Secretary in Singapore “that there is a campaign in Singapore to spread Soviet propaganda through films and periodicals”. In that year, two Soviet documentaries, *May 1st Celebrations* and *Festival of Youth*, were screened at the Jubilee Theatre in Singapore.<sup>5</sup>

The *Morning Tribune* reported that the documentary on the Soviet Union’s 1946 May Day celebrations in Moscow had highlights that included a gigantic military parade which was reviewed by Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin. The other film, *Festival of Youth*, focused on the “vitality and talent of the youths of Soviet Russia who participated in an all-day sports parade...” Both films were in technicolour, noted the newspaper. It added that they “compare very favourably with those from Hollywood in technique and production” and “should serve as an ‘eye-opener’ for those of us who know so little, except from book and news extracts, about a country which is branded as ‘Red’”.<sup>6</sup>

**Chow Chia Yung** is an Assistant Archivist with the National Archives of Singapore. He provides archival-related reference services for researchers.



*May 1st Celebrations* was in Mandarin, while English commentary was provided for *Festival of Youth*. These two films attracted huge Chinese audiences. Jubilee Theatre also issued concession tickets for the viewing of these two Soviet films to schools and associations.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to films, the Soviet Union also relied on print materials. According to an American State Department report, the Soviet Union produced approximately 25 to 30 million books in various languages in the 1950s and most of them contained Marxist-Leninist titles or themes. Some of these works found their way to Singapore. They include titles such as *Study the Philosophy of Marxism and Leninism* and *A History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*.<sup>8</sup> Both books were translated into Chinese.

The Soviet authorities also sent propaganda items to Russians living in Singapore to convince them to return to their home country. In 1956, the *Singapore Standard* noted that Singapore was being flooded by “Russian booklets, weeklies and pamphlets depicting a ‘new way of life’ in the Soviet Union”.<sup>9</sup>

China’s Revolutionary Literature

“Proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause...”<sup>10</sup>

— Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong, 1972

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Chairman Mao Zedong pledged to support global communist revolutionary movements. It would take a while but the effort would eventually take off. In 1959, a sessional paper from the Legislative Assembly of Singapore noted that “certain publishing houses – the majority of which are in mainland China – are consistently exporting to Singapore books, both ancient and modern, literary and scientific, which are tainted with Communist ideology”.<sup>11</sup>

One example cited was a Chinese-English dictionary, 通俗小字典 (*Popular Small Dictionary*), published by the Tung Fang Book Co. in Shanghai. In it, the entry “敬爱”, which means “respect and love”, has this example given: “Everyone respects and loves Chairman Mao.”<sup>12</sup>

The dictionary’s definition for the Chinese Communist Party (“共產黨”) was the “[V]anguard of the Proletarian rebellion. It is the political party of the workers class”. It went on to define communism as the “realisation of a Communist society wherein there is no fleecing of some persons by some other persons. In this kind of society, everybody does the job he can do best, get what he needs, and leads the most reasonable and most happy life”.<sup>13</sup>

Another Chinese-English dictionary highlighted was 新華字典 (*Sin Hwa Dictionary*), which was published by the People’s Education Publishing House in Peking (now Beijing). It defined the characters “擺脫” to mean “get rid of” and gave the example: “Today, one third of the whole human race have already got rid of the oppression of capitalism.” The character “蔑” was translated to mean “look down upon” and the example given was: “We must look down upon American imperialism.” “共產主義”, which means “Communism”, was defined as “the highest stage in the development of human society”.<sup>14</sup>

Dictionaries were not the only focus. The book, *Singing and Acting for Young Children Vol IV*, had songs with lyrics that glorified the success of communism in China such as “The entire China wants liberation” and “Equality and freedom in New China”.<sup>15</sup>

China also produced literature in support of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) during the Malayan Emergency period. The educational book in English, simply titled *Malaya*, sought to get readers to sympathise with the MCP and to support their efforts. The book noted that the party had to go underground in 1948 because “of the persecution of the British imperialists. Following this it initiated and led armed resistance against the British in the struggle for national liberation... the MCP has been carrying on its struggle against enslavement and colonial rule”.<sup>16</sup>

