

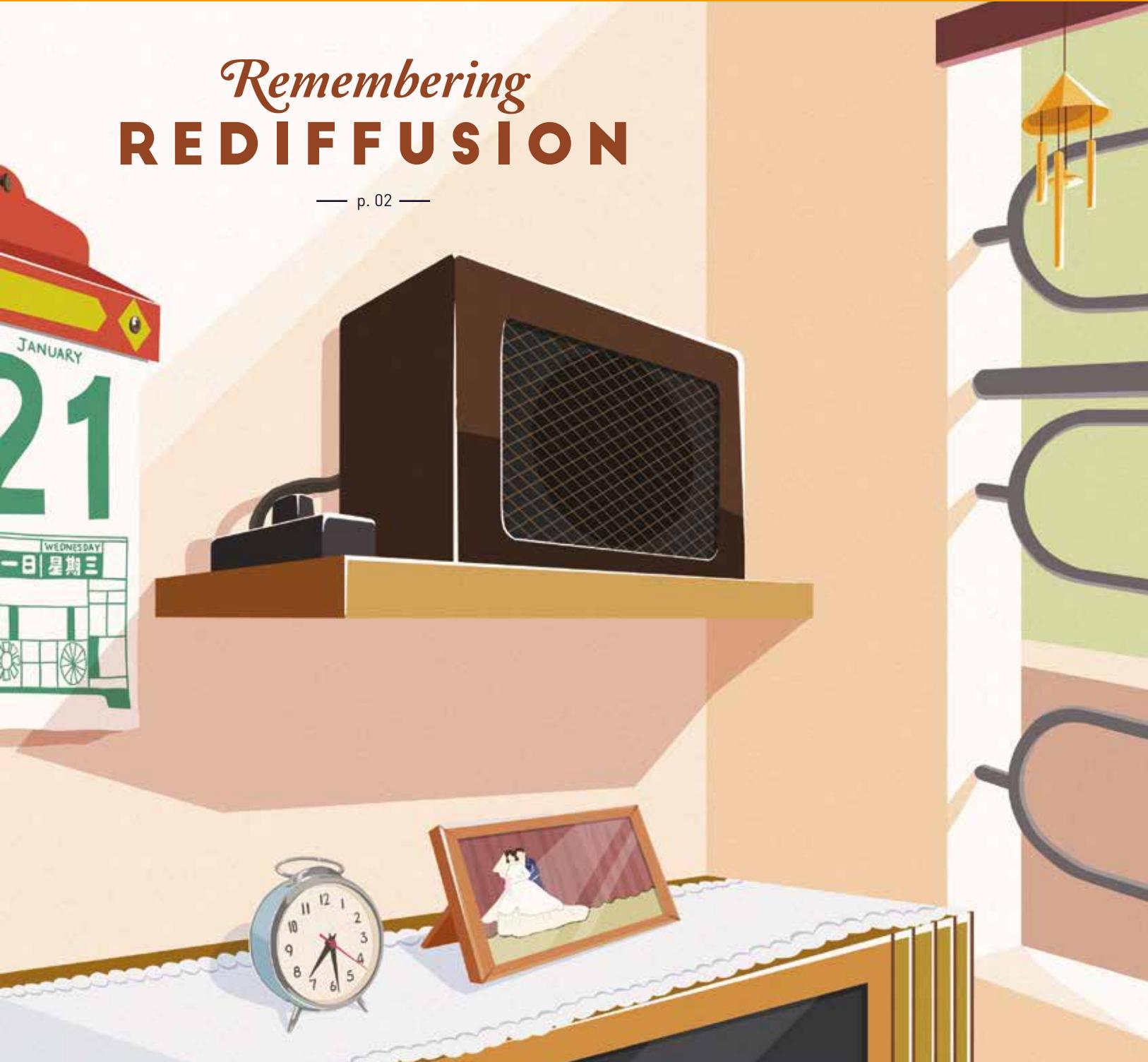
# biblioasia

Vol.  
**15**  
Issue  
**04**  
JAN-MAR 2020

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## *Remembering* **REDIFFUSION**

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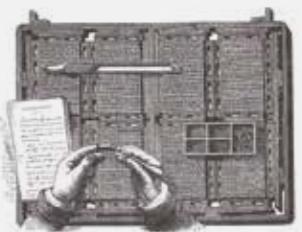


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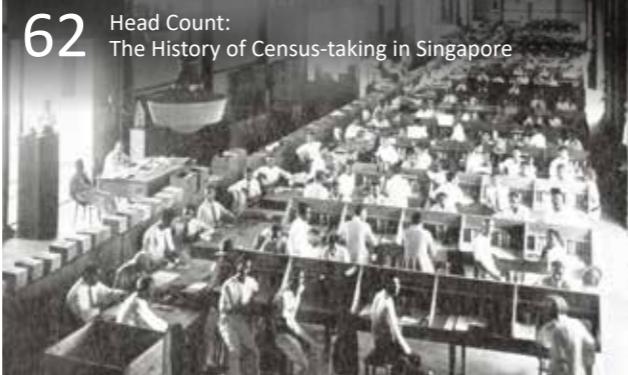
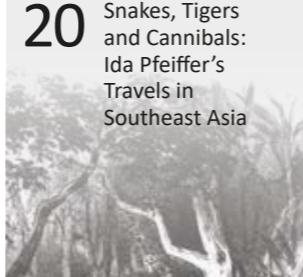
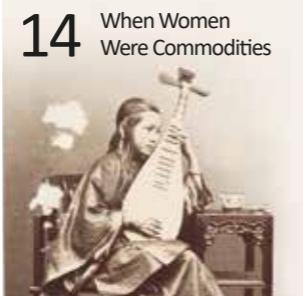
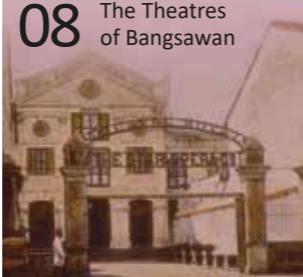
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## Director's Note

Welcome to the first issue of 2020! The start of any new year always provides us with the opportunity to look forward to what the future holds, and to reflect on our past.

Today, we take it for granted that we can get our fill of entertainment anytime and anywhere we want. We download movies and television programmes onto our phones and tablets, and watch them while lying in bed or riding the MRT.

Things were very different in the immediate post-war years though. In the 1960s and 1970s, many Singaporeans relied on their trusty Rediffusion sets for entertainment. Although Rediffusion only had two channels and limited programming, it was beloved by Singaporeans. Until, that is, it fell out of favour. Barbara Quek looks at the rise and decline of this venerable form of entertainment (pg. 2).

If the idea of a Rediffusion set seems quaint, imagine life in the late 19th and early 20th century. Back then, for a night's entertainment, you would walk or ride on a bullock cart to North Bridge Road to catch a *bangsawan* show, a stage production performed in Malay by actors and backed by an orchestra. Tan Chui Hua puts *bangsawan* venues under the spotlight (pg. 8) to show us what life was like back then.

Both Rediffusion sets and *bangsawan* theatres have had their day in the sun. Will newspapers be next to go? Perhaps not. As an industry, newspapers have demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt, as Lee Meiyu shows in her essay (pg. 44) on how Chinese newspapers here have evolved over the last 200 years.

Even as newspapers change to meet new challenges, one thing remains constant: someone needs to gather the news. This can be dangerous work as Shirlene Noordin recounts in her story of four Singaporean journalists who covered the Vietnam War (pg. 28). Sadly, of the four, only one survived.

Armed conflict is the subject of another piece that recounts the final moments of Indian soldiers in Singapore who mutinied in 1915. Umej Bhatia recreates their last hours before they were executed by a firing squad in an excerpt from his newly published book (pg. 38).

Some stories about colonial Singapore are better known than others. Adeline Foo provides a glimpse of a more seedy side of our city, highlighting the lives of women at the turn of the 20th century who were kidnapped or forced by circumstances to become sex workers (pg. 14). Many of these women had little say in how they lived their lives.

In contrast, we feature the intrepid Austrian writer Ida Pfeiffer, who travelled the world alone and stopped over twice in Singapore in the second half of the 19th century. She wrote about the wonders of Pulau Ubin, described a Chinese funeral in detail and came up close to drying human heads in Sarawak. John van Wyhe has the story (pg. 20).

We round off this issue with Ang Seow Leng's piece on census-taking in Singapore (pg. 62), Gracie Lee's article on the history of printing in Indochina (pg. 50) and Wong Sher Maine's retrospective on 150 years of the Istana (pg. 54).

Ms Tan Huism  
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### On the cover

Rediffusion sets were a common sight in Singapore homes in the 1960s and 1970s. Illustration by Oxygen Studio Designs Pte Ltd.

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ISSN 0219-8126 (print)  
ISSN 1793-9968 (online)

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# REDIFFUSION'S GOLDEN YEARS

Singapore's only cable radio service was an instant hit when it was launched in 1949. **Barbara Quek** charts the history of the pioneering broadcasting station.



**F**or a generation of Singaporeans, the name Rediffusion brings back warm memories of a little nondescript brown, rectangular box blaring music and entertainment in homes and coffeeshops across Singapore in the 1960s and 1970s. This iconic radio station – known as 丽的呼声 in Mandarin (Li Di Hu Sheng) – provided countless hours of enjoyment to

its listeners with the latest American pop music, dramatic stories told in Chinese dialects like Hokkien and Cantonese, and the friendly chatter of DJs at a time when home entertainment options were in short supply.

Before the production of Channel 8 dramas, people were hooked on traditional tales narrated by the likes of

Lee Dai Soh (李大傻) in Cantonese, Ng Chia Kheng (黄正经) in Teochew, Ong Toh (王道) in Hokkien and Chong Soon Fat (张顺发) in Hakka. Their work on Rediffusion was in the tradition of the storytellers of old who went around Chinatown, Telok Ayer and Boat Quay to entertain the crowds in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>1</sup>

Storytellers like Lee Dai Soh (see text box overleaf) and Ong Toh helped make Rediffusion popular.<sup>2</sup> Their efforts left a mark on people like James Seah who, on the Singapore Memory Project,<sup>3</sup> recalled how these stories affected the daily rhythms of life at home. Seah had become a Rediffusion fan in 1960 when he was still in Primary 5 and was living in a kampong in Bukit Ho Swee. He wrote:

“My mother would stop whatever housework, and I had to complete school homework before 9 pm to sit attentively on a stool beside the wooden partition of my next door neighbour. The Rediffusion was subscribed by my neighbour and he kindly shared it with us... The radio was located nearest to our side of the wooden partition and the volume... turned on to its maximum.”<sup>4</sup>

Apart from stories, Rediffusion also broadcast recordings of outdoor stage shows such as concerts and music programmes, which were mainly in Chinese. Recordings of Chinese *wayang* (street opera) performances, in particular, were well received until the 1970s when boxing match commentaries took over.<sup>5</sup>

Rediffusion became popular at a time when the majority of Singaporeans lived in rural areas and not many households could afford a television set. Besides, Rediffusion triumphed over the state-owned broadcaster because it had a clear advantage over conventional radio services operated by the state.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike AM or FM radios, Rediffusion boxes did not have receivers; they were largely loudspeakers with a built-in amplifier. As Rediffusion's service was transmitted via cable, the audio quality was much better compared with over-the-air radio services of the time. In addition, Rediffusion sets did not depend on electricity, as power was supplied via the same cable that delivered the radio signal. This was a boon especially in rural areas that were not connected to the electrical grid.<sup>7</sup>

At its peak, Rediffusion, which was dubbed “the people’s network”,

**Barbara Quek** is a Senior Librarian (Statutory Functions) with the National Library, Singapore. Her work involves collection development through Legal Deposit, Gift and Exchange as well as the provision of content and reference services.

had more than 100,000 subscribers.<sup>8</sup> It provided a novel way of delivering entertainment programmes, the majority of which were in Chinese dialects. On the other hand, government-owned radio stations like Radio Malaya and its successors broadcast mainly news and educational programmes from England that were deemed as lacking “life and originality”. People also found Rediffusion to be more “intimate” and “homely” as listeners could call in to chat with their favourite DJs.<sup>9</sup>

However, due to changing market conditions, new government policies and competition from television and free-to-air radio, Rediffusion began to wane in popularity in the 1980s and its audience numbers declined. The radio station ceased operations in 2012, and although it was revived a year later, Rediffusion no longer functioned as a radio station.

## The Formative Years

Rediffusion was launched as a cable radio service in the town of Clacton, England, in the 1920s by Broadcast Relay

Services (Overseas) Ltd, a London-based company, and introduced to Singapore in 1949. Jack Snowden, a young English engineer with the company, arrived with a core team to set up Rediffusion (Singapore). He stayed with the company for 38 years until his retirement as managing director in 1986.<sup>10</sup>

The company operated out of the Rediffusion Building that was built on the site of the old railway station on Tank Road (now Clemenceau Avenue) in 1948. Before the company could begin its radio service, miles of trunk cables were laid throughout the streets of Singapore.<sup>11</sup> The building was later sold and, in 1989, Rediffusion relocated to the four-storey Rediffusion House on Jalan Selanting, off Upper Bukit Timah Road. The new facility had six broadcasting studios, two commercial studios and a suite for the rehearsal and production of dramas.<sup>12</sup>

Rediffusion soon became a household name in Singapore.<sup>13</sup> At a monthly subscription rate of \$5,<sup>14</sup> Rediffusion offered a cheaper alternative to house-

(Facing page) A Rediffusion set from the 1950s. The radio service was transmitted via cable. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

An undated recording session in progress at a Rediffusion studio. Image reproduced from Rediffusion Singapore, photographs, circa 1948–1987. (Call no.: RCLOS 384.540655957 RED)

(Left) Rediffusion became an important source of entertainment in Singapore when it was introduced here in 1949, especially for people living in kampongs that did not have access to electricity. Rediffusion sets, which were essentially loudspeakers with built-in amplifiers, did not depend on electricity because power was supplied by the same cable that delivered the radio signal. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



## MASTER STORYTELLER LEE DAI SOH

Lee Dai Soh (李大傻) (1913–89) was a well-known storyteller who made his name on Rediffusion. His moniker is sometimes spelt as Lee Dai Sor, which means “Big Fool Lee”<sup>1</sup> in Cantonese. He was born Lee Fook Hai and grew up in Tanjong Pagar. Although Lee only had a primary school education, he loved reading and collecting books.<sup>2</sup>

According to his daughter, Lee started out telling stories while sitting on a box under a tree in Chinatown, with a burning joss stick as his timer.<sup>3</sup> His radio career began in 1938 when he joined the British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation. After the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, he returned to his job at the company, which by then had been renamed Radio Malaya. In 1949, Lee moved over to Rediffusion when the radio station began operations in Singapore.<sup>4</sup>

The master storyteller became a household name in the 1950s and 1960s. Apart from Rediffusion, he also made recordings for the Australian Broadcasting Commission station in Singapore, which were broadcast to countries such as Malaysia, Vietnam and Hong Kong.<sup>5</sup>

Lee is fondly remembered for his retelling of the Chinese classic *Journey to the West* (西游记), which he narrated in Cantonese over 175 episodes, each lasting half an hour. These were recorded in 1979 on 7-inch open reel audiotapes at the Rediffusion Building on Clemenceau Avenue.

When Rediffusion ceased its dialect programmes in 1982, Lee retired from

Cantonese raconteur Lee Dai Soh doing what he did best, 1966. *Lee Dai Soh Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*.



broadcasting in Singapore. He went on to tell stories in Cantonese for Radio Australia, and also entertained audiences with his storytelling performances at clan associations and public events.

Lee died of a heart attack in 1989, having done a recording for Radio Australia just the day before.<sup>6</sup> He left behind two wives, one son, two daughters and two grandchildren.<sup>7</sup>

The audiotapes of Lee’s *Journey to the West* form part of the more than 5,000 Rediffusion recordings held in the collection of the National Archives of Singapore (NAS). These recordings have been digitised and are available for public access on the Archives Online website.<sup>8</sup> Lee was also interviewed by the Oral History Department of the NAS in 1983 and 1989.<sup>9</sup>

holds that could not afford more expensive radio sets back in the day.<sup>15</sup> Rediffusion subscribers enjoyed Chinese programmes over the Gold Channel that ran 18 hours daily, while English programmes on the Silver Channel were available around the clock.<sup>16</sup> Paul Chan Poh Hoi, who spent his childhood tuning in to Rediffusion programmes, recalled:

“... this brown box has been a part of my family since its inception in 1949... We never switched off the set and it woke me up at six to go to Chung Cheng High School. I never missed a programme hosted by Lee [Dai Soh]. Our large family of 12 often squabbled over the

### NOTES

- 1 Hong, X. (2007, August 2). Big Fool’s reign. *The Straits Times*, p. 54. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 2 Tang, K.F. (1989, March 24). Storyteller Lee Dai Soh dies while waiting to see doctor. *The Straits Times*, p. 22; Obituary. (1989, March 24). *The Straits Times*, p. 38. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 3 *The Straits Times*, 24 Mar 1989, p. 22.
- 4 *The Straits Times*, 2 Aug 2007, p. 54; Liew, S.C. (1978, May 9). *The storyteller. New Nation*, pp. 10–11; Radio Malaya’s (1996, April 18). *The Straits Times*, p.16; N. Balakrishnan (1986, October 6). Man who brought the ‘sound box’ to S’pore. *The Straits Times*, p. 15. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 5 *New Nation*, 9 May 1978, pp. 10–11.
- 6 *The Straits Times*, 24 Mar 1989, p. 22; *The Straits Times*, 2 Aug 2007, p. 54.
- 7 *The Straits Times*, 24 Mar 1989, p. 38.
- 8 Rediffusion Pte Ltd (1979). 粵語通俗故事: 西游記 (*Journey to the West*) (175 audiotapes). Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- 9 Tan, L. & Yeo, G.L. (Interviewers). (1983, March 22 & 1989, March 13). *Oral history interview with Lee Fook Hai @ Lee Dai Soh 李福鴻@李大傻* [Transcript of recording no.: 000260; 7 reels]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

channels. I used to clash with my sisters when I wanted to listen to popular songs by Pat Boone and Doris Day in Top Tunes of the Week, and they wanted to listen to Cantonese opera.”<sup>17</sup>

Initially, the station broadcast programmes from the United Kingdom, but later added programmes in Chinese dialects to meet growing local demand. Soon, the station’s programmes became more popular than those produced by the state-owned radio station.<sup>18</sup> According to Lim Leng San, who used to work as a Hokkien voice actor, Rediffusion also held more appeal than television, which did not screen as many serial dramas in

the Hokkien dialect.<sup>19</sup> By the 1960s, the number of Rediffusion subscribers had increased to about 50,000. The radio station continued to experience steady growth and, by 1977, had garnered 90,428 subscribers.<sup>20</sup>

### The People Behind the Voices

Rediffusion was an important part of the history of broadcasting in Singapore. Some big names in the industry had their first break on the station. Channel 8 MediaCorp actors Richard Low and Chen Shucheng, for instance, cut their teeth on Rediffusion after joining the station’s Chinese drama group as voice-acting talents.<sup>21</sup>

In the early 1970s, Rediffusion nurtured many local talents, such as

veteran Mediacorp actress Xiang Yun, who started out as a child artiste with the radio station;<sup>22</sup> popular radio DJ Mark van Cuylenberg (better known as The Flying Dutchman);<sup>23</sup> and the late theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun, who began his career with the station’s Mandarin Drama Group.<sup>24</sup> Foong Choon Hon, former editor of the Chinese-language *Shin Min Daily News*, made his mark when he was a broadcaster with Rediffusion.<sup>25</sup> Composer-singer Dick Lee has credited Rediffusion for helping him break into the entertainment industry. Lee had participated in a contest organised by Rediffusion in the early 1970s and the judge later invited him back as a guest performer, and “that’s how [his] career took off”.<sup>26</sup>

Rediffusion stalwart Tan Swee Leong, who was a popular radio and television host from the 1960s to 1980s, became a mentor to younger DJs and local bands like The Quests. Tan had a long and illustrious career with Rediffusion as one of the two popular DJs alongside Larry Lai. They were nicknamed the “terrible twins”, often engaging in friendly banter to entertain listeners. Veteran sports commentator and radio presenter Brian Richmond said he modelled himself after Tan, having been inspired by him to enter the industry when he was just a teenager.<sup>27</sup>

Frankie Sim, who was a fan of these Rediffusion DJs, recalled:

“I remember Top Tunes of the Week, hosted by DJ Joseph Goh, on Rediffusion... Next was the P.O. Box 608 Request programme that aired six days a week, with announcers Peggy Ross, Honey Zain, Eric Lim, Johnny Lau, Larry Lai and Tan Swee Leong. There was also From Your House, hosted by Noreen Sales; Stars on Wings, hosted by DJ Neville Powley; and Listen with Love, hosted by DJ Jeremy Ramsey Gary Love... To them and other staff, I say thank you for the music.”<sup>28</sup>

Rediffusion Singapore also had Roger Kool, the moniker adopted by Roger Kiew, who was blind. Roger Kool made his debut on air in 1973 at the age of 19 and would go on to amass a huge following, so much so that he became known as the “king of the airwaves”.<sup>29</sup>

Then of course there were the legendary storytellers who helped Rediffusion cement its leading position in Chinese radio broadcasting between the 1950s and 1970s. Lee Dai Soh, in particular, captivated generations of listeners with his animated narration of Chinese classics such as *Journey to the West* and *Return of the Condor Heroes*.<sup>30</sup>

(Below) Rediffusion DJ Tan Swee Leong interviewing American actor Marlon Brando at the station’s studio in Clemenceau Avenue, 1956. *Image reproduced from Rediffusion Singapore, photographs, circa 1948–1987. (Call no.: RCLOS 384.540655957 RED)*

(Right) A weekly compilation of the most popular songs based on the number of requests received by Rediffusion’s English Programme Department for the week ending 23 January 1967. *Image reproduced from Singapore’s “Top Tunes” (n.d.). Singapore: Rediffusion. (Call no.: RCLOS 016.78242 RSLSTT)*



Ann Tang, who fondly remembers her grandmother listening to the Cantonese raconteur, said:

“My early memories of Rediffusion were in the 1970s. It was my grandmother’s only pastime, listening to Cantonese storyteller Lee Dai Soh... Every night after dinner, my siblings and I would climb onto granny’s bed and she would re-tell the story she had heard. That was how I came to know the stories from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* – General Cao Cao and Guan Yu, [the] war strategist who could borrow the north wind to defeat their enemies, and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, even though I did not study Chinese.”<sup>31</sup>

Another equally popular storyteller was Ong Toh, who narrated stories in Hokkien. Tan Bah Bah, a former journalist with the *New Nation* newspaper, was one of those spellbound by Ong’s storytelling when he was a child. He recalled:

“... minutes before 8.45 pm, just about every family who had [a] Rediffusion set at home would stop whatever they were doing and crowd around the little set... Around that time, too, one could hardly find a trishaw or taxi on the road! Every trishaw rider or taxi driver would be at his or her favourite coffee shop listening to the inimitable Ong Toh... At 8.45 pm sharp, everybody at home or coffee shop stopped talking. Coffee

| Singapore's "Top Tunes"  |                |
|--|----------------|
| The following chart is compiled exclusively from the number of requests received by Rediffusion’s English Programme Department during the week ending 23.1.67. |                |
| Last Week  | Year           |
| 1 3. "Morning Star"  | Saturday       |
| 2 2. "Heather On The Hill"   | Sunday         |
| 3 1. "I'm Walkin' Wild"  | Monday         |
| 4 5. "Cafe 34"   | Tuesday        |
| 5 6. "Calm My World"   | Wednesday      |
| 6 4. "In The Closer"   | Thursday       |
| 7 7. "Think Sometimes About Me"  | Friday         |
| 8 9. "I'm A Believer"  | Saturday       |
| 9 10. "Get Down Tonight"   | Sunday         |
| 10 11. "What Would I Do"   | Monday         |
| 11 12. "Sight In Shady Grove"  | Tuesday        |
| Last Week  |                |
| 1 Single Star  | Andy Powell    |
| 2 Home Sweet Home  | Connie Francis |
| 3 Country Girl   | Connie Francis |
| 4 Hello Stranger   | Connie Francis |
| Last Month   |                |
| 5 Single Star  | Andy Powell    |
| 6 Home Sweet Home  | Connie Francis |
| 7 Country Girl   | Connie Francis |
| 8 Hello Stranger   | Connie Francis |

cups would cease clinking... There would be a complete hush... all problems would be forgotten as Ong Toh transported them through time to ancient China with tales of heroism, treachery, bravery, vanity, cowardice and the like.”<sup>32</sup>

### The Sunset Years

After peaking in the early 1980s, Rediffusion began to decline as the rising popularity of new FM radio stations and the failure of Rediffusion to obtain a free-to-air broadcasting licence in the 1990s sealed its fate. Its subscription plunged by more than 40 percent, from 110,348 subscribers in 1982 to 62,940

Cantopop diva Frances Yip with Rediffusion DJ Larry Lai at a satellite station in Metro Golden Mile, 1971. Image reproduced from *Rediffusion Singapore, photographs, circa 1948–1987*. (Call no.: RCLOS 384.540655957 RED)



Broadcasting Corporation in 1980. Today, the radio division is part of the Mediacorp conglomerate.

<sup>1</sup> National Library Board. (2014). *Chinese street storytellers* by Fiona Tan. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia website.

<sup>2</sup> Cheong, J. (2006, February 12). Redi-rection. *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

<sup>3</sup> The Singapore Memory Project, launched in 2011, is a whole-of-nation movement by the National Library Board that documented memories and moments related to Singapore from individuals and organisations.

<sup>4</sup> Seah, J. (2012, April 10). *Farewell to Rediffusion*. Retrieved from Singapore Memory Project website.

<sup>5</sup> Goh, Y.L. (1986, October 6). The entertainment house that Jack built. *The Business Times*, p. 8; Watcher, M. (1986, October 7). Commercial radio is the answer. *The Straits Times*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG

<sup>6</sup> Radio transmission in Singapore began in the 1920s, but progress was initially in fits and starts. The British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation, the predecessor to today's Mediacorp broadcasting behemoth, began transmission on 1 March 1937. In 1946, the company was reorganised as Radio Malaya and renamed Radio Singapore 11 years later. In 1963, this entity merged with the television broadcaster to become Radio Television Singapore. This then became the Singapore

in 1988. By 2006, it had only 8,000 subscribers.<sup>33</sup>

The Speak Mandarin Campaign that was launched in 1979 is often cited as a major reason for Rediffusion's decline. To promote the use of Mandarin, Rediffusion was required to stop all dialect programmes by 1982. The removal of all Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew and Hakka storytellers took away a major pillar of its programming.

However, this alone may not necessarily have been the death blow for Rediffusion.<sup>34</sup> In fact, the switch to Mandarin potentially gave the station access to a new target audience: young Mandarin-speaking listeners instead of middle-aged and older people.<sup>35</sup> In 1981,

when Rediffusion introduced a new educational programme in Mandarin for secondary four students called “Revise Your Lessons with Us”, it became very popular, attracting as many listeners as some variety quiz shows.<sup>36</sup>

Ironically, one of the key reasons for Rediffusion's early success contributed to its eventual decline. Rediffusion's receiving boxes were not plugged into electrical sockets, which was an advantage for people who did not have access to electricity. However, as portable battery-powered radio sets became affordable, and more homes became wired up to the electrical grid, Rediffusion lost its initial allure. Moreover, Rediffusion could not compete with new radio stations that delivered better programming.

The cables that enabled Rediffusion to thrive in the kampong became a noose as it required an investment in cabling infrastructure, which AM and FM radios did not need. One academic study noted that Rediffusion's “fateful mis-step may have been when it decided not to lay its wires into new HDB estates that were springing up from the 1980s”<sup>37</sup> Not investing in this meant that Rediffusion lost subscribers who had moved into these new housing estates and failed to attract new ones for a number of years.

### The Revival Years

In 2003, Rediffusion (Singapore) was acquired by Ronald Reagin, a retired American lawyer, and Wong Ban Kuan, the company's general manager. Reagin became the chief operating officer while Wong assumed the post of managing director.

The new owners decided to venture into digital audio broadcasting (DAB) to

The Rediffusion Building on Clemenceau Avenue, 1989. The building was later sold and in 1989, Rediffusion relocated to the new four-storey Rediffusion House on Jalan Selantang, off Upper Bukit Timah Road. Courtesy of Xu Huimin.



help boost subscription, which had shrunk to about 10,000 by then. Although this initiative was successful initially, it failed to sustain growth and in early April 2012, the company announced that it would stop broadcasting by the end of that month. By then, its subscriber pool had dwindled to around 3,000. On 30 April 2012, Rediffusion (Singapore) officially ceased operations, after having been in business for 63 years.<sup>38</sup>

Many long-time listeners were understandably upset by the closure of Rediffusion.<sup>39</sup> There were proposals to resell Rediffusion's content as one way

- <sup>21</sup> Chan, R. (2012, April 15). Rediffusion launch pad. *The Straits Times*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- <sup>22</sup> Teo, P.L. (2005, December 12). The original ah jie. *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- <sup>23</sup> Tan, J. (2006, May 24). Time to move on. *Today*, p. 38. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- <sup>24</sup> Lam, D. (1990, November 22). Passionate pursuit. *The Straits Times*, p. 10. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- <sup>25</sup> Zakir Hussain. (2009, April 17). Telling stories so that others may remember. *The Straits Times*, p. 28. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- <sup>26</sup> Revision lessons a big hit with listeners. (1981, July 31). *The Straits Times*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- <sup>27</sup> The Straits Times, 14 May 2012, p. 21.
- <sup>28</sup> Chin, D., & Sim, R. (2012, April 9). Station was ‘part of Singapore way of life’. *The Straits Times*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- <sup>29</sup> Eddino Abdul Hadi. (2008, September 20). All-local radio station. *The Straits Times*, p. 15; Mak, M.S. (2008, June 12). Rediffusion now has 22 channels. *The Straits Times*, p. 69. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- <sup>30</sup> Oo, G.L. (2012, April 16). Preserve the spirit of Rediffusion. *The Straits Times*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- <sup>31</sup> Xu, H. (2012). *Rediffusion and its glorious 63 years*. Retrieved from Remember Singapore website.
- <sup>32</sup> Tan, B.B. (1979, April 7). Times we spent around the set. *New Nation*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- <sup>33</sup> Sorry, Rediffusion (1990, August 13). *The New Paper*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG. Xu, 2012, Remember Singapore website.
- <sup>34</sup> Ang, P.H. (2012, May 14). Study showed dialect ban need not have caused Rediffusion's end. *The Straits Times*, p. 21. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- <sup>35</sup> Tan, B.H. (1981, June 18). Rediffusion's Mandarin switch pulls in more listeners. *The Straits Times*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- <sup>36</sup> Revision lessons a big hit with listeners. (1981, July 31). *The Straits Times*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- <sup>37</sup> The Straits Times, 14 May 2012, p. 21.
- <sup>38</sup> Chin, D., & Sim, R. (2012, April 9). Station was ‘part of Singapore way of life’. *The Straits Times*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- <sup>39</sup> Our story. (2019). Retrieved from Rediffusion Singapore 丽的呼声 Facebook; 杨涵净 (Yang, H.J.) (2019, October 28). 丽的呼声设透明播音站为牛车水群众“讲故事”。联合早报 (Lianhe Zaobao), p. 7. Retrieved from Factiva.
- <sup>40</sup> Lost to history (2012, April 15). *The Straits Times*, p. 3; Chin, E. (2012, April 20). No Rediffusion materials destroyed: National Archives. *The Straits Times*, p. 26. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

based service. Listeners could tune in to free podcasts and also subscribe to a mobile app (at US\$1.99 or S\$2.50 per month), which played old programmes from the station's archives.<sup>44</sup> However, this new strategy did not work and the company no longer has a mobile app offering the subscription service. Today, Rediffusion maintains an online presence with a website detailing its history,<sup>45</sup> a Facebook page featuring interview broadcasts, a YouTube channel and the Ximalaya FM (喜马拉雅FM) channel that airs podcasts.<sup>46</sup>

With the support of the Singapore Tourism Board and Chinatown Business Association, the Chinatown Rediffusion Open Studio (牛车水街道透明播音站) opened on 26 October 2019. Since its launch, programmes such as interviews with Chinatown shop owners have taken place there. These interviews are broadcast on Rediffusion's Facebook page.<sup>47</sup>

Some of the programming that made Rediffusion popular are held by the National Archives of Singapore (NAS). The collection comprises more than 5,000 recordings of popular Chinese classics, folk stories, comedy acts, opera performances and even children's plays. The NAS also keeps a repository of oral history interviews with Lee Dai Soh and Ng Chia Keng as well as listeners recalling their fond memories of the radio station.<sup>48</sup>

The National Library's Lee Kong Chian Reference Library also has a collection of Rediffusion materials that include issues of *Rediffusion Times* (丽的呼声周刊), photographs and rare drama scripts. ♦

# The Theatres of Bangsawan

In the days before cinema, *bangsawan* performances entertained the masses. Tan Chui Hua looks at the rise and fall of *bangsawan* venues in Singapore.

Theatre Royal on North Bridge Road, c. 1910. The theatre was opened by Chinese Peranakan businessman Cheong Koon Seng in 1908. The Star Opera Company that he established was based at the theatre. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



"With a bottle of champagne broken on the door-step, the new Theatre Royal, in North Bridge Road, was opened officially on Saturday night, the Wayang Kassim's *Trip to Fairyland* being staged before a packed house, the conclusion of the formal opening ceremony."<sup>1</sup>

— *The Straits Times*, 15 June 1908

**i**n the early decades of the 20th century, before the days of cinema, residents of Singapore eagerly flocked to *bangsawan* performances to be entertained. Performed in Malay, *bangsawan* featured acting and singing as well as music provided by a live orchestra. Back then, it was one of the few forms of mass entertainment available.

