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The Archives Issue

THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES TURNS 50

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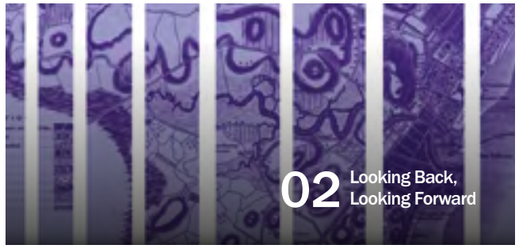
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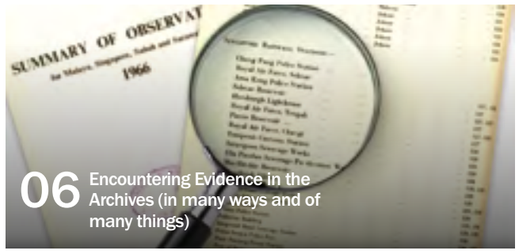
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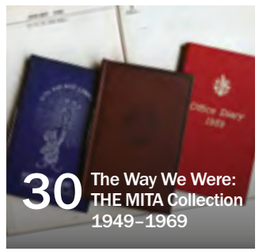
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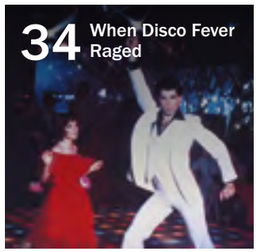
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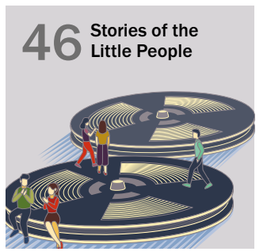
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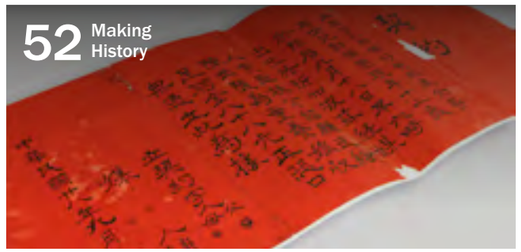
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Directors' Note

April 2019 is a special month for the National Archives of Singapore (NAS). After an 18-month makeover, the NAS building at Canning Rise re-opened on 7 April with a slew of upgraded facilities for the public. As the NAS' year-long 50th anniversary celebrations that began in June 2018 draw to a conclusion, we will mark its close by hosting the SARBICA* International Symposium from 24–28 June 2019.

This special edition of *BiblioAsia* puts the spotlight on all things archives. In his op-ed, Dr Shashi Jayakumar describes how recent initiatives undertaken by the NAS prepare the organisation – as well as Singapore – for the future. Eric Chin examines the role of the archives in providing evidence and the value this has for Singapore – from resolving the landmark Pedra Branca dispute to helping bring the past to life for today's generation.

Fiona Tan remembers some of the pioneers who started the archives in Singapore, Mark Wong interviews an archives veteran to glean insights into her 45-year career, and Abigail Huang charts the timeline of the archives buildings over the years (we did say this issue is about the archives!). Cheong Suk-Wai stresses the importance of oral history records and tells us why the life of a humble tailor matters as much as that of the tycoon.

The Japanese Occupation remains a dark chapter in our history, and three essays touch on this period and its aftermath. Kwok Kian Woon reflects on the tragedy of war and why it is important to remember. Lee Geok Boi pieces together oral history interviews to paint a grim picture of hunger and deprivation during those difficult years. The problem didn't go away when the war ended: the British had to set up children's feeding centres to address malnutrition, as Cheryl-Ann Low discovered.

Other articles elucidate the value of the archives. Tan Chui Hua puts on her dancing shoes to uncover Singapore's early disco scene through oral history and newspaper records. Irene Ng, biographer of one of our founding fathers, S. Rajaratnam, ponders the painstaking process of uncovering the life of a person using archival records. Gretchen Liu highlights the work of the Photo Unit, whose contributions comprise the single largest collection of photographs held by the NAS.

We recently published *50 Records from History: Highlights from the National Archives of Singapore*. Three of these items – a map, a contract and an architectural drawing – provide a peek into the NAS' vast collection of 10 million records (and counting).

Since 2012 – when the NAS became part of the National Library Board – the library and the archives have worked together to make our resources more accessible to the public. We hope this issue of *BiblioAsia* will inspire many of you to look deeper into Singapore's documentary and publishing heritage in this bicentennial year, and gain a new appreciation of our roots.

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On the cover
Various locations of the National Archives of Singapore over the years. From top: Raffles Museum and Library on Stamford Road, National Library on Stamford Road, Old Hill Street Police Station, and the recently renovated NAS building at Canning Rise (see page 10)

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LOOKING BACK LOOKING FORWARD

Shashi Jayakumar examines the role of the National Archives as the official custodian of government records and the people's collective memory.

The National Archives of Singapore (NAS) celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2018. This, along with Singapore's bicentennial this year, is an occasion to reflect on the past as well as the way forward.

The National Archives and Records Centre, as it was known in 1968 when it first began, was established as the custodian of the corporate and institutional memory of Singapore, a repository for records of national or historical significance – some of which date as far back as 1800.

When the Oral History Unit was set up as part of the archives in 1979 to record oral history interviews, the archives also became the repository for the memory of the people and Singapore's historical patrimony. The first two oral history projects undertaken by the new unit were "Pioneers of Singapore" and "Political Developments in Singapore 1945–1965".

Recent Initiatives

Singapore's coming of age as a nation has sparked interest in finding out about our past. There has been a surge in the number of requests for Singapore content at the archives. To tap this impulse, the NAS launched the Singapore Policy History Project (SPHP) in 2016. This microsite found on the Archives Online website presents the policy paths taken by the government, which are categorised according to themes. The SPHP site, which saw 30,000 visits in 2018, currently features 12 themes, ranging from "The Making of a Nation - Forging a Singapore Identity" to "Putting Singapore on the Tourist Map - Singapore's Early Grand Prix". There are plans to include more themes in the future.

The SPHP would not have happened without the potentially controversial declassification initiative undertaken by the NAS. Since the effort to encourage agencies to systematically declassify government files began in 2016, approximately 2,655 files from various agencies have been made publicly available on Archives Online.

The number of requests to access such government files, too, has almost quadrupled, from an average of three requests a month in 2015 to 11 in 2018. In response to the increasing demand, the average waiting time upon application to view such records has been reduced by 44 percent, from 62 days in 2015 to 35 days on average in 2018. Efforts are also underway to make the process of requesting records more user-friendly with an improved interface for researchers and members of the public.

Co-opting, Co-creation

Beyond these initiatives, it is important to examine how the NAS has engaged communities and people in recent years. More than 50 years have lapsed since Singapore's independence, and we have to accept the fact that the pioneer generation who built the nation with their collective blood, sweat and tears – and lived through some of the most painful and turbulent times of our history – is passing from the scene. This is an incalculable loss. Thankfully, many of their stories have been captured in the archives or in oral history interviews. But it is impossible to know if everything that is worth remembering has been recorded for posterity.

It is partly to capture these memories before it is too late, and also to empower Singaporeans in the recording and keeping of these memories, that the NAS launched a community-driven oral history project on 15 June 2017. As part of the initiative, four Community Oral History Committees were created, comprising academics, businessmen, public servants, entrepreneurs and members of grassroots organisations from the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian communities.

These individuals – all volunteers – have been guiding NAS in terms of the areas to cover, identifying potential interviewees and helping to connect us to a network of new volunteers who can conduct oral history interviews and add to our ever-growing trove of memories. In the first 16 months after the launch, we trained 109 volunteers and collected over 60 interviews, totalling more than 160 hours.

The oral history stories are incredibly varied, reflective of the diverse range of experiences of the people of Singapore, and indicative too of what can be done when communities are empowered to share their personal memories. A story that has resonated with me is that of Eleanor Ballard, who was just 14 years old when she saved a young European girl from a frenzied mob during the Maria Hertogh riots in 1950. Another story is from the Tamil poet and writer K.T.M. Iqbal, a 2014 Cultural Medallion winner, who set up an informal Tamil library in a *kampong* in Bukit Purmei with his friends in the mid-1950s when he was a teenager. How many more heartwarming stories are out there that haven't been told and, more importantly, recorded?

The NAS recognises that harnessing the energy, talent and time of individuals by crowdsourcing is key to finding answers to this question. One tried and tested method is the Citizen Archivist Project we started in 2016, an initiative that allows volunteers to annotate and caption thousands of unmarked photographs. The volunteers have also taken a crack at transcribing handwritten records that machines cannot faithfully decipher. The target was to transcribe one million documents by the end of our bicentennial year. Thus far, more than 30,000 pages have been transcribed, and another 1,800 old photographs captioned by a community of 450 (and growing) volunteers.

To create awareness among younger Singaporeans, our archivists have introduced upper secondary and junior college students to the rich content found in NAS' collections. To encourage greater usage at the tertiary level, archivists have been invited to speak to history students about resources on Singapore that can support their learning and research needs. Our aim is to educate every young person – from the secondary school level onwards – on the wealth of patrimonial resources found in the archives. We think they will have use for such information at some point in their lives.

Evolving with IT

Technology has become indispensable in the internal operations of the NAS, and especially in our outreach initiatives so that we can connect with younger people. The NAS is progressively digitising its resources – including photographs, maps, audiovisual records and oral history interviews – and making them publicly available on Archives Online.

One noteworthy initiative is the Spatial Discovery Project, which comprises more than 3,000 online maps – digitised at high resolution – from the NAS and the National Library of Singapore. These georeferenced maps allow users to explore and learn about the changing landscape of Singapore over time, and garnered over 60,000 page views by the end of 2018.

More recently, NAS launched an e-Request system that enables requests to be handled more efficiently online. In some cases, the enquirer will have immediate access to the materials requested and can obtain digital copies of the records if needed, unless the materials are categorised as "classified" or are not available for public use.

Other types of technological evolutions will be needed, and these will have to be made in parallel with a change in our mindsets as to how information is to be disseminated in an open society. While the NAS is generally viewed favourably as the guardian of Singapore's administrative and oral patrimony, some still perceive the institution as being somewhat archaic and even unapproachable. This impression of the institution is unwarranted, and belies the unwavering passion and dedication of all the archives staff, many of whom I know personally.