A significant quantity of communist materials published in China made its way into Chinese bookshops in Singapore before the British colonial government began to impose strict controls starting from September 1950. It was not completely successful though, and a spokesman of the Chinese Secretariat in Singapore commented in 1951 that



Sergeant Danny Bulpett of the Royal Marine Commandos at the British Broadcasting Corporation studio in Singapore, where he was delivering Christmas greetings at the first live radio connection between Singapore and London, 1950. He was in Malaya on anti-riot duty during the Malayan Emergency. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

“now and then a Communist book might slip through our net”.<sup>17</sup>

British Anti-communist Efforts

“We should adopt a new line in our foreign policy publicity designed to oppose the inroads of Communism by taking the offensive against it... and to give a lead to our friends abroad and help them in the anti-Communist struggle... to provide material for our anti-Communist publicity through our Missions and Information Services abroad. The fullest co-operation of the BBC Overseas Services would be desirable.”<sup>18</sup>

— British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 1948

In response to the communist propaganda in Singapore, the British initiated a series of counter-measures. Besides banning the imports of communist films and literature, the government established the Anti-Communist

Bureau to “stimulate active democratic sentiment and to endeavour to win over Communists and fellow travellers”.<sup>19</sup> This bureau oversaw and implemented activities to counter the flow of communist propaganda.

In late 1949, some 200 pamphlets were distributed across Singapore to warn people against communism and make them enthusiastic about democracy.<sup>20</sup> An anti-communist pamphlet, *The young man who couldn’t take any more*, was produced in English and Chinese, and thousands were printed with the intention of being distributed in schools by 1950. This pamphlet provided “a plain account of what happens to students in Communist countries, who wish to preserve their freedom to think”.<sup>21</sup> It was also designed to portray communism in a negative light.

Radio broadcasts by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) were another tool used by the colonial government. BBC emerged from World War II with a greatly expanded audience and a reputation for objectivity and

truth-telling. That reputation made its news credible and gave Britain a major propaganda advantage.<sup>22</sup> The BBC’s credibility was crucial in serving Britain’s anti-communist publicity objectives.

The BBC accepted an invitation from the United Kingdom government to establish its radio broadcasting service in Singapore and it ended up taking over the British Far Eastern Broadcasting Service. The BBC began its radio operations in Singapore in 1948 with its office and studio on Caldecott Hill. Singapore residents could tune in to local radio programmes directed by BBC personnel as well as news from London. In addition to English, the BBC radio station in Singapore also aired daily radio programmes in Mandarin and Cantonese.<sup>23</sup> This was part of the BBC’s strategy to reach out to the predominantly Chinese population in Singapore.

The BBC radio station in Singapore was also used by Britain as a regional radio base to broadcast anti-communist information across Asia. As the *Straits Times* noted in 1949: “It was the intention to build a new station which was

(d) Another dictionary which follows the normal Communist pattern is the (新華字典) or Sin Hwa Dictionary, produced by the People’s Education Publishing House, Peking. The Communist policy of infusing the minds of the young with deliberate distortions is clearly illustrated by the following extracts:—

“擺脫” – get rid of.  
Today, one-third of the whole human race have already got rid of the oppression of capitalism.  
“蔑” – look down upon.  
We must look down upon American imperialism.  
“共產主義” – Communism  
Is the highest stage in the development of human society. Under this social system, productive materials are the common property of the public. There is no fleecing of one person by another person. There is no racial oppression. Everybody works to the best of his ability, and the material and cultural needs of society are assured of maximum satisfaction.  
“解放” – liberate.  
To overthrow the reactionary ruling classes so that the great masses of the people may shake off the oppression of Imperialism and of the reactionary classes.