Such was the draw of *bangsawan* in the pre-war years that people living in Tanjong Pagar would travel by bullock cart all the way to North Bridge Road to catch a performance at the purpose-built Theatre Royal. Mohamed Sidek bin Siraj, a former civil servant and *bangsawan* patron, recalls in his oral history account:

"The third class is about \$1 and the first class in front is about \$3 or something... There's no other entertainment for the Malays except *bangsawan*. Even that, it started after eight and then finished up at twelve. If you don't have the transport you have to walk. People will use a bullock-cart from Tanjong Pagar to see *bangsawan* and say about 10 or 12 people will go back in a bullock cart to Tanjong Pagar."<sup>3</sup>

Theatre Royal was just one of a handful of venues in Singapore that staged *bangsawan* performances. While much research has been carried out on the art of *bangsawan*, less has been written about the places that played host to such shows. Although secondary source materials on these venues are scant, by piecing together occasional mentions in newspaper reports, advertisements, archival records and oral history interviews, a story of the former theatres of *bangsawan* emerges.

Tan Chui Hua is a researcher and writer who has worked on various projects documenting the heritage of Singapore, including a number of heritage trails and publications.

## Of Wooden Structures, Zinc Roofs and Tents

It is unclear when commercial performances aimed at the Asian population in Singapore began, but by the late 1800s, advertisements and reports of such events began appearing in the newspapers of the day.

By all accounts, native theatre, or *bangsawan*, and other Asian entertainment such as circuses and Parsi theatrical acts from Gujarat, India, took place in tents or semi-permanent constructions of canvas, wood and bamboo.<sup>4</sup>

A rare review in the *Daily Advertiser* newspaper in 1891 provides us with a glimpse of what such performing venues must have been like then:

"A Penang Native Operatic Company, called the Empress Victoria Jawi Pranakan Theatrical Company, which is conducted on the same lines as the Parsee Company which visited this city some eight or ten years ago, opened last night in Jalan Besar, opposite the Kampong Kapor Bridge. The building is a wooden one with zinc roofing, and is both airy and commodious, but the internal arrangement is susceptible of improvement. The sceneries for a native company, are passable... Last night the building was crammed with natives. There were however a few Europeans and Eurasians, but they left before the play was concluded."<sup>5</sup>

Besides this venue at Jalan Besar, usually referred to as the Parsi Theatre, there were mentions of other performance sites in other newspapers. For instance, in 1887, a member of the public who had caught a performance by The Prince of Wales Theatrical Company wrote in *The Straits Times Weekly Issue* that the troupe performed nightly at Cheng Tee's theatre on North Bridge Road in Kampong Glam, and praised the performers for singing the songs of "Hindoostan and England in high Malay".<sup>6</sup>

Along the same road, Lee Peck Hoon Theatre was mentioned in the early 1900s for its *bangsawan* acts. Described as "fairly cool and comfortable" and "lighted by acetylene gas", the theatre was named after its Peranakan proprietor, who was the sub-manager of the Straits Steamship Company. In 1902, the staging of a play *Indra Sabha* by a Malay theatrical company was very well received, and the 3rd Madras

TO-NIGHT!  
TO-NIGHT!  
**Friday, July 3.**  
BY SPECIAL REQUEST  
The following Fairy Play will be staged  
**"HAWA I MAJLIS"**  
or  
**A TRIP TO FAIRYLAND.**  
COME ONE. — COME ALL.  
You will never regret paying a visit to the  
**NEW THEATRE ROYAL.**

THE STAR OPERA CO.  
Comprising 40 Dutch and  
Malay Actors and Actresses  
**AT THE THEATRE ROYAL,**  
North Bridge Road.  
TO-NIGHT, AT 9 P.M.,  
**FRANCLO & EUGELEE**  
will be staged.  
MISS JOHAR, one of the favourite  
actresses of Wayang Kassim will  
appear to-night.  
TO-NIGHT.  
Special Engagement.  
**MR. W. KRAMER,**  
THE NOTED FINLAND STRONG MAN  
AND WRESTLER,  
Will appear on the stage.  
Come and see this New Company with their  
NEW SCENERIES, NEW COSTUMES.  
Secure your seats early.  
Tickets at the Door.  
Prices 8s, 6s, 5s cts. and 3s cts.  
Children Half-Price.

(Above left) Advertisement for Wayang Kassim's *bangsawan* production at the New Theatre Royal, 1908. Image reproduced from *The Straits Times*, 3 July 1908, p. 8.

(Above) The Star Opera Company advertising its *bangsawan* production at the Theatre Royal, 1910. Image reproduced from *The Straits Times*, 11 January 1910, p. 8.

here nightly, we think the Municipality should thoroughly satisfy itself that the building is perfectly safe, as in the event of a collapse, hundreds, if not thousands, are likely to be killed or injured. It would pay anyone to erect a commodious brick structure to take the place of the present one, as native companies are almost constantly here."<sup>10</sup>

By the early 20th century, more solid structures had been built. A 1903 *Straits Times* article complaining of overcrowding at the North Bridge Road Theatre during Wayang Kassim's performances mentioned brick walls along the main entrance:

"Not only was every available seat occupied, but the very passages in the centre of the hall and in the wings underneath the zenana class were all densely packed, being taken up by people who could not, either for love or money, find sitting accommodation of any kind within the four walls of the building. Those among the audience who left before the conclusion of the play experienced very great difficulty in making their exit, having to carefully

## THE ALLURE OF BANGSAWAN

It is believed that the first *bangsawan* troupes made their appearance in Singapore in the late 19th century, inspired by the travelling Parsi theatre groups from Gujarat, India, which started touring Malaya and the Dutch East Indies in the 1870s.<sup>1</sup>

The first recorded *bangsawan* troupe, or at least the first known to use the term *bangsawan*, which means “nobility” in Malay, is Wayang Pusi or Indra Bangsawan troupe from Penang. The troupe was also known as The Queen Alexandra Theatrical Company and the Empress Victoria Jawi Peranakan Theatrical Company.<sup>2</sup>

By the turn of the 20th century, a number of *bangsawan* companies had been established in Malaya, such as Opera Yap Chow Thong, Wayang Kassim and the Star Opera Company. A Straits Times article in 1903 described *bangsawan* as follows:

“The origin of these plays [Malay drama] may be dated from the early part of the 18th century, for records exist in Java of such plays as having been performed there, and these indicate that playhouses similar to the present Malay theatre commonly known as Bangsawan, existed at that time in a crude form. The Bangsawan is an opera of Indian origin conducted

A scene from a *bangsawan* production, c. 1900s. Mohd Amin bin Kadarisman Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



in the Malay language. The tunes are mostly borrowed from European operas and songs which at first seems a little odd to the listener, but the Malay – a born improvisator – makes the best of them and seems to adapt these in a truly wonderful manner to his own tongue. The Chinese actors and performers spring from the lowest classes of the population, whereas the Malay actor comes from a highly educated class and is greatly esteemed and liked by his countrymen to whom the Bangsawan is a source of great enjoyment. At first the actors were almost exclusively Jawi Pakans (Kling and Malay descent),<sup>3</sup> but in latter years Singapore Malays and Dutch Eurasians of a good class joined the profession and consequently a much higher standard of perfection and culture has been reached.”<sup>4</sup>

*Bangsawan* theatre in the pre-war years was primarily a form of commercial mass entertainment, catering to a wide audience in order to compete with other forms of entertainment such as plays, dances, revues and circuses. In 1932, a European who had attended an adaptation of *Cinderella* by the Starlight Opera Company described the people he saw:

“The audience was composed of a motley crowd – Malays, dressed in all colours of the rainbow, which

somewhat never seem to clash, predominating. Among the rest of the audience I counted a large number of Chinese, Japanese, Sikhs, Bengalis, Tamils, Eurasians, and one European – myself.”<sup>5</sup>

Stories in *bangsawan* theatre were usually adapted from the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), the two great Indian epics the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, Arabic tales, Chinese classics, European stories and even Shakespearean plays. Each act was interspersed with performances consisting of orchestral music, songs, dances, comedy skits and novelty acts. It was not uncommon for *bangsawan* productions to include exotic songs from the Americas, Middle East and India. Musical instruments from different cultures, such as the piano, violin and tabla, were also featured.<sup>6</sup>

### NOTES

1 Van der Putten, J. (2017). The coming of a Malay popular theatrical form (p. 141). In C. Skott (Ed.), *Interpreting diversity: Europe and the Malay World*. New York: Routledge. (Call no.: RSEA 959.51 INT)

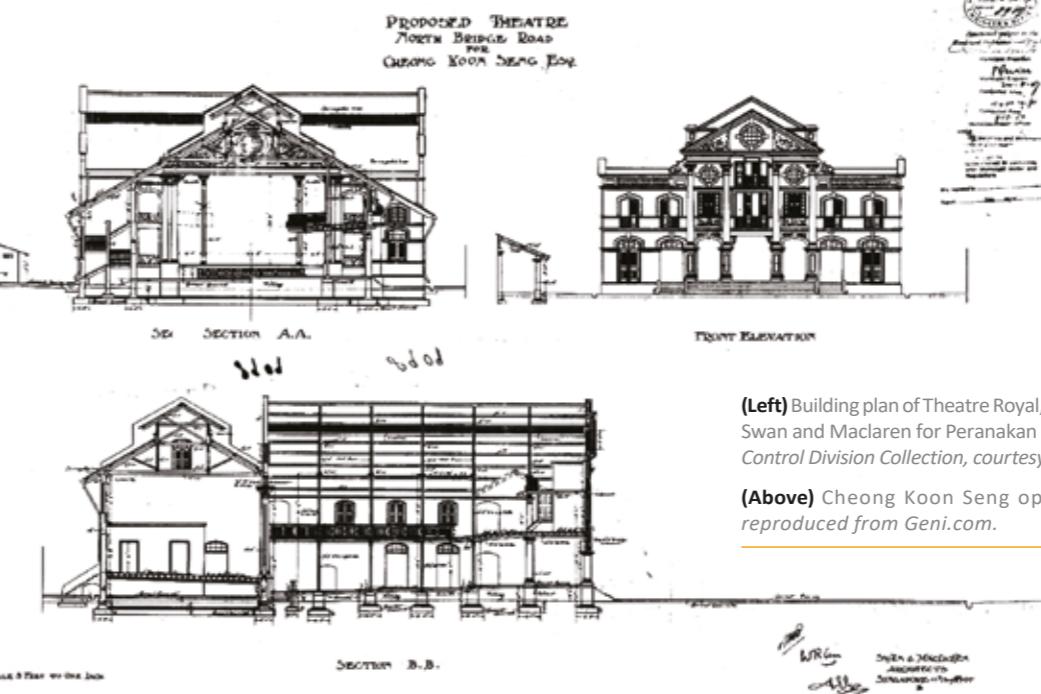
2 Van der Putten, 2017, p. 144.

3 These are Jawi Peranakans.

4 The Wayang Kassim. (1903, July 4). *The Straits Times*, p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

5 Opera in Malay. (1932, August 23). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

6 Tan, S.-B. (1989, Spring-Summer). From popular to “traditional” theatre: The dynamics of change in bangsawan of Malaysia. *Ethnomusicology*, 33 (2), 229–274, p. 236. Retrieved from JSTOR via NLB’s eResources website.



(Left) Building plan of Theatre Royal, 1907. The theatre was designed by Messrs Swan and Maclarens for Peranakan businessman Cheong Koon Seng. Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Above) Cheong Koon Seng opened Theatre Royal in 1908. Image reproduced from Geni.com.

and slowly thread their way among the maze of human beings who thronged the passages and occupied every coign of vantage, from the main entrance up to the very stage itself... There is seemingly only one public entrance from the main thoroughfare, bordered on either side by a brick wall to the length of about 30 feet or so; and in the case of a panic succeeded by a block here, the result would be too awful to contemplate.”<sup>11</sup>

Such was the state of the theatres catering to local entertainment that when Theatre Royal opened in 1908, it was to much fanfare and praise.

### Theatre Royal

Located at the site now occupied by Raffles Hospital, Theatre Royal is believed to be the first “permanent” theatre for the so-called “native” form of entertainment.<sup>12</sup> It was described as a “most substantial edifice of brick, iron and stone, with seating accommodation for about 1,300 people”.<sup>13</sup>

Theatre Royal was the brainchild of Chinese Peranakan businessman Cheong Koon Seng, who was also a Municipal Commissioner and a Justice of the Peace.<sup>14</sup> Designed by Messrs Swan and Maclarens, the theatre was reported to be built along European lines in which strength and safety of the building were taken into regard.<sup>15</sup> In 1908, *The Singa-*

*pore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* gave a detailed description of the theatre prior to its opening:

“The front of the building is of very ornamental design and the main entrance is by three arches opening into a spacious hall off which is the pit and stalls both of which have ample emergency exits on either side. The auditorium is rectangular on plan about 70 feet long by 60 feet deep and is provided with good dressing room accommodation and the proscenium arch is 38 feet wide by 24 feet high. In front of the stage is the usual orchestra well. The upper part of the auditorium has a horseshoe-shaped circle and gallery and is reached by two wide and easy staircases from the side of the main entrance. The building is substantially constructed, steel being largely used, the circle being supported upon steel columns with cantilevers of the same material projecting beyond the girders to form the shape. The roof is lofty and well-ventilated and supported on steel columns. The building is pleasing in appearance, well-lighted and ventilated and the comfort of the audience and the performers has been studied.”<sup>16</sup>

The increased demand for *bangsawan* also led to more venues for the performances. New theatres were mentioned in the papers, such as Beyrouth Theatre, which opened in 1921 opposite Geylang Police Station on Geylang Road. Beyrouth was home to Nahar Opera, a large *bangsawan* troupe comprising some 90 performers and 28 musicians.<sup>17</sup>

Amusement parks such as Great World in River Valley and Happy Valley in Tanjong Pagar also hosted regular



*bangsawan* programmes. Zubir Said, composer of *Majulah Singapura*, the national anthem of Singapore, started out as a musician in the City Opera *bangsawan* troupe based in Happy Valley after arriving in Singapore in 1928. He recalled that the hall, as big as Victoria Theatre, was specially built for the performances, and that there were also living quarters on the park grounds for *bangsawan* performers.<sup>21</sup>

Besides local *bangsawan* troupes, travelling acts from the region also performed at the theatres and halls in Singapore. Sometimes, performing tents would be specially erected for the duration they were based on the island. In 1928, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* reported on the popularity of such shows:

"An attraction which never fails to draw crowds in any town either of Malaya or of the Dutch East Indies is described by a visit of a *Bangsawan*, or opera company... The personnel... is generally mixed, containing Malays, Eurasians, and sometimes Chinese players. Travelling from town to town, like a circus, the company pitches its tent on the medan and at once begins to advertise its presence by the distribution of leaflets."<sup>22</sup>

Hamid bin Ahmad, who wrote *bangsawan* scripts, said in his oral history interview in 1987 that tents for *bangsawan* performances used to be erected on the vacant plot of land on Geylang Road, just beside the MRT station facing City Plaza.<sup>23</sup>

Great World amusement park bounded by Kim Seng, River Valley and Zion roads, 1950s. It was the venue of regular *bangsawan* performances. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



*Bangsawan*, however, was not the only draw of these performing venues. In an era of heady live entertainment before cinema became mainstream, performances such as variety shows, revues, vaudevilles, circuses, magic acts, acrobatics and even sports events were frequently staged. Theatre Royal and Alexandra Hall, for example, were famous for hosting high-profile wrestling and boxing matches featuring local and overseas champions in the pre-war years. The former was said to be filled to the brim with spectators every week for boxing promotions.<sup>24</sup>

### A Gradual Decline

"I am afraid the talkies and the slump together are trying to oust the *Bangsawan* from its rightful place in the Malayan scheme of things."<sup>25</sup>

— Dr Kamel Mohamed Ariff,  
at a lecture on Malay poetry  
and *bangsawan*, 1932

As more cinemas were built and watching films became a popular pastime among Singaporeans, live entertainment such as *bangsawan* became less attractive. By the late 1930s, advertisements touting *bangsawan* performances became few and far between.

Mohd Buang bin Marzuki, a former violinist and pianist for various *bangsawan* troupes, pointed to the advent of films in the 1930s as the start of *bangsawan*'s decline:

"...ini gambar boleh bercakap... Singapore punya orang semua ini gambar boleh bercakap, "Baguslah, bercakap" dia orang bilang. Jadi semua orang bertumpulah di situ. Wayang [bangsawan] dah jadi kendur merosot. Baik-baik boleh dapat \$30, makin kurang, kadang \$20, kadang satu sen [pun] tak dapat... Gambar bagus-bagus main, semua bercakap menyanyi. Itulah yang jadi *bangsawan* merosot, sudah kurang orang. Sekali masuk ini filem, Melayu punya, terus sekali habis. Filem P Ramlee sekali masuk, habis sekali... gambar Melayu."<sup>26</sup>

(Translation: The pictures could talk... The people in Singapore all praised these talking pictures, so all of them went to the pictures. *Bangsawan* thus began declining. On a good day, we could make \$30, sometimes less, \$20, sometimes not even a cent... The nice pictures could talk, sing. So *bangsawan* declined, fewer people. When Malay films entered the scene, it became even worse [for *bangsawan*]. When P. Ramlee's films were launched, it became even worse.)

When Cheong Koon Seng died in 1934 at the age of 55, his family sold Theatre Royal to Amalgamated Theatres, the company managing Capitol and Pavilion cinemas.<sup>27</sup>

Amalgamated Theatres immediately set to work modernising the place. In February 1935, Theatre Royal, "once the favourite Star Opera", had its grand opening with a Hindustani film, *Krishna Sudama*, produced by the well-known Ranjit Studio of Bombay.<sup>28</sup> The grand dame of *bangsawan* performances was transformed into a cinema screening films from India, with the occasional live act from Indian theatrical and performing groups.<sup>29</sup> Eventually, Tamil talkies replaced *bangsawan* as the mainstay of the Theatre Royal, now renamed Royal Theatre.

During the Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942–45), Royal Theatre was known as Indo Gekijo and used mainly to screen approved films and shows for the Indian community in Singapore.<sup>30</sup> *Bangsawan* continued to be performed at Garrick Cinema in Geylang. *Bangsawan* music was also aired regularly over the radio. Nevertheless, the vibrancy of the *bangsawan* scene continued its decline.

*Bangsawan* scriptwriter Hamid bin Ahmad felt that the quality of *bangsawan* productions deteriorated, especially after the war. He recalled:

"... saya sudah mulai hilang minat menonton kerana bila saya tengok alat-alat *bangsawan* itu sudah tidak seperti yang biasa saya tonton di dalam tahun-tahun 30-an dulu... sebelum perang Jepun. Begitu cantik begitu gemilang segala-gala yang dialatkan. Jadi apa lagi *bangsawan* waktunya lepas Jepun ni dia orang buatkan *bangsawan* khemah. Di buat panggung sendiri seperti panggung wayang Cina, memang, kalau tak silap, kontraknya kontrak-kontrak itu orang kontrak panggung wayang Cina tulah. Buat panggung, habis, lantainya jugak berbunyi bila kita pijak tu semua, banyak sudah mulai. Saya pikir di waktu itulah mulai *bangsawan* mulai turun. Mulai standard *bangsawan* telah turun dari lepas perang Jepun lah tidak dapat naik kembali."<sup>31</sup>

(Translation: I lost interest in watching *bangsawan* because I saw that the standard was no longer the same as that in the 1930s... before the war with Japan. The performances then were so beautiful, so alluring. After the Occupation, the performing

### NOTES

- 1 New theatre opened: Wayang Kassim's first night at the Royal. (1908, June 15). *The Straits Times*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 2 *Bangsawan* means "nobility" or "something noble. See Tan, S.-B. (1989, Spring-Summer). From popular to "traditional" theatre: The dynamics of change in *bangsawan* of Malaysia. *Ethnomusicology*, 33 (2), 229–274, p. 232. Retrieved from JSTOR via NLB's eResources website.
- 3 Chew, D. (Interviewer). (1991, May 13). *Oral history interview with Mohamed Sidek bin Siraj* [Transcript of recording no.: 001255/6/4, p. 41]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- 4 Van der Putten, J. (2017). The coming of a Malay popular theatrical form (p. 141). In C. Scott (Ed.), *Interpreting diversity: Europe and the Malay World*. New York: Routledge. (Call no.: RSEA 959.51 INT)
- 5 Local and general. (1891, November 21). *Daily Advertiser*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 6 The Prince of Wales Theatrical Company. (1887, September 21). *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG; *Daily Advertiser*, 21 Nov 1891, p. 3.
- 7 The Malay Theatre. (1902, August 5). *The Straits Times*, p. 4; Trouble at a wayang. (1906, December 12). *The Straits Times*, p. 7; [Untitled]. (1902, August 23). *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 8 No address was given for the "North Bridge Road Theatre" in advertisements.
- 9 Municipal Commission. (1895, August 17). *The Mid-day Herald*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 10 Local and general. (1896, June 10). *The Mid-day Herald*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 11 Crowded theatres. (1903, June 17). *The Straits Times*, p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 12 Van der Putten, 2017, p. 145.
- 13 New theatre opened: Wayang Kassim's first night at the Royal. (1908, June 15). *The Straits Times*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 14 Death of Mr. Cheong Koon Seng. (1934, March 20). *The Straits Times*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 15 A new native theatre. (1908, April 9). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, p. 233. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 16 *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, 9 Apr 1908, p. 233.
- 17 Abdul Ghani bin Hamid (Interviewer). (1991, February 13). *Oral history interview with Abu Talib bin Ally* [Transcript of recording no.: 001216/11/5, p. 95]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- 18 Van der Putten, 2017, p. 153.
- 19 Mohd Yusoff Ahmad. (Interviewer). (1987, October 8). *Oral history interview with Hamid bin Ahmad* [Transcript of recording no.: 000897/10/1, pp. 9–10]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- 20 Naha Opera of Singapore. (1921, February 2). *The Straits Times*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 21 Tan, L. (Interviewer). (1984, August 23). *Oral history interview with Zubir Said* [Transcript of recording no.: 000293/23/6, pp. 81–84]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- 22 The Bangsawan: Incongruities of opera. (1928, October 23). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 23 Mohd Yusoff Ahmad. (Interviewer). (1987, October 8). *Oral history interview with Hamid bin Ahmad* [Transcript of recording no.: 000897/10/5, pp. 56–57]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- 24 New cinema for Indian films. (1947, April 30). *Malaya Tribune*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 25 Govt to acquire another 32 acres of land. (1970, June 16). *The Straits Times*, p. 19; The wayang Shakespeare of 1909. (1979, April 23). *New Nation*, p. 9. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

began evolving too. From being popular commercial theatre, it began taking on the form of "traditional" Malay theatre and was staged in smaller arts venues on occasion. Advertisements for *bangsawan* performances became very infrequent.

Diamond Theatre and Royal Theatre continued with their new leases of life as Tamil cinemas until the late 1970s. In 1970, the government announced its land acquisition plans in the Rochor area, which included the sites of both theatres. By the end of the 1970s, the chapter on theatres specially built for *bangsawan* performances finally came to a close when these venues were demolished, making way for urban redevelopment.<sup>33</sup> ♦

Theatre Royal in the midst of demolition in 1977. Image reproduced from Remember Singapore website.



# When Women Were Commodities

Brothels in colonial Singapore, with its large male migrant population, did a roaring trade. **Adeline Foo** examines the lives of the unfortunate girls and women who were sold into prostitution.

**I**n 1884, Tomiji Onda, a Japanese barber in Singapore, described the trade in young girls operating here in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Ships carrying girls from Japan and China

This account by Tomiji Onda, a Japanese barber in Singapore, describes how the trade in young girls operated here in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Ships carrying girls from Japan and China

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**(Facing page)** A late-19th century portrait of a *pipa tsai* (Cantonese for “little pipa player”). The *pipa*, or Chinese lute, is a pear-shaped four-stringed musical instrument made of wood. These girls were trained to play the instrument and sing to entertain men in clubs and brothels in Singapore. In some cases, the *pipa tsai* were forced into prostitution. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

**(Right)** Chinese coolies unloading goods in a godown, 1900s. Chinese male migrants to Singapore in the 19th century, who worked mainly as coolies, were a lonely lot and sought solace in the arms of prostitutes. Boden-Kloss Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

reached Singapore after three weeks to a month, while junks from Hong Kong took slightly more than a week. Once these girls landed, they were sold “as if they were cattle”. Between 1900 and 1910, the average price for a Japanese woman was 500 to 600 yen, while a Chinese girl shipped in from South China cost between \$150 and \$500. This was a large sum considering that the average worker earned a monthly wage of about \$10 to \$15 in those days.<sup>2</sup>

While much has been said about Singapore’s early economic history with its focus on canny entrepreneurs and hardworking coolies, much less has been written about the seedier side of a colonial port city where men vastly outnumbered women. In 1884, there were 60,000 Chinese men but only 6,600 Chinese women, of whom an estimated 2,000 – mainly Cantonese and Teochew – worked as prostitutes.<sup>3</sup> It is believed that as much as 80 percent of the young Chinese girls who came to Singapore in the late 1870s were sold to brothels.

Prostitution at the turn of 20th-century Singapore, as with most other things, was the result of supply rising to meet demand. Most of the prostitutes came from patriarchal societies like China and Japan. There, sexual licence and the purchase of women was a male prerogative. Abject poverty in some regions in turn pushed these women out to find work in places like Southeast Asia.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to girls who were “imported” into Singapore from elsewhere, there were others on the island who were tricked into entering the profession. In 1940, the *Nanyang Siang Pau* described how one hapless victim was misled:

“A’s mother met a woman whom she regarded as Second Aunt, who was sympathetic towards her daughter. Second Aunt recommended ‘A’ to get a job and offered to bring her to



Kuala Lumpur. She agreed and left Singapore without telling her mother. Later, they returned to Singapore and ‘A’ became a prostitute. ‘A’ chose not to find her mother because she did not wish for her to know that she was a prostitute, it was an ugly thing. She only wished to save up enough money, look for her mother and return to China with her. She thought that once she had become a prostitute, it was not possible... to turn back...<sup>5</sup>

In some instances, prostitutes raised abandoned or orphaned girls as their own, and some of these girls followed in their adopted mothers’ footsteps.<sup>6</sup> Once a girl reached puberty, she would have been taught the necessary skills by an “older sister”. During a more explicit period of training, the teenager would receive detailed instructions in the arts of lovemaking and massage. She would also learn how to use aphrodisiacs and other sexual devices, and how to entertain and pleasure men from sex manuals, erotic paintings and pamphlets.

Once the girl, usually between the ages of 13 and 15, completed her apprenticeship, her virginity would be sold to the highest bidder: men would pay several hundred dollars to more than a thousand dollars for the experience of deflowering her.<sup>7</sup>

## The Brothels

The men who frequented brothels in Singapore were a mixed bag that included “sons of towkay, bank clerks, street hawk-

ers, rickshaw pullers, high-ranking officials, restaurant proprietors, colonial soldiers, and denizens of the underworld”.<sup>8</sup> These men could have their pick from any of the many brothels that lined certain streets cheek by jowl.<sup>9</sup>

“Each of the districts... had their local clients... Europeans – diplomats, officials and planters – favoured the discreet Japanese women of Malay and Malabar Streets. Foreign tourists, soldiers, and, especially Japanese sailors also sought their sexual favours by visiting the unregistered haunts of Malay and Eurasian women scattered in the side lanes and alleys of the city. Rickshawmen made regular journeys to the brothels in Chin Hin Street, Fraser Street, Sago Street, Smith Street, Tan Quee Lan Street and Upper Hokien Street.”<sup>10</sup>

Japanese prostitutes, known as *karayuki-san*, operated within the Japanese enclave along Hylam, Malabar, Malay and Bugis streets where Japanese merchants, shopkeepers, doctors and bankers had set up shop. By 1920, the Japanese community in Singapore was large and thriving enough to host its own newspaper, the *Nanyo Shimpō*, a Japanese cemetery and a Japanese school.<sup>11</sup>

In the Kreta Ayer/Chinatown area, Chinese brothels catered to a largely different clientele. In addition to brothels that served the average worker, there were high-class ones that were visited by rich patrons who had their favourite prostitutes.

Historian James Warren's in-depth study of life in Singapore brothels pieced together the practices of women in the profession by, among other things, examining information from coroner's records and inquests as well as interviewing people who lived close to where the brothels were. His research unveiled intimate details such as how older women in the brothel prepared virgins for their first sexual experience. Warren also learned of their beauty secrets that

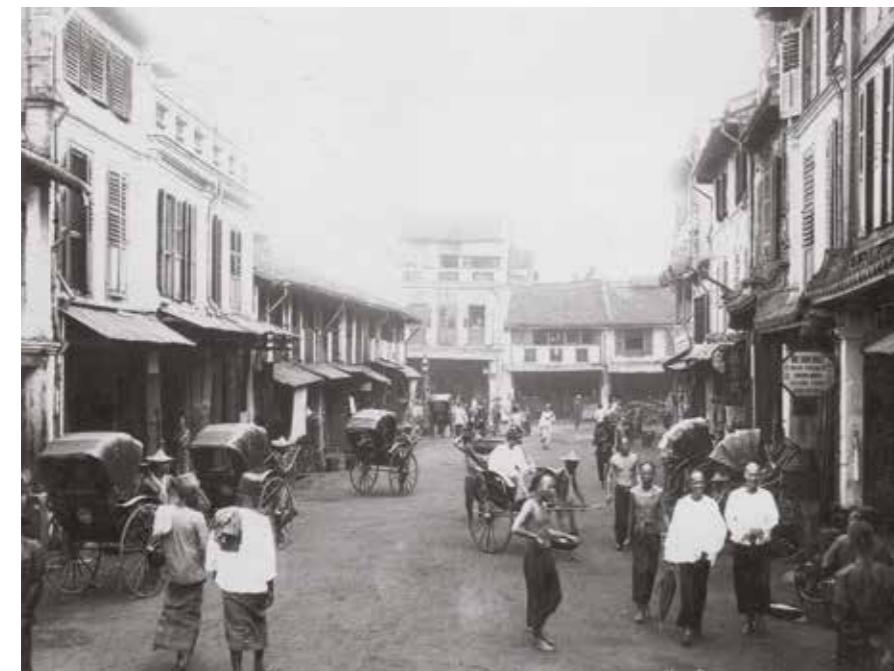
included washing one's face with powder ground from raw rice instead of cheap scented soap.

Some of these sex workers managed to escape the trade: a few were able to save enough money to pay their way out of brothels while others were bought by wealthy businessmen and ended up as their mistresses or concubines.<sup>12</sup> The latter were a minority though; for most, prostitution was a lifetime prison sentence until they met with illness or death.

**(Below)** A G.R. Lambert & Co. photo of coolies on China Street, 1890s. The street was infamous for its numerous gambling houses. Courtesy of Editions Didier Millet.

**(Bottom)** A photo of *karayuki-san* by G.R. Lambert & Co., 1890s. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

**(Bottom right)** A portrait of a *karayuki-san* with her hair let down, 1890s. Gretchen Liu Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



"Wong Mau Tan was one of the prostitutes in my brothel... she was coughing a lot and said that she had a cough and headache for two months. Yesterday evening, her maid servant found her in bed, spit was coming from her mouth. I removed her to the hospital, she was conscious up to the last."<sup>14</sup>

#### An Evening's Entertainment

Why did men in Singapore visit prostitutes? For some, it was all part of business entertainment. Influential Chinese and European elites would arrange to meet in brothels to discuss business first before progressing to the evening's entertainment.<sup>15</sup> And it was not just the rich who thought a visit to a prostitute was normal.



Warren's research uncovered shocking accounts of sex workers dying because of venereal disease, fatal fights resulting from social rivalry, alcoholism and drug abuse. Many prostitutes committed suicide – by overdosing on opium or ingesting poison, or by hanging or slitting their throats and, in one gory account, being burnt alive – because they had no chance of ever leaving the brothel. Death provided release from poverty, debt and ill health.<sup>13</sup>

One account by Chu Ah Tan, a brothel owner, recounted the desperation experienced by a prostitute struggling with pulmonary tuberculosis and venereal disease. For eight years she smoked opium and injected herself with increasing dosages of morphine. She finally died after an overdose of opium.

Entrepreneur Choong Keow Chye recalled in his oral history account:

"I was a *sinkeh* earning about \$10 a month. These people who won some money, \$80 to \$100, in gambling invited me to the brothel... Three to five dollars, or eight to ten dollars would pay for a night's stay with a prostitute."<sup>16</sup>

The women could not keep all this money either: they were expected to pay the brothel owner between 40 and 50 percent of their earnings for rent, secret society protection, food, tailored dresses, loan of jewellery and medical fees.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond the immediate satiation of their sexual urges, many of the thousands of men who sought comfort in the arms of prostitutes did not see marriage in their future. They were too poor and earned too little to even entertain the thought of finding a wife, either in Singapore or back in their hometowns.<sup>18</sup> These men toiled as manual labourers, working as rickshaw pullers, coal shovellers, construction workers and coolies, and led a tough life with little or no means of leisure. Apart from work, these men were lonely and many led a meaningless existence without companionship.

Prostitution naturally brought with it a host of social ills. The demand for paid sex was a lucrative source of revenue for brothel owners and especially for the secret societies that controlled the brothels, and hence any threat to this busi-

ness would have serious consequences. Secret societies frequently fought one another over control of the brothels and the women.

Sex workers were also a conduit for sexually transmitted diseases. This was a problem that pervaded all classes of society. Even the wealthy who patronised the more expensive brothels on Smith Street under the misconception that the women there were more discriminating, and thus safer, were not exempt. These men then – either knowingly or unknowingly – passed on sexually transmitted diseases to their wives and concubines.

Despite the many social problems associated with prostitution, the colonial authorities tolerated and legalised the trade in the early years, partly due to the low female-to-male population ratio in Singapore.

#### Protecting Girls and Women

The government, however, did help young girls and women who were trafficked into prostitution. This task was initially handled by the Chinese Protectorate, which was set up in 1877 under colonial administrator William Pickering. The Protectorate managed the affairs of the migrant Chinese community.