The NAS must play the role of facilitator when attending to legitimate requests for information. In cases where records are restricted due to matters of national security or genuine sensitivity, archives staff should be able to articulate and explain the rationale to the public. At the same time, we hope that agencies that deposit their materials with us will realise that information flow is a two-way street: allowing access to government and administrative records not only helps researchers with their work, it also provides agencies with the opportunity to clarify potentially opaque or contentious issues and gain a better understanding of their own policy histories.

There is no better time to arrive at this consensus than during our bicentennial year as we look forward to the next lap of the NAS journey. ♦

Dr Shashi Jayakumar is the Head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. He is also the Chairman of the National Archives Advisory Committee.

THE UNRESOLVED PAST

REFLECTIONS ON WAR AND MEMORY

Why recall traumatic memories of war when it is painful for both perpetrators and victims? **Kwok Kian Woon** considers the stakes in remembering and understanding war experiences in times of relative peace.

Kwok Kian Woon is Professor of Sociology and Associate Provost (Student Life) at the Nanyang Technological University. His teaching and research interests relate to the historical and comparative understanding of modern social transformation. He was Chairman of the National Archives Board from 1999 to 2005.

At a Singapore Writers Festival panel in 2018, the eminent historian Wang Gungwu was asked: "What is the one thing that keeps you awake at night?" He replied without hesitation: "The drums of war."

Born in 1930 in Surabaya, Indonesia, Wang grew up in Ipoh and was a teenager when the Japanese invaded Malaya. In his memoir *Home is Not Here*, he looks back to 1948 and recalls: "That stage of my life was… linked to war to an unexpected degree, so much so that I almost viewed war as normal."[1]

World War II had ended three years earlier and the civil war in China[2] was headed towards a communist victory. Wars of independence were raging in Indonesia and Vietnam, and a state of emergency[3] had just been declared in Malaya and Singapore.

Born in the mid-1950s, I see myself as part of an intermediate generation – in between those who had personally experienced war and those living in an era of relative peace. On many occasions, I've heard my parents and older relatives recount their lives during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942–45). Their stories of deprivation, fear, anxiety and humiliation have shaped some of my lifelong habits. For example, I am loath to end a meal with even a grain of rice remaining on my plate, and I would be deeply troubled by arbitrary acts of violence against the innocent and the helpless.

Such first-hand accounts are fast disappearing with the passing of the war generation. Younger generations are left with only textbooks, archival materials, museum exhibits and media reports to learn about the war.

But, today, living in an era of relative peace, what are the stakes in remembering an increasingly distant past and understanding the experiences of mass violence inflicted upon the innocent?

80-year-old Madam Ng Kuai Chee leaning against an urn at the Civilian War Memorial on Beach Road on 15 February 1975, on the occasion of the 33rd anniversary of the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942. Her late husband Dr Hum Wai was killed by the Japanese. *Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.*

Making Sense of an Unresolved Past

As I read more widely and deeply, I came to realise how woefully ignorant my contemporaries and I were about the mass violence that unfolded in neighbouring countries – the Vietnam War,[4] the communist purge in Indonesia,[5] and the Cambodian genocide.[6]

It was as if World War II had cast a long and dark shadow over the ensuing decades, its unprecedented scale and degree of inhumaneness giving licence to new and even more deplorable acts of violence. Each case of massive human tragedy provokes endless soul-searching and unresolved questions – many of which echo those that have repeatedly been asked about the Holocaust in Europe.

Why did ordinary men commit extraordinary evil – killing, maiming, and terrorising innocent people? What were the perpetrators thinking? In following orders, were they thinking at all? Did the civilian populations of the aggressor country support these acts of violence? Did they silently acquiesce to their leaders? Should they – could they – have resisted in any way?

Japan's aggression against its Asian neighbours and across the Asia-Pacific region between 1931 and 1945 is a prime example of an *unresolved past*. Although some attempts have been made over the decades at acknowledging, apologising and atoning for the country's wartime record, they never seem to do sufficient justice to the scale and scope of atrocities suffered by untold millions.

In particular, the questions of forgiveness appear to be in limbo: who asks for forgiveness and from whom, and under what conditions might forgiveness be asked for and given? It is far from clear that the perpetrators of war crimes have properly accounted for their wrongdoing – both to the dead and to surviving victims.

Never Again

The injunction "never again" is often invoked in reflections on the Holocaust. It is a key message in the work of Elie Wiesel, the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. Wiesel, who survived the Holocaust but lost family members in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, said: "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere."[7]

What is the relationship between memory and conscience? For perpetrators and their descendants, feelings of guilt and shame are invariably bound up with avoidance and evasion about what happened in the past, in effect suppressing or erasing memories of war.

For victims and their descendants, the recollection of trauma and suffering can be accompanied by hatred and resentment – to the point that they hold all members of the aggressor country, including the unborn at the time of war, as morally complicit and equally responsible for the atrocities committed. This, in effect, imposes a collective guilt on an entire population, including innocent civilians and those who had resisted, who, ironically, also became victims of the war – as in the case of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[8]

Given the complexities in the recollection of traumatic events, there is sometimes a tendency to speak of "putting the past behind us" and of the need to "move on" and not be "weighed down" by painful memories. Yes, we cannot bring back the dead. The chances for a proper reconciliation between surviving perpetrators and victims, too, diminish by the day. Nevertheless, do their descendants have a duty to remember, a moral obligation to bear the burden of the past in a meaningful way?

An understanding of the causes, costs and consequences of mass violence should accompany the act of remembering the past. In so doing, we engage in a process of examining why people do what they do in the face of extreme conditions, not least because they feel powerless to resist the workings of an entire war machinery.

The brutality that occurred during the Japanese Occupation, for example, ranged from arbitrary everyday acts of violence, from soldiers who randomly slapped and kicked civilians to the systematic and cold-blooded "Sook Ching" massacre[9] that took place in the first 12 days of the Occupation, during which thousands of innocent Chinese men were rounded up and summarily executed.

Among the victims, war brings to the surface not only acts of moral courage, but also the worst of human traits. During the Occupation, there were many reported cases of civilians collaborating with the Kempeitai (the Japanese secret police), profiting from the black market and hoarding rations for themselves. In his memoir *When Singapore was Syonan-to*, Low Ngiong Ing lamented the "general coarsening of conscience" under wartime conditions. He wrote, "More and more we came to repudiate the claims men had on us: we refused to consider ourselves our brothers' keepers. It was each man for himself and the devil take the hindmost."[10]

Becoming More Fully Human

War can be said to be the ultimate condition that distorts human behaviour and strips human beings of agency, dignity and empathy. But war is man-made and not unavoidable, and is neither normal nor inevitable in human life.

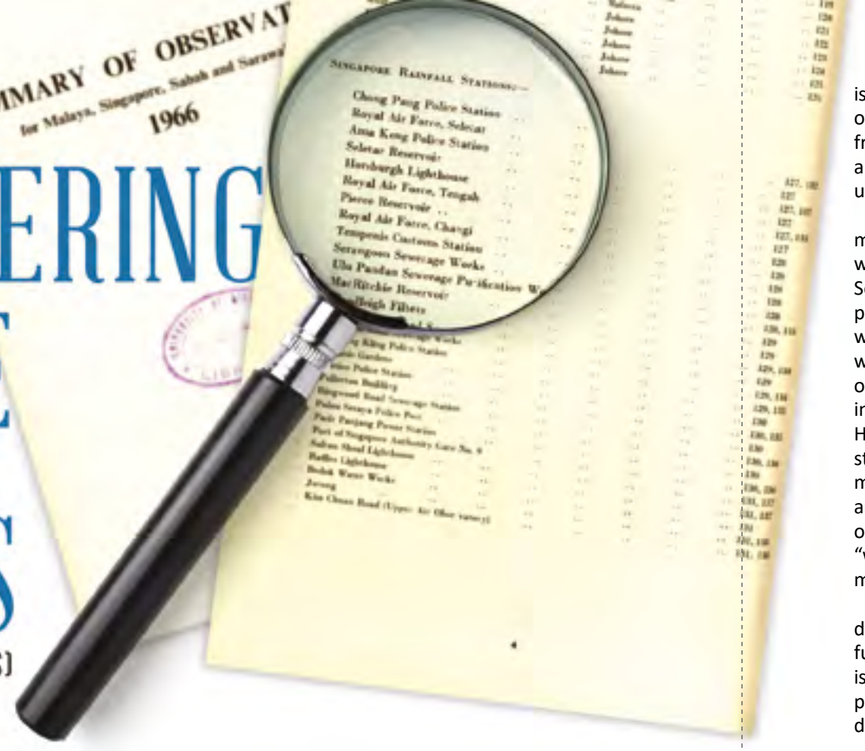
Today, war memories can be drawn into nationalist discourses and, in turn, deepen animosity and create tension between countries. To remember, however, is not only to acknowledge the violence that was inflicted and the suffering that was experienced. It is also a conscious effort to understand the human potential for both good and evil and, as Wiesel exhorts, to take sides, to speak on behalf of the victims, and to insist: "Never again". ♦

NOTES

1 Wang, G.W. (2018). *Home is not here*. Singapore: Ridge Books. (Call no.: RSING 950.04950092 WAN).
2 The Chinese Civil War (1927–50) was fought between the Nationalist Party of China (Kuomintang) under Chiang Kai-shek and the Communist Party of China under Mao Zedong for control of China.
3 A state of emergency was declared in Singapore on 24 June 1948, a week after an emergency was launched in the Federation of Malaya following a spate of violence by the Malayan Communist Party. The guerilla war lasted for 12 years from 1948–60.
4 The Vietnam War (1955–75), also known as the American War, pitched the communist government of North Vietnam against South Vietnam and its main ally, the United States.
5 The Indonesian mass killings of 1965–66 were carried out at the instigation of the military and government.
6 The Cambodian genocide by the Khmer Rouge regime under the leadership of Pol Pot resulted in the deaths of between 1.671 and 1.871 million people from 1975 –79.
7 Nobel Media. (1986, December 10). *Elie Wiesel's acceptance speech on the occasion of the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, December 10, 1986*. Retrieved from The Nobel Prize website.
8 Kwok, K.W. (2015, August 6). A letter to Japanese friends on Hiroshima Day. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from The Straits Times website.
9 Sook Ching means "purge through cleansing". Chinese males between the ages of 18 and 50 were ordered to report to designated centres for mass screening. Many were taken to deserted spots and executed, and their bodies buried in mass graves in many parts of the island.
10 Low, N.I. (1995). *When Singapore was Syonan-to*. Singapore: Times Book International. (Call no.: RSING 959.57023 LOW-[HIS])

ENCOUNTERING EVIDENCE IN THE ARCHIVES

(IN MANY WAYS AND OF MANY THINGS)



Who would have thought that obscure rainfall records from the 1960s would have a bearing on a landmark case before the International Court of Justice? **Eric Chin** explains the value of archival records in preserving and presenting evidence.