Entries from the *Sin Hwa Dictionary*. Image reproduced from “Legislative Assembly, Singapore, Sessional Paper No. Cmd 14 of 1959,” in the National Archives (United Kingdom), Singapore: Control of Cultural Influences from the Chinese Mainland. Secret – Migrated Archives, 9 March 1952, 6. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. FCO 141/15152).



to become the Voice of Britain in Asia, radiating programmes to the entire Far East- from Japan to India... Obviously the campaign against Communism in Asia must be fought in Asia... If the radio weapon is to be of real use to Britain, and to Malaya, then the main broadcasts must have their origin in Singapore...”<sup>24</sup>

The United States Information Service

“We must make ourselves known as we really are – not as Communist propaganda pictures us. ... We must make ourselves heard round the world in a great campaign of truth.”<sup>25</sup>

– United States President Harry Truman, 1950

Just as the British had the BBC, the US relied on the United States Information Service (USIS). This was a state agency that served the political interests of the American government, which included assisting in “the offensive campaign of truth against Communist propaganda”.<sup>26</sup> To this end, the USIS launched a series of overseas information programmes under its cultural diplomacy initiative.<sup>27</sup>

The Singapore branch of the USIS Library was officially opened on 2 May 1950 in Raffles Place. Its collection – consisting primarily of American books, newspapers and magazines – exposed the people in Singapore to American values and worldviews.<sup>28</sup>



(Above and below) The United States Information Service Library in Raffles Place, c. 1950s. Courtesy of the U.S. Embassy in Singapore.

Books such as *Animal Farm* by George Orwell and *Rice-Sprout Song* by Eileen Chang made their appearances on the library’s bookshelves.<sup>29</sup> These two titles were known for their anti-communist themes. The USIS Library’s collection was curated in a way that would sell American ideals to the people here, which was essential in undermining the appeal of communism.

The USIS Library welcomed the public to browse or borrow its reading materials regardless of membership. There was a constant stream of patrons visiting the library, which welcomed its 10,000th member within a few months of its opening.<sup>30</sup>

The USIS also funded the production of anti-communist films in Singapore such as *Kampong Sentosa*. The agency provided covert financial support for the production of this film, which was helmed by Hollywood director B. Reeves Eason.<sup>31</sup>

Besides *Kampong Sentosa*, the USIS also developed its own documentaries for public viewing at the USIS Library. The documentaries portrayed the domestic and international policies of the US in a favourable light. The collection of the library also included anti-communist documentaries such as *In Defense of Peace* and the *Hungarian Story*.

*In Defense of Peace* documented measures by the Soviet Union to obstruct the efforts of the United Nations to maintain world peace in the aftermath of World War II, while *Hungarian Story* showcased Hungarian citizens staging a revolt against the oppressive Hungarian communist regime.<sup>32</sup> The distribution of these USIS films to Singapore was intended to persuade the people to be wary of communism and to cultivate the perception that communism was a threat to peace and stability, both domestically and internationally.

Immense and Intense

The Cold War period was a major period of geopolitical tension that played out in various spheres: military, economic, political and culture. Given that both the US and the Soviet Union were superpowers, it is fortunate that they never escalated into a nuclear war, though the world certainly came close with events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>33</sup>

While hard power – measured by the size of armies and nuclear arsenals



The opening scene of *Kampong Sentosa*. Courtesy of the United States and Records Administration (NARA).

– was important, soft power was just as crucial. The propaganda battle was an integral component of the Cold War as both blocs vied for influence. They leveraged print, radio and films to promote

their own point of view and undermine those of their ideological opponents. This battle played out throughout the world, and Singapore was very much part of the battleground. ♦

NOTES

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# LOKE WAN THO

## *The Man Who Built Cathay*

While best known as a giant in the movie business in Malaya, Loke Wan Tho was also passionate about bird photography and the arts.

By Bonny Tan

Armed with just a camera and a seeming lack of fear, cinema magnate Loke Wan Tho spent hours on the precarious platform at the top of a 12-storey (40 m) wooden tower, not dissuaded by the burning sun or the fact that the tower swayed beneath him in strong winds. At one point, he even endeavoured to sit out a storm while on the platform, though he quickly thought better of it after he became giddy. Why was one of Malaya's richest men risking his life some 40 m above the ground? Loke was on a quest: to snap the perfect photograph of a white-bellied sea eagle.

Loke Wan Tho, as this anecdote reveals, was not your usual business tycoon. With the closure of Cathay Cinplex in June 2022, it is timely to throw the spotlight on Loke, who helmed Cathay and its associated businesses for over

two decades before his untimely death at the age of 49.