In 1888, the Protectorate set up a separate body, the Po Leung Kuk, or the Office to Protect Virtue, to help women who had been sold or tricked into prostitution. The Po Leung Kuk also functioned as a halfway house for young girls such as the *mui tsai* that it helped rescue from abuse.

The *mui tsai* (literally "little sister" in Cantonese) were girls as young as eight years old who came to Singapore, accompanying a relative or a fellow villager. The girls came to seek a better future through marriage or employment as domestic workers. However, many of these girls ended up being tricked into prostitution, or sold to rich families who might abuse them.

As the *mui tsai* grew into her teens, her situation could worsen: if she was pretty, she would find herself servicing the sexual needs of the male members in the household; if she were to bear children, she would not be allowed to claim or acknowledge them until her mistress passed away.<sup>19</sup> The Po Leung Kuk rescued these girls, gave them a safe place to live and trained them in useful skills that could help them find decent men to marry or a useful job when they left the Po Leung Kuk.

Another group of young girls who were rescued by the Po Leung Kuk was the *pipa tsai*. These were girls who were trained to play and sing to the accompaniment of the *pipa*, a short-necked wooden lute. In brothels and clubs where men

The now demolished Chinese Protectorate building on Havelock Road, c. 1910. The office was first set up in 1877 at a shophouse on North Canal Road under William Pickering, the first Protector of Chinese, to look after the affairs of Singapore's migrant Chinese community. In 1888, the Protectorate established the Po Leung Kuk in another location to help women who had been sold or tricked into prostitution. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



## THE OFFICE TO PROTECT VIRTUE

The Po Leung Kuk was set up in Singapore in 1888, about 10 years after it was first established in Hong Kong. The Po Leung Kuk, or the Office to Protect Virtue, was created to offer protection to girls who had been sold or lured into prostitution.

In Singapore, the Po Leung Kuk also provided protection and assistance for the repatriation of women and girls to China. Its other role was to supply marriage partners to a predominantly male population who did not have the means to find a bride from their village.

In addition to housing girls rescued from prostitution, the Po Leung Kuk took in young female servants known as *mui tsai* if they had been abused.<sup>1</sup> The Po Leung Kuk also functioned as a "halfway house", offering shelter, food and training to rehabilitate girls. Once the residents turned 18, they were eligible for marriage. All applications made to the Po Leung Kuk by men to select brides were carefully screened and approved by the management committee.

The Po Leung Kuk had its beginnings in Lock Hospital in the Kandang Kerbau area, moving subsequently to larger premises on York Hill in Chinatown which could accommodate as many as 300 residents.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs Mabel Winter, the first Lady Assistant Protector of Chinese, passed away on 25 January 1934. Image reproduced from *The Straits Times*, 26 January 1934, p. 13.

## DEATH OF MRS. H.B. WINTER.

### Assistant Protector Of Chinese.

The death of Mrs. H. B. Winter, assistant Protector of Chinese, occurred yesterday at the General Hospital. Mrs. Winter had not been in good health for some time and a week ago entered the hospital suffering from pneumonia to which she succumbed.

In charge of the Po Leung Kuk Home, run by the Chinese Protectorate for the care and welfare of *mui tsais* and orphan girls, Mrs. Winter did very excellent work for which she



Women who were rescued and rehabilitated by the Po Leung Kuk were sought after as wives as they were trained in domestic service, and acquired skills such as dressmaking and hairdressing that could help supplement their husband's income.<sup>3</sup>

Life for the residents of Po Leung Kuk seemed to be a pleasant one, if a visitor's impression in 1936 is any guide:

"The walls of the main schoolroom which is a large cheerful apartment are gaily decorated with pictures drawn and painted by the pupils themselves. The children are educated in accordance with Chinese custom, and the bigger girls are taught the arts of fine sewing and embroidery. With few exceptions, the girls are all under eighteen, and they appeared so happily carefree that I found it difficult to believe they had ever suffered unkind treatment or neglect."<sup>4</sup>

In Singapore, the Po Leung Kuk's management committee was chaired by the Protector of Chinese and a body of 13 influential Chinese businessmen. The activities of the Po Leung Kuk were supported by government funds and private donations.<sup>5</sup>

On 1 March 1929, Mrs Mabel Winter was appointed the first Lady Assistant Protector of Chinese.<sup>6</sup> She took over the management of Po Leung Kuk's day-to-day operations and was assisted in her duties by a committee of ladies.<sup>7</sup>

Winter's appointment as Lady Assistant Protector of Chinese was significant as it was the first time a woman had been given such an important post, signifying the serious intent of the British, or at least the Chinese Protectorate, to rescue and rehabilitate women and girls from prostitution and slavery.

Mabel Winter was the wife of Mr H.B. Winter, the proprietor of a well-known tailoring establishment on Battery Road. She had been born in Hong Kong where "she learned to speak Chinese so fluently that the Chinese expressed astonishment at her complete mastery of the language".<sup>8</sup>

She married in Colombo in 1915, where her husband had served in the Fifth Gurkhas regiment.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, Winter's time at the Po Leung Kuk was cut short when she died from pneumonia on 25 January 1934 and was buried in Bidadari Cemetery.<sup>10</sup> She was only 42.

To remember her contributions, the Mabel Winter Memorial Shield was set up and given out annually to an outstanding candidate in the Po Leung Kuk who excelled in needlework and cooking and displayed exemplary conduct.<sup>11</sup>

From the 1930s, the number of women and girls admitted to the Po Leung Kuk in Singapore fell. One researcher suggests that this was due to the implementation of the 1930 Women and Girls' Protection Ordinance that outlawed brothels and vice activities. Unfortunately, the legislation sent brothels underground and made it harder to track and rescue women who needed help.<sup>12</sup> In 1932, the Mui Tsai Ordinance was introduced to prohibit the acquisition of *mui tsai*; this would, in time, also reduce the number of girls that needed to be rescued.

During the Japanese Occupation, the Po Leung Kuk's premises were abandoned and its residents dispersed to several welfare centres. When the British Military Administration took over after the war, the new Department of Social Welfare was set up, and the Po Leung Kuk was closed.<sup>13</sup>

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- 9 *The Malaya Tribune*, 26 Jan 1934, p. 10.
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- 13 Paul, 1990, p. 63.



Five dance hostesses at a cabaret in the 1930s. The women are dressed in figure-hugging cheongsams with daring slide slits that showed off their legs. They were an obvious attraction for men with their artfully applied makeup and coiffured hair-dos. Courtesy of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee.

gathered, these girls entertained their clients by reciting Chinese poetry and bantering with them. The older among the *pipa tsai* would be made to sit at tables to accompany men. These girls were paid by the hour and sometimes also provided sexual services.

How did these *pipa tsai* enter such employment? Like the *mui tsai*, they had been entrusted by their parents in China to the care of distant relatives in Singapore, the so-called "third or sixth paternal aunt" – *sum gu* or *luk gu* – some of whom worked in or even owned entertainment establishments themselves. The *pipa tsai* could also have been picked out when these "aunts" visited destitute women and their young daughters living in shelters such as temples.

Girls who had been forcibly controlled and detained by these aunts could escape their bondage only after they had outlived their popularity or if they were able to find married men who were willing to buy them out of their *pipa*-playing employment.<sup>20</sup> The more fortunate girls were rescued by the authorities and taken in by the Po Leung Kuk. But this was a temporary arrangement: the future of these girls depended on whether they could learn new skills and find suitable jobs after leaving the Po Leung Kuk.

### The Cabaret Scene

When the glitz and glamour of the 1920s Shanghai nightclub scene spilled over to Singapore, it brought with it the promise of a different life, at least for some of the

women who struggled to make a new life for themselves after they had left or broken free from sexual slavery and bondage.

The women who chose to step into Singapore's budding cabaret scene could now take control over their lives. Dancing in a cabaret paid relatively well, and was filled with music, alcohol and laughter. They could doll up and use their feminine wiles to manipulate men, unlike the subservient *mui tsai*, *pipa tsai* or brothel worker who had to endure servitude, slavery and indignity.

As cabarets and nightclubs burgeoned in Singapore,<sup>21</sup> women who lacked education or skills were able to seek out more enticing employment opportunities.

#### NOTES

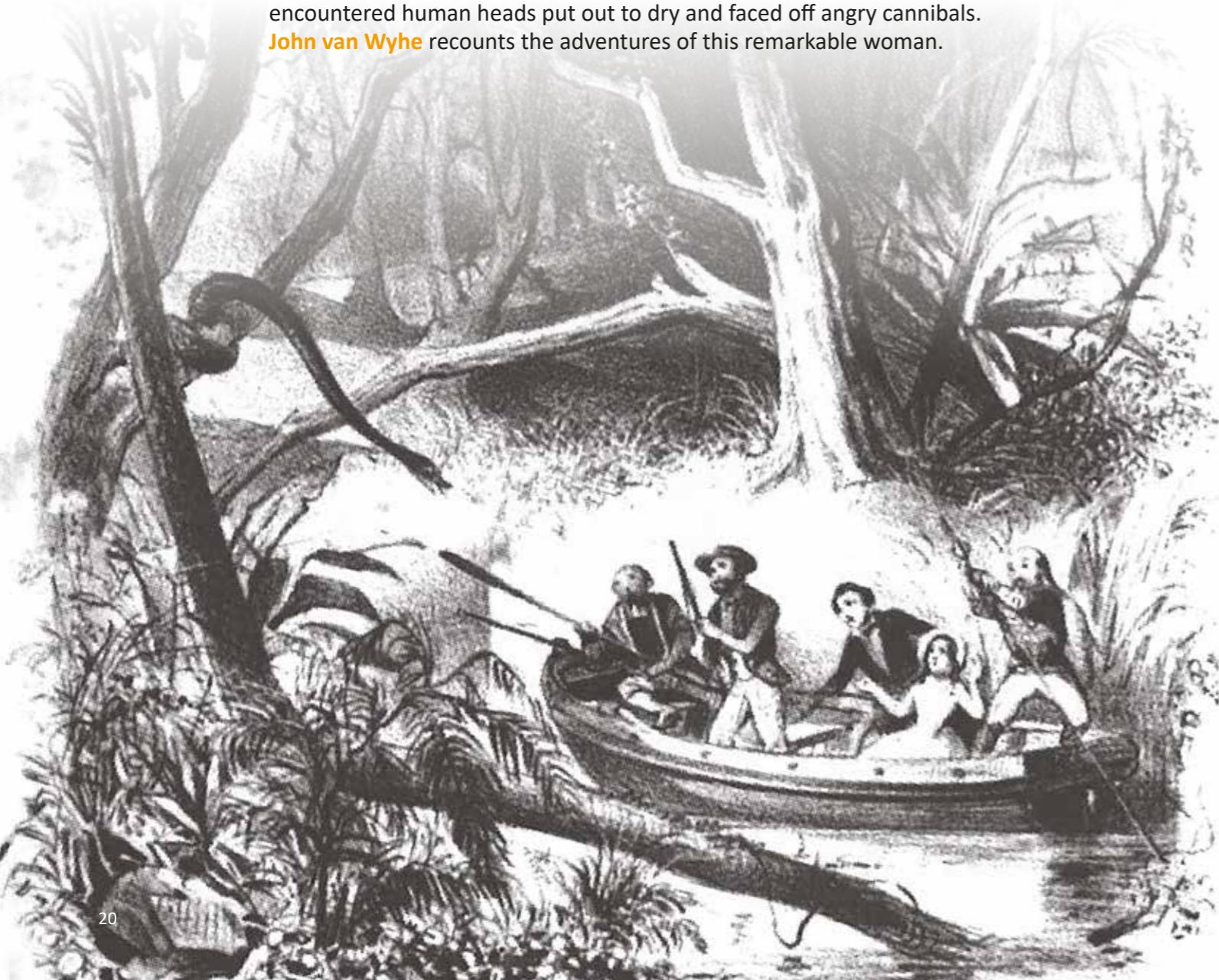
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- 15 Warren, 2003, p. 388.

# Snakes, Tigers and Cannibals

**Ida Pfeiffer's Travels  
in Southeast Asia**

Travelling alone across Southeast Asia in the 19th century, Ida Pfeiffer encountered human heads put out to dry and faced off angry cannibals.

**John van Wyhe** recounts the adventures of this remarkable woman.



**(Facing page)** Ida Pfeiffer encounters a green snake while paddling up the Kallang River on her first visit to Singapore. *Image reproduced from Pfeiffer, I. (1852). Reis een vrouw rondom de wereld (Frontispiece). Gorinchem: Noorduyn.*

**(Right)** The earliest known daguerreotype of Ida Pfeiffer, date and photographer unknown. Her clothing suggests this must be the early 1840s. She is wearing a lace day-cap (not a bonnet), a headpiece worn by married women. *Image reproduced from Lebzelter, F. F. (1910). Die österreichische Weltreisende Ida Pfeiffer 1797–1858 mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der naturwissenschaftlichen Ergebnisse ihrer Reisen. Vienna.*

**(Bottom right)** Ida Pfeiffer dressed in her travel costume with an insect net in her hand and a specimen bag across her shoulder. Lithograph by Adolf Dauthage. *Courtesy of John van Wyhe.*

The name Ida Pfeiffer (1797–1858) is largely unknown today, but in the mid-19th century, she was one of the most famous women in the world. Starting in her mid-40s, this Viennese mother of two embarked on five major expeditions, two of which involved circumnavigating the globe. She accomplished all this while travelling as an unchaperoned woman, a notion that was almost unheard of in those days.

During the course of her journeys, Pfeiffer visited Singapore twice: in 1847 and in 1851. Thanks to her, we have a glimpse of Singapore's natural environment during the period as well as snapshots of daily life on the island.

#### A Tomboy Who Grew Up

Ida Laura Reyer was born into a wealthy merchant family in Vienna in 1797. As a child, she was a stubborn and headstrong tomboy who frequently harboured grand ambitions, such as travelling to exotic far-off lands and exploring the world.

She married a lawyer named Dr Mark Anton Pfeiffer in 1820. The union, which produced two sons, was not a happy one though. In 1835, she separated from her husband, although they remained on good terms. By 1842, her sons were gainfully employed and independent. With her motherly duties completed, Ida Pfeiffer, now aged 45, was finally free to do what she had always dreamed of – to see the world.

Pfeiffer's career as a travel writer began after her first journey, which was to

**Dr John van Wyhe** is a historian of science who has written extensively about Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace. He is the author of *Wanderlust: The Amazing Ida Pfeiffer, the First Female Tourist* (2019).



the Middle East in 1842 when she visited Constantinople, Jerusalem and Cairo. Her travel journal caught the attention of a publisher; in 1844, he turned it into her first book, *Journey of a Viennese Lady to the Holy Land*, which became a bestseller.

This bankrolled her next adventure to Iceland in 1845. The country had a reputation as both impossibly remote and a land of dramatic natural wonders, including volcanoes and geysers. Her adventures led to her second book in 1846 titled *Journey to the Scandinavian North and the Island of Iceland*.

#### First Visit to Singapore (1847)

Not long after her Nordic adventure, Pfeiffer set off on her greatest voyage yet: a circumnavigation of the entire globe. She would be the first woman ever to do so alone.

In 1846, Pfeiffer boarded a sailing ship to Brazil. During a forest excursion, she and a male companion were attacked by a robber with a large knife that left both of them injured. She continued on her journey to Chile and then Tahiti before arriving in China in 1847, where her appearance as an unaccompanied European woman on the streets nearly caused riots. In September 1847, she boarded the monthly P&O steamer from Hong Kong to Singapore.

The 10-day trip was not a happy one. She wrote: "I have made many voyages on board steam ships and always paid second fare, never did I pay so high a price for such wretched and detestable treatment. In all my life I was never so cheated."<sup>1</sup>

The names of arriving and departing first-class P&O passengers were

announced in the newspapers. *The Singapore Free Press* must have assumed that the Austrian lady, who disembarked with two other passengers in first class, also travelled in the same class. Respectable people didn't travel any other way and so they reported the arrival of "Mrs Pfeiffer" from Hong Kong.<sup>2</sup> However, Pfeiffer had very little money and had actually travelled second class, even though the men at the ticketing office in Hong Kong commented that "respectable" people did not travel in steerage.

Upon her arrival in Singapore, Pfeiffer made her way to the office of German shipping and trading agent Behn, Meyer & Co., which had been established by Theodor August Behn and Valentin Lorenz Meyer in 1840. She had brought letters of introduction with her.

Behn's wife Caroline was the first German lady Pfeiffer had met since Brazil and the two immediately hit it off. In fact, Frau Behn "would not hear of my lodging in a hotel; I was immediately installed as a member of her own amiable family in their comfortable bungalow on Mount Sophia, not far from Government hill".<sup>3</sup>



Apart from the incessant heat and inescapable humidity, Pfeiffer found life very pleasant in Singapore. There was very little crime and the infrastructure was good. Pfeiffer wrote:

"...the whole island offers the most enchanting sight... the luxuriant verdancy, the neat houses of the Europeans in the midst of beautiful gardens, the plantations of the most precious spices, the elegant areca and feathered palms, with their slim stems shooting up to a height of a hundred feet, and spreading out into the thick feather-like tuft of fresh green, by which they are distinguished from every other kind of palms, and, lastly, the jungle in the background, compose a most beautiful landscape... The whole island is intersected with excellent roads, of which those skirting the sea-shore are the most frequented, and where handsome carriages and horses from New Holland, and even from England, are to be seen."<sup>4</sup>

#### Paddling up the Kallang River

During her time in Singapore, Herr Behn and Herr Meyer took Pfeiffer on a hunting excursion where they hoped, rather optimistically, to bag a tiger or at least a wild boar. They first paddled up the narrow Kallang River. It was here that Pfeiffer encountered the vibrant exuberance of a tropical Southeast Asian forest:

"The natural beauty of the scene was so great, however, that these occasional obstructions, so far from diminishing, actually heightened the charm of the whole. The forest

was full of the most luxuriant underwood, creepers, palms, and fern plants; the latter, in many instances sixteen feet high, proved a no less effectual screen against the burning rays of the sun than did the palms and other trees."<sup>5</sup>

No tigers or wild boars were spotted but they did encounter a large green snake in a tree. In her diary, Pfeiffer melodramatically described the shooting of this snake as a dangerous battle against a fork-tongued devil.

After the snake was killed, one of their Malay assistants dragged it out of the tree with an impromptu noose made from grass and after skinning the reptile, gave it to some Chinese plantation workers nearby.

Later that afternoon, returning to the same spot where they had killed the snake, Pfeiffer could not resist checking to see if the plantation workers were eating the reptile. She rushed up to one of their houses to find out, but sensed that the men wished to hide their repast: "I entered very quickly and gave them some money to be allowed to taste it. I found the flesh particularly tender and delicate, even more tender than that of a chicken".<sup>6</sup>

The same day, Pfeiffer also "paid a visit to a sugar-refining establishment situated upon the banks of the [Kallang] river". She described the operation:

"The cane is first passed under metal cylinders, which press out all the juice; this runs into large cauldrons, in which it is boiled, and then allowed to cool. It is afterwards placed in earthen jars, where it becomes completely dry."<sup>7</sup>

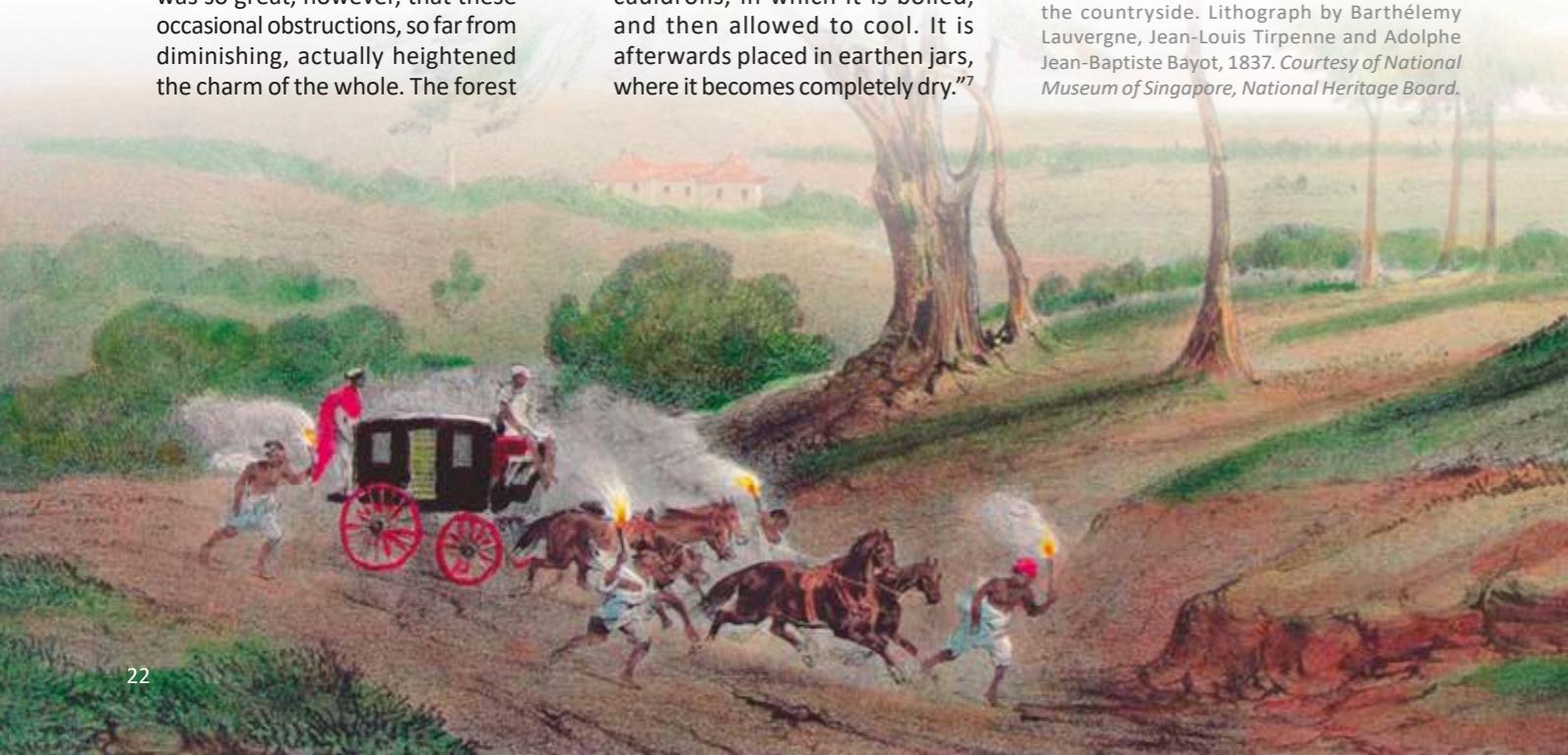
#### Customs of the Chinese in Singapore

On another day, Pfeiffer observed the funeral procession of a wealthy Chinese merchant. She joined the long line of mourners who seemed, to her, strangely to be in high spirits, and observed everything about the funeral carefully. She would write a detailed account of the rituals, all of which were very new and mysterious to her. She noted:

"The friends and attendants, who followed the coffin in small groups without order or regularity, had all got a white strip of cambric bound round their head, their waist, or their arm. As soon as it was remarked that I had joined the procession, a man who had a quantity of these strips came up and offered me one, which I took and bound round my arm."<sup>8</sup>

She also noted how Chinese burial customs required public displays of deep grief which did not appear to be completely genuine. On reaching the grave, the relatives "at first threw themselves on the ground, and, covering their faces, howled horribly, but, finding the burial lasted rather long, sat down in a circle all round, and, taking their little baskets of betel, burnt mussel-shells, and arecanuts, began chewing away with the greatest composure".

This is a scene that Ida Pfeiffer would have come across when she visited Singapore in the mid-19th century. It shows a gharry (an enclosed carriage drawn by horses) led by four Indian syces with torches hurrying home at dusk in the countryside. Lithograph by Barthélémy Lauvergne, Jean-Louis Tirpenne and Adolphe Jean-Baptiste Bayot, 1837. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



Pfeiffer's stay also coincided with the Mid-Autumn Festival, which she called the lantern festival. She recalled:

"From all the houses, at the corners of the roofs, from high posts, &c., were hung innumerable lanterns, made of paper or gauze, and most artistically ornamented with gods, warriors, and animals. In the courts and gardens of the different houses, or, where there were no courts or gardens, in the streets, all kinds of refreshment and fruit were laid out with lights and flowers, in the form of half pyramids on large tables."<sup>9</sup>

#### India and Onwards

After a month in Singapore, Pfeiffer was ready to press on. Her next destination was India and, grumbling to herself, she bought another second-class ticket for the P&O steamer *Braganza*, under Captain Potts, which sailed on 8 October 1847. *The Singapore Free Press* was not fooled this time; it did not list her name in the list of first-class passengers.

Pfeiffer travelled to Calcutta and then made her way, again alone, across northern India, where among other things, she rode an elephant during a tiger hunt.

After India, she headed to the Persian Gulf and reached Baghdad. Then, again against all good sense and advice, Pfeiffer joined a Kurdish camel caravan and crossed the vast desert to Mosul and then to Russia. Along the way, she was kidnapped by a Cossack and kept imprisoned overnight until her travel papers could be checked. She finally reached Vienna, via Greece and Italy, in October 1848.

#### Second Visit to Singapore (1851)

Three years later, in March 1851, Pfeiffer set off again for another circumnavigation. She first sailed to London and from there to Cape Town, where she hoped to travel into the interior of Africa. However, once there, she found that it was impossibly expensive. Fortunately, a German brig was then lying in harbour bound for Singapore and there, she well knew, "[one] may find ships to all the regions of the earth". Here, her special status as a celebrity lady traveller and writer got her a discount; she would only be charged for her board.

Ida Pfeiffer on a tiger hunt in India. Image reproduced from Pfeiffer, I. (1885). *Voyage autour du monde de Mme Ida Pfeiffer*. Translated from the English by E. Delauney. Rouen.

On 16 November 1851, the *Louisa Frederika* dropped anchor in the bustling harbour of Singapore. Again, as with her first visit in 1847, Pfeiffer was warmly welcomed by the Behn family.

Pfeiffer's reputation now preceded her, and *The Singapore Free Press* announced the arrival of the "undaunted and adventurous traveller" whose "remarkable courage and perseverance" were now near legendary.<sup>10</sup>

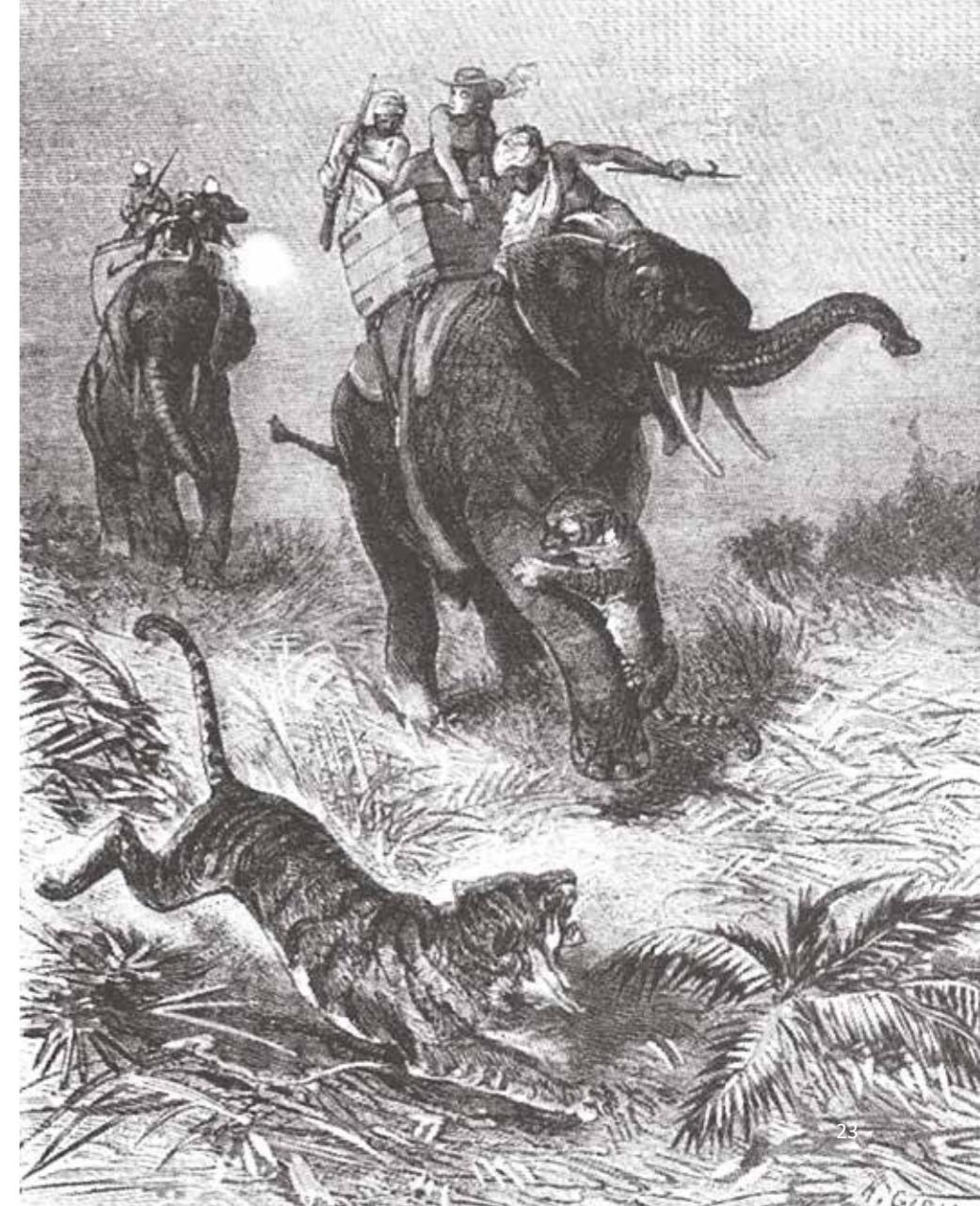
Shortly before Pfeiffer's arrival, a small cottage had been built in the forest far from the town. It was to be used as a holiday retreat by several families. As it happened to be unoccupied, Theodor Behn knew that he could give Pfeiffer no greater pleasure than "passing a few days in the midst of the jungle, and enjoying to [her] heart's content the scenery, and the amusement of searching for insects".<sup>11</sup>

Herr Behn sent her a boat to visit nearby islets, and five Malays to help

her. The men came every morning and asked if she wanted the boat. If she didn't, they would join in her rambles through the jungle hunting insects and protecting her from tigers.

"These animals have of late increased tremendously", she was told. And the beasts "do not hesitate to break into the plantations and carry off the labourers in broad daylight. In the year 1851, it is stated that no less than the almost incredible number of four hundred persons were destroyed by them".<sup>12</sup> But even these harrowing stories could not deter her from "finding the greatest delight in roaming from morning till evening in these most beautiful woods".<sup>13</sup>

Pfeiffer's Malay companions were armed with muskets and long knives. "We saw traces of tigers every day; we found the marks of their claws imprinted in the sand or soft earth; and one



day at noon, one of these unwelcome guests came quite near to our cottage, and fetched himself a dog, which he devoured quite at his leisure only a few hundred steps off.”<sup>14</sup>

Although Pfeiffer wrote in her book that 400 people a year were killed by tigers in Singapore, she was in fact repeating a widespread myth that virtually every visitor in those years was told. The British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace would repeat the same dramatic story in his book, *The Malay Archipelago*, published in 1869. In fact, the death toll from tiger attacks was more like 20 per year.<sup>15</sup>

#### Collecting Specimens

While tigers were a concern, the richness and diversity of the forest made it far too enticing for Pfeiffer to cower indoors. She wrote:

“I was busy with the beautiful objects that presented themselves to my observation at every step. Here merry little monkeys were springing from bough to bough, there brightly

The blue-tailed bee-eater is a common sight in Singapore. This painting of the bee-eater in a candlenut tree is one of 477 watercolours in the William Farquhar Collection of Natural History Drawings at the National Museum of Singapore. Gift of Mr G. K. Goh. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



plumed birds flew suddenly out; plants that seemed to have their roots in the trunks of the trees, twined their flowers and blossoms among the branches or peeped out from the thick foliage; and then again the trees themselves excited my admiration by their size, their height, and their wonderful forms. Never shall I forget the happy days I passed in that Singapore jungle.”<sup>16</sup>

On 30 November 1851, Pfeiffer wrote to Vinzenz Kollar, her museum contact in Vienna. The insect collecting was not as productive as she had hoped. Nevertheless, she was sending back another cache of specimens.

“Oh my dear Herr Kollar,” Pfeiffer wrote, “you cannot believe how difficult it is to send collections when funds are so extremely limited as with me.” She then asked Kollar to sell the specimens not needed for the museum’s collection and to turn them “into money because to [her] every small profit is of great value.”<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, Pfeiffer had not brought enough alcohol to preserve the many specimens that could not be dried and preserved. All of her larger specimens rotted almost immediately in the hot and humid tropical weather. She did manage to collect a new species of mole cricket (*Gryllotalpa fulvipes*) and for almost a century, hers was the only specimen ever found.<sup>18</sup>

She was, however, more successful in drying seaweed and preserving fish, the latter earning her a handsome £25 from the British Museum, according to the naturalist Alfred Wallace. He later wrote to Samuel Stevens, their shared London agent, from Singapore saying that he, too, procured fish in the market but wondered, “How did Madame Pfeiffer preserve hers?”<sup>19</sup>

#### Pulau Ubin

During her time in Singapore, Pfeiffer also visited Pulau Ubin, which she described as being off Shangae (Changi). She found it so interesting that she advised her readers not to neglect visiting this island:

“... it has a natural curiosity to show which no geologist I think has been able satisfactorily to explain. The masses of rock on the sea-shore – namely, instead of being smoothed and rounded as they usually are when constantly washed over by the tides – are angular, sharp-edged,



A Dayak head. Image reproduced from Marryat, F.S. (1848). *Borneo and the Indian Archipelago: With drawings of costume and scenery*. London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans.

and split into various compartments. The clefts are from a foot to a foot and a half deep, and the edges stand one or two feet apart.”<sup>20</sup>

Pfeiffer also noted that “a magnificent lighthouse had been built” from the granite quarries of Ubin.<sup>21</sup> This was the Horsburgh Lighthouse on Pedra Branca.