"and the archive... was caught up in the middle of it all"

– Anne Gilliland, *Archival Science*, September 2010 [1]

Archivists and those who use the archives for research work may be familiar with the well-known adage that archives are "about acquiring, describing and preserving documents as evidence".[2]

This was most powerfully demonstrated in the resolution of the Pedra Branca dispute in 2008 by the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Prof S. Jayakumar and Prof Tommy Koh were unanimous in their view that the legal team "would not have the materials with which to write the written or oral pleadings"[3] without the help of the National Archives of Singapore (NAS). At the end of the court proceedings, the judgment of 23 May 2008 on Pedra Branca (ICJ Judgment)[4] was granted in Singapore's favour. The NAS would go on to receive the President's Certificate of Commendation in November that year for its "outstanding team work and contributions towards the successful resolution of the Pedra Branca dispute".

The same honour was bestowed on the NAS some 10 years later on 28 October 2018 for "outstanding teamwork and contributions in defending Singapore's sovereignty and national interests", as part of an Inter-Agency Pedra Branca Team, when Malaysia filed an application at the ICJ on 2 February 2017 to review the judgment made in 2008.[5]

Evidence in the Everyday

"not compiled with an eye toward history"

– Arlette Farge, 1989[6]

How was the day won? The ICJ Judgment stated the basic legal principle on the burden of proof – "a party which advances a point of fact in support of its claim must establish that fact".[7] The key facts cited in the judgment were established through evidence found in diverse archival records, such as correspondences, official memos, reports and maps. These were compiled from the archival holdings of the NAS and other Singapore public agencies as well as from overseas archives.

Together, the documents provided a wealth of evidence testifying that Singapore's actions were wholly consistent with the exercise of ownership, such as the exercise of control on who could visit Pedra Branca. Notably, the ICJ Judgment specifically highlighted the converse as well: the absence of any archival evidence of actions presented by Malaysia to contradict Singapore's position.[8]

In a case where the legal examination of the facts went all the way back to the 1800s, the heavy reliance on documentation provided by the NAS and other archives was to be expected. What was more surprising was that most of the archival records that eventually found their way into bundles of evidence for scrutiny were bureaucratic records created in the course of everyday business – received and dutifully kept as ordinary records of seemingly little national or historical significance. It is fair to say that the many who produced or filed away these archival records, some from over a century ago, could not have anticipated how they would come to be used one day.

Among the archival records that made a surprise appearance before the ICJ was a letter from the American Piscatorial[9] Society dated 17 June 1972, requesting permission to undertake research in the waters surrounding Pedra Branca. There were also meteorological publications on rainfall that were held as "significant in Singapore's favour": the inclusion of Horsburgh Lighthouse as a "Singapore" station in 1959 and 1966 when such information was jointly reported by Malaysia and Singapore and, more significantly, its omission from the 1967 Malaysian report "when the two countries began reporting meteorological information separately".[10]

It is clear that the value of the evidence contained in an archives is not always fully realised at the point of its creation. It is the role of the archivist to see a bigger picture, the ability to see beyond the immediate purpose and use of a document.[11]

"Archives are not a static artefact imbued with the creator's voice alone, but a dynamic process involving an infinite number of stakeholders over time and space."[12] Those in the archives community are only too aware that archives are "always in a state of becoming",[13] as different people can view and interact with the same archival records from different perspectives and contexts at different times. This being the case, the value of the evidence contained in the archives is not confined to its use in legal proceedings alone.

Beyond Judicial Evidence

We can take a leaf from the Australian Society of Archivists, which has posited that the mission of the archivist is "to ensure that records that have value as authentic evidence of administrative, corporate, cultural and intellectual activity are made, kept and used".[14] This positions "evidence" as the constant at the heart of the archives but it also touches on the fact that the archives may be valued for different reasons, from the bureaucratic and organisational to the cultural, from being symbols of national pride to those of a community and the personal.

As the NAS entered its 50th year in 2018, it is apt that it can offer much for those wishing to cast a renewed eye on our history during this bicentennial year (marking Stamford Raffles' arrival in Singapore). A multi-faceted archives can offer varying insights for diverse people, from historians interested in serious post-colonial discussions to those simply wanting to discover nuggets of interesting sights and sounds of the times.

A first stop when looking at NAS' holdings relevant to the bicentennial must be what has become known as the Straits Settlements Records (SSR), which date back to the year 1800 and charts the history of the British administration in Singapore as well as the Malay Peninsula. Among these records are Raffles' proclamations and his letters of instruction on the administration of Singapore.

A well-known example of Raffles' influence on Singapore's development is the six "Regulations" issued by him despite not having the legal authority to do so. More recently uncovered alongside the substantive parts of the regulations are his common-sense instructions for their dissemination. Apart from the original versions in English, Raffles astutely directed that the regulations be translated into both Malay and Chinese. He also directed that they "be published by beat of gong and affixed to the usual places for public information". The use of the gong in lieu of the bell rung by a typical English town crier was at the very least practical; or perhaps it was simply a nod to local culture.

The NAS has come to learn a lot more about the contents of the early handwritten SSRs through the tremendous efforts of members of the public. These "citizen archivists", as they are known, have steadily transcribed the manuscripts into searchable text since the voluntary project began in 2015. To date, more than 28,000 pages of the SSR have been transcribed to reveal a vast amount of new knowledge.

For instance, in the proclamation made under the direction of Raffles dated 14 March 1823, the transcription revealed that Raffles' sense of British justice for serious crimes included the rather protracted punishment where the body of an executed murderer is "hanged in Chains and given to the winds".[15] We now know from our own archives that dramatic movie scenes of hanging skeletons were very much true to life back in the day.

Raffles' Regulations III and VI set up a nascent magistracy, and the first notions of British-style justice was practised in Singapore until formal ties with English courts were cut in 1994.[16] The reception of English law and its courts were formally confirmed in the Charters of Justice. The original copy of the 1855 Third Charter of Justice has been preserved by the NAS and is currently on display at the NAS exhibition, "Law of the Land: Highlights of Singapore's Constitutional Documents", at the former Chief Justice's Chamber and Office, National Gallery Singapore.

The Third Charter of Justice provided for the post of the very first professional judge to be permanently located in Singapore – evidence of the island's growing commercial and administrative importance

(Facing page) Horsburgh Lighthouse on Pedra Branca island is clearly listed as a Singapore Rainfall Station on page 4 of the report, *Meteorological Services Malaysia and Singapore: Summary of Observations for Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak 1966. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) An 1851 painting of the gunboat *Nancy* and Horsburgh Lighthouse on Pedra Branca by John Turnbull Thomson, Government Surveyor for the Straits Settlements. *Nancy* sailed from Malacca and arrived at Pedra Branca on 1 May 1848 to combat piracy in the area. The lighthouse was designed by Thomson and completed in 1851. It is named after James Horsburgh, a hydrographer with the British East India Company. *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

Eric Chin is the General Counsel of the National Library Board. He was formerly Director of the National Archives of Singapore (2012–17).

by that time. Citizen archivist transcriptions, however, have provided evidence that the British did not necessarily have blind faith in their methods alone.

Another citizen archivist transcription revealed that on 16 April 1862, long before the 1990s push towards "Singapore law to develop in a way most suited to its people's needs",[17] then Governor of the Straits Settlements William Orfeur Cavenagh voiced serious misgivings about magistrates fresh from the English Bar who possessed scant local knowledge. In a letter addressed to the Secretary to the Government of India, he wrote:

> "I am unable to agree… as to the propriety of selecting Magistrates from the English Bar without any reference to local knowledge; although most readily acknowledging all the great advantages of a legal education as fitting its recipient for the performance of legal duties. I have long considered that a knowledge not only of the languages, but of the general character and habits of Orientals is not merely essential but absolutely necessary to enable an Englishman to satisfactorily dispense justice amongst our Asiatic fellow subjects."[18]

2019 also sees the 60th anniversary of an event on the other end of the colonial era. In 1959, Singapore achieved self-government with an elected 51-seat Legislative Assembly. The positions of Governor and Chief Minister would be replaced with the Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Head of State) and Prime Minister respectively. In the run-up to the election that took place on 30 May 1959, the importance of voting was emphasised through colourful posters and election songs,[19] encouraging people to "vote to choose our government" as "Singapore is ours".

The posters and songs preserved by the NAS serve as part of the evidence of the sights and sounds of an important but turbulent period, culminating with the archival document that has been imbued with symbolic value – the hastily typewritten Proclamation of Singapore in 1965.

Evidence from Beyond Singapore

Apart from holdings transferred from other government agencies, NAS has for a long time been active in securing Singapore-related content from overseas archives. Unlike in ancient times, no single archive can claim to be the only "repository of both knowledge and proof in its day".[20] Chief among the "foreign archives" that the public can access at the NAS Archives Reading Room are copies of "Migrated Archives"[21] relating to Singapore from The National Archives in the United Kingdom.

These records from former British colonies were kept by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and had not been available for public access until they were released in tranches from 2012. Similar records from the national archives of Australia and the United States have also been identified (and copied where permitted) as they provide different strands of evidence of Singapore's colonial and post-colonial past as well as alternative perspectives of historical events. Through such steady work, the NAS seeks to be the primary and one-stop repository of Singapore content when it comes to archives from anywhere in the world.