### A Privileged Upbringing

Loke was born on 14 June 1915 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaya, the ninth scion of prominent merchant Loke Yew (born Wong Loke Yew) and his fourth wife, Lim Cheng-Kim. Loke Yew was an impoverished 13-year-old who arrived in Singapore from Guangdong, China, around 1858. Dropping his surname Wong in an attempt to improve his luck, Loke Yew made his fortune through tin-mining before expanding into rice mills, real estate, the motor industry and steam trading. His businesses spanned Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Singapore and beyond. By the turn of the 20th century, Loke Yew had become one of the richest men in Malaya.<sup>1</sup>

He also donated generously to social causes such as schools and hospitals, and became a respected business leader in the Chinese community, not only in Malaya but also in Hong Kong, China and Taiwan.<sup>2</sup> His sudden death in 1917 from malaria left the two-year-old Loke Wan Tho with wealth and in due time the weight of business and philanthropic responsibilities.<sup>3</sup>

Afflicted with poor health, the young Loke was initially educated by a governess and only began attending school at age 12.<sup>4</sup> After a short stint at Victoria Institution in Kuala Lumpur, a school co-founded by his father, his doctor advised him to move to a place with a better climate to improve his weak constitution. His entire family thus left for Europe in 1929 where Loke continued his education at prestigious schools, excelling in both sports and academics.<sup>5</sup>

He enrolled at Chillon College in Montreux, Switzerland, a boarding



school popular with wealthy British colonialists. Set in the scenic alps, the mountain air seemed to do Loke good. He became captain of the school soccer team and set the 1932 long-jump record in the Swiss county of Vaud – a record he held for over 30 years. His

(Above) Loke Wan Tho built up Cathay Organisation and established Cathay Cinema, 1962. Sir Percy McNeice Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Left) In 1932, Loke Wan Tho won the long-jump record in the Swiss county of Vaud. Image reproduced from Lim Kay Tong, *Cathay: 55 Years of Cinema* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1991), 11. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 791.43095957 LIM).

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athleticism was noticed by the British Olympic sprinter, Harold Abrahams (the subject of the movie *Chariots of Fire*), who encouraged Loke to train professionally. Unfortunately, a broken ankle put paid to his athletic dreams.<sup>6</sup>

Although Loke knew that he would have to eventually run his father's business, he studied English literature "for pleasure, if not for profit".<sup>7</sup> In 1936, Loke graduated from King's College, Cambridge, with an honours degree in English literature and history.<sup>8</sup> He subsequently furthered his studies at the London School of Economics, where he excelled academically and also as an athlete and leader, becoming the school's badminton champion in 1937 and 1938.<sup>9</sup>

**(Top left)** Loke Wan Tho in his Mercedes in Cambridge, 1936. Image reproduced from Lim Kay Tong, *Cathay: 55 Years of Cinema* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1991), 11. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 791.43095957 LIM).

**(Left)** Loke Wan Tho in his office on the fourth floor of Cathay Building, 1946. Image reproduced from Lim Kay Tong, *Cathay: 55 Years of Cinema* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1991), 7. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 791.43095957 LIM).

**(Below)** The Cathay Building, 1947. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



### A Film Mogul

Meanwhile, Loke's mother, Mrs Loke Yew (née Lim Cheng-Kim), and a relative, Khoo Teik Ee, were busy setting up the foundations for the family cinema business. Mrs Loke Yew had incorporated Associated Theatres on 18 July 1935 with Khoo and an Englishman, Max Baker, who introduced the first talkies to Singapore in 1929. On 5 August 1936, she established the 1,200-seat Pavilion in Kuala Lumpur, and on 3 October 1939, the iconic Cathay Cinema in Singapore opened its doors.<sup>10</sup>

Loke returned to Singapore in 1940 and the next year, the main tower of the 83.51-metre-tall Cathay Building was completed comprising apartments that offered a panoramic view of Singapore and the sea.<sup>11</sup> (Cathay Cinema and Cathay Restaurant were located in the front block.)