#### Living with Head-hunters

On 2 December 1851, Pfeiffer departed for Sarawak. Her hosts, the representatives of the absent James Brooke, the “White Rajah” of Sarawak,<sup>22</sup> secretly thought this middle-aged lady traveller was rather ridiculous. When Wallace later visited Sarawak in 1854, he was told that she resembled the fictitious Mrs Harris in the satirical magazine *Punch*. This was not a very flattering image as Mrs Harris was an ageing, opinionated, gossipy, bossy and clearly ridiculous busybody.

While in Sarawak, Pfeiffer travelled through the territory of the Dayak head-hunters, an unprecedented journey for a European. She stayed in a succession of Dayak longhouses, sometimes with freshly decapitated human heads drying over a fire near where she slept. Of one encounter with these heads, she wrote:

“They were blackened by smoke, the flesh only half dried, the skin unconsumed, lips and ears shrivelled

together, the former standing wide apart, so as to display the teeth in all their hideousness. The heads were still covered with hair; and one had even the eyes open, though drawn far back into their sockets.”<sup>23</sup>

Pfeiffer’s response to this was interesting though. She wrote:

“I shuddered, but could not help asking myself whether, after all, we Europeans are not really just as bad or worse than these despised savages? Is not every page of our history filled with horrid deeds of treachery and murder?”<sup>24</sup>

Pfeiffer subsequently made her way through the very heart of Borneo to the Dutch port of Pontianak in the south. When she arrived, the Dutch officials were utterly dumfounded that she had crossed the mountains from Sarawak. The *Athenaeum* magazine called it “one

of the most extraordinary journeys made by a European in Borneo”.<sup>25</sup>

#### Close Encounters with Cannibals

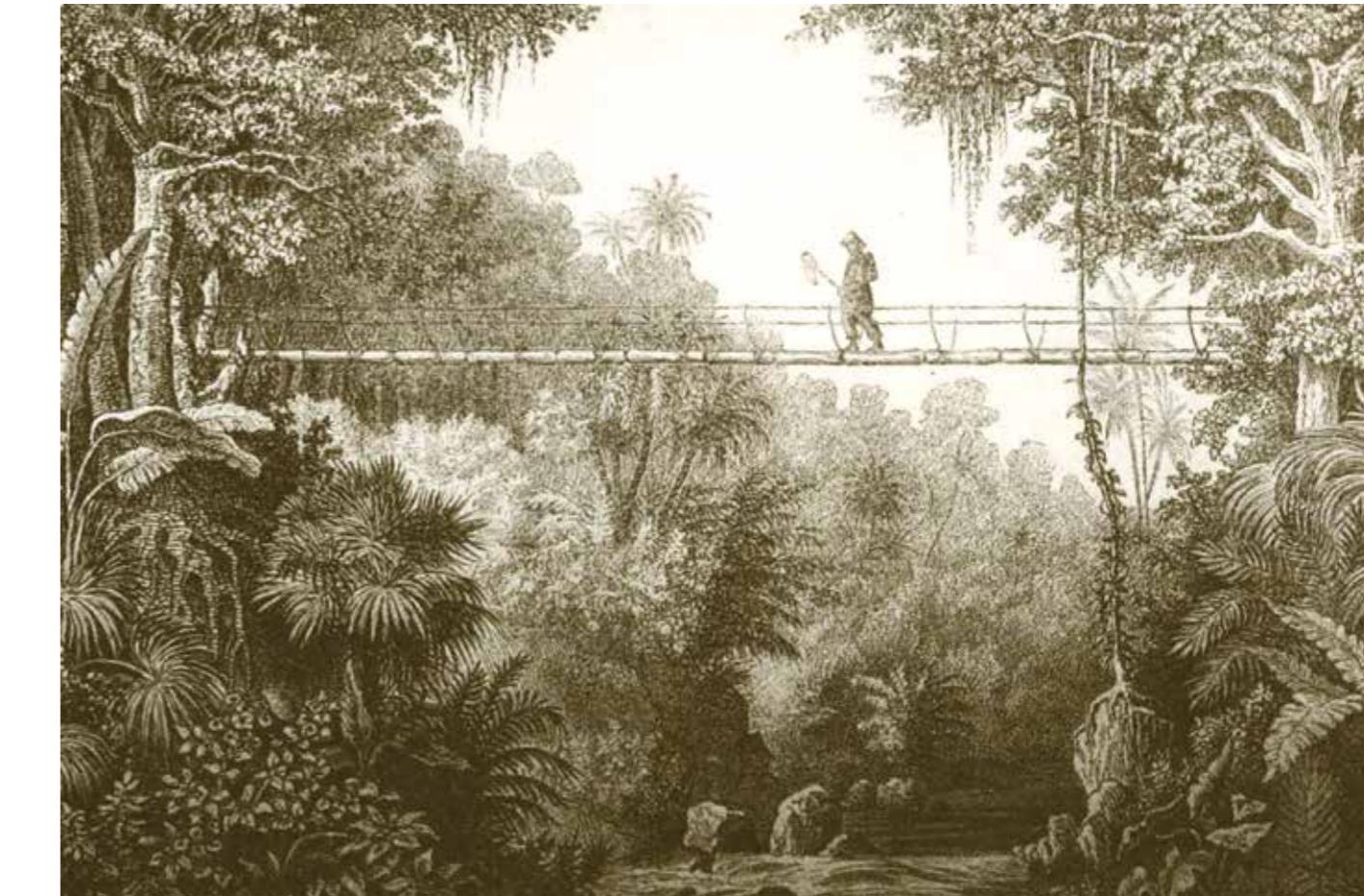
Pfeiffer later made her way through Sumatra where she almost came to an untimely end. Again she insisted on visiting the remotest and wildest places, to boldly go where no European had gone before. Her goal was to reach an inland lake, Lake Toba, reportedly deep in the territory of the infamous cannibals—the Batak people. No European had ever seen Lake Toba.

She pushed on into Batak territory, venturing further than any European had ever reached, each day negotiating permission to enter the territory of the next village.

Eventually, Pfeiffer’s presence could no longer be tolerated. One day, she was encircled by 80 armed men, shouting and gesticulating violently. Despite the fact that she could not understand a word of their language, there was no mistaking that they meant business. “They pointed with their

(Right) Ida Pfeiffer calms the Batak in Sumatra in one encounter. Image reproduced from Stökl, H. (1920). *Die Weltfahrten der österreichischen Reisenden Ida Pfeiffer. Erzählt von Helene Stökl. Mit einem Bildnis der Weltreisenden und Bildern von Fritz Gareis*. Vienna: Österr. Schulbücherverlag.

(Below) Ida Pfeiffer crossing Dayak bamboo bridge in Sarawak with a butterfly net in hand. Image reproduced from Pfeiffer, I. (1856). *Meine zweite Weltreise (vol. II)*. Vienna: Gerold.



knives to my throat, and gnashed their teeth at my arm, moving their jaws then, as if they already had them full of my flesh.”<sup>26</sup>

Pfeiffer, however, had memorised a little speech for just such an occasion. Standing up and looking straight in the eye of the chief closest to her, she clapped him familiarly on the shoulder, and said in a half-Malay and half-Batak phrase,



## THE WRITING OF WANDERLUST

**John van Wyhe** talks about the research process behind his book on Ida Pfeiffer and his assessment of her as a traveller and collector.

**You're known as an expert on Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace. How did you learn about Ida Pfeiffer and why did she intrigue you?**

I came across her while doing research for my 2013 book on Alfred Russel Wallace. I wanted to read about as many travellers to Singapore and Southeast Asia in those years as possible in order to enrich the story I could tell. Pfeiffer was one such traveller. Her writing was excellent and her adventures unbelievable. I could not resist reading more and more about her.

**What was the research process like?**

I spent four to five years researching this book. I bought all of her books and made extensive use of resources such as



John van Wyhe at Lake Toba, following in Ida Pfeiffer's footsteps.

8 Pfeiffer, 1852, p. 125.

9 Pfeiffer, 1852, p. 127.

10 The Free Press. (1851, November 21). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

11 Pfeiffer, I. (1855). *A lady's second journey round the world: From London to the Cape of Good Hope, Borneo, Java, Sumatra, Celebes, Ceram, the Moluccas, etc. California, Panama, Peru, Ecuador, and the United States* (vol. I, p. 50). London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans. (Not available in NLB holdings)

12 Pfeiffer, 1855, vol. I, p. 51.

13 Pfeiffer, 1855, vol. I, p. 51.

14 Pfeiffer, 1855, vol. I, p. 52.

15 Wallace, A.R. (1869). *The Malay Archipelago: The land of the orang-utan, and the bird of paradise: A narrative of travel, with studies of man and nature* (vol. II, p. 37). London: Macmillan & Co. Retrieved from Wallace Online. Also see van Wyhe, J. (Ed.). (2014). *The annotated Malay Archipelago by Alfred Russel Wallace* (p. 86). Singapore: NUS Press. (Call no.: RSING 959.8 ANN); van Wyhe, J. (2013). *Dispelling the darkness: Voyage in the Malay Archipelago and the discovery of evolution by Wallace and Darwin* (pp. 83–86). Singapore: World Scientific Publishing. (Call no.: R 576.82092 VAN)

16 Pfeiffer, 1855, vol. I, p. 51.

17 Quoted in Riedl-Dorn, C. (2001). Ida Pfeiffer (pp. 265–269). In W. Seipel (Ed.), *Die Entdeckung der*

Welt. *Die Welt der Entdeckungen Österreichische Forscher, Sammler, Abenteurer*. Vienna: Skira. (Not available in NLB holdings)

18 NParks Flora & Fauna web. (2019). *Gryllotalpa fulvipes (Saussure, 1877)*. Retrieved from Flora & Fauna Web.

19 Wallace to Samuel Stevens, 12 May 1856. See van Wyhe, J., & Rookmaaker, K. (Eds.). (2013). *Alfred Russel Wallace: Letters from the Malay Archipelago* (p. 80). Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Call no.: RSEA 508.092 WAL)

20 Pfeiffer, I. (1856). *A lady's second journey round the world: From London to the Cape of Good*

Hope, Borneo, Java, Sumatra, Celebes, Ceram, the Moluccas, etc. California, Panama, Peru, Ecuador, and the United States (p. 53). New York: Harper & Brothers. (Not available in NLB holdings)

21 Pfeiffer 1855, vol. I, p. 49.

22 The White Rajahs were a dynastic monarchy of the British Brooke family, who ruled Sarawak from 1841 to 1946. The first White Rajah was James Brooke, who ruled until his death in 1868. As a reward for helping the Sultan of Brunei suppress "insurgency" among the indigenous peoples, Brooke was made Rajah of Sarawak in 1841.

23 Pfeiffer, 1855, vol. 1, p. 84.

24 Pfeiffer, 1856, p. 60.

25 Anon. (1861, August 3). [Review of] Ida Pfeiffer's last travels. *The London Review*, vol. 3, p. 153.

26 Anon, 1861, p. 153

27 Pfeiffer's words are quoted by von Humboldt. See Müller, C. (Ed.). (2010). *Alexander von Humboldt und das Preußische Königshaus. Briefe aus den Jahren 1835–1857* (p. 255). Severus Verlag. (Not available in NLB holdings)

as plants, minerals, fungi, seaweed, crustaceans, fish, and ethnographic artefacts of many kinds.

**You've obviously spent a lot of time thinking about Pfeiffer. What do you find most striking about her and what do you think were her weak points?**

She was a fascinating human being and her exploits were amazing. She was a woman of her time though, and as a historian, one cannot just praise things that agree with our modern values and condemn things that don't.

I feel that what she lacked most was preparatory research. She did almost no research about the places she was going to visit. She could have understood much more about the places she visited if she had. For example, when she travelled in China, she was amazed to see people eating with chopsticks, which she had never heard of. This was astonishingly ignorant. Any basic book on China would have told her about such things.

She was also very stubborn. She never followed the advice of local experts, no matter how dangerous they said a part of her journey would be. She would just go ahead anyway. This includes her final destination, Madagascar, which ultimately cost her her life.

**Finally, you've written extensively about Darwin and Wallace, and now Pfeiffer. Who's next on your list?**

I have returned to my primary area of research on Darwin and Wallace and I'm about to submit another book on Darwin, which has been 10 years in the making.



"Don't eat me. I am an old woman so my flesh is very tough."<sup>27</sup>

The tension was dispelled, and laughing, the armed men dispersed. Unfortunately, Pfeiffer never made it to Lake Toba as she was eventually forced to turn back.

Her journey continued to the Spice Islands of Maluku where she trekked all the way across the mountainous island of Seram to visit the Alfur people, who were also said to be head-hunters. From Batavia, her fame gained her the offer of a free passage across the Pacific to California.

From California, Pfeiffer visited Peru and Ecuador. Unable to swim, she almost drowned when she fell off a boat in Ecuador. Travelling across Panama, she landed at New Orleans where she was outraged by the slave trade. Eventually she toured New York and Boston before returning home via London in 1855. She had circled the globe alone for a second time.

### Final Journey: Madagascar (1856–58)

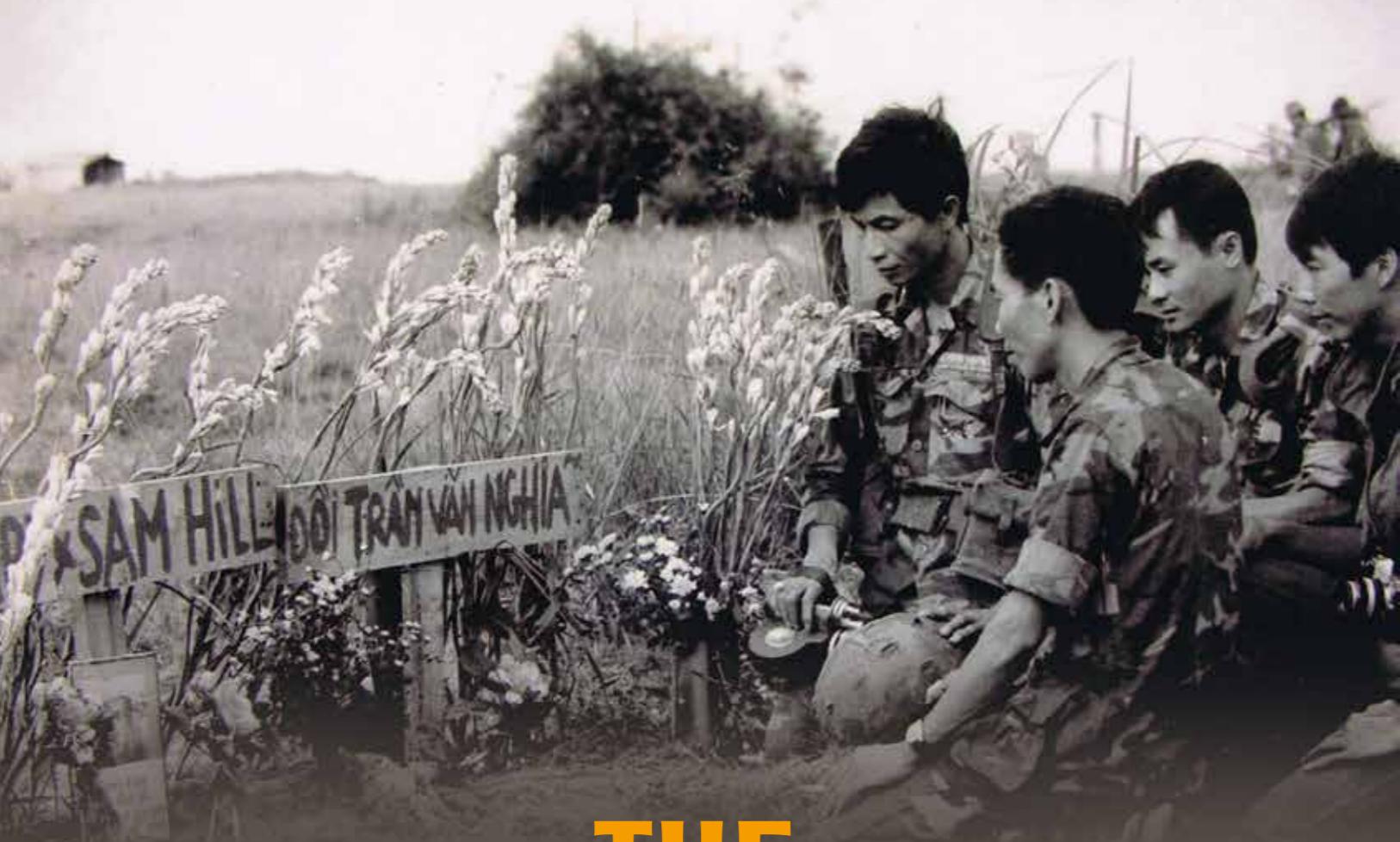
Pfeiffer's next and last journey in 1856 was to a land almost completely unknown to Europeans: the Indian Ocean island of Madagascar. To reach it, she had to travel via South Africa and Mauritius.



**John van Wyhe's *Wanderlust: The Amazing Ida Pfeiffer, the First Female Tourist* (2019)** retails at major bookshops and is also available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 910.41 VAN and SING 910.41 VAN).

The 1888 French edition of Ida Pfeiffer's second book, *Voyage autour du monde de Mme. Ida Pfeiffer (Voyage Around the World by Mme. Ida Pfeiffer)*, translated by E. Delauney can be viewed at the "On Paper: Singapore Before 1867" exhibition held at level 10 of the National Library Building.





# THE VIETNAM WAR — THROUGH — SINGAPOREAN EYES

Four journalists from Singapore covered the Vietnam War for the international news media. Only one survived. **Shirlene Noordin** has the story.

**Shirlene Noordin** is a communications consultant specialising in arts and culture. In 2011, she organised the exhibition "Requiem - By the Photographers Who Died In Vietnam and Indochina" with NAFA Galleries. In March 2019, she curated the exhibition "Battlefield Lens: Photographers of Indochina Wars 1950–1975" held at the Selegie Arts Centre.

Some of the most iconic and impactful images of the 20th century emerged from the Vietnam War, or Second Indochina War, which took place from 1955 to 1975.

During what the Vietnamese called the Resistance War Against America, the world's media had unprecedented access to the combat zone as these photographers followed American troops into battle. By 1968, at the height of the war, there were about 600 accredited journalists in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> Photographers, camera crew and war correspondents could easily hitch a ride in a helicopter and find themselves in the thick of combat action. The media had unfettered access to the events as they unfolded, with the photographers and cameramen obtaining some of the most vivid, uncensored images and video footage of war ever captured.

As a result, for the first time, images of the war were beamed directly into the homes of Americans and people around the world through television, and also appeared in newspapers and magazines. As Vietnam is more than 13,000 km away from the US, these images helped provide new perspectives and shape the understanding of a conflict that, as a result of the draft – as conscription was known<sup>2</sup> – directly affected a large swathe of American society.

Many of the journalists covering the conflict were American. However, because it was such a significant event, journalists from all over the world descended on Saigon to document the war, including those from Asia.

Among the Asian journalists were at least four Singaporeans – Chin Kah Chong, Sam Kai Faye, Terence “Terry” Khoo and Chellapah “Charlie” Canagaratnam. Sadly, of the four, only Chin survived.

## Chin Kah Chong

Born in Singapore in 1931, Chin Kah Chong began writing for several news outlets from the early 1950s. He started out as an intern for the Chinese newspaper *Chung Shing Jit Poh* and a number of

other Chinese papers, and also did a three-month stint in Kuala Lumpur.

When Chin set foot in Saigon in 1954, it was by accident rather than design. He was not in the city to cover the ongoing First Indochina War<sup>3</sup> (1945–54). By chance, his Hong Kong-bound plane had to be diverted to Saigon airport due to engine trouble. This was two weeks before the French defeat on 7 May 1954 at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu fought against Viet Minh forces.<sup>4</sup> The scene that greeted him on the tarmac was of wounded French soldiers waiting to be evacuated.<sup>5</sup> This was his first brush with the Indochina Wars (see text box on page 42).

When Chin was covering the Bandung Conference in April 1955, he met Hawaii-born and Hong Kong-based journalist Norman Soong, who had founded the Pan Asian News Agency (PANA) as an independent international news agency “of Asians, by Asians, for Asians”.<sup>6</sup> Chin was offered the job to manage and write for the agency’s Chinese-language news service based in Singapore.

One of Chin’s first major assignments for PANA was the Baling Talks on 28 December 1955, which brought together Tunku Abdul Rahman, Chief Minister of the Federation of Malaya;

David Marshall, Chief Minister of Singapore; and Chin Peng, leader of the Malayan Communist Party, to discuss amnesty. In 1956, PANA sent him to Saigon for five months to cover the unifying national elections that had been established by the Geneva Accords of 1954.<sup>7</sup> Thus began his two-decade-long coverage of the Vietnam War, shuttling between Singapore and Saigon.

The elections never took place because it was cancelled by South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. However, in 1956, Chin managed to score an exclusive interview with Tran Le Xuan, popularly known as Madame Nhu. She was the wife of the president’s younger brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, who was also the president’s chief political adviser. As President Diem was not married, Madame Nhu assumed the duties of the first lady.

Chin recounted in his 2011 memoir, 越南, 我在现场: 一个战地记者的回忆 (*Vietnam, I Was There: A War Correspondent’s Stories*), that it was during the interview when he came up with the title “First Lady”, which was later widely used by the Western press. Madame Nhu was extremely pleased as she hated the nickname “Mother Tigress” which the American correspondents had given her.<sup>8</sup>



(Facing page) South Vietnamese soldiers paying their respects to the memory of Sam Kai Faye, Terry Khoo and South Vietnamese Army photographer Tran Van Nghia at the spot where the three men were killed in a sniper attack on 20 July 1972. The memorial was built by Tony Hirashiki (ABC News cameraman) and friends. The sign on the left (cut off in the photo) reads “Terry + Sam Hill”. Courtesy of Chin Kah Chong.

(Left) Chin Kah Chong at the 17th Parallel, the Vietnamese Demilitarised Zone (DMZ), 1965. Photo taken by Sam Kai Faye. Courtesy of Chin Kah Chong.

As a committed journalist covering a war, Chin went on risky missions to get to the heart of a story.

In 1961, Chin was one of three journalists – the other two were from Russian newspaper *Pravda* and *The New York Times* – invited by Norodom Sihanouk, then Cambodia's head of state, to visit the Cambodia-Vietnam border to dispel accusations from the South Vietnamese government against him for sheltering Viet Cong fighters in Cambodia. At the time, Cambodia had closed its doors to Western journalists.<sup>9</sup>

In April 1965, Chin and his Japanese photographer colleague H. Okamura ventured into the Iron Triangle, an area northwest of Saigon that had become a major stronghold of the Viet Cong. It was also where the final attack on Saigon was orchestrated in 1975. They were accompanied by a female Viet Cong liaison officer for a meeting with Viet Cong fighters. After a four-hour bus ride northwest of Saigon, they arrived at an abandoned rubber plantation. They were met by a five-year-old boy who led them to the village of Bau Bong. There, they were briefed by a Viet Cong cadre who told them that the village had been heavily bombed by US air force planes just a few days before.

When the Vietnam War ended, Chin continued running PANA's Chinese-language news service from Singapore until his retirement in 2004. He has written several books, one of which, 我所知道的李光耀 (*LKY Whom I Knew*),<sup>10</sup> won the Singapore Literature Prize in the Chinese

non-fiction category in 2016. Though now in his 80s, Chin continues to write and is currently working on his next book.

#### Terence "Terry" Khoo and Sam Kai Faye

It was Chin who spurred two fellow Singaporean journalists – Terence (better known as Terry) Khoo and Sam Kai Faye, former photographers with *The Straits Times*, to venture to Vietnam. Both Khoo and Sam covered the war for about a decade, between 1962 and 1972.

Born in 1924 in Penang, Sam came to Singapore to work for *The Straits Times* from 1950 to 1955, where he was an award-winning photographer. In 1954, he became the first Asian to win the Best News Picture in the British Press Pictures of the Year Competition for his photo of a plane crash at Kallang Airport.<sup>11</sup> He also won the British Commonwealth Photo Contest in 1958 and 1959.

After leaving the newspaper, Sam struck out on his own as a freelance photographer and shared office space with PANA, where Chin was the bureau chief. As PANA did not have its own staff photographers, it frequently used Sam for assignments.

Khoo, who worked at *The Straits Times* from 1954 to 1956, was 12 years younger than Sam. But despite the age difference, they became best friends with Sam taking Khoo under his wing in the newsroom. Khoo would often visit Sam at the PANA office; soon, Khoo began taking on assignments for the agency.

Chin, Khoo and Sam became fast friends, and Chin often took the other two on assignments in Singapore and Malaya in the mid-1950s. The three of them covered the Malayan Emergency during the latter part of the 1950s as well as the Duke of Edinburgh's visit to Sarawak in 1959.

In 1960, Chin arranged their first trip to Vietnam. A Royal Air Force (RAF) plane was scheduled to fly Singapore-based journalists to Saigon to cover a story about an RAF-led relief mission for flood victims. Chin managed to get both Sam and Khoo on the same flight as him. While there, Sam and Khoo were so enamoured of the city that they missed their flight home and a special flight had to be arranged for them the next day.<sup>12</sup>

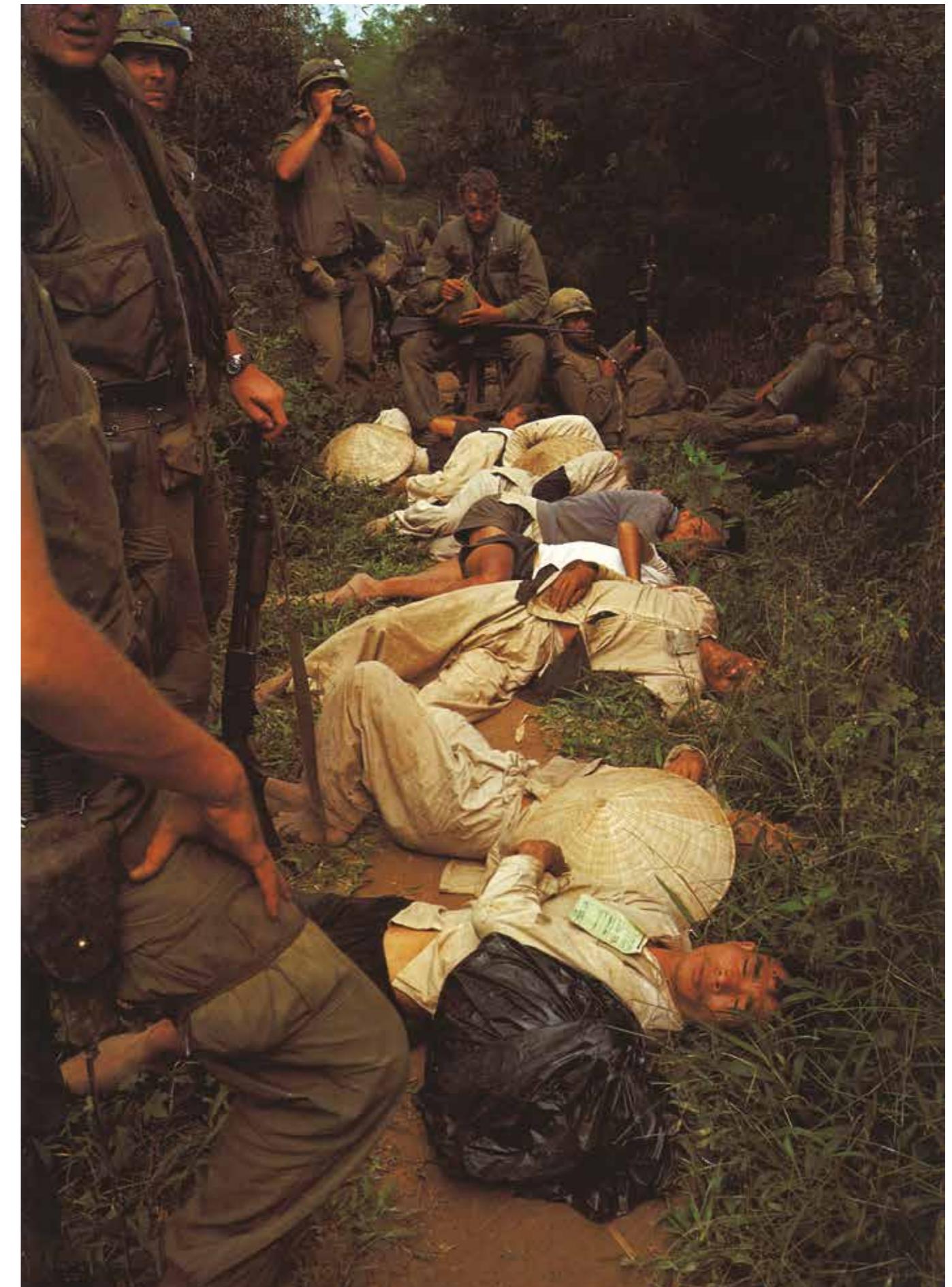
In late 1962, Khoo moved to Saigon to work, while Sam did so much later. Chin related that Khoo was able to make the move earlier because he was single, while Sam, although unmarried, was running a photography business with his elder brother, Sam Kai Yee, who was also a *Straits Times* photographer.<sup>13</sup>

In Saigon, Khoo worked initially as a freelancer and counted among his mentors David Halberstam of *The New York Times* and Neil Sheehan of United Press International, both Pulitzer Prize winners, as well as Malcolm Brown of the Associated Press and the prominent historian and war correspondent, Bernard B. Fall.<sup>14</sup> Khoo also did some work for *Asia Magazine*, a widely circulated weekly publication focusing on topics in Asia.

Before long, Khoo was hired by ABC News as a cameraman where he became much sought after for not only his keen eye, but also his language skills and personable nature. Apart from speaking English, Malay and several Chinese dialects, Khoo picked up French and Vietnamese, thus making him indispensable to his American colleagues. The ability to speak the local language also endeared him to the Vietnamese with whom he worked.

**(Left)** Chin Kah Chong returning from a visit to the US airbase in Pleiku, 1965. Photo was taken by the legendary French photographer Henri Huet who later died in a helicopter crash over Laos in 1971. Terry Khoo was supposed to be on the helicopter but he had given up his place to Huet whom he respected as a senior photographer. Courtesy of Chin Kah Chong.

**(Facing page)** An undated photo of Viet Cong prisoners. Photo taken by Terry Khoo. Image reproduced from Fass, H., & Page, T. (Eds.) (1997). *Requiem: By the Photographers who Died in Vietnam and Indochina* (p. 258). New York: Random House. [Call no.: RSEA q959.7043 REQ-WAR]





Among the Asian journalists, Khoo was looked upon as a leader and mentor, especially to many of the younger, inexperienced journalists in Saigon. He welcomed them at his house, which was fondly referred to as "Terry's Villa", and provided them with food. He even lent money whenever someone was in need.<sup>15</sup>

Khoo's ability to remain cool and calm under pressure also earned him great respect among his peers. In Cambodia, where the situation was far more unpredictable and dangerous, Khoo and his ABC News colleagues – American correspondent Steve Bell and Japanese soundman Takayuki Senzaki – were once captured by an insurgent patrol and held for several hours in an area several kilometres outside of Phnom Penh. Khoo managed to talk his way out of the situation and even offered himself up as hostage when the insurgents wanted to hold Steve Bell. Luckily for everyone, the leader changed his mind and let them all go free.

An incident in early June 1972 in the besieged town of An Loc, in southeastern Vietnam, demonstrated the kind of person Khoo was. When Khoo and ABC News correspondent Howard Tuckner arrived in An Loc, they found it littered with dead bodies as well as numerous wounded American soldiers waiting to be evacuated by helicopter.

After completing their assignment, Khoo and Tuckner were supposed to return by helicopter to Saigon that same day. However, instead of boarding the only helicopter of the day, the two men elected to give up their seats to severely wounded soldiers in need of urgent medical attention.

Staying an unplanned night in An Loc could have cost them their lives and

**(Facing page top)** ABC crew Sam Kai Faye, Don Baker, Hoang Dinh De (soundman) and an unnamed person on board US aircraft carrier, USS Coral Sea, c. 1967. Courtesy of Sam Yoke Tatt.

**(Facing page bottom)** Terry Khoo with Tony Hirashiki (ABC News cameraman) in Quang Tri in July 1972, 10 days before Khoo and Sam Kai Faye were killed on 20 July. According to Hirashiki, they seldom took photos together at the frontline and this was one of the few rare photos of them together in the field. On the far left is a South Vietnamese soldier. Courtesy of Chin Kah Chong.

**(Right)** A gathering of friends at the home of ABC News cameraman Tony Hirashiki, which was located on Pasteur Street in Saigon, c. 1971. From left: Terry Khoo (seated on the floor), Sam Kai Faye, Tony Hirashiki, Mrs Hirashiki, Mrs Morita and Koichiro Morita (AP photograher). The Asian photographers and camera crew used to gather at Khoo's or Hirashiki's home. Courtesy of Chin Kah Chong.

their exclusive report but they made the decision to stay. For his bravery, skill and generous spirit, Khoo was dubbed "The Dean of the Vietnam Cameramen".

Sam Kai Faye, who had left for Saigon in the late 1960s, started as a freelance cameraman for ABC News, but soon became a permanent member of the team. Sam Yoke Tatt, Sam Kai Faye's only nephew, remembers his uncle as a calm, mild-mannered man with an adventurous streak. It was this sense of adventure that drew him to cover the Vietnam War, despite the obvious dangers.