Oral History as Evidence

> "creating an archival record"
>
> – Kwa Chong Guan & Ho Chi Tim, 2012[22]

Instead of being cautious about treating oral testimony as evidence, the NAS sees the use of oral history and other forms of archives (apart from the textual) as the "path to a rich and nuanced understanding of events and actions".[23] There has been a recent turning away by archivists and historians from the traditional reliance on textual records. There is a growing realisation that the purely textual is "not sufficient for all cultures and places",[24] although the NAS has always proudly championed oral history through its Oral History Centre. In words co-authored by noted historian and former director of the Oral History Centre, Kwa Chong Guan,[25] the oral history recording programme was "in effect creating an archival record of the circumstances of Singapore's creation and development".

The NAS' long-time practice of drawing out concrete evidence as well as subtle nuances from key actors in events that have shaped Singapore and those who experienced the events first-hand and have a story to tell, has become the current refrain of many an archival theorist: "where documentary gaps exists… archivists should

(Above) A poster from the 1959 Legislative Assembly general election encouraging people to "vote to choose our government" as "Singapore is ours". *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) The typewritten Proclamation of Singapore document signed off by founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on 9 August 1965. This is another key document in the holdings of the National Archives. *Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.*

A typical staff workspace with simple wooden desk and chair amongst the archives at the National Archives and Records Centre at Lewin Terrace, 1971. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

actively intervene with documentary projects such as oral histories… to create a 'record' that fills in the missing experience or knowledge"[26] or indeed, the eye witness accounts (i.e. evidence) of happenings.

Such was indeed required in the case of Singapore's collective memory of the Japanese Occupation[27] where local records were all but destroyed. Where gaps have been less serious, oral history and archives in the form of photographs and audiovisual archives have also "contribute[d] to bringing to life individuals and communities that (may) otherwise lie rather lifeless or without colour in the paper record"[28] alone.

The Keepers of Evidence

> "even if it is challenging – as all worthy activities tend to be"
>
> – James M. O'Toole & Richard J. Cox, 2006[29]

It would be remiss when speaking of evidence in the archives not to pause and recognise that archivists, historians and other researchers are now painfully aware that archives can sometimes only offer an "archival sliver".[30] This may be partly attributed to the "avalanche of over documentation" (starting as far back as the mid-20th century[31] and especially now in the digital age). Besides the indiscriminate disposal or deliberate destruction by creators of records,[32] large gaps in archival records can also stem from careless appraisal methodologies or biases,[33] the exclusion of the marginalised,[34] and also the sheer failure by some to record transactions because of ignorance or deliberate acts by those wanting to be forgotten.[35]

The wealth and reliability of evidence from any archives are ultimately shaped and nurtured by archivists, conservators and administrative staff who, together, have to apply sound archival ethics, policy, preservation and standards.[36] This started in Singapore some 50 years ago in 1968, when the National Archives and Records Centre was set up as an institution with its own dedicated mandate and "one Senior Archives Officer; two Clerical Assistants; two Archives Attendants; one Typist; one Binder; one Office Boy".

Despite the modest numbers, it was a good start not least because the senior archives officer was Lily Loh (later Mrs Lily Tan), the first professionally trained archivist who would later be appointed director of the NAS from 1978 to 2001. She and her team of dedicated staff expanded operations to establish the first Oral History Unit, the first Audiovisual Archives Unit, and oversaw the move to the NAS' current location at Canning Rise with its purpose-built conservation equipment and repositories based on international standards.

Today, the staff of NAS continue to build on this solid bedrock to preserve and present archival records that offer what the French historian Arlette Farge has evocatively described as a tantalising "tear in the fabric of time".[37] ♦

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Building History

FROM STAMFORD ROAD TO CANNING RISE

Abigail Huang tracks the movement of the National Archives of Singapore, from its early days in the Raffles Museum and Library on Stamford Road to an old school building at the foot of Fort Canning.

Abigail Huang is a Records Management Archivist with the National Archives of Singapore. She became interested in the history of the archives while doing her Master's degree in Information Studies in the University of Texas at Austin.

The Raffles Museum and Library on Stamford Road.

1938

The archives unit is set up as part of the Raffles Museum and Library on Stamford Road (today's National Museum of Singapore). Its initial collection comprises 170 original volumes of 19th-century records from the library of the Colonial Secretary. This collection, later named the Straits Settlements Records, documents the history of British administration in Singapore, Penang and Malacca.

1 April 1958

The Raffles Library is renamed Raffles National Library and tasked to "receive, preserve and administer the official archives".

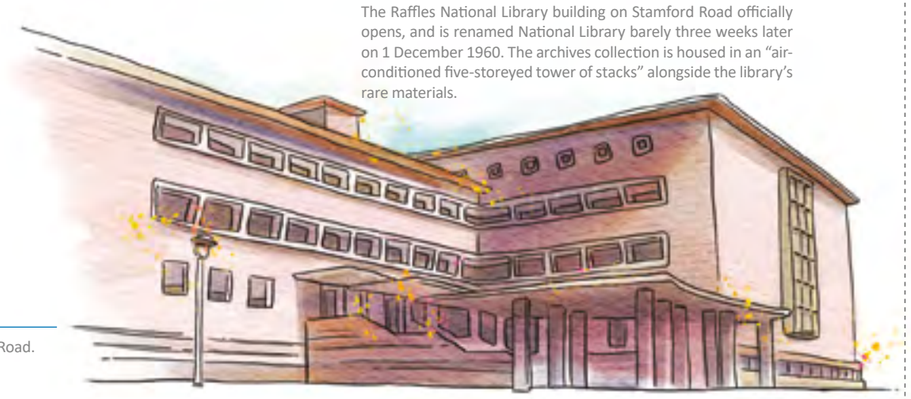
The reading room of the Raffles Library.

1955

The Raffles Museum and Library is restructured into the Raffles Museum and the Raffles Library. The archives unit becomes a department under the Raffles Library.

12 November 1960

The Raffles National Library building on Stamford Road officially opens, and is renamed National Library barely three weeks later on 1 December 1960. The archives collection is housed in an "air-conditioned five-storeyed tower of stacks" alongside the library's rare materials.



The National Library on Stamford Road.

August 1968

The National Archives and Records Centre begins operations, taking over the management, custody and preservation of public archives and government records from the National Library.

June 1973

Due to space constraints at the National Archives and Records Centre, a new Records Centre opens at 45 Minden Road as a repository for government records that are deemed too valuable to be destroyed but not important enough to be kept at the Lewin Terrace site.

1981

The National Archives and Records Centre is merged with the Oral History Unit to form the Archives and Oral History Department.

The new Records Centre at 45 Minden Road.

January 1970

The National Archives and Records Centre moves into two refurbished colonial houses at 17–18 Lewin Terrace on Fort Canning Hill. The new premises contain a 24-hour air-conditioned repository as well as facilities for binding and repair work.

September 1979

The National Archives and Records Centre obtains approval to move into the colonial-era Hill Street Police Station building, but would not make the physical relocation until 1984. In 1979, too, the Oral History Unit is set up as a department under the National Archives and Records Centre for the purpose of collecting and documenting the memories of people through oral history recordings.

The refurbished colonial buildings at 17–18 Lewin Terrace on Fort Canning Hill.

The Old Hill Street Police Station.

The Archives and Oral History Department finally moves into the Old Hill Street Police Station – the police force vacated the building in 1980 but renovations are delayed – sharing the space with several government agencies. The new location has a bigger climate-controlled archival repository, a proper conservation and repair workshop, a microfilming lab, an exhibition space, a lecture hall and a public reference room.

28 May 1984

The National Archives, Oral History Department and National Museum are merged to form the National Heritage Board (NHB), with the National Archives and Oral History Department becoming a single entity known as the National Archives of Singapore (NAS). The Oral History Department is renamed the Oral History Centre.

1 August 1993

August 1985

The Archives and Oral History Department is split into two entities: the National Archives and the Oral History Department.

1997

The NAS moves into the former Anglo-Chinese Primary School building at 1 Canning Rise. The renovated building includes a modern Archives Reading Room, an enlarged exhibition space integrated with the foyer, soundproof audio recording rooms and a theatre. Supporting archival work are five climate-controlled repositories as well as conservation and image preservation laboratories.

The NAS building at 1 Canning Rise showing the administrative block facade. The building is the former home of the Anglo-Chinese Primary School.

INTERPRETIVE CENTRES BY THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SINGAPORE

In the 2000s, NAS opened two World War II "Interpretive Centres"– places where archival records, especially oral history accounts, present multifaceted stories of Singapore's history.

"Reflections at Bukit Chandu", at 31K Pepys Road, was officially opened in February 2002. Launched to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the fall of Singapore, it honours the brave soldiers of the Malay Regiment in their heroic defence against Japanese enemy forces in one of the last battles before the fall of Singapore in February 1942. The National Heritage Board took over its management in 2012.

The "Memories at Old Ford Factory" exhibition gallery, at the Former Ford Factory at 351 Upper Bukit Timah Road, was opened in February 2006 to relive the dark days of the Japanese Occupation in Singapore between 1942 and 1945. This building, used as an assembly plant for the Ford Motor Company in 1941, was the site of the British surrender of Singapore to the Japanese. The exhibition was revamped and retitled in 2017 as "Surviving the Japanese Occupation: War and Its Legacies".

Reflections at Bukit Chandu on Pepys Road. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

The NAS becomes an institution under the National Library Board.

1 November 2012

November 2017

The NAS building on Canning Rise is closed for major renovations, and archive services move temporarily to the National Library building on Victoria Street.