The Japanese invasion of Singapore in December 1941, however, forced a change of plans. In February 1942, Loke boarded the *Nora Moller* to escape the war. Unfortunately, the vessel was bombed off the Strait of Banka and Loke suffered severe burns to his body and was also temporarily blinded. Rescued by the Australian cruiser *Sydney*, Loke was taken to a hospital in Batavia (now Jakarta). After a few weeks of recuperation, Loke left for

India against his doctor's orders as he had predicted – rightly – that Java would soon suffer the same fate as Singapore. He then spent the war years in India.<sup>12</sup>

During the Japanese Occupation, Cathay Building was used as the local branch of the Japanese Broadcasting Department and the cinema, renamed Dai Toa Gekkizyo (Greater East Asian Theatre), screened Japanese propaganda films. After the Japanese surrender in 1945, Loke returned to Singapore and Cathay became the first cinema to start screening movies in post-war Singapore, reopening on 23 September 1945.<sup>13</sup>

In 1947, Loke set up Caravan Films – a joint venture with Overseas Cinematograph Theatres – to bring film and entertainment to estates and villages throughout Singapore and Malaya by using vans carrying projectors, sound equipment and screens. By 1948, Cathay Organisation had cinemas operating in Penang, Borneo and Thailand.<sup>14</sup> By then, Loke was known as one of the wealthiest men in Singapore.

In 1953, Loke established Cathay-Keris Studio with Ho Ah Loke, the managing director of Keris Film Productions. Competing against its main rival, Shaw Brothers, Cathay-Keris produced

mostly Malay films, including *Pontianak* (1957), made in both Malay and Chinese. Cathay-Keris's *Hang Jebat* (1961) is still considered one of the best screenplays of the legend of the titular Malay warrior.<sup>15</sup>

To penetrate the Chinese film market, Loke acquired Yung Hwa Studio in Hong Kong in 1955 for film production and distribution, and subsequently formed the subsidiary, Motion Picture and General Investment Co Ltd (MP&GI), in Hong Kong to run Yung Hwa. MP&GI was a significant player in the Hong Kong market, and made about 250 films between 1956 and 1970.<sup>16</sup>

Loke studied the art of filmmaking as much as the commercial aspects of running a film business. He travelled to India to better understand the craft and invited Hollywood stars to coach his studio's actors.<sup>17</sup> The efforts bore fruit in 1957 when MP&GI became the first Hong Kong studio to garner a prize at the Fourth Asian Film Festival in Tokyo.

Loke's other appointments included the chairmanship of Malayan Banking, Singapore Telephone Board and Malayan Airways. He was also the director of companies such as Great Eastern Life Assurance, Malaya Tribune Press and Sime Darby. In the public sector, Loke served as the pro-chancellor of the University of Malaya and was the first chairman of the board of the National Library in Singapore. For his contributions to the early Malayan film industry, Loke was conferred a Dato by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong in 1961.<sup>18</sup>