From 1959 until the time he left for Vietnam, Sam and his brother Kai Yee ran a photography business in Singapore called Sam Brothers Photographers, doing commercial, event and editorial photography work. According to Sam Yoke Tatt, Khoo, who had already established himself in Saigon, persuaded Sam Kai Faye to leave Singapore to join him at ABC News as a cameraman, although Sam was more of a stills photographer. Once in Vietnam, Khoo helped Sam familiarise himself with the film camera, which Sam quickly mastered.<sup>16</sup>

Among the many assignments that Sam took on for ABC News was one on a B-52 bombing mission over North Vietnam. His nephew, Yoke Tatt, said that Sam had received a certificate from the American military when the mission was completed.<sup>17</sup>

Both Khoo and Sam were described by Kevin Delany, ABC News bureau chief, as "tough and courageous Singapore Chinese who had produced years of combat footage".<sup>18</sup>

### It's All Fate Anyway...

In late 1971, Chin met with Khoo and Sam in Saigon for what would be the last time all three would be together. Chin was with Sam in his hotel room, chatting about the situation in Vietnam and the future. Khoo had not arrived as he was delayed by the curfew, which took place regularly after dark in Saigon.<sup>19</sup>

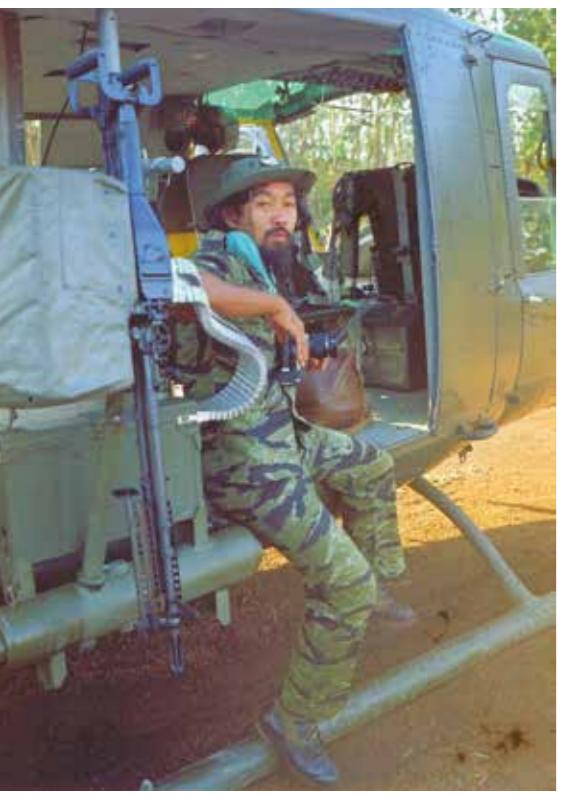
Chin remembered Sam saying that he was feeling more and more afraid of the situation. The Viet Cong forces were becoming better armed, and the fighting was getting more intense. Sam told Chin that he wanted to call it a day and return to Singapore.

Khoo joined them after midnight and, like Sam, also felt that it was time to leave. That night, the three Singaporeans talked about their future into the wee hours of the morning.

Yasutsune "Tony" Hirashiki, a renowned ABC News cameraman and Khoo's best friend in Vietnam, wrote in his memoir, *On the Frontlines of the Television War: A Legendary War Cameraman in Vietnam*, about Khoo's growing anxiety over their safety in Vietnam. Khoo told Hirashiki that he had accepted a transfer to ABC's bureau in Bonn, Germany. The Singaporean had become engaged to Winnie Ng, a secretary in ABC's Hong Kong office, and he was looking forward to getting married and starting a new life with her.

Some time in mid-July 1972, Khoo returned to Saigon after a vacation in Hong Kong and was supposed to remain there in preparation for his imminent departure to Bonn. Instead of remaining





in Saigon, Khoo told his bureau chief Kevin Delany that he needed a few more photographs for an unfinished feature story and left for Hue on 15 July.

On 18 July, Korean cameraman In Jip Choi was supposed to relieve Khoo in Hue. As Choi was nursing a nasty cold, Delany asked Sam to go in Choi's place. The plan was for Choi to take over from Sam once he was feeling better. Together with newly minted news correspondent Arnie Collins, Sam arrived in Hue on 20 July to replace the crew consisting of Khoo, Korean soundman T.H. Lee and veteran American correspondent Jim Bennett.

In Hue, Khoo heard a rumour that a North Vietnamese tank had been spotted west of Highway One, between Hue and Quang Tri City, located south of the demilitarised zone. Quang Tri was the site of the bloody Easter Offensive of 1972 during which the North Vietnamese

Terry Khoo in a helicopter wearing army fatigues and carrying a still camera during a mission in Laos, c. 1971. Courtesy of Chin Kah Chong.

army launched a large-scale campaign in an effort to gain territory. The fighting began on 31 March and continued until 22 October that year.

Never one to miss a story, Khoo insisted on checking out the situation although having completed his last assignment, he was supposed to be on his way back to Saigon. On 20 July, Khoo, Sam, T.H. Lee and South Vietnamese Army photographer Tran Van Nghia headed to an open field near Highway One where fighting was reported to have occurred.

Moving into the deceptively quiet field with their heavy camera equipment, the men were suddenly caught by sniper fire, which hit Sam. Everyone quickly dived for cover. Lee asked Khoo, "Are you all right?" to which Khoo replied, "I'm ok but Sam has been hit."<sup>20</sup>

When a second attack happened, Lee heard Khoo moaning in pain. Tran was also injured but Lee, who was trained in martial arts, managed to roll along the ground until he reached the edge of the field near the road and escape to safety.

On 30 April 1975, Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese Army. According to estimates, about three million Vietnamese civilians and combatants died during the conflict while close to 60,000 Americans were killed or missing in action.

The war in Vietnam soon spilled over into neighbouring Cambodia and Laos, resulting in the Third Indochina War (1975–91) which involved Thailand and China. In 1975, armed conflicts between Vietnam and Cambodia resulted in the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978 that eventually led to the fall of the Khmer Rouge government in Phnom Penh. The remaining Khmer Rouge forces retreated to the Thai-Cambodian border. In the following decade, Thai and Vietnamese troops clashed on several occasions.

China had objected to the invasion of Cambodia and launched attacks on Vietnam's northern provinces in February 1979, capturing several cities near the border. Although China withdrew from Vietnam in March 1979, both countries were engaged in border disputes and clashes until 1990. The 1991 Paris Peace Agreements officially marked the end of the war between Vietnam and Cambodia.

## THE INDOCHINA WARS: A SHORT HISTORY

The First Indochina War (1945–54), or what the Vietnamese called the Anti-French Resistance War, came on the back of World War II in Asia. The returning French colonial forces were pitted against the nationalists led by Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap, united under the banner of the Viet Minh fighting for Vietnamese independence.

Fearing a communist victory, the United States officially provided military assistance to the French in 1950 and laid the groundwork for the subsequent protracted American involvement in Indochina.

The Viet Minh forces were, in turn, supported by China and the Soviet Union. What started as a low-level insurgency escalated into conventional war, which raged on until the Battle of Dien Bien Phu that lasted from 13 March to 7 May 1954 and saw the defeat of France.

In July 1954, the Geneva Agreements were signed. As part of the agreement, the French agreed to withdraw their troops from North Vietnam, leaving the Viet Minh in control.

South Vietnam came under the control of Ngo Dinh Diem, who was first the prime minister and then became president in 1955.

The heavy fighting continued with Khoo, Sam and Tran caught in the cross-fire. A US reconnaissance plane later saw Khoo and Sam lying motionless, side by side on the ground, but could not confirm if they were dead or alive. After three days of heavy shooting, their bodies were finally retrieved. Hirashiki and Delany had to identify the bodies.<sup>21</sup>

In 2006, Delany wrote, "It was clearly the low point of my stay in Vietnam. Heavy fighting had continued in the area of ambush for three days after they went down, and by the time another cameraman and I were able to travel to the scene, we had trouble identifying their remains."<sup>22</sup>

According to Chin, the hospital in Saigon had instructed that the coffins remained closed during Khoo's and Sam's funeral service in Singapore.

Following the deaths of his two good friends, Chin recalled that Khoo had once said, "When I die, I'll surely go to heaven, because I've already been to hell," a reference to his experiences during the war. ABC News correspondent Arnie Collins, who was with Khoo and Sam before they left on their fateful assignment, recounted Khoo's last words after warnings for them to be careful: "It's all fate anyway, baby, so play it cool."<sup>23</sup>

In memory of both men, ABC News set up a two-year fellowship in the name of Terence Khoo and Sam Kai Faye for Asian students studying at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. Khoo also bequeathed a third of his insurance money of \$62,500 to the University of Singapore (now National University of Singapore). Yearly awards of \$1,300 were given to medical students from low-income families.

## Chellapah "Charlie" Canagaratnam

The fourth Singaporean journalist in Vietnam was Chellapah Canagaratnam, nicknamed Charlie or Charles Chellapah by the Americans. He was born in Singapore in 1940, the fourth child in a family of 10.<sup>24</sup>

Chellapah arrived in Saigon in January 1965.<sup>25</sup> Although Chin, Khoo and Sam were in South Vietnam at around the same time that Chellapah was there, there is no evidence that the trio met Chellapah in Saigon or that they were even acquainted with him.

Charlie Chellapah stepping off a US military helicopter, c. 1963. Courtesy of the Canagaratnam family.

Chellapah had been a sports reporter with *The Singapore Free Press*, covering mostly soccer matches before becoming a freelance photographer. He then moved to Kuala Lumpur where he worked for *The Malayan Times* and subsequently to Sabah for the *Sabah Daily Express*.<sup>26</sup>

An avid sportsman, Chellapah raced both cars and motorcycles, and participated in local Grand Prix races. Still a bachelor, his thirst for adventure, his free spirit and sense of purpose brought him to Vietnam where he worked as a freelance photographer for Associated Press. Chellapah's close-up shots of casualties and combat were so dramatic that he was warned by Horst Faas, his Associated Press photo editor, to be careful.<sup>27</sup>

On 14 February 1966, Chellapah was in Cu Chi, northwest of Saigon, where he had accompanied some American soldiers on a road-clearing mission. Cu Chi was also known as Hell's Half Acre because of the sheer number of people killed by camouflaged Viet Cong snipers in the dense jungle, under which was a complex network of connecting tunnels used by the Viet Cong.<sup>28</sup>

During the mission, a Viet Cong mine was set off. As Chellapah scrambled towards those wounded, a second mine exploded, instantly killing everyone. His family only learned of his death later from the BBC World Service.<sup>29</sup>

Chellapah was the third Associated Press photographer to die in Vietnam in less than a year, and Horst Faas had to report the circumstances of his





death to the president of the company. According to Faas, Chellapah's last roll of film showed how he was in the thick of the action.

He said, "Here are the last pictures by photographer Charlie Chellapah... This last roll of film was released by the authorities today along with his other personal effects. The pictures reveal, better than any words could, how close Chellapah was to the action up to the moment of his death."<sup>30</sup> The last photograph taken by him shows an American soldier holding a seriously wounded comrade.<sup>31</sup>

Associated Press made arrangements for Chellapah's body to be flown back to Singapore. He was cremated

and his ashes scattered in the sea off Bedok.<sup>32</sup>

Chellapah's elder brother and his sister recounted that one month after his funeral, they received a letter Chellapah had written before he died, informing them that he was planning to go to Hong Kong and at the same time purchase insurance coverage for himself. Sadly, this did not happen.<sup>33</sup> According to Chellapah's brother C. Tharmalingam, "Chellapah was a selfless person who always put others before himself, whether it was his school mates, colleagues or comrades. It was this commitment to work and friendship which claimed his life. Unfortunately, his courage was his misfortune."<sup>34</sup>

### Leaving a Legacy

These Singaporean journalists went to Vietnam with a sense of purpose and devotion to duty: to bring stories of the war and the people involved in it to the world. The photographs taken by Sam Kai Faye, Terence Khoo and Chellapah "Charlie" Canagaratnam were published in international newspapers and magazines, and the footage they shot appeared nightly on the news on American television. Whether they were aware or not, their perspectives of the war as seen through their work contributed to the international public discourse about Vietnam at the time. As the bureau chief of PANA, the stories that Chin Kah Chong wrote and the books he published offer

**(Facing page)** The last photo that Charlie Chellapah shot before he was killed by a Viet Cong mine on 14 February 1966. It shows an American soldier holding a comrade who had been seriously wounded. *Photo from the Associated Press.*

**(Right)** Charlie Chellapah in the field, 1963/64. *Courtesy of the Canagaratnam family.*

an Asian perspective on this prolonged war in Southeast Asia.

The news stories that these men chased came at a great personal cost. Three of them paid with their lives. Chellapah, in wanting to help the wounded, met his fate, cutting short the life of an exceptional young journalist who had a bright future ahead of him. Sam and Khoo died as they had lived – as best friends committed to each other and wanting to help each other out. Chin survived the war but lost two close friends.

Their consummate professionalism, their selfless courage, and their unstinting generosity of spirit continue to be an inspiration to journalists all over the world. ♦

### NOTES

- 1 Spector, R.H. (n.d.). *The Vietnam War and the media*. Retrieved from Britannica website.
- 2 Conscription in the United States is commonly known as the draft. From a pool of around 27 million, the draft raised some 2.2 million American men for military service during the Vietnam War.
- 3 There were three Indochina wars: First Indochina War (1945–54), the Second Indochina War or Vietnam War (1955–75) and the Third Indochina War (1975–91).
- 4 The Battle of Dien Bien Phu took place between 13 March and 7 May 1954. The French fought against Viet Minh forces for the control of a small mountain outpost on the Vietnamese border near Laos. The Viet Minh, or League for the Independence of Vietnam, was formed by Ho Chi Minh to fight for Vietnamese independence from French rule. The Viet Minh's victory over the French effectively ended the First Indochina War.
- 5 Author's interview with Chin Kah Chong, 11 September 2019.
- 6 陈加昌(Chen, J.C. [a.k.a. Chin Kah Chong]). (2011). 越南, 我在现场: 一个战地记者的回忆 (Vietnam, I was there: A war correspondent's stories) (p. 258). 新加坡: 八方文化创作室. (Call no.: RSING Chinese 959.704 CJC)
- 7 The Geneva Accords of 1954 resulted from a conference held in Geneva, Switzerland, from 26 April to 21 July 1954 that aimed to resolve the war between French and Viet Minh forces. There were representatives from Britain, France, China, the Soviet Union, the United States, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and the State of Vietnam (later South Vietnam). The accords called for national elections in 1956 to reunify Vietnam.
- 8 陈加昌(Chen, J.C. [a.k.a. Chin Kah Chong]). (2011). 越南, 我在现场: 一个战地记者的回忆 (Vietnam, I was there: A war correspondent's stories). 新加坡: 八方文化创作室. (Call no.: RSING Chinese 959.704 CJC); Author's interview with Chin Kah Chong, 11 September 2019.
- 9 Author's interview with Chin Kah Chong, 11 September 2019.
- 10 陈加昌(Chen, J.C. [a.k.a. Chin Kah Chong]). (2015). 我所知道的李光耀 (LKY Whom I Knew). 新加坡: 玲子传媒私人有限公司. (Call no.: RSING Chinese 959.57051092 CJC-[HSI])
- 11 Author's interview with Sam Yoke Tatt, 2011 and on 23 November 2019; Fass, H., & Page, T. (Eds.) (1997). *Requiem: By the photographers who died in Vietnam and Indochina* (p. 318). New York: Random House. (Call no.: RSEA q959.7043 REQ-WAR)
- 12 Author's interview with Chin Kah Chong, 11 September 2019.
- 13 Author's interview with Chin Kah Chong, 21 November 2019.
- 14 Hirashiki, Y. (2017). *On the frontlines of the television war: A legendary war cameraman in Vietnam* (p. 272). Philadelphia: Casemate Publishers. (Call no.: RSEA 959.70438 HIR-[WAR])
- 15 Author's interview with Chin Kah Chong, 11 September 2019; oral interview with Sam Yoke Tatt, 23 November 2019; Hirashiki, 2017, pp. 272–273.
- 16 Author's interview with Sam Yoke Tatt, 23 November 2019.
- 17 Author's interview with Sam Yoke Tatt, 23 November 2019.
- 18 Delany, K. (2006, September). The Saigon I left behind. *Williams Alumni Review*. Retrieved from Williams College website.
- 19 Author's interview with Chin Kah Chong in March 2011 for the Requiem exhibition held in Singapore from 13 June to 21 August 2011.
- 20 Hirashiki, 2017, p. 289.
- 21 Hirashiki, 2017, pp. 289–290.
- 22 Delany, Sep 2006.
- 23 Hirashiki, 2017, p. 272.
- 24 Author's interview with the Chellapah family in April 2011 for the Requiem exhibition held in Singapore from 13 June to 21 August 2011.
- 25 Nag, N. (Ed.). (2016). *Inspirations of a nation: Tribute to 25 Singaporean South Asians* (p. 30). Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co Pte Ltd. (Call no.: RSING 305.8914105957)
- 26 Author's interview with the Chellapah family in April 2011 for the Requiem exhibition held in Singapore from 13 June to 21 August 2011; Nag, 2016, p. 32. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 27 Tay, K.C. (1997, December 6). 'I'm OK.' Moments later, he was shot. *The Straits Times*, p. 28.
- 28 During the Vietnam War, the tunnels were used by Viet Cong soldiers as hiding spots during combat. These also served as communication and supply routes, hospitals, food and weapon caches and even living quarters for the soldiers. The tunnels were instrumental to the Viet Cong in their fight against the American forces and helped to counter the growing American military effort. The 121-kilometre-long Cu Chi Tunnels are a popular tourist attraction today.
- 29 Oral interview with the Chellapah family in April 2011 for the Requiem exhibition held in Singapore from 13 June to 21 August 2011.
- 30 Fass & Page, 1997, p. 174.
- 31 Chellapah, C. (1966, February 14). *Vietnam War photographer's last photo*. Retrieved from Associated Press website.
- 32 Nag, 2016, p. 31.
- 33 Author's interview with the Chellapah family in April 2011 for the Requiem exhibition held in Singapore from 13 June to 21 August 2011.
- 34 Nag, 2016, p. 32.



# Trial by Firing Squad



On 15 February 1915, a mutiny broke out among sepoys (Indian soldiers) of the 5th Light Infantry Regiment based in Singapore. The mutiny lasted almost a week and claimed the lives of 44 people – British soldiers and civilians, as well as Chinese and Malay civilians. More than 200 sepoys were tried by court martial and received varying sentences, while more than 47 were publicly executed at Outram Prison. Initially

portrayed as a minor event confined to Singapore, Umej Bhatia's recently published book *Our Name is Mutiny* argues that the event was part of a larger movement rebelling against the British Raj. This abridged extract is from the first chapter of Bhatia's book, which deliberately uses a novel-like narrative to recount the events.

**T**he end is always a good place to start. Even in the face of its own extinction the mind believes it will go on.

Under the light of Singapore's early evening sun, 16 men are being led out of His Majesty's Criminal Prison on Out-

ram Road. A crowd of about 6,000 have gathered on Golf Hill, opposite Pearl's Hill, to watch the unfolding spectacle. Men, women and children representing all the races and faiths of Singapore – Europeans, Eurasians, Malays, Indians, Chinese and Christians, Buddhists, Muslims and freethinkers – are about to participate in an ancient ritual of public justice. Gently sloping heights that had served as the sixth hole of the Sepoy Lines golf links now double up as a viewing gallery. The onlookers have an unobstructed view from a space looking out towards Outram Park, to be levelled and occupied in the near future by the Singapore General Hospital.

Among the spectators is a six-year-old boy named Chan Chon Hoe.<sup>1</sup> From his home in Pagoda Street, he had followed the military band of Volunteers that marched up New Bridge Road to Outram Road. Now Chon Hoe peeks out from between the legs and shoulders of the gathered crowd to catch a glimpse of the prisoners. The prisoners are all former sepoys, soldiers of the 5th Native Light Infantry of the British Indian army. Shipped in to defend Singapore, they have now been charged with mutiny in the middle of the First World War. The prisoners' armed escort are an imposing squad from the Sikh Police Contingent policemen. The tall and burly Sikhs carry Lee Enfield .303 bolt-action rifles that resemble toys in their massive hands.

Heads bowed, the 16 mutineers are ordered to stand to attention by British Army Major E.H. Hawkins of the 4th Shropshire Light Infantry. They obey instinctively, surrounded by two companies of the 4th Shropshires and other British soldiers from the Singapore garrison. Like surplus caddies, British non-commissioned officers and enlisted men hurriedly form three sides of a square with the prison wall. It has become a full-dress show. Colonial officials are sensitive to the spectacle of British power and its salutary effect on the natives. The difference between loyalty and treachery to King and Emperor must be made clear. Imperial officialdom uses the civilising veneer of ceremony and procedure to demonstrate that the Empire's rule of law trumped the barbaric whims of a debauched Eastern potentate. Never mind the hasty court martial or the macabre theatre that is about to be staged. This Empire had offered the world the Magna Carta. Its ruddy-faced representatives will now serve up an object lesson on the fate of those who ate their salt and then spat it back in their faces.

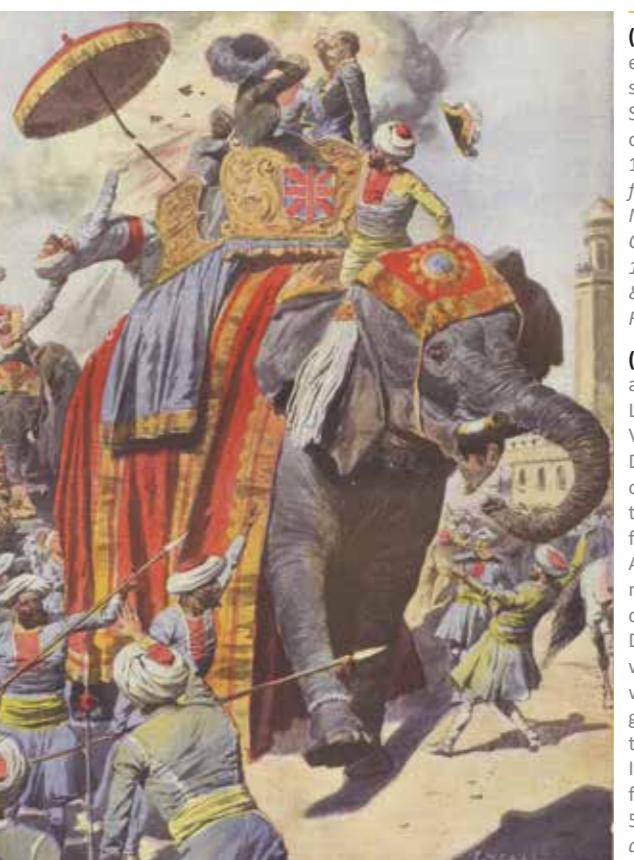
The prisoners and their escort of Sikh constables are a study in stark contrast. The handcuffed sepoys mutineers wear ill-fitting long kurta shirts, Indian dhoti or Malay sarong. The Sikh lawmen, with their headquarters situated next door in Pearl's Hill, represent the force of order in these parts. The police sport striped blue and white pagri (turbans) and wear impassive faces behind groomed, raven-dark beards. Their perfectly pressed khaki uniforms are secured by shiny belt buckles while mirror-polished boots under neat puttees reflect glints of the dying sunlight.

Recruited and drilled by their colonial masters, guards and prisoners alike belong to the so-called martial races of India. Both sets trace their origins to the widest reaches of Punjab, Rajputana and the North-west Frontier, well before its violent partitioning between Muslim and non-Muslim in 1947. Hardy specimens hand-picked to perform a lifetime of military labour. Trained to ensure that religion comes a distant second after loyalty to the British Raj. The Sikhs hail from the fertile west of Punjab, while the mutineers are mainly Muslim Rajputs known as Ranghars from small dusty towns in the more backward eastern reaches of Punjab known today as Haryana. These were towns and villages where camels roamed, and home of the sturdy black Murrah buffalo, with the nearest Sikh and Punjabi speakers further up north.

British orientalists and linguists understood these differences. They know that unlike the Ranghars, Sikhs did not wear a cone-shaped kulla hat under their tall pagri. The colonial social engineers of efficient power maintenance shaped and created the martial races and used the age-old caste and class system to their full advantage. Singapore's Chinese and Malays are largely ignorant of the shades of the

sub-continent. These lesser subjects of His Majesty the King deride the darker South Indians as *kling*, derived from Kalinga, an ancient Indian kingdom, but was derogatorily said to be from the sound of the chains that hobbled them as convict labour. And they label Sikhs, Rajputs and Pathans collectively as Bengalis, because they sailed from the Calcutta port in Bengal to Malaya. Some are confused, having once seen the Ranghars, now bare-headed, wearing turbans, with some even full-whiskered like their Sikh guard.

While some spectators may struggle to discern between the regimented Indians and those in rags, the Sikh police know all the difference between faith and faithlessness. And there is no love lost for the mutineers who had tried to kill some of them in the Central Police Station and even wounded fellow constables. Outram Prison had also come under attack. Now the only remaining link of values between the Sikh police and the sepoys mutineers was a devotion to the code of *izzat*, or reputation and respect. A question of manly pride, of honour and of shame. *Izzat* made good soldiers. But if offended it made them vendetta-hunters seeking revenge at any cost. And *izzat* required them to die like men.



(Facing page) The public execution of convicted sepoys mutineers at the Singapore Criminal Prison on Outram Road, March 1915. Image reproduced from James, L. (1987). *Mutiny in the British and Commonwealth Forces, 1797–1956*. London: Buchan & Enright Publishers. (Call no.: RSING 355.1334 JAM).

(Left) An illustration of the assassination attempt on Lord Charles Hardinge, Viceroy of India, on 23 December 1912 on the occasion of the transfer of the capital of British India from Calcutta to New Delhi. A bomb was thrown by Indian nationalists at the viceroy's ceremonial procession in Delhi. Hardinge escaped with injuries but his mahout was killed. The act of terror galvanised the movement to gain independence for India. Illustration by E. Abbo for *La Tribuna Illustrata*, 5–12 January 1913. © Look and Learn.



Sepoys in the British Indian Army in Singapore, 1915. This photograph is from the album of Sergeant B.W. Turner of the 1st/4th Battalion, King's Shropshire Light Infantry. Turner served in one of the battalion's companies sent to Singapore in February 1915 to quash the mutiny. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Major Hawkins reads out the court-martial sentences of the prisoners. The 16 prisoners receive sentences with varying lengths of imprisonment. As each verdict is announced, a mutineer is ordered to step forward. Four ex-sepoys of the Taiping-raised Malay States Guides receive the lightest punishment possible – below two years without hard labour. The remaining dozen from the 5th Light Infantry of the British Indian Army are slapped with far harsher penalties. Some face “transportation for 15 years”, or hard labour in a penal colony. Eight of them stare at “transportation for life” in the dreaded Andaman Islands. The Andaman Islands’ Cellular Jail is the Indian Alcatraz. The Indians know it as Kala Pani (Black Water), for it lay across the forbidding waters of the Indian Ocean. Only the fit and those under 40 were sent to the Kala Pani, overseen then by a vicious Irish warden familiar with all the dark secrets of living purgatory. This could mean being shackled like a donkey to a mill, circling in endless loops to grind oil. Or to sit in pitch dark for years with no face or voice apart from your own.

Fates confirmed, the bedraggled group of 16 are marched off back behind the grey prison walls by their police escort. The huge crowd massed behind the cordon of British soldiers has not come all the way just for this. This scene has merely whetted their appetite for the main show that is about to begin.

Spread on and below Golf Hill, 6,000 pairs of eyes follow the final steps of a smaller group of men emerging from the prison gates. A new scene in the theatre of public instruction unfolds.

Unlike the 16, the five are handcuffed. And their escorts this time are not the straight-backed Sikh police but white-suited British prison wardens who form a close guard. Affirming British prestige, only the superior race may dispense ultimate justice. The wardens are in no mood to give any quarter, after one of their own was killed outside Outram Prison by the mutineers.

The execution will be carried out in full public view – a spectacle revived after almost 20 years of its prohibition in Singapore. The natives must be taught their manners, including little Chon Hoe. The condemned men are marched to their execution spots with military precision. The weathered and peeling execution wall faces a flat piece of ground on the western side of Outram Road, rising gently to become Golf Hill. An eerie silence holds as the five prisoners are marched in. Quite unusual for a large crowd who is responsible for Singapore’s constant market hubbub. All are captivated now by the sight before them.

Two of the five ragged prisoners had worn officer’s uniforms in the British Indian Army. Dunde Khan is the senior of the pair of cashiered officers. Fat and fair-skinned with a beard and moustache once neatly trimmed, the ex-Viceroy Commissioned Officer had once flashed the two-star epaulette of a *subedar* (captain) on his shoulder straps. Now ordered to march forward, his muscle memory completes a familiar drill. In step by his side is Chiste Khan, a lean, sharp-faced former *jemadar* (lieutenant) sporting a long, flowing beard. Garbed in rumpled and soiled civilian clothes, former Sube-

dar Dunde Khan and ex-Jemadar Chiste Khan struggle to retain some soldierly bearing and dignity.

A few weeks earlier, the pair of Khans had been in a very different position. Both were native officers of the 5th Light Infantry garrisoned in Singapore. Dunde commanded B Company of No 1 Double Company and Chiste led D of No 2 Double Company. They had turned out with their battalion for a Monday morning inspection parade by Acting Brigadier-General Dudley Ridout, the General Officer Commanding the Troops in the Straits Settlements. Ridout was conducting his farewell inspection of the regiment just before its redeployment to Hong Kong. The inspection coincided with the Chinese New Year holidays. The festivities had begun the day before. At the stroke of midnight, the settlement’s Chinese population exploded in riotous celebration. Official hours for firing small bombs and crackers were midnight until 1 am and from 5 to 6 am. The large Chinese community in carnival mood could hardly be expected to obey the rules.

In the fast evaporating cool of a humid tropical morning, the paraded sepoys were in no mood to celebrate. And they were eager to break a different set of rules. Many, especially those from the Ranghar half of the dual-race

Acting Brigadier-General Dudley H. Ridout, General Officer Commanding the Troops in the Straits Settlements. At his farewell inspection of the 5th Light Infantry Regiment on 15 February 1915, just before its redeployment to Hong Kong, he had tried to rally the men with a rousing speech but failed. Image reproduced from *The Royal Engineers Journal*, vol. LV, September 1941, p. 354.



battalion, looked sullen and unhappy. A hard core was ready to explode, itching to do the unthinkable. The Pathans from the other half were in a better state, with several of their own up for the coming promotion test.

Physically, the pudgy-looking Ridout with his bristly toothbrush moustache did not inspire fear or respect. But looks are deceiving. Short and stout, Ridout’s benign and inoffensive appearance was sharpened by cold, piercing blue eyes. He had tried to rally the men with a rousing speech. The Khans and their sepoys listened to his words. Or rather half-heard its translation into Hindustani by their regimental commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Victor Martin. The perennially sleepy-looking Martin was an isolated figure, unpopular with his fellow British officers and judged by some as too sympathetic to the sepoys.

In the rising heat and humidity of the morning, Ridout’s speech rehearsed a tired formula: “The empire is vast and the duties of guarding it are great”<sup>2</sup> – words meant for the British Tommy, not Jack Sepoy. Describing his burden of command as General Officer Commanding the Straits Settlements was the last thing the already troubled, confused and demoralised sepoys needed to hear. Later

that day, Lance-Naik (Lance-Corporal) Najaf Khan wrote a letter to his brother in India lamenting:

“As this war is such that no one has returned out of those who have gone to the war. All died. And those who have enlisted will not live alive. Believe this. World has died. No one has escaped who has gone to the war. All have perished. And there is recruiting open, don’t let any men enlist. As all are being taken to the war. All will be caused to be killed.”<sup>3</sup>

With a battalion and their own minds in disarray, some of the sepoys developed their own conspiracy theories, with help perhaps from passing agents of influence. Their once-disciplined heads held many confusing ideas. Some noble, others dangerous and mixed with trivial feuds and simmering frustrations. They were being sent away from Singapore to fight and kill Turks – their fellow Muslims. This contradicted the one true faith. Even worse, they speculated that their ship was to be sunk en route to their next post. Reflecting the Rajput Hindu origins

of his Ranghar identity in a moment of great stress, Sepoy Shaikh Mohammed wrote to his family, reflecting Hindu ideas of resurrection:

“It is with sighing, crying, grief and sorrow to tell you that the transfer of the regiment on the 20th February is now a settled fact. It will go to Hong Kong. But don’t know this, whether it is going to the war.

“God knows what kinds of trouble we will have to confront. What is this war? It is resurrection. That who goes there, there is no hope of his returning. It is God’s punishment. If God released us from this calamity we will take to have reborn. We are very much confused and shocked. All the regiment is in sorrow together.”<sup>4</sup>

On their part, the pair of ex-officer Khans, now standing with their backs against the walls of Outram Prison, had done their own listening, thinking, and whispering. Quiet intriguing was soon followed by bold declarations and preaching.

The European officer in the photograph is Captain Moira Francis Allan (7th from the right), seen here with men of the Mountain Battery of the Malay States Guides who had stoked the 5th Light Infantry Regiment to mutiny on 15 February 1915. He was one of the commanders of the battery and was killed in the mutiny. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



## THE LOST TREASURE OF SINGAPORE'S HISTORY

By Umej Bhatia

It was a century-old map of Singapore discovered in a London bookshop about 10 years ago that launched my quest. The topographical map showed intriguing features of a settlement in Singapore and its infrastructure, formed between now-levelled hills and drained swamps, with a port that was already the world's seventh busiest in 1914. I was intrigued by a prominently marked German prisoners camp, setting me off on a journey to find the "lost treasure" of Singapore's neglected history just before, during and after the First World War.