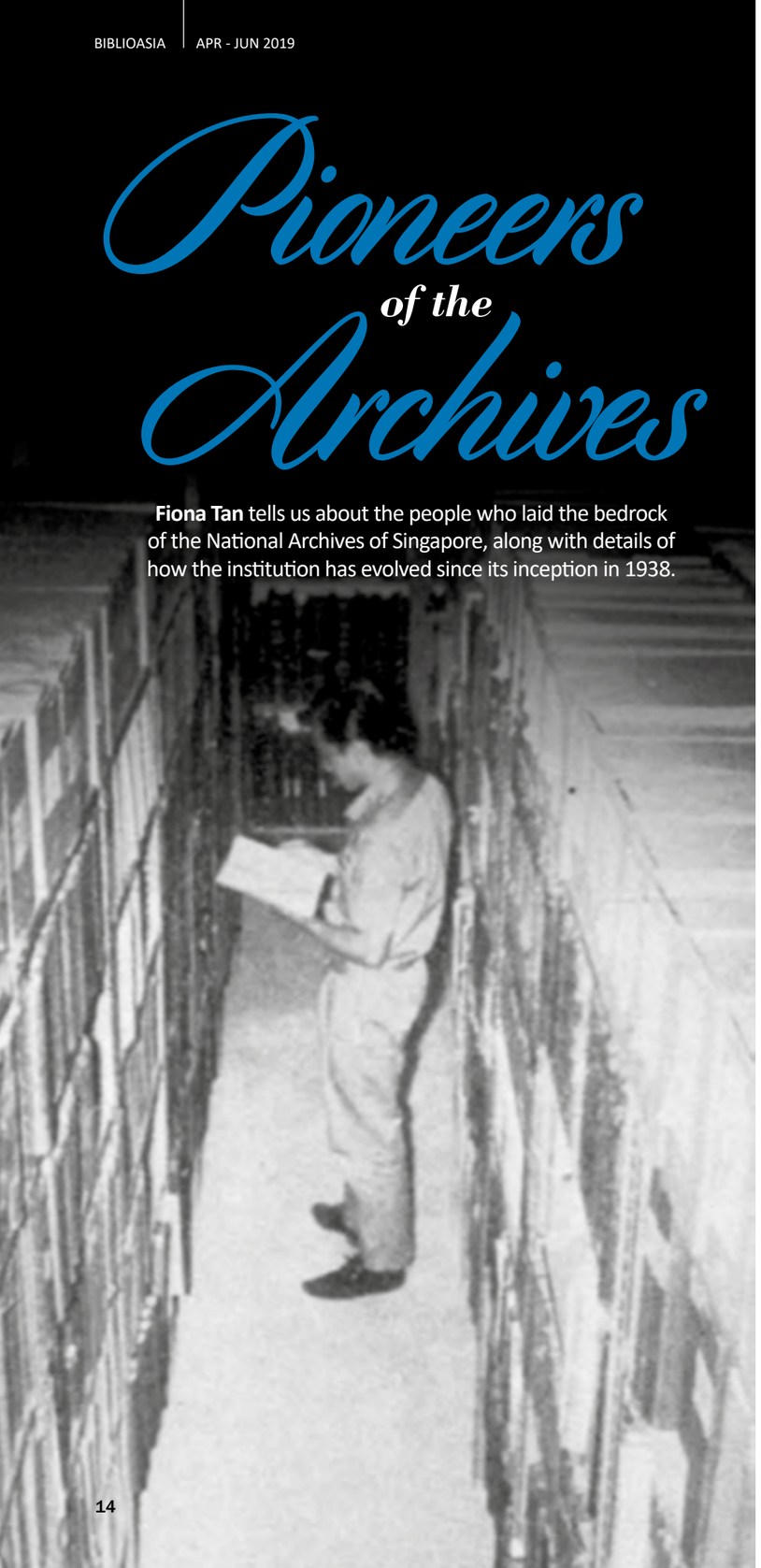
7 April 2019

The refurbished NAS building at Canning Rise officially opens with upgraded facilities and equipment, and expanded public spaces, including a new theatre for the screening of Asian classics and films restored by the Asian Film Archive. Some of the design elements in the former building, such as the distinctive scalloped-roof shelter at the side of the administrative block, are reinstated during the renovations.

The newly renovated NAS building at 1 Canning Rise.

Pioneers of the Archives

Fiona Tan tells us about the people who laid the bedrock of the National Archives of Singapore, along with details of how the institution has evolved since its inception in 1938.



Fiona Tan is an Archivist with the National Archives of Singapore, where she answers reference enquiries at the Archives Reading Room and helps to promote greater awareness of archival collections.

> "The man who is appointed to a post being created by the Straits Settlements Government will have a life-time job before him. An archivist is wanted."[1]

In April 1938, an advertisement to recruit the first archivist for the Raffles Museum and Library was placed in *The Straits Times*, describing the position – with typically dry British wit – as a "life-time job". One can assume that this phrase was not in reference to the permanent nature of the job, but to the scale and difficulty of the tasks that awaited the person who eventually filled the position.

Since then, many brave and dedicated persons have played a part in preserving Singapore's history through their work as pioneering archivists and early supporters of the archives.

The First Archivist: Tan Soo Chye

The man eventually selected as Singapore's first archivist was Tan Soo Chye, a fresh graduate from Raffles College. Shortly after his appointment at the archives unit under the Raffles Museum and Library, the 24-year-old left for Batavia (present-day Jakarta) to study under Frans Rijndert Johan Verhoeven, the Landsarchivaris (National Archivist) of the Lands Archief te Batavia (State Archives of Batavia) in Java for two weeks. The Raffles Museum and Library was then located on Stamford Road, in the building that today houses the National Museum of Singapore.

Upon his return, Tan began indexing the Straits Settlements Records (SSR), a series of 170 large bound volumes of handwritten records from as early as 1800 that document the British administration of the Straits Settlements comprising Singapore, Penang and Malacca. These records had been recently transferred from the library of the Colonial Secretary to the care of the Raffles Museum and Library.[2] By 1940, Tan had compiled a "comprehensive index recording every person, event and institution mentioned in original documents of all records relating to the Straits Settlements" in the series.[3]

A staff sorting records at the repository in the Lewin Terrace premises of the National Archives and Records Centre (NARC) in 1970. *Image reproduced from Annual Report of the National Archives and Records Centre 1970.*

Soon after the outbreak of World War II in Malaya in 1941, the records were sent to the Raffles College for safekeeping.[4] Edred J.H. Corner, the botanist responsible for the care of the remaining books and specimens in the Raffles Museum and Library during the Japanese Occupation, wrote a vivid account of how some of these records came back to the library's possession – first through a passive, but incomplete, return from the Syonan Department of Education in February 1944, and later by a chance discovery and subsequent swift purchase of several missing volumes that were being sold as wastepaper by unknowing Chinese women labourers.[5]

After the war, Tan returned to his job as the sole archivist. He began to promote the SSR collection by writing articles on Singapore's history for various newspapers, giving public talks on local history, and publishing essays about the SSR in academic journals, including the esteemed *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. Michael Tweedie, then Director of the Raffles Museum and Library, began exploring ways to provide Tan with opportunities for further study and professional development.[6] Tan eventually obtained a Class II honours in history from the University of Malaya in 1951 and graduated at the same time as Hedwig Aroozoo (later Hedwig Anuar, the first director of the National Library).[7]

In December 1953, an unexpected turn of events saw Tan transferred to the Department of Customs and Excise. There, Tan rose rapidly through the ranks to become Comptroller of Customs in 1960, the first Asian to do so. Tan later served as a member of the National Archives and Records Committee, albeit for a short period, from 1975 to 1976, to advise the National Archives and Records Centre on what records to acquire and review as a representative of the Joint Chambers of Commerce.[8]

Historians Call for a National Archives

With Tan's departure, the position of archivist remained vacant until 1967. Upon the separation of the Raffles Library and Museum in 1955, the archives unit became a department under the Raffles Library. In 1958, the Raffles Library was renamed Raffles National Library, moving two years later into the now-demolished red-brick building at the other end of Stamford Road and changing its name yet again – this time to just the National Library. All this while, the archives was under the charge of the library. During this period, reference librarians continued to provide administrative support and helped researchers with their requests, even though they had no experience in managing archival records.[9]

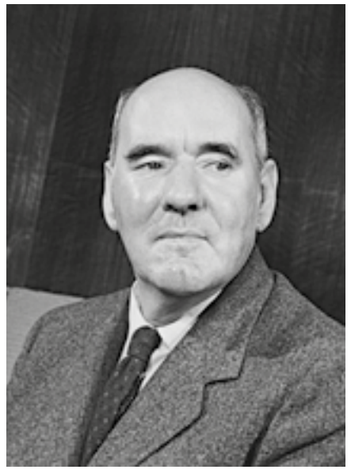
One of the earliest public calls for an independent archives came from Cyril Northcote Parkinson, Head of the Department of History at the University of Malaya. In 1953, he issued a strongly worded editorial in *The Straits Times*, titled "Lumps are Being Eaten Out of Our History: Cockroaches Make Past a Mystery", in which he recommended setting up a national archives where "in air-conditioned rooms, on steel shelves, with skilled supervision and proper precaution against fire and theft, the records of Malayan history might be preserved indefinitely".[10]

In 1956, Parkinson reiterated his view, which had now taken on a nationalist urgency, asserting that "one early sequel to Merdeka should be the creation of a Malayan National Archives".[11] His view was echoed by Kennedy Gordon Tregonning, a history lecturer at the university, who urged for archival and records management legislation to ensure that the past will be "preserved for the historians (and the administrators) of the future".[12]

While an archives was set up in the Federation of Malaya in 1957, Singapore continued to be without an independent archival institution. Tregonning, who succeeded Parkinson as head of the University of Malaya's history department in 1959, continued advocating for a national archives in Singapore.[13] During a visit to the Toyo Bunko[14] in Tokyo, Japan, in 1966, he saw a collection of East Asian manuscripts printed on bamboo strips which inspired him further. Upon his return, he helped

(Below) Cyril Northcote Parkinson, Head of the Department of History at the University of Malaya. He was one of the earliest to call for a national archives to be established in Singapore. This portrait was taken in 1961. *Source: National Archives of The Netherlands, retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.*

(Below right) Tan Soo Chye, the first archivist appointed by the Straits Settlements government in 1938 to manage the historical records at the archives office at the Raffles Museum and Library. *Image reproduced from The Straits Times, 13 August 1939, p. 13.*



AUGUST 13, 1939

MALAYA'S HISTORICAL RECORDS

Bureau Of Archives Is Rapidly Taking Shape

SPECIAL BUILDING MAY BE PROVIDED

TAN SOO CHYE

M. MAISKY WILL BECOME DIPLOMAT NO. 1

This Will Please Plain Jane

WOMAN LEFT £10,000 TO HER MAID

Hedwig Anuar, Director of the National Library, to draft a proposal to establish an archives institution in Singapore.[15]

Recommendation by UNESCO

In February 1967, the Singapore government approached the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for technical assistance to set up a national archives. UNESCO assigned the aforementioned Dutch archivist Frans Rijndert Johan Verhoeven, who had just completed a stint as the Director-General of the National Archives of Malaysia from 1963 to 1966.