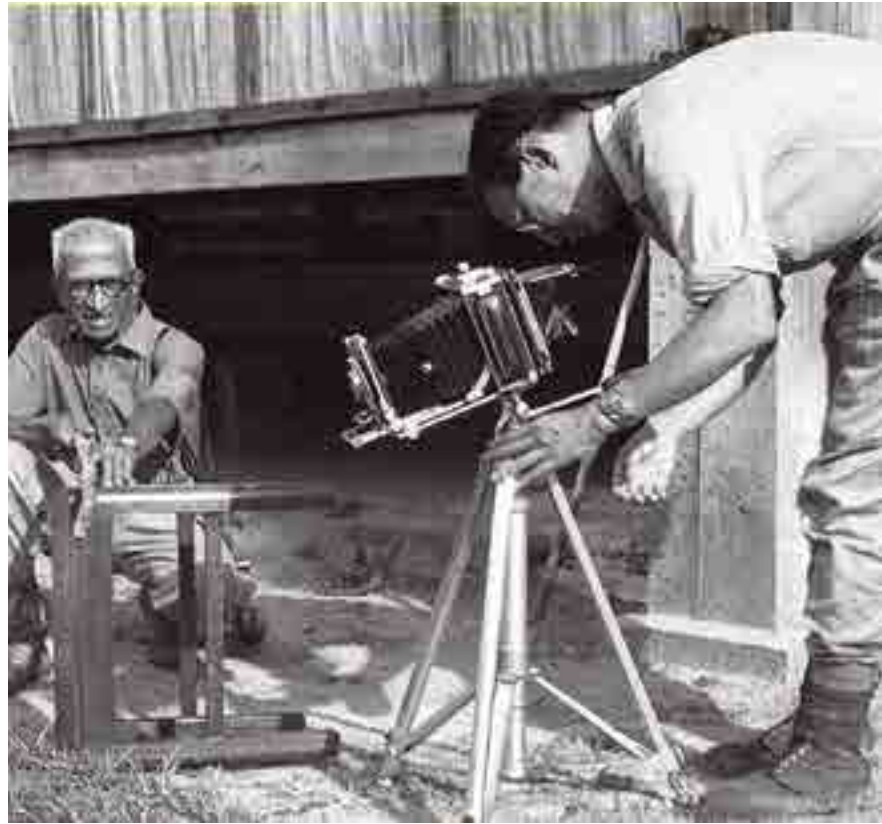
### A Bird Lover

In addition to being a successful businessman, Loke was also a serious nature lover. His passion for ornithology went hand in hand with that of photography. Introduced to the camera at age 12, Loke clinched his first photographic award for a photograph of the Matterhorn just three years later. During a summer vacation while still a student in Cambridge, Loke had the opportunity to sharpen his photography skills under master photographer G.L. Hawkins.<sup>19</sup>

Loke Wan Tho established Caravan Films in December 1947 to bring film entertainment to estates and villages in Singapore and Malaya by using vans carrying projectors, sound equipment and screens. Image reproduced from Lim Kay Tong, *Cathay: 55 Years of Cinema* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1991), 7. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 791.43095957 LIM).







Much of Loke's summer vacations were spent at Pembrokeshire where the Welsh coastland, enlivened by a great variety of coastal birds, ignited in the young Loke a fascination for birds. He later published a book titled *A Company of Birds* (1957), showcasing his photographs of birds in India, New Guinea and Malaya.<sup>20</sup>

During one of these jaunts to Pembrokeshire, Loke managed to capture a raven attacking a heron on film. As Singapore's former Governor-General Malcolm MacDonald poetically noted in his foreword to Loke's book, *A Company of Birds*: "[Loke] watched a Raven work off a fit of rage by chasing a Heron. When the pursuit ended the Heron was still free, but Loke was a captive."<sup>21</sup>

Loke's love for birds was enhanced during the years he spent in India while Singapore was under Japanese rule. There, Loke was introduced to the Indian ornithologist Salim Ali, a leading figure in the field. Almost 20 years his senior, Salim became Loke's mentor, taking him on expeditions to survey birds in the rugged landscapes of Kutch (in Gujarat) and Kashmir. As Loke was unable to return home due to the war, he remained in India for a couple of years and the two men became firm friends.<sup>22</sup>

Conditions in the field were primitive and Loke confessed that outdoor living without access to a water-closet was not something he would "become wholly accustomed" to, but he recognised that "these petty discomforts were a cheap price to pay for the opportunity to study bird life at close quarters".<sup>23</sup>

The experience not only taught Loke how to accurately observe birds in their natural habitats, but also to take concise notes and preserve specimens for museums. It was through this study of birds that Loke found his diverse

**(Above left)** Loke Wan Tho (right) and Indian ornithologist Salim Ali preparing equipment before a field trip. Image reproduced from Lim Kay Tong, *Cathay: 55 Years of Cinema* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1991), 11. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 791.43095957 LIM).

**(Left)** Loke Wan Tho emerging from his cloth hide on a rock to photograph sea birds off Changi in Singapore, 1952. Image reproduced from Lim Kay Tong, *Cathay: 55 Years of Cinema* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1991), 7. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 791.43095957 LIM).



passions – for books, photography and outdoor adventures – meld into a single obsession. In the mid-1950s, Loke funded two expeditions to Sikkim, led by Salim, resulting in the publication *Birds of Sikkim* (1962), authored by the latter.<sup>24</sup>

Despite his busy work schedule, Loke returned to India frequently to photograph birds with Salim, travelling to Kashmir, Sikkim and the Himalayas. These expeditions extended into New Guinea in 1952, where Loke became one of the early bird photographers on the island. He even ventured to far-flung locations such as Finland near the Arctic circle to pursue his passion.<sup>25</sup>

Loke's images of birds were the result of hours of patience waiting in dangerous and awkward positions, or from trekking through treacherous jungle and mountainous terrain. In his foreword to Loke's book, *A Company of Birds*,

MacDonald gave a firsthand account of Loke's dedication, based on the fact that Loke's 40-metre-high tower was built in MacDonald's garden in Johor.