The result is my book, *Our Name is Mutiny: The Global Revolt against the Raj and the Hidden History of the Singapore Mutiny, 1907–1915*, which focuses on an event usually known as the Sepoy Mutiny of 1915. The sepoys were Indian soldiers who turned against their British officers and marauded through Singapore on the eve of their departure for Hong Kong. The account in my book differs from the conventional historical narrative in that I uncover and tease out the globetrotting ideas and the rolling-stone revolutionaries chased by imperial policemen who played their part in influencing, seducing and subverting the sepoys to mutiny. Crucially, the mutiny was not just a local affair but a revolt and insurgency with a global flavour, one of a

As Viceroy Commissioned Officers, men like the Khans were expected to know better than to encourage such seditious talk. They sat at the top of the pyramid of Indian military labour that was recruited to defend the British Empire. Raised from the ranks of the sepoys for good service, they were trained not to question why but to do or die.

Fat Dunde certainly didn't look the part of a recruiting station officer. But he appeared to have something to prove. Displaying a maverick streak, he wore non-regulation earrings, a Rajput custom to project warrior virility. Dunde also had unusual interests for a professional soldier and an officer at that. In Singapore he had taken personal music lessons from a musician from his village of Bajpur in Gurgaon. Dunde was fond of playing his newfound instrument and singing to his men, an officer doubling up

number of planned uprisings under the banner of a wider Mutiny movement.

The uprising of sepoys in Singapore was a symptom of an overstretched and slowly declining British Empire, set during the period of the First World War, with its unique cocktail of *jihad*, or holy war propaganda, promoted by the Germans and Ottoman Turks, and ideas of the Ghadar or Mutiny movement, pushed by Indian revolutionaries from across the Atlantic Ocean. These ideas crossed the Pacific to port cities like Hong Kong, Rangoon, Singapore and Penang, and over the Indian Ocean to British India.

The Ghadar or Mutiny movement part of the story that I tell had its roots not only in northern India, but also, and more importantly, among the Punjabi immigrants in the US and Canada. It brought them together with Bengalis who had been leading an underground movement against the British for some time. An idea of national identity was developing among these revolutionaries without them being fully aware of it. I found it especially interesting that religious and even regional identities were so fluid, and concepts of race, nationhood and even religious identification were in a plastic phase of definition. That phase is much less plastic now, while the use of identity politics by the British Empire as a form of imperial control has had lasting repercussions.

The Singapore mutiny of 1915 provided the canvas to sketch out a broader story of war, migration, populism,



terrorism, fake news and revolution in an earlier era of globalisation. So many echoes of the present can be found in the past. I wanted to use a little-known event in a period that most historians of Singapore and the region seem to overlook, to make this point.

With this book, I hope to show that the history of Singapore, and even its present and certainly its future, is driven by its location and its positionality as a global city. Our understanding of Singapore is enriched by interpreting events and episodes of its history by carefully tracing the contours of its global links and connections, with all the opportunities, challenges and threats that come with this globalism. And telling that story creatively while staying true to the facts with the demanding but rewarding long form of narrative non-fiction is all part of a universal story of what happens when the unstoppable force of revolt meets the immovable object of power.

Chiste was a disciple of the enigmatic Nur Alam Shah. A mysterious Muslim preacher and Sufi Master (*pir*), the latter had a cult following among Indian and Malay Muslims in Singapore. Nur Alam Shah delivered sulphurous sermons at his mosque on Kampong Java Road, just down the road from the house where Singapore's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, would be born a few years later.

As the First World War turned into a brutal conflict of attrition, Nur Alam Shah had raised thorny questions for the sepoys to consider. To whom was loyalty owed? To which Kaiser and to which Emperor? Charismatic Chiste also had a way with words. He persuaded some of his men that the tide was turning against British rule. Largely illiterate and unschooled, the thoughts of the sepoys did not match the precision or logic of

Promulgation of sentences on 21 sepoys found guilty of participating in the mutiny of the 5th Light Infantry Regiment. Sixteen mutineers received imprisonment of varying lengths, while five were executed. *Image reproduced from The Straits Times, 23 March 1915, p. 7.*

## The Mutiny. SENTENCES ON TWENTY-ONE INDIAN SOLDIERS. Five Public Executions.

A huge crowd, estimated to number six thousand people, assembled on Outram Road and on the heights of the Sepoy Lines golf course yesterday afternoon to hear the promulgation of sentences on twenty-one men found guilty of participating in one or another in the recent mutiny of the 5th Light Infantry, and to witness the public execution of five by shooting. It was an exceedingly well behaved crowd, mainly Asiatic in composition, and its very silence and absorption was indicative of the profound impression created by the proceeding.

The Volunteers paraded at nearly their full available strength and, with two companies of the Shropshire Light Infantry and detachments of regulars from the forts, composed a square enclosing the scene of the promulgations and executions. Major Hawkins of the Shropshires was in command of the whole parade and Major A. M. Thompson, Provost Marshal, represented the military authority. At 5.10 p.m. the four Malay States Guides and twelve 5th Light Infantrymen were brought into the square under an escort of Sikh police. Major Hawkins promulgated the following in English and translations were read in Malay, Chinese and Hindustani:—

trained minds. This thinking was dangerously open-ended and tumbled through their heads like the fake news Lance-Naik Fateh Mohammed had shared with his father on the day the mutiny broke out:

"The war increases day by day. The Germans have become Mohammedans. Haji Mahmood William Kaiser... [whose] daughter has married the heir to the Turkish throne... to succeed after the Sultan. Many of the German subjects and army have embraced Mohammedanism. Please God that the religion of the Germans (Mohammedanism) may be promoted or raised on high."<sup>5</sup>

All it took was a spark, which eventually ignited. An explosion of gunfire amid the noise and smoke of Chinese New Year firecrackers and bomblets. A cluster of little rebellions had erupted within the regiment. Soon the sepoys had the run of the island. Chaos. Confusion. And then the inevitable betrayal.

Secret agents in their midst. The prisoners they had sprung who went their own way. The rounding up. Wounded and bloodied after his capture, Chiste was heard reciting the Qur'an. Its familiar *surahs* both balm and support. The trials. The cover-up. Documents sealed away for half a century or more in dusty archives, eaten by termites or firebombed or misplaced.

Turn back now to the scene outside the Outram Road Criminal Prison in 1915. A moss-splotched grey wall and three lines of khaki-clad soldiers forming a square on the green turf. A red, laterite road separates the spectators from the spectacle. The little six-year-old boy staring wide-eyed. The Khans with three others. About to face their earthly fate in a few moments. They are not being sent back to the Kala Pani, the dreaded black sea they had crossed to reach Singapore, but to a blackness of another kind – *sakrat-ul-maut* – senselessness. And not before *jan-kandani* – the agonised sucking out of life.

One choice remains for the proud Ranghars – they must uphold the Rajput warrior tradition. Dunde Khan son of Khan Mohammed Khan, Chiste Khan son of Mussalam Khan, two *havildars* (sergeants) and a sepoy (private) next to them hold their heads up and look straight ahead. They see heavy wooden posts sticking out of the ground like dead men standing. But their *izzat* of manly honour requires them to remain as steady and as erect as those poles.

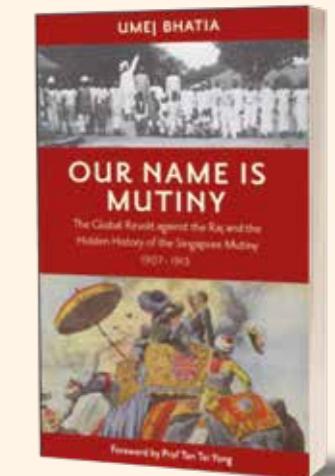
Khaki-clad army officers scurry about in the square making final preparations. They are joined by a gaggle of civilian officials and warders. The civilians are in pristine white cotton drill suits with matching solar pith helmets on pomaded heads. To the spectators atop Golf Hill, the harried officials down below resemble brown and white ants in frenzied activity. The bureaucrats of Empire dash around fussing right up to the moment the five condemned men are marched to their execution spots.

The firing squad is composed of 25 men from the Royal Garrison Artillery under the command of Second Lieutenant Frank Vyner. Wearing large khaki pith helmets, with their knobbly, white knees peeking out between pulled up socks and "Bombay bloomers" shorts, the firing squad resembles overgrown schoolboys. In fact, they are artillerymen who have exchanged their large-bore guns for rifles.

With little fanfare, the doomed men are strapped to the five-foot timber stakes that throw long, ghostly shadows on the prison's high outer perimeter wall. Their naked brown ankles are secured firmly by cotton thongs. The final whispered murmurings of the large crowd are hushed. Major Hawkins steps forward. He reads out a statement in a firm and loud voice:

"These five men, Subedar Dunde Khan, Jemadar Chiste Khan, 1890 Havildar Rahmat Ali, 2311 Sepoy Hakim Ali and 2184 Havildar Abdul Ghani have been found guilty of stirring up and joining a mutiny and are sentenced to death by being shot to death... All these men of the Indian Army have broken their oath as soldiers of His Majesty the King. Thus justice is done."<sup>6</sup> ♦

Umej Bhatia's *Our Name is Mutiny: The Global Revolt Against the Raj and the Hidden History of the Singapore Mutiny, 1907–1915* retails at major bookshops and is also available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 959.5703 BHA-[HIS] and SING 959.5703 BHA).



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# FROM LAT PAU TO ZAOBAO

## A HISTORY OF CHINESE NEWSPAPERS

Chinese newspapers have been published in Singapore since the 19th century. Lee Meiyu looks at how they have evolved and examines their impact on the Chinese community here.



Elderly Chinese men reading newspapers in coffeeshops are a common sight in Singapore. Photo taken in 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The Chinese newspaper industry in Singapore has a colourful and varied history enriched by a large, revolving cast of missionaries, reformists, revolutionaries, businessmen, writers and the government. Since the first Chinese newspaper was published in Singapore in 1837, over 160 newspapers have come and gone.<sup>1</sup> Some of them played an important role in disseminating information to the people as well as shaping politics, society, culture and literature in Singapore.

### The First Chinese Newspaper in Singapore

Singapore's first Chinese newspaper was a periodical titled *Eastern Western Monthly Magazine* (东西洋考每月统记传). It was originally published in Canton (now Guangzhou), China, on 1 August 1833 by the German missionary Karl Friedrich August Gützlaff. He started the magazine with the aim of making "the Chinese acquainted with [the] arts, sciences and principles of [the Westerners]... to show that [the Westerners] are not indeed 'Barbarians'; and... convince the Chinese that they have still very much to learn... of the relation in which foreigners stand to the native authorities, the Editor endeavoured to conciliate their friendship".<sup>2</sup>

Gützlaff (who adopted the Chinese name Guo Shilie [郭士立 or 郭实腊 or 郭实猎] and a Chinese pen name Ai Han Zhe [爱汉者], which means "one who loves the Chinese") was the first Lutheran missionary to China, and a translator and

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(Far left) See Ewe Lay (right) founded the *Lat Pau* newspaper in December 1881. He is seen here with his eldest son, See Tiou Hong. Image reproduced from Chen, M.H. (1967). *The Early Chinese Newspapers of Singapore, 1881–1912* (plate 1). Singapore: University of Malaya Press. (Call no.: RSING 079.5702 CHE)

(Left) The earliest extant copy of *Lat Pau* dated 19 August 1887. This front page with the masthead features an editorial and three news items. Image reproduced from Chen, M.H. (1967). *The Early Chinese Newspapers of Singapore, 1881–1912* (p. 30). Singapore: University of Malaya Press. (Call no.: RSING 079.5702 CHE)

civil servant. Due to his busy schedule, Gützlaff had to stop the printing of *Eastern Western Monthly Magazine* in May 1834. Readers had to make do with reprints and with occasional new issues published in 1835. In 1837, the magazine operations relocated to Singapore – possibly due to the increasingly strained Sino-British relations – and continued as the organ of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China, which had been founded by Gützlaff in Canton.

The magazine restarted in earnest in Singapore under the editorship of Gützlaff, John Robert Morrison, the son of Robert Morrison (the London Missionary Society's first missionary to China and the man who translated the Bible into Chinese) and, most likely, the English Protestant missionary Walter Henry Medhurst, who was also involved in the Chinese translation of the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

Although published by missionaries, the *Eastern Western Monthly Magazine* was a largely secular periodical that covered the news and included articles on history, geography, science, commerce and literature. Religion only made the occasional appearance in the form of articles on Western culture in comparison with its Eastern counterpart. Its news section mostly carried translated articles from foreign newspapers and, in later issues, news from the *Peking Gazette*.<sup>4</sup> The magazine ceased publication in 1838.<sup>5</sup>

### Singapore's First Chinese Daily

A little over four decades after the demise of *Eastern Western Monthly Magazine*, *Lat Pau*,<sup>6</sup> the first Chinese daily in Singapore

(and Southeast Asia), made its debut. *Lat Pau* was founded in December 1881 by See Ewe Lay (薛有礼), a prominent Melaka-born Straits Chinese who moved to Singapore to join the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank as a comprador.

*Lat Pau*, or *Le Bao* (叻报), derived its name from *Se-lat-po* or *Shi Le Po* (石叻坡), the Hokkien and Cantonese names for Singapore. The names, in turn, came from the Malay word *selat*, which means "straits". One of the paper's earliest editors was Yeh Chi-yun (叶季允) from Hong Kong.<sup>7</sup> Yeh worked for *Lat Pau* for 40 years, penning numerous editorials under his pen name Xing E Sheng (惺噩生).

The staff of *Lat Pau* believed in "recording whatever is heard" (有闻必录), which meant that many of the reports were based on hearsay, with little or no effort taken to verify facts. According to Yeh, "The people were not enlightened, hence very narrow in their outlook. They were not interested in the affairs of the world but only interested in their own petty amusement. The newspapers... presented their news items only to catch the eye. Therefore the newspapers contained a hotch-potch of serious events and frivolous matters."<sup>8</sup>

The paper's editorial was published on the front page, with extracts from the *Peking Gazette* on subsequent pages. General news consisted of reports reproduced from Hong Kong and Shanghai newspapers, translations from local English newspapers as well as stories based on hearsay or news provided by agents living in other parts of Southeast Asia. The remaining pages were devoted to business-related advertisements

and notices, including those by the British and Dutch colonial governments.<sup>9</sup>

The editorials of *Lat Pau* tended to be conservative when it came to Chinese politics, supporting the Qing government on anything related to China. It took a pro-Chinese stand when the interests of the Chinese community in Singapore were affected by government policies.

In the early years, Chinese newspapers in Singapore had a very small circulation because of low literacy rates among Chinese migrants here. By 1900, *Lat Pau*'s circulation had reached 550, up from 350 in 1883.<sup>10</sup> Subscriptions formed an insignificant portion of the paper's income. Instead, the company derived its revenue from advertising, with the printing and sale of books helping to sustain business as *Lat Pau* was also a bookseller and ran a commercial printing press.<sup>11</sup>

*Lat Pau* was profitable in the early years and its subscriptions increased. However, after Yeh died in 1921, there were frequent changes to its editorial board. The English-educated members of the See family who took over the management also found it difficult to run the Chinese newspaper. Because of these factors, as well as increasing competition from other Chinese newspapers, *Lat Pau* finally ceased publication in 1932.<sup>12</sup> The earliest extant copy of *Lat Pau* is dated 19 August 1887.<sup>13</sup>

### Growing Political Awareness

In 1898, *Thien Nan Shin Pao* (天南新报) was founded by Khoo Seok Wan (邱菽园), Chinese literary pioneer in Singapore who was also the paper's chief writer. After

seeing the Qing government humiliated by Western powers, Khoo became an advocate for reform and enlightenment in China. He established *Thien Nan Shin Pao* for "the expression of progressive ideas and the elucidation of the methods which have lifted up the European nations from the empiricism and follies of the past".<sup>14</sup>

The newspaper provided extensive coverage of the political and social reforms taking place in China as well as local news. In addition, it supported progressive ideas such as education for girls. Although short-lived (the newspaper folded in 1905), *Thien Nan Shin Pao* is significant because it is the first example of a local Chinese newspaper that took an ideological position and actively advocated for a cause – in this case Chinese nationalism and reform.<sup>15</sup>

### Reformists Versus Revolutionaries

Following the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform movement,<sup>16</sup> reformist leader Kang Youwei (康有为) fled China and arrived in Singapore in 1900 where he sought to build the reform movement with the aid of funds and supporters here. In August 1905, Sun Yat-sen established the Tong Meng Hui (同盟会; Chinese Revolutionary Alliance) in Tokyo. This was an underground resistance move-

ment aimed at gathering support for the Chinese revolutionary cause and to raise funds for its activities. In the same year,<sup>17</sup> the Singapore branch of Tong Meng Hui was founded and became the centre of revolutionary activities in Southeast Asia.

Singapore became a battleground as reformists and revolutionaries made use of the local Chinese newspapers to further their cause and denigrate the opposition.<sup>18</sup> The most intense battle was fought between the reform-minded *Union Times* (南洋总汇报) and *Chong Shing Yit Pao* (中兴日报), which was set up by revolutionaries.<sup>19</sup>

*Union Times* was founded in 1906 by two supporters of the revolutionary movement, Teo Eng Hock and Tan Chor Lam,<sup>20</sup> but it came under the control of reformists shortly after and became their mouthpiece in Singapore and Southeast Asia. In response, the revolutionaries set up *Chong Shing Yit Pao* in 1907 to combat the influence of *Union Times*.

Editorials in *Chong Shing Yit Pao* ridiculed the belief held by the reformists that a constitution would work under the Qing government, while *Union Times* argued that revolution was impracticable and branded the revolutionaries as rebels and hooligans causing civil strife in China. Articles written by Kang

The front page of *Chong Shing Yit Pao* published on 20 August 1907. The newspaper was set up by revolutionaries. Besides advertisements, this page features an acknowledgement of donations to the newspaper. Image reproduced from Chen, M.H. (1967). *The Early Chinese Newspapers of Singapore, 1881–1912* (p. 96). Singapore: University of Malaya Press. (Call no.: RSING 079.5702 CHE)



and Sun can be found in the respective newspapers.<sup>21</sup> Both newspapers also presented the news in a way that supported their editorial positions.

It was in the literary section, however, that the debates were the most exciting. Here, the writers unleashed their creativity and literary skills using commentaries, short stories, dramatic dialogues, Cantonese ballads, poetry and humour<sup>22</sup> to persuade, argue, refute, condemn and even slander the other party. They were not above calling each other names like "fleas", "mad dogs" and "prostitutes". These altercations sometimes ended up in court as the newspapers sued each other for libel.<sup>23</sup>

The fierce rivalry between the two newspapers, however, sparked an increased awareness in world affairs and an interest in newspapers among the masses. The pool of foreign journalistic talent in Singapore also raised the bar of the Chinese newspaper industry.

Due to financial difficulties, *Chong Shing Yit Pao* folded in 1910 and did not witness the fall of the Qing dynasty a year later. *Union Times*, which had a more established support network, ceased publication in 1948.<sup>24</sup>

### Modernisation and the War Years

Two important newspapers appeared in the 1920s: *Nanyang Siang Pau* (南洋商报),

founded by "Rubber and Pineapple King" Tan Kah Kee in 1923 and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (星洲日报) by Aw Boon Haw of Tiger Balm in 1929. Both newspapers played an important role in the modernisation of the industry.<sup>25</sup>

*Nanyang Siang Pau* was set up as an advertising platform for Tan's rubber products. It was a business newspaper that also aimed to promote education. Likewise, Aw used *Sin Chew Jit Poh* to publicise the Chinese medicinal products under his Tiger Balm brand.<sup>26</sup> He also hoped to make readers better informed and to encourage them to invest in China's economy.<sup>27</sup>

In the initial issues, news coverage in both newspapers was limited and tended to focus on events in China. Instead the papers were filled with advertisements. However, Tan and Aw spared no efforts to recruit talent, and the quality of the content soon improved. News coverage was expanded and became more organised. Layout was also improved to make for easier reading. Segments focusing on commerce, sports, culture and education were added to provide greater variety.

Well-known writers and journalists in China and Singapore such as Fu Wumen, Khoo Seok Wan, Yu Dafu and Hu Yuzhi were also hired by the newspapers. Their editorials and *fukan* (副刊; literary supplements) were well written, perceptive and informative.<sup>28</sup>

With substantial financial backing and the availability of experienced staff, the two newspapers soon became the leading Chinese dailies in Singapore. Both invested heavily in infrastructure and built up their distribution network. Modern printing machines were introduced into their operations in the 1920s and 1930s. They also successfully expanded into the region by establishing an extensive network of agencies and sub-distributors. Additionally, the newspapers tapped on local correspondents in various countries to submit news and stories via cable.<sup>29</sup>

Following the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, *Nanyang Siang Pau* began publishing on Sundays to deliver the latest news about the war. This edi-

tion, later renamed the "Sunday Edition", first came out on 20 December 1931. This marked the first time that a local newspaper was published on a Sunday. Other newspapers, including non-Chinese ones, soon followed with their own Sunday edition. Rival *Sin Chew Jit Poh* started its "Sunday Special Supplement" five months later.<sup>30</sup>

The fall of Singapore to the Japanese in February 1942, however, put a halt to further newspaper developments. During the Japanese Occupation, many Chinese journalists, writers and editors ended up being killed during Operation Sook Ching<sup>31</sup> or had to flee Singapore because of their anti-Japanese writings before the Occupation. All local newspapers were taken over by the Propaganda Department and later by Domei News Agency, the official news agency of the Empire of Japan.

Facilities at *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* were seized, and the office of *Sin Chew Jit Poh* on Robinson Road was used to publish the Chinese newspaper *Zhaonan Ribao* (昭南日报), a wartime propaganda channel for the Japanese government. First published on 21 February 1942, *Zhaonan Ribao* was the Chinese edition of *The Syonan Shimbun*, the English-language newspaper produced by the Japanese to replace *The Straits Times*.

One defining feature of *Zhaonan Ribao* was its articles about the Overseas Chinese Association, an organisation set up to mediate between the Japanese government and the local Chinese community. The newspaper also carried more content relating to Japanese culture, values and history in a section called "Chao Yang" (朝阳).<sup>32</sup>

### Post-war Developments

Both *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* resumed publication in September 1945, almost immediately after the Japanese surrendered. The readership

and market of these two newspapers expanded in the post-war years and, in the 1950s, both papers even purchased aeroplanes to deliver copies to their subscribers in the region.

This post-war period also saw the streamlining of work processes at the two newspapers: administrative duties were hived off from editorial work, and new departments such as public

(Below) Portrait of "Tiger Balm King" Aw Boon Haw, who founded *Sin Chew Jit Poh* in 1929. Image reproduced from Who's Who in China (4th edition) (1931) (p. 497). Shanghai: The China Weekly Review.

(Bottom) Portrait of "Rubber and Pineapple King" Tan Kah Kee, c. 1950. He founded the *Nanyang Siang Pau* newspaper in 1923. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



1 Some sources state 1906, which is likely a misinterpretation of Tan Yek Seong's statement in *The First Newsman in Nanyang* (《南洋第一报人》). Tan provided the date as "the 3rd day of the 12th month in the 32nd year of Emperor Guangxu's reign". This would be 16 January 1907 in the Gregorian calendar.

2 The New Culture Movement in China, which took place between the 1910s and 1920s, criticised traditional Chinese culture, blaming it for the country's subordinate position in the world. Intellectuals supporting the movement pushed for the adoption of Western notions of science and democracy, and these became the focus of their writings. The movement also called for vernacular literature to replace classical literature, which had become unintelligible to the masses.

3 In 1925, *Nan Feng* (南风) was published by *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh* while *Xing Guang* (星光) was published by *Lat Pau*. These supplements helped define Singapore Chinese literature and establish its future direction of growth.

## THE SWORDSMAN MAKES ITS DEBUT

Fans of Chinese sword-fighting, or *wuxia*, novels would be familiar with Linghu Chong (令狐冲), the honourable, happy-go-lucky swordsman with a weakness for alcohol. He is the protagonist in *Xiao Ao Jianghu* (笑傲江湖), a story written by the Hong Kong writer Jin Yong (金庸; also known as Louis Cha).

Known in English under various titles such as *The Wandering Swordsman* and *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer*, the novel is so popular that it has been adapted for the stage, television, the big screen, comic books and even video games. To attract readers, the novel was first serialised in the inaugural issue of *Shin Min Daily News* (新民日报) on 18 March 1967, a local newspaper started

by Cha and the founder of Axe Brand Universal Oil, Leong Yun Chee.

This was even before the novel was published in the Hong Kong newspaper *Ming Pao* (民报), which was also founded by Cha. Serialisation of his other novels in *Shin Min* soon followed.

The entrance of *Shin Min Daily News* livened up the Chinese newspaper publishing scene in Singapore with its focus on the world of entertainment. The daily became an instant hit, thanks to its lottery results, sword-fighting novels, exclusive entertainment news and horse racing tips.

In 1983, *Shin Min Daily News* became a subsidiary company of The Straits Times Press Limited. One year later, in 1984, the paper became part of Singapore Press Holdings group.

relations and operations were established. Both papers also moved with the times by using simplified Chinese characters and horizontal typesetting in the 1970s, and incorporating new technology in the 1980s.<sup>33</sup>

It was not all smooth sailing though. In 1971, the arrest of four senior staff from *Nanyang Siang Pau* sent shockwaves through the industry. The government accused the newspaper of jeopardising the internal security and stability of Singapore. The relationship between the newspaper and the government became tense, with both sides releasing statements denying each other's claims. The four people were detained for periods ranging between

*Xiao Ao Jianghu* (笑傲江湖) by the Hong Kong writer Jin Yong (金庸; also known as Louis Cha) was first serialised in the inaugural issue of *Shin Min Daily News* on 18 March 1967. Image reproduced from 金庸 [Jin Yong]. (1996). 《笑傲江湖》[The Wandering Swordsman]. 新加坡: 明河社出版有限公司.



seven and 29 months.<sup>34</sup> In 1973, another senior executive was arrested under the Internal Security Act. He was only released five years later.

In 1974, the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act came into force. Under this legislation, all newspaper publishing companies had to be converted into public companies. The company that owned *Sin Chew Jit Poh* was reorganised into a public entity under the name Sin Chew Jit Poh (Singapore) Limited, while *Nanyang Siang Pau* became owned by Nanyang Press Singapore Limited. The act also required the companies to issue both ordinary shares and management shares, which they did in 1977.<sup>35</sup>

In 1984, the three newspaper companies in Singapore – Singapore News and Publications Limited, The Straits

located two notices on 9 and 10 December 1881 in *The Singapore Daily Times*, which mentioned that *Lat Pau* would be published under the editorship of T. Chong Eng. However, Wong was unable to ascertain whether T. Chong Eng, the editor of *Lat Pau*'s first issue, was Yeh Chi-yun.

8 Chen, 1967, pp. 35–36, 50.  
9 Chen, 1967, pp. 33, 34, 35, 38–39, 44–45.  
10 Chen, 1967, p. 40.

11 Chen, 1967, p. 41.  
12 Chen, 1967, pp. 52–53.

13 The earlier issues of the newspaper are no longer available. The 19 August 1887 copy of *Lat Pau* has been digitised and can be read on the NUS Libraries website: lib.nus.edu.sg/lebavo/index.html.

14 Chen, 1967, p. 68.  
15 Chen, 1967, pp. 63, 66–69, 71, 74.

16 The Hundred Days' Reform was a failed 103-day reform movement undertaken by Emperor Guangxu and his supporters in 1898. Accepting suggestions made by Kang Youwei, Emperor Guangxu enacted a series of reforms aimed at making sweeping social and institutional changes. The movement failed when the opposing conservative forces initiated a coup that led to the emperor's house arrest.

17 Chen, 1976, pp. 31–32; Wong Hong Teng mentioned in his article, "The confirmation of *Lat Pau*'s first date of issue" (《叻報》創刊日期正式確定), published in the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* on 24 May 1982 that he had

Times Press Limited and Times Publishing Berhad – merged to form Singapore Press Holdings Limited (SPH). The publishing conglomerate currently owns all the major newspapers produced in Singapore.<sup>36</sup>

Today, SPH publishes 17 newspapers titles in the four official languages (English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil). The main Chinese daily, *Lianhe Zaobao*, has a print and digital circulation of 212,200, with subscribers from Singapore as well as Indonesia, Brunei, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Beijing and Shanghai. In 1995, as part of its digital transformation, *Lianhe Zaobao* began publishing an online edition to enlarge its subscriber pool.<sup>37</sup>

In this digital age, however, subscriptions to physical newspapers have been steadily decreasing. On 18 October 2019, SPH reported that the total circulation of all print newspapers in its stable had declined by 7.3 percent compared with the previous year. On the contrary, its digital business showed healthy growth with Chinese newspapers attracting more than 10,000 signs-up, of which three-quarters were new subscribers.

Moving forward, SPH has announced that it will focus on the digital transformation of its core media business and intensify efforts to make content available across different platforms. It remains to be seen, however, if Chinese newspapers in Singapore will continue to evolve and transform with the same innovative spirit and fervour that their predecessors did.<sup>38</sup> ♦

The author wishes to thank Mr Lee Ching Seng for reviewing the essay. Past

revolutionaries in Singapore, Teo Eng Hock, Tan Chor Lam and Lim Nee Soon, state the year as 1905. See *Nanyang and founding of the Republic* (《南洋与创立民国》), *Wan Qing Yuan and the 1911 Revolution* (《晚晴与中国革命史略》) and *A record of the Tong Meng Hui in Singapore* (《星洲同盟会录》). See "When was the Singapore branch of Tong Meng Hui established?" (星洲同盟会到底何时成立) in *Lianhe Zaobao* (6 October 2011) for a discussion of the discrepancies.

18 Chen, 1967, pp. 70–71, 86, 92, 94.  
19 Chen, 1967, pp. 43, 53; Peng J. (2011). 《清季宪政大辩论:〈中兴日报〉与〈南洋总汇新报〉论战研究》[Debates on constitutionalism in late Qing: The arguments between Union Times and Chong Shing Yit Pao] (pp. 19–20). 武汉: 华中师范大学出版社. (Call no.: Chinese R 951.07 PJ)

20 Sources referred to in this article mention two dates: late 1905 or early 1906. Unfortunately, as the early issues of *Union Times* are lost, there is no way to ascertain the correct year.

21 Chen, 1967, pp. 86, 89, 94, 97; See J. Peng for a detailed list of articles and names of main writers (pp. 27–39).

22 See J. Peng for a detailed list of the literary articles (pp. 49–55).

23 Chen, 1967, pp. 100–104; Yen, C.H. (1976). *The Overseas Chinese and the 1911 revolution* (p. 188). Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press. (Call no.: RSING 301.451951095957 YEN); Song, O.S. (1984).

## THE RISE AND FALL OF CHINESE TABLOIDS

Chinese tabloids first appeared and flourished in Singapore in the 1920s, providing readers with a different form of entertainment compared to the dailies. Known as *xiao bao* (小报), these tabloids were usually published once every two to three days and were much thinner than the dailies.

The first Chinese tabloid, *Xiao Xian Zhong* (消闲钟), was published in Singapore in 1925. It featured mostly entertainment news, while other tabloids focused on topics such as photography, commerce, literature, education and politics.

The late 1940s and the 1950s marked another golden age for Chinese tabloids in Singapore. *Ye Deng Bao* (夜灯报) and *Xin Li Bao* (新力报) were the two most popular tabloids during that period. Chinese tabloids were mainly known for their frivolous reporting of entertainment news on the latest movies, celebrity gossip, *getai* (live stage performances) and popular bar hostesses. They also prided themselves on their ability to get the inside scoop on these subjects and regularly covered titillating topics like sensational crime and prostitution.

Some tabloids resorted to pornography to increase their readership

issues of Chinese newspapers can be accessed via *NewspaperSG* – a searchable, online archive of local newspapers

in the highly competitive market. On the basis that these tabloids were promoting "yellow culture",<sup>1</sup> the government banned a number of such publications or revoked the printing licences of the companies in the 1960s.

*Xin Li Bao* (新力报) reporting on the opening of the latest nightclub in Singapore in December 1950. *Xin Li Bao*, 29 December 1950 (issue 16).



### NOTE

- 1 The Singapore government launched a campaign against "yellow culture" on 8 June 1959 to clamp down on various aspects of Western culture that were seen as promoting a decadent lifestyle. The term "yellow culture" is a direct translation of the Chinese phrase huangse wenhua (黄色文化), which refers to undesirable behaviour such as gambling, opium-smoking, pornography, prostitution, corruption and nepotism that plagued China in the 19th century.

– and also from the microfilm collection at level 11 of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library.

Operation Sook Ching (the Chinese term means "purge through cleansing"). It is not known exactly how many people died; the official estimates given by the Japanese is 5,000, but the actual number is believed to be eight to 10 times higher.

32 *Zhaonan Ribao*, 21 February 1942–31 May 1944.

33 Lim, 1993, pp. 60, 65, 85, 87–89.

34 Lim, 1993, p. 85.

35 George, C. (2012). *Freedom from the press: Journalism and state power in Singapore* (pp. 30–31). Singapore: NUS Press. (Call no.: RSING 079.5957 GEO)

36 George, 2012, p. 127; 崔貴強 [Chui, K.C.] (2002). 《东南亚华文日报现状之研究》[A study of the current Chinese dailies in Southeast Asia] (p. 15). 新加坡: 华裔馆. (Call no.: RSING 079.59 CGQ); Peng, W.B. (2005). 《东南亚华文报纸研究》[A study of Chinese newspapers in Southeast Asia] (p. 36). 北京: 社会科学文献出版社. (Call no.: RSEA 079.59 PWB)

37 Singapore Press Holdings Limited. (2019). *Homepage*. Retrieved from Singapore Press Holdings website; Singapore Press Holdings Limited. (2019). *Lianhe Zaobao/Lianhe Zaobao Sunday*. Retrieved from Singapore Press Holdings website; Chui, 2002, pp. 17, 23, 33.

38 SPH to shed 130 jobs to rein in costs. (2019, October 18). *The Straits Times*, p. C2. Retrieved from The Straits Times website.