Between April and August 1967, Verhoeven advised the Singapore government on the best international practices on archives management and assisted in drafting related legislation, which would eventually become the National Archives and Records Centre Bill. Verhoeven also conducted an extensive survey of records and archives held at the National Library and at other government agencies. He found that there was no systematic method for appraising records among the government ministries and statutory boards he surveyed, and that only three departments had been transferring records since 1959. He also recommended halving the time that public records were kept restricted, from 50 to 25 years, and having archives staff, rather than administrative officers, be responsible for appraising records.

Furthermore, Verhoeven found that the pre-war records held by government departments were in a much worse state, as they had been "stored on wooden shelves and cupboards, a victim of the rigours of the tropical climate, of the continuous attacks of voracious insects and rodents, and liable to moulding and foxing from dampness and flooding". There was "no air-conditioning, fumigation nor repair", and the precious records were at risk from fire and flooding. Verhoeven anticipated an urgent need for additional space to accommodate both new and existing records.

In addition, Verhoeven reviewed the archives' existing holdings and concluded that there was much material "of historical value for the region". He lamented, however, over the severely inadequate storage facilities and handling of the collections. For example, the National Library, which fumigated the documents twice a year, did not have "the staff, the equipment nor the know-how to give these unique and important documents the treatment they urgently need[ed]". There were also inadequate descriptions, indices and lists of the holdings to aid research and access.

(Top) Dutch archivist Frans Rijndert Johan Verhoeven advised the Singapore government on the best international practices on archives management and assisted in drafting related legislation, which eventually became the National Archives and Records Centre Bill. *Image reproduced from Web Centre for the History of Science in the Low Countries.*

(Above) The report prepared by Dutch archivist Frans Rijndert Johan Verhoeven on the state of Singapore's archives and records management practices. Titled *Singapore: The National Archives and Records Management*, it was published by UNESCO in December 1967 and presented to the Singapore government in February 1968.

(Above right) Staff of the Raffles Library photographed in 1957. Between 1954 and 1967, the archives was a department under the Raffles Library, later renamed as the National Library. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Facing page) Mrs Hedwig Anuar (extreme left) with then Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam at the presentation ceremony of the Gibson-Hill Collection to the National Library, 1965. *Courtesy of National Library Board.*

Verhoeven's findings and recommendations were documented in a highly influential report, *Singapore: The National Archives and Records Management*, published by UNESCO in December 1967 and presented to the Singapore government in February 1968. In the document, Verhoeven underscored the importance of a national archives to Singapore's growth as a nation:

> "Perhaps I should stress here, that no people can be deemed masters of their own history until their public archives, gathered, preserved and made available for public inspection and investigation, have been systematically studied and the importance of their contents determined. Therefore, it is a moral obligation of any democratic government to make archives of national and historical value available to the people."[16]

The First Archives Director: Hedwig Anuar

In September 1967, Singapore's parliament passed the National Archives and Records Centre Act, which established the National Archives and Records Centre (NARC) under the Ministry of Culture. The legislation empowered the NARC to operate as a separate national institution and to take over the management of archives and government records from the National Library. Its new statutory powers included the critical provision that public records could now only be destroyed or disposed on the authority of the NARC director. On 7 February 1969, Hedwig Anuar became the first director of the NARC; she was concurrently director of the National Library.

Under Anuar's leadership, the NARC rapidly built up its institutional infrastructure and capabilities. In January 1970, partly in response to its perennial problem of insufficient space, the NARC moved to bigger premises, taking over two refurbished colonial houses at 17–18 Lewin Terrace, Fort Canning Hill. The new facility had space for more materials to be stored, more staff to be hired, and new equipment and services to be introduced. It was also furnished with a 24-hour air-conditioned repository.

Despite this, the archives' collections continued to grow so rapidly that the institution expanded into four buildings by mid-1973, including a third facility beside 17–18 Lewin Terrace, operational by mid-1971; and a Records Centre at 45 Minden Road in Tanglin, which opened in 1973.[17]

In the early years, establishing the paper conservation department was a priority as the NARC had an enormous volume of paper records that urgently needed care from years of neglect. Hence, the paper binding and repair section, the predecessor of today's Archives Conservation Lab, was set up in July 1970.[18]

Besides overseeing the NARC's development, Anuar also led the institution in establishing ties with other archival institutions in the region. In 1969, the NARC joined the Southeast Asian Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (SARBICA), which had been established the previous year. Anuar also contributed to a greater regional awareness of archival resources in Singapore, presenting a paper in April 1969 on the National Library and NARC's research resources on Southeast Asia at the SARBICA conference held in Puncak, Indonesia.[19] She also served as the vice-chairman of SARBICA's executive board between 1971 and 1973, and as its chairman from 1973 to 1975.[20]

Anuar held the position of director of the NARC until 7 February 1978, when a senior archives officer took over as acting director.

The First Professional Archivist: Lily Tan

In September 1967, Lily Tan left Singapore to pursue her studies in archives administration at the University College London under a Colombo Plan Scholarship.[21] Upon her return and appointment as senior archives officer in late August 1968, the NARC officially began operations with a skeletal staff of eight people: Tan, two clerical assistants, two archives attendants, a typist, a binder and an office assistant.

Ten years later, in 1978, Tan was promoted to acting director. In 1985, she became NARC's director, and would lead the institution for over two decades until her retirement in 2001 – the institution's longest-serving director to date.

One of Tan's first major tasks as acting director was to draft a memorandum for the establishment of an oral history programme within the NARC. The setting up of a national-level oral history programme to document histories that were not found in official records had the strong support of several influential members of government. While the idea was first mooted by then Deputy Prime

Minister Goh Keng Swee in 1978, it was the permanent secretary in the Ministry of Finance, George Edwin Bogaars, who played an instrumental role in securing high-level support from his superiors and the Ministry of Culture.[22]

The proposal was quickly approved and the Oral History Unit began operations in September 1979, with Lily Tan concurrently holding the position as director of the newly formed unit. At the beginning of 1981, the Oral History Unit merged with the NARC to form the Archives and Oral History Department (AOHD), with Tan again serving as the director of the new entity.

In 1985, the AOHD was split into the Oral History Department – which came under the charge of Kwa Chong Guan, a senior Ministry of Defence officer who had been seconded to the Ministry of Culture – and the National Archives with Tan continuing as director, resuming its traditional role as the custodian of national records.[23]

Tan also oversaw the enhancement of the archives' capabilities in preserving records. These plans included managing the Central Microfilm Unit (CMU) after it was transferred to the AOHD from the National Library in 1983.[24] Starting in 1995, the archives began to emphasise the importance of managing electronic records. As Tan explained: "If we fail to manage electronic records, there will be gaps in our history."[25] These early initiatives in 1999 to develop guidelines on the archiving of e-mail records for the government and custom archival systems, such as the Electronic Registry System, continue to evolve and remain very relevant today.

Next, to improve access to its collections, the NAS launched an ambitious scheme to digitise its reference system in 1996. This meant painstakingly converting the archive's hardcopy finding aids into an online digital database. Beginning with Picture Archives Singapore (PICAS) in 1998, which provided access to the archives' extensive photo collection, it grew into a full-scale online database called Access to Archives Online (a2o) in July 2000.[26] This was the precursor to today's Archives Online database, which contains public listings of more than a million records. Technological advancements have also enabled the NAS to offer more records and of higher resolution on Archives Online, realising the vision of an archive that is accessible from home.

In April 1995, the Audiovisual Archives Unit was established within the NAS to collect, preserve and provide access to audiovisual records of national or historical significance. In the beginning, the collection comprised some 8,000 motion picture film reels and videotapes, which had been created by public offices, private organisations and individuals.[27] The NAS also became a founding member of the Southeast Asia-Pacific Audio Visual Archives Association (SEAPAVAA), established in February 1996 in Manila, the Philippines, to bring together ASEAN film and video archivists. Today, SEAPAVAA is the leading audiovisual archive association in the Asia-Pacific region.

Lily Tan, Director of the National Archives of Singapore (1978–2001), at the opening of the exhibition "Road to Nationhood" in 1984. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Building Awareness

Under Tan's leadership, the National Archives embarked on several initiatives – mainly exhibitions and publications – to generate greater public awareness of its collections and services.[28] Besides engaging traditional users, such as "people conducting historical research", the NAS also cultivated new users, for instance, through dialogue sessions with arts practitioners.[29]

Like her predecessor Hedwig Anuar, Tan also saw the importance of establishing good relations with archives outside of Singapore. She played a leading role in SARBICA's executive board, serving as its secretary general (1978–81), vice-chairman (1981–84; 1997–99), chairman (1984–87; 1999–2002) and executive board member (1987–95).[30]

Led by Tan, Singapore hosted high-profile regional and international archives-related seminars. One of these was the SARBICA seminar on the Management of Architectural and Cartographic Records in November 1991, a significant forum for dialogue between professionals across Southeast Asia, including archivists, librarians and professionals from other disciplines, such as urban planners, architects and conservation experts.[31] Another was the IASA-SEAPAVAA Conference 2000, a major international conference hosted in conjunction with the International Association of Sounds and Audiovisual Archives (IASA) and SEAPAVAA. More than 190 leading archive professionals from 40 countries attended this event.[32]

In 1993, Tan led the National Archives through a major restructuring exercise, which saw the amalgamation of the National Archives, Oral History Department and National Museum into a new statutory board, the National Heritage Board (NHB). Under the NHB, the National Archives and Oral History Department came together once again to become a single unit called the National Archives of Singapore, with the Oral History Department renamed the Oral History Centre. The NHB was tasked to preserve and showcase Singapore heritage across all mediums and to increase public awareness and appreciation of Singapore's past.

Accordingly, NHB's public outreach efforts were stepped up, with almost 40 NAS exhibitions curated between 1996 and 2011 at high-traffic locations islandwide, including schools, community hubs and shopping centres. One high profile project was "The Singapore Story: Overcoming the Odds".