"At weekends, Loke would arrive [from Singapore] to take his pictures," MacDonald wrote. "Hour after hour he sat aloft on his small platform. The tropical sun almost roasted him alive, his camera had to be worked from an angle which nearly sent him crashing headlong from his perch." As MacDonald noted, a strong wind would make the tower sway "like the mast of a ship on a heaving ocean". Once, Loke tried to ride out a storm on the platform but "had to descend hastily because he got giddy. It was an extraordinary demonstration of crazy heroism".<sup>26</sup>

Loke's efforts paid off with dramatic photographs of the white-bellied sea eagles. The images were later used as a template for the crest design of the

**(Left)** Loke Wan Tho had this 130-foot (40-metre) wooden tower erected to photograph the white-bellied sea eagles and their nest. The birds had built the nest in a tree in Malcolm MacDonald's garden in Johor. Image reproduced from Loke Wan Tho, *A Company of Birds* (London: M. Joseph, 1957), 131. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCLOS 598.295 LOK-[GBH]).

**(Below)** Loke Wan Tho's photograph of the white-bellied sea eagle returning to its nest. Image reproduced from Loke Wan Tho, *A Company of Birds* (London: M. Joseph, 1957), 128. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCLOS 598.295 LOK-[GBH]).







**(Above)** Loke Wan Tho with his second wife Christina Lee and American actor Jerry Lewis. Image reproduced from Lim Kay Tong, *Cathay: 55 Years of Cinema* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1991), 11. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 791.43095957 LIM).

**(Left)** Loke Wan Tho and Mavis Chew on their wedding day in London, 1963. Image reproduced from Lim Kay Tong, *Cathay: 55 Years of Cinema* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1991), 7. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 791.43095957 LIM).

Singapore Island Country Club where Loke had served as its first president.<sup>27</sup>

Some of Loke's photographs of Malayan birds were also made into Christmas cards and postcards. Indeed, the image on the back of the Singapore one-dollar note in the bird series is believed to have been based on Loke's 1952 photographs of black-naped terns on Squance Rock (also known as Loyang Rock) off Changi.

In 1954, Loke was made an Associate of the Royal Photographic Society in 1954. He was conferred the Fellowship of the Photographic Society of America in 1961, on top of other awards in the US and the UK.<sup>28</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Loke was a staunch supporter of various nature organisations such as the International Council for Bird Preservation, and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. He also contributed actively to the Malayan Nature Society, becoming an honorary life member in 1961 and serving as its vice-president in 1962.<sup>29</sup>

Loke was also a connoisseur of the arts. He and his second wife Christina Lee shared a love for Chinese ceramics. In 1963, Loke donated 500 photographs of birds, people and places to Malaysia's National Art Gallery. The collection included famous images by Armenian-Canadian photographer Yousuf Karsh and those by well-known American landscape photographer and environmentalist Ansel Adams.<sup>30</sup>

### An Untimely Demise

Running Cathay Organisation and its associated businesses proved challenging in the face of stiff competition from Shaw Brothers. The company also had to deal with the increasing political tumult in post-war Singapore as well as financial losses and bleeding business investments.<sup>31</sup> By 1958, as the film business as a whole faced a decline, Loke's foreign partners began withdrawing their financial support and he felt the impact. Loke disclosed that for some years in the mid-1950s, he did not draw any salary.<sup>32</sup>

In 1959, Loke consolidated his stable of companies – Associated Theatres, Loke Theatres and International Theatres – under Cathay Organisation, with plans to go public by the following

year.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately the public listing was never realised in his lifetime.

Adding to Loke's woes, his marriage to Christina Lee ended in an acrimonious divorce in 1962. He was, however, able to find love soon after and in September the following year, he married Mavis Chew.<sup>34</sup>

Sadly, barely nine months later, the couple lost their lives when the plane they were on crashed in Taichung, Taiwan, shortly after takeoff on 20 June 1964. All 53 people on board died. Loke

and Chew were returning home from the 11th Asian Film Festival, where Loke had received Golden Accolades awards on behalf of three Cathay Organisation stars.<sup>35</sup> He had just turned 49 a few days before.