# EARLY PRINTING IN INDOCHINA

In the first of two essays on the history of printing in mainland Southeast Asia, **Gracie Lee** examines the impact of the printing press in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

**P**rinting in Southeast Asia was largely established on the back of European colonialism and expansion in the region. Motivated by the need to disseminate official government information and Christian knowledge, colonial governments and missionary societies set up the earliest printing presses in Southeast Asia and introduced Western printing methods such as letterpress printing<sup>1</sup> and lithography.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to this, writing in Mainland Southeast Asia largely consisted of inscriptions on stone or bamboo, or handwritten manuscripts composed of palm leaf, bark or paper. These early books were mainly in the form of palm-leaf manuscripts and folding books.<sup>3</sup>

As the production and function of books at the time were deeply rooted in the traditions of religion and the aristocracy, common topics discussed in these books included subjects such as religion, history, law, royal genealogies, classical literature, magic, healing and divination. The adoption of Western-style printing technology, however, transformed the way in which texts were produced and

consumed in Southeast Asia, much as it did in Europe earlier.<sup>4</sup>

## Vietnam

While most countries in mainland Southeast Asia were introduced to printing technology in the 19th century, Vietnam is an exception. There, the Chinese technique of woodblock printing was thought to have been in use as early as the 13th century. Vietnamese annals suggest that a version of the Chinese Buddhist canon was printed in Vietnam between 1295 and 1299.<sup>5</sup>

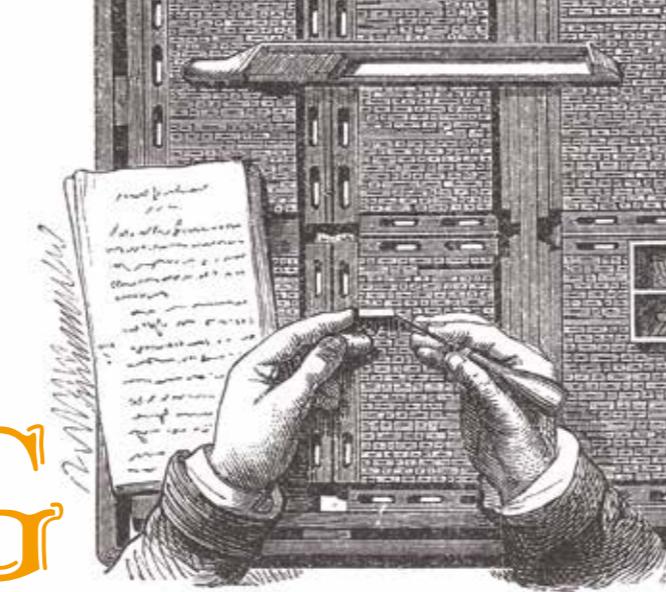
The spread of printing in the country is commonly attributed to the 15th-century Vietnamese scholar Luong Nhu Hoc, who imparted the craft to the villages of Hong Lac and Lieu Trang in Hai Hung province. As a result, these villages later prospered as centres of printing. Some of these artisans, who specialised in woodblock engraving and paper-making, later relocated and set up publishing houses in the capital Thang Long (present-day Hanoi), which grew as an urban centre for book publishing and retail. In 1820, the Nguyen dynasty

(1802–1945) – the last royal house of imperial Vietnam – sought to consolidate all printing in its new capital Hue.<sup>6</sup>

The Chinh Hoa edition of *Dai Viet su ky toan thu* (*Complete Book of the History of Great Viet*; 1697). It is widely regarded as the oldest printed book in Vietnam. The work was compiled by the royal historian Ngo Si Lien of the Le dynasty (1428–1789) in the 15th century, and updated by successive historians.<sup>7</sup>



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The title page of *Dai Nam Quac Am Tu Vi* (*The Dictionary of National Language*; 1895) by scholar Paulus Cua (Vietnamese name Huynh Tinh Cua). This is the first Vietnamese-authored dictionary in *quoc ngu*. The two-volume work was published in Saigon. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.



The oldest printed book in Vietnam is widely regarded to be the Chinh Hoa edition (named after the Chinh Hoa reign era which lasted from 1680 to 1705) of *Dai Viet su ky toan thu* (*Complete Book of the History of Great Viet*; 1697). This monumental work was compiled by the royal historian Ngo Si Lien of the Le dynasty (1428–1789) in the 15th century, and updated by successive historians.<sup>7</sup>

Scholars generally concur that locally produced books were accessible in Vietnam by the 15th century, at least among the intellectual elite, a class created by the country's institutionalised system of court examinations modelled on the Chinese bureaucracy. These texts existed alongside manuscripts and books imported from China. Up until the early 20th century, woodblock printing was the main technique used in Vietnam, and texts were written in either classical Chinese or *chu nom* – Chinese characters that had been adapted for the Vietnamese language.<sup>8</sup>

The period of French colonisation dramatically altered the traditional print culture of Vietnam: it introduced Western typographic processes and increased the popularity of *quoc ngu*, a Romanised writing system for Vietnamese. The government presses established by the French administration in Cochinchina (South Vietnam) in 1862 and Tonkin (North Vietnam) in 1883 were among the earliest printing presses in Vietnam.

By the late 19th century, several commercial French publishing establishments had taken root in French Indochina. In the 1870s, the Catholic mission set up a publishing house known as the Imprimerie de la Mission on the premises of Tan Dinh Church in Saigon. The printing press produced early publications such as *Huan mong khuc ca* (1884), an Annamese primer, and French-Vietnamese dictionary *Petit dictionnaire Francais-Annamite* (1884).

In the 1880s, Francois-Henri Schneider, a former foreman with the Imprimerie du Protectorat in Hanoi, branched out to set up his own publishing firm, F.H. Schneider. This would later become one of the largest publishers in Vietnam, with offices in Hanoi, Haiphong and Saigon. Among other things, it published *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient* (1901–), a leading scholarly journal on the archaeology, philology, geography, history and religion of Indochina that is still in print today. In 1907, the firm's Hanoi-Haiphong office was renamed Imprimerie d'Extreme-Orient (IDEO). To compete against French publishing companies in Saigon, Dinh Thai Son started one of the earliest Vietnamese publishing houses, the Imprimerie de l'Union.<sup>9</sup>

Local book publishing flourished with the widespread use of *quoc ngu*, or Romanised Vietnamese, which had been devised by Portuguese missionaries in the 17th century and designated the official writing system by the French administration in 1910. The ease of learning *quoc ngu* aided the proliferation of printing and education in Vietnam.<sup>10</sup>

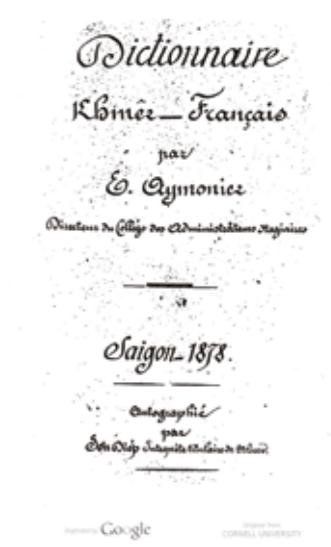
In 1865, the first newspaper in Romanised Vietnamese, *Gia Dinh Bao* (*News of Gia Dinh*), was published and, in 1895, the first Vietnamese-authored dictionary by scholar Paulus Cua (Vietnamese name Huynh Tinh Cua), *Dai Nam Quac Am Tu Vi* (*The Dictionary of National Language*), was produced. By 1920, modern print technology had replaced woodblock printing as the main printing technique in Vietnam.

## Cambodia

Compared to Vietnam, printing in Cambodia developed much later. Scholars have attributed this to factors such as the small literate class, the challenges of creating printing types in the Khmer language, and resistance from traditionalist monks who saw the copying of religious texts as a sacred performative act that was integral to the practice of merit-making.<sup>11</sup>

Printing was introduced to Cambodia during the period of the French Protectorate (1863–1953). Until the 1880s, many of the earliest publications about Cambodia were published outside the kingdom, in particular Vietnam, and were in French. Examples include the *Bulletin officiel de l'Expedition de Cochinchine* (1862) and the *Bulletin officiel du Cambodge* (1884). The latter is the first official organ and administrative bulletin of colonial Cambodia.

Privately published works such as French linguist Etienne Aymonier's collection of popular Khmer folklores were



**(Top)** Portrait of French linguist Etienne Aymonier, 1883. He compiled the first Khmer-French dictionary, *Dictionnaire Khmer-Francais* (1878), with assistance from local interpreter Son Diep. *Bibliothèque nationale de France*.

**(Above)** The first Khmer-French dictionary, *Dictionnaire Khmer-Francais* (1878), was published in Saigon using lithography. Cornell University Library. Retrieved from *HathiTrust* website.

also produced in Vietnam. Lithographed in Saigon in 1878, this bilingual work – in Khmer and French – is regarded as the first collection of Cambodian oral tales ever recorded on paper in the vernacular. Additionally, Aymonier compiled the first Khmer-French dictionary, *Dictionnaire Khmer-Français* (1878), in Saigon with assistance from local interpreter Son Diep.<sup>12</sup>

It was not until around 1886 that the first official printing press in Cambodia, the Imprimerie du Protectorat, was established by the French in Phnom Penh. One of its earliest publications was the first printed periodical in Cambodia titled *Annuaire Illustré du Cambodge* (1890).

In the early 20th century, a royal printing office was set up in the palace in Phnom Penh to publish sutras (Buddhist scriptures), laws and regulations. Its maiden publication was likely the programme sheet produced in French for the inauguration of the Preah Keo pagoda, titled *Programme des fêtes données à l'occasion de l'inauguration de la Pagode de Prah Keo en 1903* (1903). In 1911, the first official gazette in the Khmer script, *Reachekech* (Royal Gazette), commenced publication. It remains in circulation today, although primarily as an online publication.<sup>13</sup>

The European concept of the printed book as a tool for the dissemination of information marked a paradigm shift from the traditional textual practices of Cambodia. As this view gained wider acceptance in Cambodian society from the early 20th century onwards, a number of French and Cambodian printing houses began opening in Phnom Penh, and published secular works such as newspapers and local literature.

The need to educate also spurred the publishing of textbooks in the vernacular. Cambodia's first newspaper, *Le Petit Cambodgien*, made its appearance around 1899. The biweekly newspaper was published privately and produced using lithography. The first Cambodian newspaper printed by typography was *La Gazette Khmer* (1918–1919).<sup>14</sup>

No overview on the history of printing in Cambodia would be complete without mentioning the history of printing in the Khmer script. Most sources cite the first Khmer type fonts as being cast at the Imprimerie Nationale, the official printing office of the French government, in Paris in 1877. However, type designer Zachary Scheuren has pointed out that, as early as the 1840s, Austrian printer Alois Auer's *Sprachenhalle*, a magnum opus containing more than 600 language

samples, had already included a Khmer font type called "Kambog'a".<sup>15</sup>

The person most associated with the pioneering development of Khmer font types is Marie-Joseph Guesdon. Guesdon was a French Jesuit priest who arrived in Cambodia in 1874, where he cultivated an abiding interest in the country and its language. On his return to Paris, Guesdon cast his own Khmer types in 1894, and collaborated with French publishing house Plon-Nourrit to release books in Khmer. More importantly, Guesdon was very likely the unnamed French missionary who participated in the design of Parisian foundry Deberny & Cie's Khmer font types. These types were later supplied to major printers of Cambodian works, such as the Imprimerie du Protectorat, Plon-Nourrit and F.H. Schneider, and used in a wide array of publications from the turn of the 20th century.<sup>16</sup>

### Laos

Of the three states in French Indochina, Laos was the last to adopt modern printing technology, with the first Lao publications reportedly produced only in the early 20th century.

During the 1930s, the French colonial government press, the Imprimerie du Gouvernement du Laos, was established in Vientiane by the 1910s. Among its earliest publications was *Essai de Cours de Langue Laotienne* (1917), a Lao language textbook written for French speakers by Pierre Le Ky Huong. Le was the Vietnamese director of the Lao government printing office and translator for the Resident-Superieur (the chief colonial official who answered

them onto palm leaves for circulation. Due to its late introduction, the high cost of printing and the small readership base, book production remained low in Laos in the early 20th century.<sup>17</sup>

Some of the earliest Lao publications were language guides. The Imprimerie de la Société des Missions-Etrangères, a Catholic press in Hong Kong, released *Lexique Français-Laocien* in 1904 and *Dictionnaire Laotien-Français* in 1912.

In 1935, the first Lao grammar book was published under the auspices of the Institut Bouddhique (Buddhist Institute) established in Vientiane by the French in 1931. The four-volume work, based on the study of Buddhist texts in the Lao language, was compiled by Maha Sila Viravong, regarded as one of the greatest modern scholars of Laotian history and literature.<sup>18</sup> Sila Viravong also wrote *Phongsawadan Lao* (*A Lao History*), which was used as a school textbook for many years. Published by the Lao Ministry of Education in 1957, the text remains a standard reference on Lao history today.<sup>19</sup>

The French colonial government press, the Imprimerie du Gouvernement du Laos, was established in Vientiane by the 1910s. Among its earliest publications was *Essai de Cours de Langue Laotienne* (1917), a Lao language textbook written for French speakers by Pierre Le Ky Huong. Le was the Vietnamese director of the Lao government printing office and translator for the Resident-Superieur (the chief colonial official who answered

to the Governor-General of Indochina). An early proponent of the standardisation of written Lao, Le also initiated the publication of *Chot Mai Het Lao*, the Lao edition of the *Bulletin Officiel Laotien*, a government communiqué in French.<sup>20</sup> However, its exact year of publication cannot be ascertained.

The first Lao-language newspaper, *Lao Nhay*, which means "Great Laos", was published only in 1941 as part of a Vichy French-sponsored nationalist movement. The fortnightly periodical featured political news, articles on local life as well as literary works. The newspaper also issued a French supplement, *Pathet Lao (Lao-land)*, for the French-educated Lao elite. In 1945, during the Japanese Occupation, *Lao Nhay* was supplanted by *Lao Chaleun (Prosperous Lao)*, a Japanese-sponsored newspaper.<sup>21</sup>

The publisher of *Lao Nhay* also published other Lao works, such as the national anthem of Laos and the first modern Lao novel, *Phraphuttharup Saksit (The Sacred*

*Buddha Image*; 1944). Written by Pierre Somchine Nginn under the pen name Lao Chindamani, the story follows a detective of French and Lao descent as he investigates the disappearance of a Buddha statue from the Wat Si Saket temple in Vientiane. The book has an introduction in French as well as a French title, *La Statuette Merveilleuse: Nouvelle Laotienne*.<sup>22</sup>

French colonisation and the emergence of commercial publishers who used Western printing technology were key factors in the disruption of traditional methods of book production and consumption in Indochina. Their appearance saw greater diversity in the books produced, ranging from language guides and

Front page of *Lao Nhay* (Great Laos), the first newspaper published in the Lao language. Image reproduced from Ivarsson, S. (2008). *Creating Laos: The Making of a Lao Space between Indochina and Siam, 1860–1945* (p. 151). Copenhagen: NIAS. (Call no.: RSEA 959.403 IVA).

13 Herbert & Milner, 1989, pp. 53–54; Nepote & Khing, 1981, pp. 62, 76; Edwards, 2004, p. 68; Jarvis & Arfanis, 2002, p. 4–1; Dara, M., & Tyrton, S. (2017, February 2). *Royal Gazette to move online*. Retrieved from Phnom Penh Post website.

14 Nepote & Khing, 1981, pp. 62–64; Jarvis & Arfanis, 2002, p. 4–1; Herbert & Milner, 1989, p. 54.

15 Scheuren, 2010, p. 21.

16 Scheuren, 2010, pp. 15–29; Herbert & Milner, 1989, pp. 53–54; Suarez & Woudhuysen, 2013, p. 634; Edwards, 2004, p. 68.

17 Herbert & Milner, 1989, p. 70; Koret, P. (1999). *Introduction to Lao literature*. Retrieved from SEAsite Laos website; Koret, P. (2009). The short story and contemporary Lao literature (p. 81). In T.S. Yamada (Ed.), *Modern short fiction of Southeast Asia: A literary history*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Association for Asian Studies. (Call no.: RSEA 808.83108895 MOD)

18 Ivarsson, S. (2008). *Creating Laos: The making of a Lao space between Indochina and Siam, 1860–1945* (pp. 129–131, 133–134). Copenhagen: NIAS. (Call no.: RSEA 959.403 IVA); Keyes, C.F. (2003). The politics of language in Thailand and Laos (p. 189). In M. Brown & S. Ganguly (Eds.), *Fighting words: Language policy and ethnic relations in Asia*. Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press. (Call no.: RSEA 306.4495 FIG); Meyers, C. (2019). Lao language policy (pp. 204–205). In A. Kirkpatrick & A.J. Liddicoat (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of language education policy in Asia*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge. (Call no.: R 306.4495 ROU)

19 Ivarsson, 2008, pp. 113, 124, 139; Pholsena, V. (2006). *Post-war Laos: The politics of culture, history and identity* (p. 81). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Copenhagen: NIAS Press; Chiang Mai: Silkworm books. (Call no.: RSING 959.4042 VAT); Soontoravanich, C. (2003). Sila Viravong's *Phongsawadan Lao*: A reappraisal (pp. 111–128). In C.E. Goscha & S. Ivarsson (Eds.), *Contesting visions of the Lao past: Lao historiography at the crossroads*. Copenhagen: NIAS. (Call no.: RSEA 959.40072 CON)

20 Ivarsson, 2008, pp. 131–132.

21 Herbert & Milner, 1989, pp. 70–71; Ivarsson, 2008, pp. 145–207; Gunn, G.C. (1988). *Political struggles in Laos, 1930–1954* (pp. 22, 100–102). Bangkok, Thailand: Editions Duang Kamol. (Call no.: RSEA 320.9594 GUN)

22 Koret, 1999; Koret, 2009, pp. 81–82; Thong-Dy & Maha Phoumi. (1947?). *Le patriote Lao: Hymne Lao*. Vientiane: Editions de Lao Nhay. (Not available in NLB holdings)

newspapers to modern novels – thereby overtaking traditional publications such as religious texts. ♦



# THE ISTANA TURNS 150



The resplendent Istana – where colonial governors and modern-day presidents once lived – celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2019. **Wong Sher Maine** recounts key moments in its history.

Built at a cost of \$185,000 and completed in October 1869, the Istana was first known as Government House. It was originally built by the British colonial government to serve as the residence of the governor of the Straits Settlements and later the governor of the Colony of Singapore. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



"The building is a handsome one – the handsomest by a long way in the Settlement and one which will be an ornament to the place long after those who fought for and against it have passed away."<sup>1</sup>

– *The Straits Times*, 24 April 1869

These words by a Straits Times scribe some 150 years ago would prove to be uncannily prophetic. He was referring to Government House, which is today known as the Istana, the official residence and office of the president of Singapore. A century-and-a-half old, the Istana – which means "palace" in Malay – is a gazetted national monument and also functions as the working office of the prime minister of Singapore. It is the closest thing Singapore has to Buckingham Palace or the White House.

## Colonial Beginnings

Government House was originally built by the British colonial government to serve as the residence of the governor of the Straits Settlements and later the governor of the Colony of Singapore.<sup>2</sup> For about 40 years after Stamford Raffles landed in

**Wong Sher Maine** is a freelance writer who has written two books about the Istana: *Our Istana* was published in 2015, while *50 Best Kept Secrets of the Istana: People and Places* was published in 2019.

by Prince Albert – Duke of Edinburgh and the second son of Queen Victoria – in December 1869 hastened the pace of construction.<sup>6</sup>

Government House took shape under the hands of convict labourers from India, Ceylon and Hong Kong who were paid 20 cents a day to work as stone masons, plumbers, carpenters, painters and stone cutters. It was completed in October 1869 at a cost of \$185,000.<sup>7</sup>

The stately building was designed in the neo-Palladian style<sup>8</sup> and reflected architectural elements of the East and West: imposing Greek-style columns, cornices and arches reminiscent of buildings in Europe, and wide verandahs, large louvred windows and dwarfed piers adapted from traditional Malay architecture.

Between 1869 and 1959, Government House was home to 18 colonial governors.<sup>9</sup> Government House also bore witness to a procession of kings, sultans, dukes and other members of the nobility, who graced the halls with their presence. These included the Sultan of Selangor Abdul Samad, who called on the governor in 1890 with an entourage of over 30 people, and King Chulalongkorn of Siam who visited with a reported 66 people in 1871.<sup>10</sup>

Given Singapore's prime geographical location, the island was a popular stopover for European visitors en route to China, and some of these visitors put up at Government House on transit. These



William Goode, who became Singapore's first Yang di-Pertuan Negara, hosting a tea party for Junior Chamber International (Jaycees) at Government House, 1956. Garden parties held on the front lawn of Government House were a regular feature in the social calendar of the British governor and his wife. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

included the likes of the English botanical artist Marianne North, who visited in 1876 and waxed lyrical about the lush vegetation around Government House; Annie Brassey,<sup>11</sup> inveterate traveller and wife of the first Earl of Brassey, who stayed over in 1877 when her schooner had to be replenished with coal at the Tanjong Pagar docks; and Prince Albert Victor and his brother, Prince George of Wales, who were treated to a royal party at the house by Governor Frederick Weld in 1882.<sup>12</sup>

On occasion, the large and leafy expanse of grounds hosted garden parties, while dances were held in the capacious ballrooms. Retired colonel John Morrice, who lived in the servants' quarters of Government House between 1935 and 1947 as his father worked as a waiter there, recalled:

"During the time of the British there used to be a lot of parties and tea dances, once a fortnight or month. We all used to hang around there and watch from the side. The ladies wore long dresses all the time..."<sup>13</sup>

### The War Years

Those halcyon days ended as the Japanese advanced down Malaya in late 1941. In February 1942, a cellar at Government House, which was connected to a tunnel leading out to an opening

beyond its domain, was bombed by the Japanese. When the soldiers discovered the escape hatch, they sealed it by pushing grenades into the tunnel, killing a number of staff and partially damaging the cellar.<sup>14</sup>

The remaining staff escaped and hid in houses along Kampong Java Road. When Count Hisaichi Terauchi, a Field Marshall in the Imperial Japanese Army and Commander of the Southern Expeditionary Army Group, took up residence in Government House in March 1943, he brought them back. Donning their old uniforms, the staff served their new boss and had to learn Japanese.<sup>15</sup>

Thankfully, Terauchi left much of the building intact, apart from redecorating some rooms to give it a Japanese flavour, including introducing some Japanese-style screens and getting rid of items with the British Royal crest on them, such as the crockery. However, he largely respected and preserved what was contained in the building.

Abdul Gaffor bin Abdul Hamid, whose father worked as a butler in Government House, was born on the grounds in 1931 and spent his childhood and teen years there. He recalled:

"Before the Japanese came in, we were still here [in the Istana]. We had a shelter underneath the building... air raid shelter for all the staff. When there was heavy

bombardment, the governor said don't stay here because [it] was dangerous. Then they got us a lorry... We moved to some old house at Java Road.

"When the Japanese came, we all came back. They asked us to come back. My father did the cleaning and gardening... A year before they went off, they called me to come and work in the Istana because I was learning Japanese. I said okay because they gave us oil and fish... I attended a Japanese school for 2½ years. I learnt Japanese – katakana, hiragana – and Malay. Whenever visitors wanted to come into the Istana, the Japanese sentry would call me to translate. The Japanese were quite polite to us."<sup>16</sup>

When the Japanese surrendered in September 1945, the British returned and reoccupied Government House once again.

### From Government House to Istana

The biggest transformation to the building took place after 1959, when Singapore embarked on its road to independence and the Istana became a symbol of an increasingly independent Singapore and not of colonial Britain.

When Singapore achieved internal self-government in 1959, Government

House was renamed Istana Negara Singapura, or Palace of the State of Singapore. This was shortened to The Istana when Singapore separated from the Federation of Malaysia on 9 August 1965 to become an independent sovereign nation.

From housing colonial governors who hailed from Britain, the Istana became the designated official residence for the presidents of Singapore. The last governor of Singapore was William Allmond Codrington Goode, who served as the Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Malay for "Head of State") from June to December 1959, before making way for Yusof Ishak, the first local-born Head of State. When Singapore gained independence, Yusof was sworn in as the country's first president.

While the Istana still remains the official residence of Singapore's presidents, only two have actually lived on the Istana grounds and, even then, not in the main building: Yusof lived in an outlying bungalow named Sri Melati, which was built in 1869 to house the colonial under-secretaries.<sup>17</sup> Third president Devan Nair lived in the Lodge, which was built to replace Sri Melati after it was torn down in the 1970s when termite infestation rendered it structurally unsafe.

Yusof explained at the time when he became Head of State that he felt that the Istana's main building was too lavish for him and his three children. The family stayed in Sri Melati for 11 years, between 1959 and 1970, where Yusof indulged in his passion for gardening by growing papayas and orchids.<sup>18</sup> Devan Nair and his family lived in the Lodge between 1981 and 1985.<sup>19</sup> The other presidents, on the other hand, felt more comfortable living in their own homes elsewhere in Singapore.

Aside from its occupants, the way of life in the Istana also changed when local staff ran the Istana after the British left. In 1960, the first Asian Comptroller of Household Jean Leembruggen, a Eurasian from Melaka, was appointed. Her husband, Geoffrey Leembruggen, was then acting permanent secretary at the Ministry of Health.

Yusof's wife, First Lady Puan Noor Aishah, personally supervised the menu and food preparation in the Istana, from English-style fare like roast beef and Yorkshire pudding to local favourites.<sup>20</sup> The skilled home chef introduced dishes like *nasi sambal*, *chicken rendang* and *chap chye* which were served to foreign dig-

naries. She was particularly well known for her *gula melaka* dessert made with sago, egg white and coconut milk.<sup>21</sup> The First Lady was also known for her shrimp and sardine *sambal* sandwich rolls:

"I wanted something different so instead of cutting the sandwiches into triangles or rectangles like usual sandwiches, I would roll them up and cut them into circular segments like a Swiss Roll. That way, the 'sandwiches' would be easier to eat... we usually had two fillings – sardines and shrimp sambal."<sup>22</sup>



(Left) President Yusof Ishak and Puan Noor Aishah with their children at Sri Melati, c. 1960s. *Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



(Below) Puan Noor Aishah (second from right), wife of Singapore's first president, Yusof Ishak, seen here hosting a reception at the Istana for delegates of the Red Cross Society seminar, 1966. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Puan Noor Aishah also trained the Istana's chefs to whip up her signature dishes which included curry puffs and *kueh onde onde*.<sup>23</sup> One of her trainees, Wong Shang Hoon, is still said to be cooking up a storm in the Istana today.

After Singapore gained independence in 1965, the new nation began establishing diplomatic ties with other countries, and soon, visitors from foreign countries started streaming in. Memorable visits include those by West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, China's Deng Xiaoping and Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom. Queen Elizabeth visited



### JEWELLED GREENS OF THE ISTANA

Landscaping has always been an essential element of the Istana's grounds. From the beginning, a nursery was established and many varieties of fruit and flowering trees and shrubs were planted on the 41 hectares that Government House stood on.<sup>1</sup>

In the years following Singapore's independence, the gardens grew in tandem with founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's efforts to turn Singapore into a garden city. Remembered by many as Singapore's chief gardener, Lee used the Istana as a testbed for flora to be planted in the rest of Singapore. He also felt it was important for the Istana's gardens to make an impression on visitors. He said:

"When they drove into the Istana domain, they would see right in the heart of the city a green oasis, 90 acres of immaculate rolling lawns and woodland, and nestling between them a nine-hole golf course. Without a word being said, they would know that Singaporeans were competent, disciplined and reliable, a people who would learn the skills they required soon enough."<sup>2</sup>

When Lee came across the foxtail palm – the name inspired by the bushy fronds resembling the tail of a fox – while on a visit to Australia, he asked for it to be planted on the Istana grounds. Visitors to the Istana today can still see this palm, which is found beside the iconic Swan Pond.<sup>3</sup>

The Swan Pond, home to a pair of white mute swans, is also a legacy of Lee's. It was constructed in 1968 at his request and is the largest of various ponds on the Istana grounds.<sup>4</sup>



**(Far left)** Spreading over 41 hectares, the Istana's gardens are meticulously cared for and are home to some 260 plant species. The Japanese Garden shown here was completed in 1967. It features stone and wooden bridges, lanterns and pebbles and a Merkus Pine with needle-like leaves that add to the zen-like quality of the surroundings. Photo by Ministry of Communications and Information.

**(Left)** Although the Swan Pond is home to a pair of mute swans, other bird species can also be seen quenching their thirst from its waters on many evenings. Courtesy of Marshall Cavendish and the Istana.

As Lee often spent long days working inside the Istana building, the gardens were a welcome respite. He and Mrs Lee would visit and feed the swans during their evening walks and he would sometimes pick a cluster of white flowers, commonly known as the breadflower, for his wife. These flowers, with their sweet pandan fragrance, were a favourite of Mrs Lee's.<sup>5</sup>

The fruit trees on the grounds also provided an occasional treat for the Istana staff who used to reside in the staff quarters on the grounds. Many of them, and their children, recall plucking fruit off the trees.

Today, more than 10,000 trees and palms – making up some 260 species – grow on the grounds of the Istana. Around 100 are mature trees with girths of over 4 metres. The oldest tree is a Tembusu, which is believed to have been planted in 1867, two years before the Istana was completed. This tree is located next to Sri Temasek,<sup>6</sup> which is the designated official residence of the prime minister of Singapore.

The gardens have naturally become home for a great variety of wildlife, including butterflies like the Lesser Grass Blue Butterfly, which is only one centimeter in size, dragonflies, fish, terrapins, squirrels, bats, flying foxes, monitor lizards, snakes and weaver ants, which are found on trees like the Tembusu.<sup>7</sup>

As a gazetted bird sanctuary, the Istana grounds teem with avian life. A survey carried out in April 2019 registered 89 bird species.<sup>8</sup> In fact, current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has had a barn owl visit him in his Sri Temasek office in 2013 and 2015. In both cases, the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority of

Singapore and the Jurong Bird Park had to be called in to trap the bird and release it behind Sri Temasek. He saw the bird again in 2017, but this time it was perched in the overhang along the exterior of the Istana.<sup>9</sup>

As for larger animals, horses used to be stabled in the Istana, though no longer today. In the 1950s, an elephant was briefly a resident of the Istana's grounds and it aided the gardeners by supplying bounteous composting material. However, the elephant was apparently sent to Malaya in early 1960.<sup>10</sup>

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- 2 Leong, 2011, p. 143
- 3 Ng, H. (2016, March 20). President plants tembusu tree in Istana and pays tribute to Mr Lee. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from The Straits Times website.
- 4 Cheah, S. (2019). *50 best kept secrets of the Istana: Flora and fauna* (pp. 20, 23). Singapore: Published by Epigram for the Istana, the office of the President of the Republic of Singapore. (Call no.: RSING 959.57 CHE-[HIS])
- 5 *The Straits Times*, 20 Mar 2016.
- 6 Sri Temasek, designed by Colonial Engineer Major John Frederick Adolphus McNair, is a two-storey bungalow built on the grounds of the Istana in 1869. During the colonial era, it was the residence of the colonial secretary or chief secretary. When Singapore attained self-government in 1959, Sri Temasek became the official residence of the prime minister of Singapore. However, none of the prime ministers have ever lived there.
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- 10 Tan, 2003, pp. 51 & 55.

Among the guests who visited the Istana were Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh Prince Philip. Here they are seen chatting with Speaker of Parliament Yeoh Ghim Seng during a state banquet hosted by President Benjamin Sheares (in the background) at the Istana on 18 February 1972. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Singapore in 1972, 1989 and 2006 and each of her visits caused much excitement among the Istana's household staff. Senior Butler Ismail Abdul Ghani recalled meeting her in 1972 and 2006.<sup>24</sup>

"The first time I met Queen Elizabeth, I was one of two Istana butlers who was assigned to attend to her personal needs. I didn't think she would remember me. But when I next saw her, at an event where all the butlers lined up in a row to greet her, she stopped when she came to me and said – 'I remember you'. I felt so happy!"<sup>25</sup>

Sometimes, visitors were invited to stay at the Istana. The guest facilities, which no longer exist today, comprised two rows of five rooms on the second floor of the main building. Guests were supplied with Lux brand soap, one box of detergent in the form of soap flakes as well as toothbrushes and toothpaste.<sup>26</sup> VIPs who had spent the night at the Istana include Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, who stayed with his two pet dogs in 1968,<sup>27</sup> and Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in 1978.

Yusof and his wife also opened up the Istana to ordinary Singaporeans.

With its swagged valances, arched fanlights and draperies in a woven damask fabric, the Reception Hall of the Istana provides an elegant setting for guests. Courtesy of Marshall Cavendish and the Istana.

"Life used to be simple. But once we moved into the Istana, we became very busy; there were many changes in our lives and there was a lot of protocol to observe. I remember there would be courtesy calls in the morning, tea parties in the afternoon, and I had to meet many charity organisations which were coming to me for help. All the meetings and social gatherings were necessary as we were new and we had to get to know people to win their confidence."<sup>29</sup>

It was Yusof who started the Istana's open house tradition. The very first open house event took place on 1 January 1960, between 8 am and 6 pm, on New Year's Day. Numerous slides, swings and seesaws were trotted out for children, while the police band entertained the public.<sup>30</sup>

### The First Major Renovations

By the time Singapore's fifth president Ong Teng Cheong took over, the Istana had stood for over 120 years and was in need of a major overhaul.



Renovation works were carried out between 1996 and 1998. This was the Istana's first major infrastructural upgrade, and the aim was to create more room for state functions and to replace the building's ageing mechanical and electrical services while preserving its heritage features. Ong, who served as president from 1993 to 1999, explained the need for the makeover:

"[The Istana] is a stately building, very grand, very symmetrical, as it should be for an institutional building. But internally, it needs refurbishing. Where we can, we will try to renovate the place and try to bring back its old grace."<sup>31</sup>

Many new features were added, including centralised air-conditioning, mechanically activated louvres, restored timber rafters and beams, automatic sliding doors and a dedicated Ceremonial Plaza with four flagpoles for military displays. Previously, these displays were performed at the airport when foreign guests disembarked from the aeroplane.<sup>32</sup>

The Istana gardens were also overhauled and professionally landscaped, a Herculean effort that took the team two years and which involved making trips to countries such as Australia to source for unusual plants.