INSIGHTS FROM A VETERAN ARCHIVIST

Mrs Kwek-Chew Kim Gek has spent the last 45 years at the National Archives of Singapore (NAS). Besides her wealth of institutional knowledge, Mrs Kwek holds the record of being its longest-serving staff. She retired as Deputy Director (Records Management) in 2014 and currently works part-time as a senior archivist. She relates some of her experiences:

On joining the National Archives and Records Centre (NARC) – as the NAS was known back then – in 1974:

I've always wanted to be a teacher or librarian, but when I saw an ad for an archives and records position, I decided to apply. I hadn't the faintest idea what an archivist did as archival work was new at the time in Singapore, but the job description attracted me as I've always had a keen interest in history. Many people didn't even know how to pronounce the word "archives" back then and we had to correct them while trying to keep a straight face ("are-cheeves" was one of the several permutations!).

On the set-up of the NARC in the 1970s:

The archives was still in its infancy in those days. We had fewer than 10 staff members, and resources and funding were very tight. My boss Mrs Lily Tan, who would become the first director of the archives, used to describe our operations as a "man, a woman and a dog set-up"!

Mrs Kwek-Chew Kim Gek with colleague, Assistant Archivist Yao Qianying, of the Records Management Department. This photo was taken in 2017 when the National Archives was vacating its premises at 1 Canning Rise for major renovations. *Courtesy of Mrs Kwek-Chew Kim Gek.*

Mrs Kwek-Chew Kim Gek (extreme right) with colleagues at an office function to celebrate the National Archives' 25th anniversary in 1993. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

On the training of young archivists in the 1970s:

There were no formal courses to attend and I had no experienced colleagues to learn from. Training was on the job. We had to familiarise ourselves with the standard textbooks on archives and records by the two gurus of archives: T.R. Schellenberg and Hilary Jenkinson…

In 1983, after almost 10 years on the job, I was sent on a three-month attachment with the State Archives of New South Wales, Australia, and in 1991, on a two-month stint in Ottawa and Toronto in Canada. These attachments combined theory and practice, and enabled me to meet archivists from all over the world. This network of contacts would prove extremely valuable in time to come when I had to seek advice from experienced people on archival best practices.

On collecting private records from religious organisations:

One of my first tasks was to microfilm archival records of churches and Hindu temples. In those days, the churches were a little suspicious of our intent and unwilling to release their records to us. So, together with a photographic assistant from the National Library, we carted along a portable microfilm camera and carried out microfilming on site at the church premises. This was not ideal because we couldn't control the ambient lighting to obtain the best results. Still, we made do.. Going to a Hindu temple to collect records was a bit of a culture shock for me. Once, I was greeted by a Hindu priest with a chalk-marked bare torso and I didn't know where to avert my eyes!

On the value of NAS for Singaporeans:

First and foremost, to meet the needs of the man in the street. Private records are important documents that any ordinary citizen might seek access to. For example, there are people who ask for copies of their school attendance records to show as proof when registering their children at the same school. We've also had people requesting for their marriage certificates in order to settle inheritance and estate matters.

Second, archival records help us to understand ourselves as Singaporeans. The Maria Hertogh riots of 1950 and the racial riots of 1964, for example, teach us that race and religion are sensitive issues in Singapore and things that we should never take for granted. Reading primary records and listening to oral history accounts can give us new perspectives on historical events that have already been extensively documented.

Finally, by providing public servants with access to past official records, they can learn which government programmes and initiatives were successful and which ones failed. This can be a useful exercise when framing and implementing new public policies.

Interview was conducted by Mark Wong, Senior Oral History Specialist at the Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore.

Launched in 1998 and curated by the Singapore History Museum (now National Museum of Singapore), the travelling national education exhibition and accompanying programmes, which featured archival materials from the NAS' extensive collection, attracted a record 648,000 visitors. To complement the exhibition, NAS published the book *Singapore: Journey to Nationhood*, which enjoyed a record print run of over 27,000 copies and was subsequently translated into Chinese, Malay and Tamil.[33]

During Tan's tenure as director, the archives relocated twice. The first was in 1984 to the refurbished Old Hill Street Police Station when it was still known as the Archives and Oral History Department. The new space had a substantially larger archival repository, a professional conservation and repair workshop, a microfilming lab, an exhibition space, a lecture hall and a large public reference room.[34]

In 1997, the archives moved again to a building it could finally call its own – the former Anglo-Chinese Primary School at 1 Canning Rise. Designed to encourage public visits to the archives, the building was renovated to include an Archives Reference Room, an enlarged exhibition area, a theatre and soundproof audio recording rooms. The new premises also came with five purpose-built climate controlled repositories and large workspaces for the archives' conservation and imaging laboratories, ideal for both archival work and public tours.[35]

More recently, in April 2019, the NAS building reopened after an extensive 18-month renovation programme that saw upgraded facilities, expanded public spaces and a dedicated theatre for the screening of Asian film classics.

Building on Pioneers' Work

Retiring from a long and illustrious career in the archives in 2001, Lily Tan handed over the baton to her successor. Many of her initiatives have been continued by subsequent directors of the National Archives of Singapore: Pitt Kwan Wah (2001–11), Eric Tan (2011–13), Eric Chin (2013–17) and Wendy Ang (2017–).

The pioneering officers who charted the course of the archives worked with a dependable team of staff, board members, government officials and public advocates who helped lay the foundation for many of the key programmes to acquire, preserve and disseminate records of national or historical significance.

The NAS has progressed a long way from its origins as a small archives unit in the Raffles Museum and Library in 1938. From a collection of just 170 Straits Settlements Records, the NAS has grown to become the trusted repository of a vast and growing multimedia collection of over 10 million records. It has become an archive of international standing today, and stands head and shoulders among the leading archival institutions of the world. ♦

NOTES

1 Colony's history to be preserved: Government will appoint an archivist. (1938, April 17). *The Straits Times*, p. 10. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

2 Raffles Museum and Library. (1940). *Annual report for the Raffles Museum and Library for the year 1939* (p. 7). Singapore: GPO. (Microfilm no.: NL5723).

3 Old colonial documents comprehensively indexed. (1940, June 14). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

4 Tan, S.C. (1945, October 31). *Report entitled 'The Archives at Raffles Museum', forwarded by Lt-Col Archey to Headquarters of the British Military Administration*. File reference MSA1141/259, Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore.

5 Corner, E.J.H. (1981). *The marquis: A tale of Syonan-to* (pp. 60, 137). Singapore: Heinemann Asia. (Call no.: RSING 959.57023 COR-[HIS])

6 While Michael Tweedie initially wanted to send Tan Soo Chye to London to study archives administration at the University College London, the realities of budgetary considerations ultimately meant Tan's professional development would have to be pursued locally. See correspondence between Tweedie and the Colonial Secretary: Tweedie, M. W. F. Tweedie. (1948, May 31). *Letter to Colonial Secretary*. File Reference: MSA1155/399. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore.

7 University arts exam results. (1951, July 7). *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

8 Tan Soo Chye's career progression can be tracked through mentions in the following: Raffles Museum and Library. (1954). *Annual report for the Raffles Museum and Library for the year 1953* (p. 1). Singapore: GPO. (Microfilm no.: NL5723); Mr. Tan takes top customs post. (1960, November 4). *The Straits Times*, p. 9. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.; National Archives and Records Centre. (1976). *Annual report of the National Archives and Records Centre 1975* (p. 4). Singapore: GPO. (Microfilm no.: NL26798); National Archives and Records Centre. (1977). *Annual report of the National Archives and Records Centre 1976* (p. 5). Singapore: GPO. (Microfilm no.: 26799).

9 For example, see Lim, J. (Interviewer). (2000, May 19). *Oral history interview with Ng Cheng Onn* [Accession no. 002274/17/6]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

10 Lumps are being eaten out of our history. (1953, June 14). *The Straits Times*, p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

11 Parkinson, C.N. (1956, April 19). Digging up Malaya's past will take ten years to complete. *The Straits Times*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

12 Tregonning, K.G. (1956, April 23). National Archives call. *The Straits Times*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

13 For instance, see Tregonning, K.G. (1961, October). An archival system for Singapore. *Majallah Perpustakaan Singapura, 1 (2),* 53–54. (Microfilm no.: NL27804)

14 The Toyo Bunko, or "Oriental Library", is the largest Asian-studies library in Japan.

15 Tregonning mentions this in his interview. See Lim, J. (Interviewer). (2003, July 31). *Oral history interview with K.G. Tregonning* [Transcript of recording no. 002783/6/5, pp. 3-4]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

16 Verhoeven, F. R. J. (1967). *Singapore: The national archives and records management, 15 April–14 August 1967.* Paris: UNESCO (Call no.: RCLOS 025.171095957 VER)

17 Details of the archives' expansion can be traced through the National Archives and Records Centre's annual reports, in particular the 1969, 1970, 1973, 1976 and 1984 issues. (Microfilm nos.: NL26798, NL26799 and NL26699).

18 *Annual report of National Archives and Records Centre 1970*, 1971, p. 8. The lack of a conservation unit was reported as an urgent priority action item on p. 11 of Verhoeven's report.

19 Anuar, H. (1970, July). Current research resources on Southeast Asia in the National Library and the National Archives and Records Centre, and an account of the bibliographical project in progress. *Southeast Asian Archives*, *3*, 30–33. (Microfilm no.: NL27911).

20 For details of Hedwig Anuar's appointments, see Southeast Asia Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives. (n.d.). *Executive Board*. Retrieved from SARBICA website.

21 In fact, Verhoeven notes on p. 18 of his report that Lily Tan was selected out of seven candidates to be sent overseas to study archives administration, making her the first employee of the National Archives and Records Centre even before it was officially established. The Colombo Plan is an intergovernmental regional organisation that supports economic and social development of member countries in the Asia-Pacific region. It funds scholarships for developing countries to train their local human resources.

22 Kwa, C.G. (2005). Desultory reflections on the Oral History Centre (p. 4). In D. Chew (Ed.), *Reflections and interpretations: Oral History Centre: 25th anniversary publication*. Singapore: Oral History Centre. (Call no.: RSING 907.2 REF)

23 The history of the organisation's restructuring can be traced through the National Archives and Records Centre's annual reports, in particular the 1979, 1980 and 1985 issues. (Microfilm nos.: NL26799 and NL26699)

24 Since the inception of the National Archives and Records Centre in 1968, microfilming had been the archives' principal means of preserving paper records, and the work was handled by the National Library's Microfilm Unit. However, the volume of records later increased significantly beyond the National Library's capacity.