### A Lasting Legacy

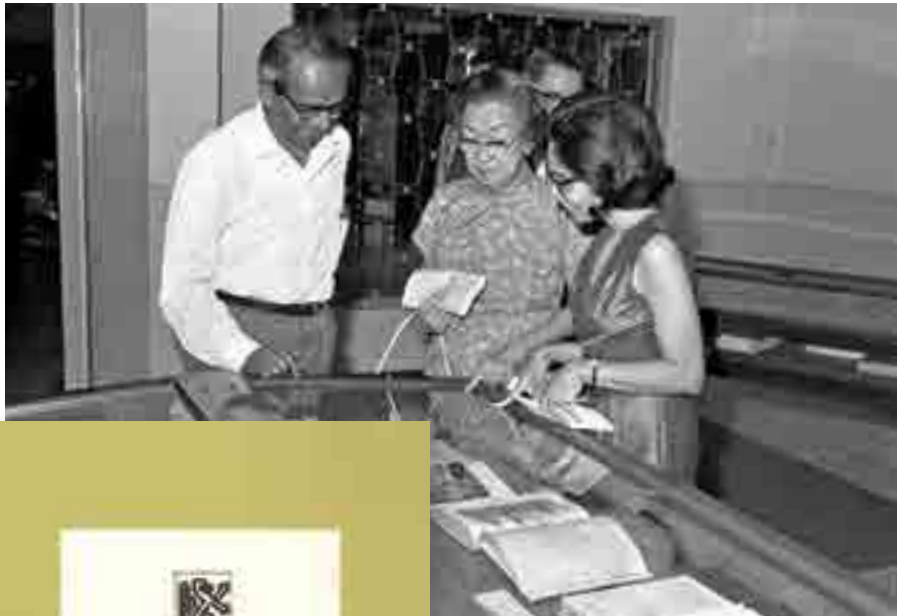
In 1965, Loke's mother donated the Dr Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill Collection to the National Library, which augmented the newly opened Southeast Asia Room that would house resources

**(Below)** Actresses Ummi Kalthoum and Rose Yatimah, and director Roomai Noor at Loke Wan Tho's funeral. They were supposed to have been on board the same flight as Loke when it crashed. Image reproduced from Lim Kay Tong, *Cathay: 55 Years of Cinema* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1991), 11. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 791.43095957 LIM).

**(Bottom)** Thousands of people lining the streets of Kuala Lumpur as Loke Wan Tho's cortege passes on its way to burial. Image reproduced from Lim Kay Tong, *Cathay: 55 Years of Cinema* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1991), 7. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 791.43095957 LIM).







(Above) Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam and Mrs Loke Yew, mother of the late Loke Wan Tho, touring the National Library during her donation of the Dr Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill Collection to the library, 1965. Accompanying them is Hedwig Anuar, director of the National Library. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Left) In 1965, Mrs Loke Yew donated the Dr Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill Collection to the National Library of Singapore, “in fulfilment of the intention of her son”.

relating to the region. Gibson-Hill was the last expatriate director of the National Museum and a close friend of Loke’s. Loke had received Gibson-Hill’s collection of rare books upon the latter’s death, just a year prior to his own passing. Considered at the time as “one of the most outstanding private collections of its kind in this part of the world”, the collection includes 25 of Loke’s personal titles on photography.<sup>36</sup>

The Loke Wan Tho Memorial Library was opened in 1972 at Jurong Bird Park, with a \$100,000 donation by Loke’s mother and his sisters as well as his collection of books on birds, photographs and tape recordings of bird songs.<sup>37</sup>

Loke’s name also lives on in Wan Tho Avenue in Sennett Estate and the Loke Wan Tho Gallery at the Selegie Arts Centre.<sup>38</sup> The gallery was launched in 1996 thanks to his contributions to the Photographic Society of Singapore and to commemorate his breadth of work in the field.<sup>39</sup> In death, as in life, Loke has continued to make his mark. ♦



For more on Loke Wan Tho and Cathay, visit <https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-18/issue-3/oct-dec-2022/loke-wan-tho-cinema>.

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