The front lawn of the main garden was originally designed as a traditional European garden.<sup>33</sup> To frame the Istana's main building upon approach, the team transplanted 18 majestic *meninjau* trees, each soaring over 10 metres in height, from other parts of Singapore to the periphery of the circular front lawn.

### The Istana Today

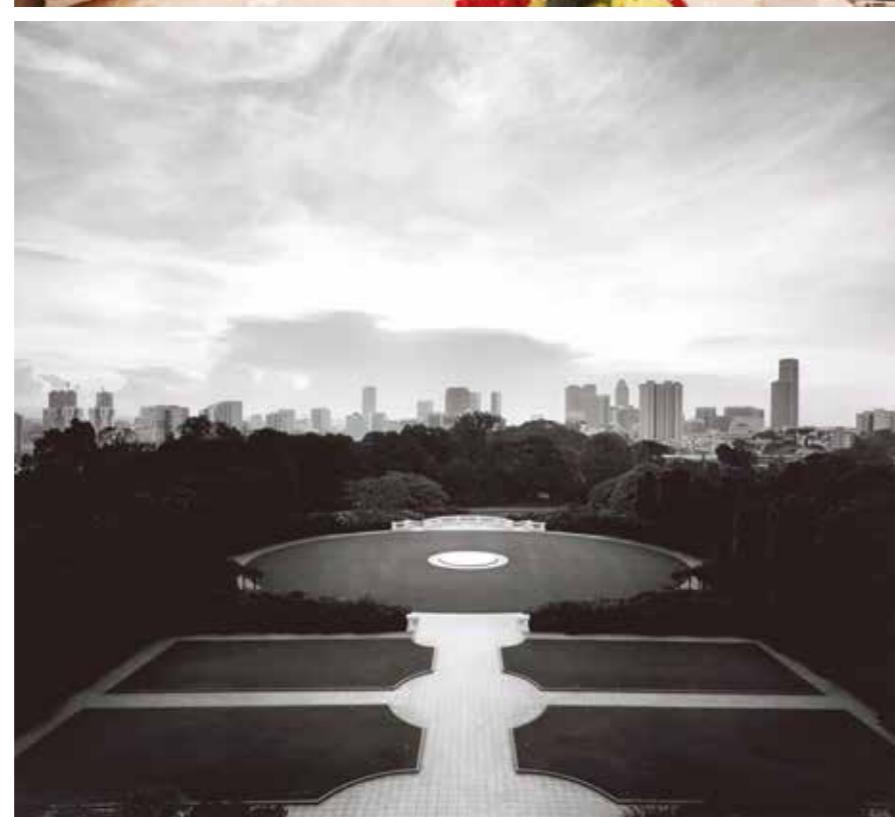
The main building of the Istana exudes elegance, while retaining its heritage and historical roots.

State gifts bestowed by foreign visitors are showcased in the main building as well as at the Istana Heritage Gallery, which is located at the Istana Park opposite the Istana's main entrance facing Orchard Road. The walls of the main building are also decorated with artworks by local artists, some commissioned by former presidents.

Foreign VIPs continue to pass through the halls of the Istana, among them US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, who were in Singapore for the historic Trump-

**(Below)** Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and US President Donald Trump enjoying a working lunch with their teams at the Istana on 11 June 2018, ahead of the Trump-Kim Summit held in Singapore on 12 June. Photo by Ministry of Communications and Information.

**(Bottom)** Sunrise from the Presidential Balcony of the Istana, 2006. Photo by Russel Wong. *Istana Art Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board.*



Kim Summit on 12 June 2018. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong hosted Kim at the Istana on 10 June, while Trump and his delegation attended a working lunch there on 11 June.<sup>34</sup>

For many Singaporeans, the Istana is a place associated with the highest honours in the land. All manner of ceremonies honouring individuals at the top

of their professions are held there, such as the President's Award for Teachers, the President's Award for Nurses and the Cultural Medallion.

A total of eight presidents have passed through the halls of the Istana. The current president is Madam Halimah Yacob, Singapore's first female president.

As part of her plans to open up the Istana to even more people, President Halimah Yacob started a series of picnics and garden tours. Here she is seen mingling with patients from Metta Hospice Care and Singapore General Hospital during a garden tour on 30 July 2019. Photo by Ministry of Communications and Information.

Madam Halimah declared at the beginning of her term in 2017 that she wanted to make the Istana grounds more accessible to the people, including the elderly and those with special needs. She launched the Picnic@Istana series when she took office, where four picnics would be held each year for underprivileged children as well as those with special needs.<sup>35</sup> Another programme that she initiated, Garden Tours@Istana, has welcomed senior citizens, hospice patients and their caregivers, and patients from the Institute of Mental Health.<sup>36</sup>

On 6 October 2019, the Istana held its very first open house event at night, hosted by Madam Halimah and her husband Mohamed Abdullah Alhabshee, to mark its 150th anniversary. Highlights included a lightshow on the walls of the main building depicting the Istana's heritage and his-



tory over the years, and performances by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and other local talents.<sup>37</sup>

Soon after, the Istana launched an interactive multimedia website with augmented reality features titled "Inside the Istana" in collaboration with *The Straits Times*. The website allows people to "walk

### NOTES

- 1 New Government House. (1869, April 24). *The Straits Times*, p. 1. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 2 The Straits Settlements, comprising Singapore, Melaka and Penang, was formed in 1826. It was initially an administrative unit of the British East India Company (1826–67) before it came under direct control of the Colonial Office in London as a crown colony (1867–1946). Following the dissolution of the Straits Settlements in 1946, Singapore was made a crown colony, while Melaka and Penang became part of the Malayan Union.
- 3 The First Resident and Commandant of Singapore was William Farquhar (1819–23), who was succeeded by John Crawfurd as Resident (1823–26). Between 1826 and 1867, Singapore was governed by Resident Councillors. When Singapore became part of the Straits Settlements along with Melaka and Penang in 1867, the first governor was Robert Fullerton (1826–30). Singapore's last governor was William Goode (1957–59). See National Library Board. (2017). *Past and present leaders of Singapore* written by Vernon Cornelius. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia.
- 4 Government Hill was initially called Bukit Larangan ("Forbidden Hill" in Malay). When Stamford Raffles built a wooden house with a thatched roof for himself on the hill in 1822, it became known as Government Hill. The house was later used as the residence of the colonial governors of Singapore. When the house was demolished to make way for Fort Canning in 1859, Government Hill was renamed Fort Canning Hill.
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- 18 *Our Istana through the years* (p. 30). (2015). Singapore: Office of the President of the Republic of Singapore. (Call no.: RSING 959.57 OUR-[HIS])
- 19 Wong, S.M. (2019). *50 best kept secrets of the Istana: People and places* (p. 22). Singapore: Published by Epigram for the Istana, the office of
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- 21 Tan, 2017, p. 115.
- 22 Tan, 2017, p. 119.
- 23 Tan, 2017, p. 117.
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- 26 Chua, J.C.H. (2007, August 11). *Oral history interview with Lee Ah Jee* [Transcript of recording no.: 003215/2/1, pp. 23, 29–31]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- 27 Seet & Myddelton, 2000, p. 96.
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- 29 Our *Istana through the years*, 2015, p. 28.
- 30 Leong, 2011, p. 172.
- 31 Wong, 2019, p. 39.
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- 33 Cheah, 2019, p. 12.
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# HEAD COUNT

## The History of Census-taking in Singapore

The very first census here was conducted in 1824. Ang Seow Leng reveals how doing a headcount has evolved over the last 200 years.

**Ang Seow Leng** is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. Her responsibilities include managing the National Library's collections, developing content as well as providing reference and research services.

Singapore's population has grown steadily over the decades to reach a total population of 5.7 million as at June 2019.<sup>1</sup>

Population censuses provide vital surveys of individuals in order to understand the basic demographic composition and trends of a society. They are also useful for developing evidence-based policies in strategic planning and decision-making. In the case of Singapore, figures on population distribution by areas, for instance, are studied to plan the requirements for schools, markets, hospitals and other public amenities.

The *Handbook on the Management of Population and Housing Censuses*, published by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs in 2016, defines a population census as "the total process of planning, collecting, compiling, evaluating, disseminating and analysing demographic, economic and social data at the smallest geographical level pertaining, at a specific time, to all persons in a country or in a well-delimited part of a country".<sup>2</sup>

While huge amounts of resources are required to conduct a massive census exercise, the methods used in collecting

data are equally important as these affect the quality and accuracy of the final results.

Censuses are conducted on either a *de facto* or *de jure* basis. The *de facto* population "consists of all persons who are physically present in the country or area at the reference date, whether or not they are usual residents", while the *de jure* population is defined as "all usual residents, whether or not they are present at the time of the enumeration".<sup>3</sup>

Patterns of global migration and settlements shape the demographic, social and economic histories of a country. For instance, Adam McKeown's research showed that major long-distance migration flows in the years between 1846 and 1940 from India and southern China, and to a much lesser extent from Africa, Europe, North Eastern Asia and Middle East to Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean Rim and the South Pacific, numbered around 48 to 52 million.<sup>4</sup> These migration patterns make for interesting analyses and studies.

### Early Censuses in Singapore

According to then Acting Colonial Secretary of the Straits Settlements Hayes Marriott, when Stamford Raffles arrived in Singapore in 1819, the estimated population size was around 150, including 30 Chinese and the Malays who had accompanied Temenggung Abdul Rahman when he settled in Singapore in 1811.<sup>5</sup> The number of inhabitants soon grew exponentially. Raffles, writing to Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, the 3rd Marquess of Lansdowne, on 15 April 1820 claimed:

"When I hoisted the British flag the population scarcely amounted to 200 souls, in three months the number was not less than 3,000 and it now exceeds 10,000 principally Chinese..."<sup>6</sup>

Although primary records of the early censuses of Singapore are no longer available, they can be found in secondary sources such as newspapers and books. According to Charles Burton Buckley, one of Singapore's earliest newspaper columnists, Singapore's first census took place in January 1824. It recorded a population of 10,683, comprising 74 Europeans, 16 Armenians, 15 Arabs, 4,580 Malays, 3,317 Chinese, 756 Indians, and 1,925 Bugis, and others.<sup>7</sup>

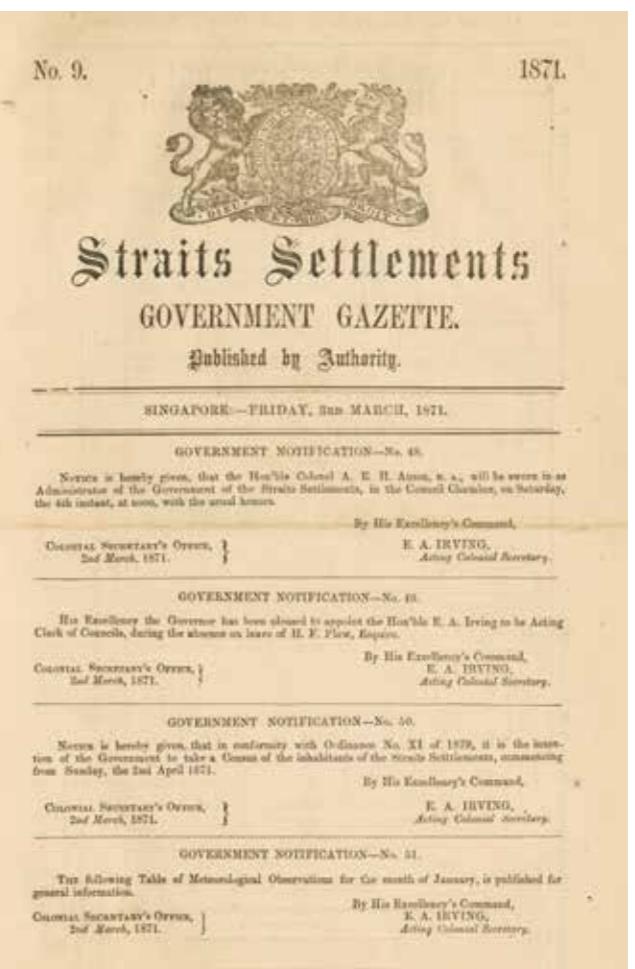
Marriott reported that censuses were taken almost every year, from 1825

to 1860,<sup>8</sup> but noted that the figures for these earlier censuses were unreliable. He pointed out that, in 1833, the census was carried out by two constables who were deployed to the settlement and had to attend to their primary duties on top of census-taking.<sup>9</sup> Thomas John Newbold, a lieutenant with the Madras Light Infantry who moved to Melaka in 1832,<sup>10</sup> also recorded the censuses of Singapore from 1824 to 1836, noting that a census was not taken in 1835. He did not list any figures for 1831.<sup>11</sup>

It was only on 2 April 1871 that the first systematic census of Singapore as part of the Straits Settlements was conducted.<sup>12</sup> The Census Bill had been passed in October 1870 to collect more reliable data, conferred power on the Governor and Executive Council to formulate rules for taking the census and to impose punishments on those who refuse to cooperate.<sup>13</sup> This bill was introduced at a time when the practice of taking a census once every 10 years was adopted throughout the British Empire. In 1871, the Singapore census took place around the same time that Great Britain and Ireland conducted theirs.<sup>14</sup>

The 1871 landmark census was different from the 1860 census, which Governor Harry Ord had dismissed. He wrote that "no great reliance can be placed upon the returns of the population stated to have been taken in that year [1860], so that for any purposes of comparison now, they are of little or no value".<sup>15</sup> The 1871 census, on the other hand, had trained enumerators to handle the census. The categories of data collected were also expanded from sex and race to include information on age, occupation, town-country divisions and the type of dwellings. The total population of Singapore at the time was 97,111.<sup>16</sup>

Successive censuses were carried out once every 10 years until 1931. It was observed during the 1931 census that all the non-Malay immigrants in Malaya were mainly sojourners who arrived here to seek a fortune without any intention of residing here permanently, and that the increase in the formation of a settled population of non-Malay origin had been very slow.<sup>17</sup> The first pan-Malayan census began in 1921.<sup>18</sup> Although preparations for the 1941 census had been underway, the onset of World War II derailed plans.



(Facing page) Staff sorting records of the census conducted in 1931. Image reproduced from Vileland, C.A. (1932). *British Malaya (the Colony of the Straits Settlements and the Malay States under British protection, namely the Federated states of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang and the States of Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu, Perlis and Brunei): A Report on the 1931 Census and on Certain Problems of Vital Statistics (between pp. 28 and 29)*. London: Crown Agents for the Colonies. (Microfilm no.: NL3005).

(Left) Government Notification—No. 50 "Notice is hereby given, that in conformity with Ordinance No. XI of 1870, it is the intention of the Government to take a Census of the inhabitants of the Straits Settlements, commencing from Sunday, the 2nd of April 1871." Image reproduced from Straits Settlements. Government gazette. (1871, March 3). Government Notification No. 50 (p. 93). Singapore: Mission Press. Retrieved from BookSG.

## BITING DOGS, CAPSIZED BOATS AND STRIKING WORKERS: STORIES FROM THE 1947 CENSUS

By Jimmy Yap

In general, carrying out a census is no easy task. However, back when Singapore was not as urbanised as it is now, counting its inhabitants was particularly challenging. Newspaper accounts of how the 1947 census was conducted give a good sense of the issues faced by census takers (or enumerators as they are more properly known).

The 1947 census was an important one, being the first undertaken after the war. It was a massive exercise that included all towns, villages, people living in the jungles and on boats and houses built out at sea, and even passengers on trains.<sup>1</sup>

To incentivise enumerators, the Malayan Census Headquarters introduced a prize scheme under which \$40,000 were given out in Singapore and the Malayan Union to the most efficient enumerators on the recommendation of the local headquarters.<sup>2</sup>

Besides using government department staff and teachers for census work, hundreds of schoolboys in Singapore were also recruited as enumerators and were each paid \$40 for their efforts.<sup>3</sup> About 80 scouts from the 10th Singapore Troop of St Andrew's School also volunteered to assist in the taking of the census in the rural areas of Singapore.<sup>4</sup>

According to one news report, enumerators in the rural areas were frequently regarded with "extreme suspicion":

"The country population, especially farmers are not always willing to open their doors. It takes a good five minutes to convince the occupants of some houses that census officers are not policemen, detectives or gangsters, but just people assigned by the Government to find out the number of people living in a house."

"This information must be obtained from the principal occupier of the house and if he does not happen to be in, as is often the case, the census officer has to make the long trek back at a time when his informant is likely to be home."<sup>5</sup>

Another problem faced in the rural districts was that many houses were not

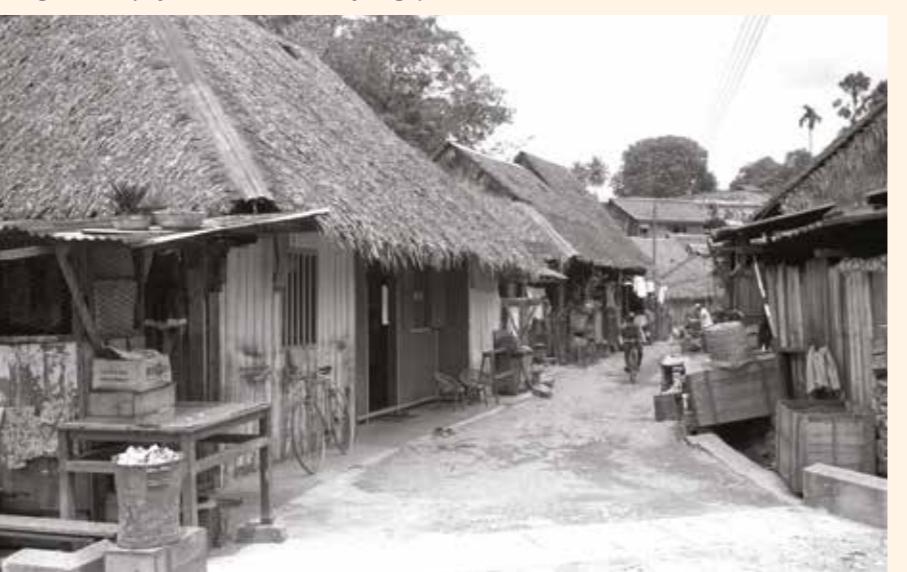
marked on maps. "The census officer covers a district, then climbs up a hill for the house on top. When he reaches it and looks round the surrounding country he is almost always sure to spot a hut that he had overlooked because it was not marked. He is then obliged to go down again to fulfil his task."<sup>6</sup>

In addition to swamps, rivers, jungles and suspicious tenants, the enumerators had to deal with dogs. The same news report said that "two of the men returned with dog bites while several others have been chased by dogs found in almost every house in the country".<sup>7</sup>

Another challenge was to count those who lived off the main island of Singapore. In some cases, the government relied on the people who knew the area best – the fishermen. One man, Penghulu Awang Chik, described as a "weather-beaten, 41-years'-old fisherman who has spent more than a score [of] years on Singapore's fishing ground", was roped in to be an enumerator. In one week in May, he visited eight small islands and "accounted for 188 lonely island homesteads".<sup>8</sup>

Because of the weather, travelling by sea could be challenging. Census supervisor T. Cordeiro had to carry out census work on Pulau Tekong. Unfortunately, just as he was about to leave the island, he was hit by a storm and his boat capsized. Fortunately, Cordeiro and five others in the party managed to hang on to their boat and they made their way safely back to Pulau Tekong.<sup>9</sup>

A rural kampong in Singapore, c. 1960s. In the early days, census takers had to go to kampongs, jungles and even reach out to those living on boats and houses built out at sea. Photo by K.F. Wong. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Counting the people living aboard vessels in the harbour required census officials to carry out their task between midnight and dawn. The enumerators – each supplied with a torchlight, a pencil, census forms, passes, and a set of instructions – were protected in the course of their duties by the police.

Malaya Tribune reporter Harry Fang accompanied the enumerators as they boarded the various vessels in the harbour and on the rivers. The night did not begin well for them though. The first vessel they boarded was the steamer *Giang Ann*. Fang said: "[W]e were half way through when a European member of the crew, apparently awoken in his sleep by the commotion, appeared in his pyjamas and created a small argument. Finally, we learned that the steamer's crew had [already] been censused."<sup>10</sup>

Naturally, most crew members did not react well to the appearance of Fang and company, given that they were awakened by enumerators "armed with torchlight, and escorted by policemen".

Fang added that the "first reaction was always one of fear but after our explanation, the men became assured and readily supplied us with required information". That said, getting the truth took time. "False names and ages were often given at first and after much gentle persuasion, the truth was finally told."<sup>11</sup>

Conducting a census at sea had unexpected hazards as well, namely hard-working fisherman. "An old disinterested

Chinese with his son fishing in a sampan off Beach Road nearly snared the Marine Police Chief, Mr J.W. Chiltern, when he cast his prawn net at the moment Mr Chiltern passed in one of his branch's fast new launches."<sup>12</sup>

This is not to say that census officials working in the city had an easy time. Some had to be given police escorts because as the Deputy Superintendent of the Census put it, in some parts of Singapore, "they would knock you on the head if you asked them their names".<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes the census officials would get help from unexpected sources, as one newspaper story reported. "The Singapore Rubber Workers' Union yesterday took time off from conducting a strike and a 'squat' to help the Deputy Superintendent of Census, Mr R.H. Oakeley, get census particulars from 120 recalcitrant workers."<sup>14</sup>

The official report of the 1947 census – released in October 1949 – gave Singapore's population as 940,824, which was almost double the figure for the 1931 census.<sup>15</sup>

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## The Japanese Occupation Years

After Singapore fell to the Japanese in February 1942, the island became known as Syonan-to. During the Japanese Occupation (1942–45), the Chosabu (Department of Research) recruited Japanese academics and civil servants, and sent them to Southeast Asia to research Southeast Asian economies and societies for Japan's administrators.<sup>16</sup> One of the reports produced by the Chosabu in Singapore was "Population by Occupation in Syonan Municipality" in December 1943.

The Chosabu noted that the last population census had taken place in Singapore in 1931, and that the police stations on the island had conducted a census survey in April 1943. The same report recorded the approximate population as being around 855,679. This figure was derived from the category that recorded occupations in the April 1943 census survey. The information was used to "identify the circumstances among the population in regard to rationing and other matters".<sup>20</sup>

The Chinese viewed the information-gathering with suspicion as they had suffered greatly during Operation Sook Ching from February to March 1942 when Chinese males between the ages of 18 and 50 were summoned to report at mass screening centres; anyone who



This is a bound volume of census slips for households on Fraser Street, c. 1945. The National Library received this donation during the 2008 Heritage Roadshow. Collection of the National Library, Singapore (Accession no.: B20026490A).

was suspected of being anti-Japanese was executed. Hence, the report also noted that "for nationality, most Chinese responded with their home region but a few identified themselves only as Chinese. There was no consistency. The same is true of occupation".<sup>21</sup>

## Post-war Censuses

The first post-war census was conducted in 1947, after a lapse of 16 years. M.V. Del Tufo, Superintendent of the Census, wrote in the Foreword of the *Report on the 1947 Census of Population* that the Japanese Occupation had resulted in loss or destruction of records, and the lack of manpower and frequent strikes added to the challenges of carrying out the census.

To quell fear and distrust among people after the war, the British authorities explained that the "census had nothing to do with income tax or rice cards, nor would it be used as a check on individuals".<sup>22</sup> They also assured the people that "all the information with regard to individuals [would be] treated as confidential, and may not be used for any purpose other than preparing tables of statistics about the community

as a whole".<sup>23</sup> At the time, there were thousands of squatters, mostly Chinese, who were living on lands that did not belong to them and they feared eviction if discovered during the census taking.<sup>24</sup>

Compared with the labour-intensive manual method of processing earlier censuses, the 1947 census used a mechanical method of punched cards to speed up the tabulation of the results. Deputy Superintendents of Census were appointed in the states of the Federation of Malaya, except in Perak where the Census Headquarters undertook the Deputy's functions, and in Singapore. The Singapore census also included the populations residing in offshore islands such as Pulau Ubin, Pulau Tekong Besar and St John's Island as well as those on Christmas Island and Cocos (Keeling) Islands. (The Cocos Islands and Christmas Island were transferred to Australia in 1955 and 1958 respectively.)<sup>25</sup>

The next census was conducted on 17 June 1957, with the Singapore Department of Statistics handling the census for the first time. It also marked the first time that the census was conducted only for Singapore.<sup>26</sup>

### Post-independence Population Censuses

Singapore gained independence in 1965 and the first post-independence population census was conducted in 1970,

13 years after the 1957 census. This was based on recommendation by the United Nations (UN) that each country undertakes a population census during the year ending in "0" or as near to those years as possible. The UN held the view that "the census data of any country are of greater value nationally, regionally and internationally if they can be compared with the results of other countries which were taken at approximately the same time".<sup>27</sup> Subsequent censuses in Singapore saw a constant improvement in the coverage of data, fieldwork, method in collecting data and an increasing reliance on technology.

The 1970 census adopted the *de facto* concept and counted all persons present in Singapore at the time of the census enumeration. Then Minister for Finance Goh Keng Swee was the Chairman of the Census Planning Committee. The Superintendent of this census was P. Arunmainathan, and he was supported by 3,000 field workers comprising mainly teachers and students. The census involved the use of computer-generated data as well as a wider coverage of the types of data collected and the use of sampling population. A two-volume report was published in 1973.<sup>28</sup>

Census takers hard at work during the 1957 census. This was the first time that the census was conducted by Singapore's Department of Statistics. Source: © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.



The census in 1980 saw new data collected, for instance, income from work, address of work place or school, and usual mode of transport to work and school. Then Minister for Trade and Industry Goh Chok Tong was the Chairman of the Census Planning Committee, while the Superintendent of Census was Khoo Chian Kim. About 2,600 people were employed for this exercise.<sup>29</sup> Between 1981 and 1986, nine statistical releases and five census monographs on demographic trends, trends in language, literacy and education, labour force, household and housing, as well as geographic analysis, were published.

The Census (Amendment) Bill that was passed on 28 March 1990 allowed for the exchange of information between government bodies in order to facilitate data gathering during population census exercises, and thus avoid duplication of efforts. To preserve confidentiality and prevent the misuse of information, only the Superintendent of Census is able to obtain and share information.<sup>30</sup>

Then Minister for Trade and Industry Mah Bow Tan chaired the 1990 Census Planning Committee, with Lau Kak En as Superintendent. With the support of more than 2,000 people employed to conduct

the census exercise during the peak period, it was the first time when details of Singaporeans and permanent residents abroad were included. This was also the first time a country used a census form that had been pre-printed with relevant particulars from various government databases.<sup>31</sup> Six statistical releases and six census monographs were published between 1991 and 1996, covering almost the same topics as the 1980 census.

Singapore became one of the first countries in the world to submit census returns through the internet for the 2000 population census. In this census, Singapore adopted a register-based approach to census-taking for the first time, in which basic data from existing government databases were utilised, thus greatly reducing the need for data entry.<sup>32</sup> With the adoption of a register-based census, the *de jure* concept based on a person's usual place of residence was used instead.

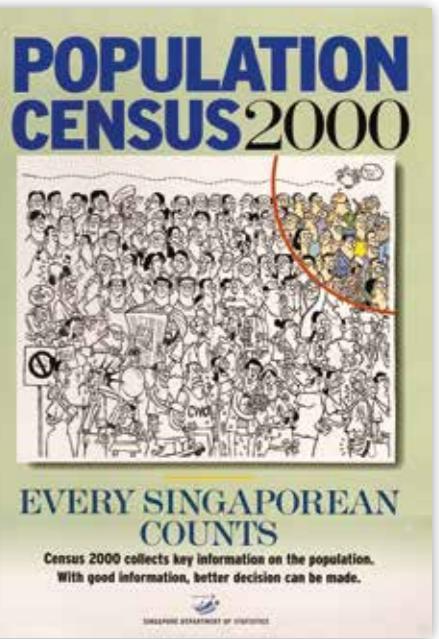
In 1996, the Department of Statistics developed an integrated database system known as the Household Registration Database, which captured the basic count of individuals and the overall profile of the population, including information like age group, sex, ethnic group, citizenship and house-type.<sup>33</sup> Only 20 percent of all households were surveyed in order to verify the accuracy of data.<sup>34</sup> For these participating households, the census adopted a tri-modal data collection strategy that allowed

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(Below) A handheld computer used by assistant census superintendents to update their work progress, c. 1990. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection*, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Below right) Publicity poster for Census 2000. Courtesy of Singapore Department of Statistics.



Superintendent was Leow Bee Geok. Five statistical releases and nine advance data releases were published between 2000 and 2001. These covered topics such as education, religion, literacy and language, economic characteristics, mode of transport, households and housing, household income growth and distribution, and marriage and fertility.

As the fifth census since independence, the exercise in 2010 also adopted

a register-based approach in which the basic population count and characteristics were compiled from administrative sources. Hence, there was a reduction of field interviewers to only 140, with 20 field supervisors across 10 regional offices in the country. These interviewers also made use of mobile personal computers to carry out their enumeration on the go, thus removing the need for hardcopy survey forms. Another 400 daily-rated staff were recruited to support day-to-day operations. Ravi Menon, then Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Trade and Industry, was the Chairman of the 2010 Census Planning Committee, with Chief Statistician Wong Wee Kim as Superintendent.<sup>36</sup> In 2011, three statistical

releases were published on demographic characteristics, education, language and religion, households and housing, and geographic distribution and transport.

#### The Future of Census

Censuses allow a country to collect data on the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of its population. Singapore has gone through 14 censuses since 1871, and each one has seen an increasing reliance on technology, especially in the recent censuses.

Emerging global trends have influenced the manner in which a census exercise is designed and undertaken, especially in developed countries. While the purpose of a census has evolved from its early days as a means for implementing taxation policies, and conscription into military service or forced labour, it has become a useful tool for social analysis and understanding as can be seen in the increasing number of census questions to gather more social statistics for successive censuses.<sup>37</sup>

Data collected during a census is crucial for any government for the purposes of long-term planning, decision-making and policy formulation. A thorough and detailed analysis of any census typically takes two years or more to complete, by which time the efficacy of the results might be called into question. One of the challenges in census-taking is the timely analysis of the findings so that these remain relevant and useful for the aforementioned purposes. Another challenge is the difficulty in capturing accurate demographic characteristics due to increasing migration and human mobility for work and study. ♦

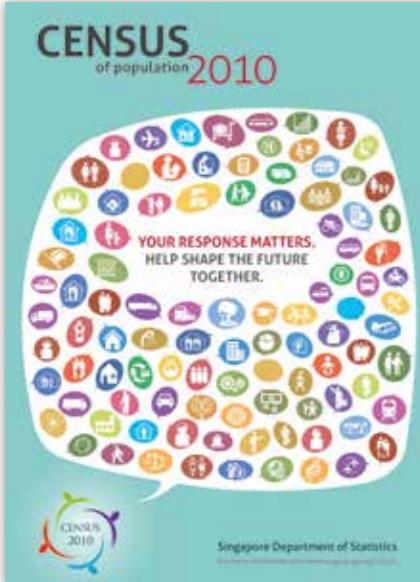
In a digital age where linked data and sophisticated data analysis tools are readily available, countries like Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Slovenia have moved away from traditional approaches in conducting a census. They now rely on centralised databases administered by the government such as tax records, electoral lists and school rolls, and also engage in periodic polling of a sample population size.<sup>38</sup>

Census data derived completely from administrative register-based sources do not require citizens to fill in census questionnaires. However, such a method is not without its drawbacks. The administrative sources may not be appropriate for census use as the information gathered is not meant for statistical purposes. Certain information may also not be available or complete in administrative databases.

It is common for countries, therefore, to adopt a combination of a register-based survey with enumeration or survey data, similar to what Singapore did in the 2000 and 2010 censuses; this will also be the case in the upcoming 2020 census.<sup>39</sup> It will be interesting to see how Singapore's future censuses keep up with evolving demographics and trends. ♦

*The author wishes to thank the Singapore Department of Statistics for reviewing the essay. The National Library's latest exhibition "On Paper: Singapore Before 1867", held at level 10 of the National Library Building until 22 March 2020, features a scribal copy of the 1827 census of Singapore.*

Publicity poster for Census 2010. Courtesy of Singapore Department of Statistics.



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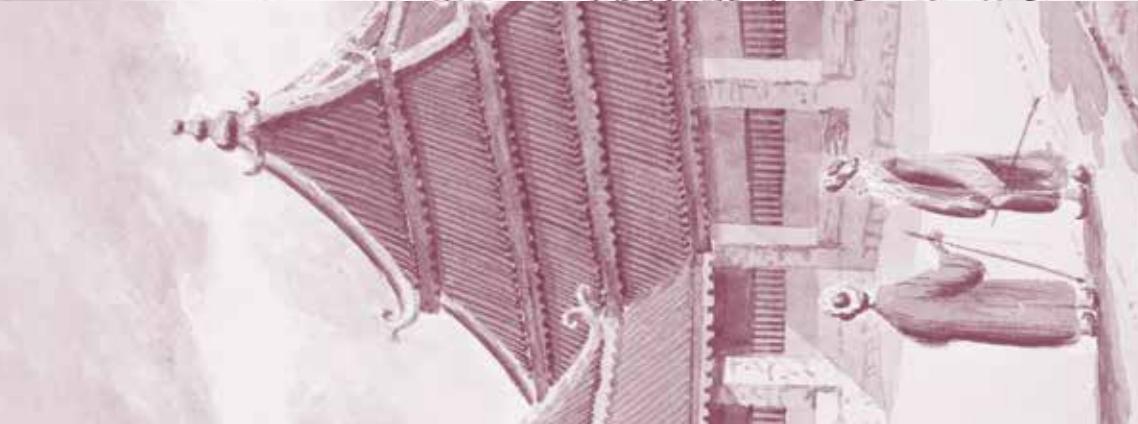
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