25 National Heritage Board. (1997). *Annual report of the National Heritage Board 1996/1997* (p. 23). Singapore: GPO. (Microfilm no.: NL26739)

26 For details of these digital initiatives, see *Annual report of the National Heritage Board 1996/1997* and 150,000 historical images online. (1998, April 29). *The Straits Times*, p. 31. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

27 For more information on the establishment of the Audiovisual Archives Department, see National Heritage Board. (1996). *Annual report of the National Heritage Board 1995/1996* (p. 48). Singapore: GPO. (Microfilm no.: NL26739).

28 Close to 30 books, many of which began as exhibitions, were published, including collection-specific features such as *Singapore Retrospect through Postcards, 1900–1930* (1982) (Call no.: RSING 769.4995957 SIN); place and community histories such as *The Development of Nee Soon Community* (1987) (Call no.: RSING Chinese 959.57 DEV-[HIS]); useful research indexes such as *Index to Papers and Reports Laid before the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements (1867–1955)* (1992) (Call no.: RSING 016.328595704 CHN-[LIB])

29 Dramatists get help from the archives. (1994, August 28). *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

30 For details of the various positions, see Southeast Asia Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives. (n.d.). *Executive Board*. Retrieved from SARBICA website.

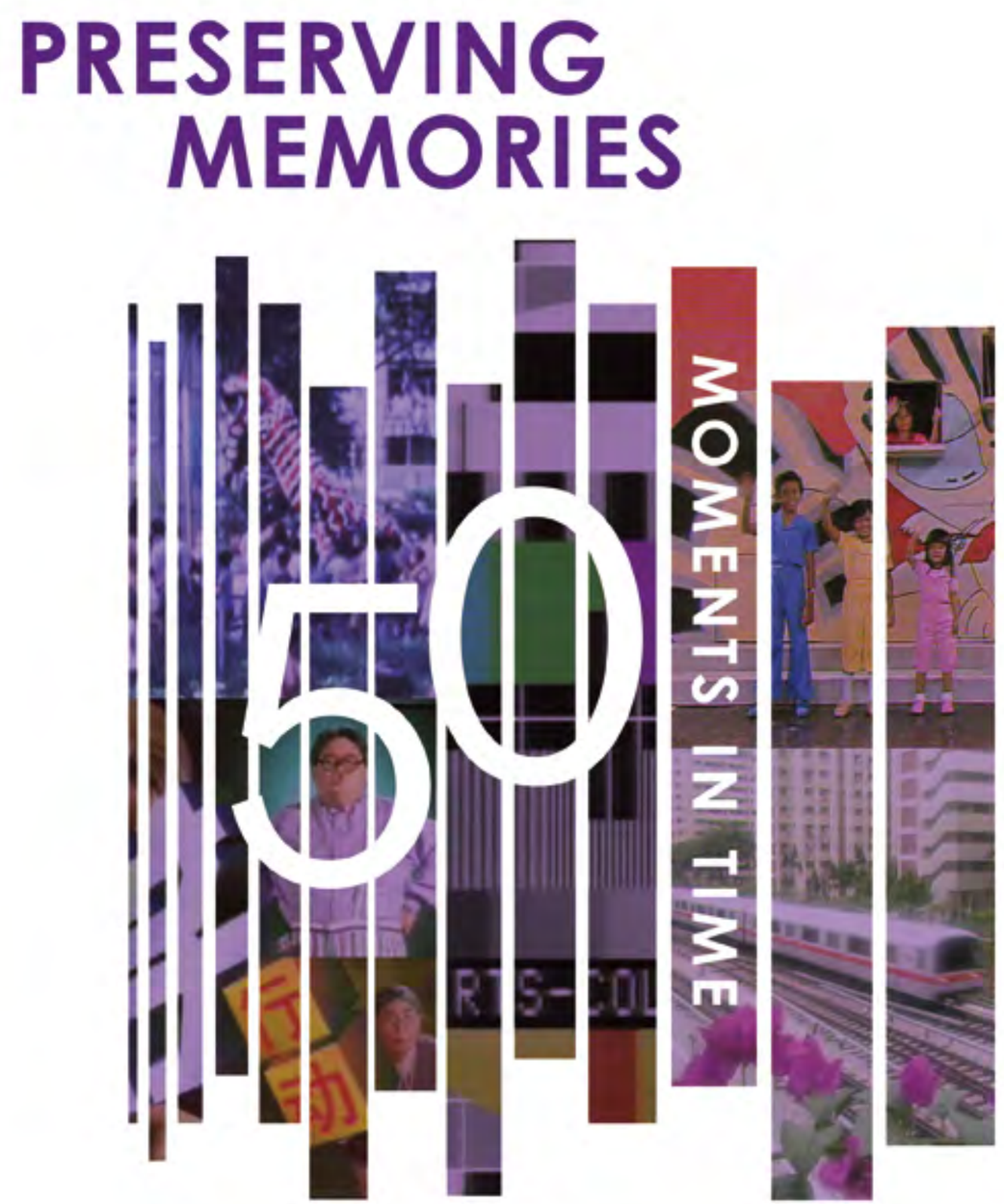
31 For details, see National Archives. (1992). *Annual report of the National Archives 1991* (p. 2). Singapore: GPO. (Microfilm no.: NL26724)

32 For details, see National Heritage Board. (2001). *Annual report of the National Heritage Board 2000/2001* (p. 21). Singapore: GPO. (Microfilm no.: NL27503)

33 For details, see National Heritage Board. (1999). *Annual report of the National Heritage Board 1998/1999* (pp. 28–29, 38). Singapore: GPO. (Microfilm no.: NL24110)

34 For details of the new amenities and services of the Archives and Oral History Department in the Old Hill Street Police Station building, see Ministry of Culture. (1984, May 26). *Speech by S Dhanabalan, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Culture, at the official opening of the Archives and Oral History Department at Hill Street Building*. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

35 For details of the new building, see National Heritage Board. (1998). *Annual report of the National Heritage Board 1997/1998* (p. 22). Singapore: GPO. (Microfilm no.: NL26741).



Relive the times that we celebrated, stood up proudly or shed tears. Travel to scenes that have since vanished. *Preserving Memories: 50 Moments in Time* is a showcase of audio-visual materials and oral history interviews that the National Archives of Singapore has collected and preserved over the past 50 years. Watch and listen to memories cherished and treasured by Singaporeans from all walks of life.

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WARTIME VICTUALS

SURVIVING THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

Desperate times call for desperate measures. **Lee Geok Boi** trawls the oral history collection of the National Archives to document how people coped with the precious little food they had during the war.

Lee Geok Boi is the author of several books on the Japanese Occupation of Singapore and a prolific writer of cookbooks on Asian cuisines, particularly Southeast Asian recipes and culinary traditions.

A father and daughter having a simple meal of porridge and nuts. Deprivation and hardship were a constant feature of life during the Japanese Occupation. *Image reproduced from Wikimedia Commons.*

In times of war and occupation, food is about survival and not quality or flavour. For the people who lived through Singapore's harrowing Japanese Occupation years from 1942 to 1945, survival was made all the more difficult for a number of reasons.

Singapore has always been a port city, its lifeline fuelled by trade and commerce.[1] Although the first commercial plantations of nutmeg and pepper never quite took off,[2] there were considerable swathes of land where pineapple, coconut and rubber grew in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The town centre made up less than a quarter of the island and there were plenty of rural areas with *kampongs* that were engaged in market gardening, poultry and pig rearing,[3] along with Indian dairy farmers who kept cows to produce milk for sale. Singapore's rural areas were, in fact, so large that the Municipal Council that administered the island had a Rural Board.

The 1931 census put the population of Singapore at 557,700[4] (although a census had been planned for 1941, it was never carried out because of the war). The only pre-war figure available is a 1939 estimation by the British, who cited the population size as 767,700.[5] In 1943, the Chosabu (Department of Research),[6] estimated that the population in Syonan-to – the Japanese name for occupied Singapore (meaning "Light of the South Island") – was around 900,000.[7]

The sudden spike in the population between 1939 and 1943 arose from the influx of refugees from Malaya in search of safety on the island as well as the injection of some 100,000 British Army troops into Singapore for the defence of British Malaya.[8] The unexpected increase in the population put severe pressure on food supplies, which was not a good thing as Singapore imported most of its food.

Pre-war Singapore was the key port in the region, handling not only commodities such as tin, rubber and copra (dried coconut kernels from which oil is obtained) from Malaya, but also the storage and distribution of oil from the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia) and Borneo. Singapore was also a major distribution centre for foodstuffs and consumer goods in the region, with Japan as a key trading partner. In the 1930s, Japan supplied more than half of Singapore's everyday essentials, ranging from canned sardines and cotton goods to glassware and bicycles.[9]

Once Japan's economy went on a war footing, it ceased to be Malaya's main source of consumer goods. At the same time, Singapore's other supply chains were affected by the war in Europe. More critically, Japan's Pacific War disrupted Singapore's food supply. Train and shipping lines that used to transport rice from Burma and Thailand were seized by the military, and the movement of people and

During the Japanese Occupation, food import and export businesses in Singapore were taken over by Japanese companies. This is a propaganda leaflet promoting Japanese goods and cooperation with the Japanese. *Source: David Ernest Srinivasagam Chelliah (Acc 4/1990, 18).*

goods were subjected to strict security checks. At the same time, traditional rice-growing cycles were affected by the war, leading to a reduced supply at a time when the need was greatest.

Pre-war Singapore hosted small enterprises producing such foodstuffs as soya sauce, noodles, *tofu* (beancurd), bread, biscuits and confectionery, all of which depended on imported ingredients. Once the supply of basic imported ingredients were cut off, these businesses either had to close down or resort to using substitutes.

For example, noodle makers had to use tapioca flour as a substitute for wheat or rice flour. People had to adjust their eating habits, switching from rice to other more easily available carbohydrates such as tapioca and sweet potatoes. While Singapore did not face outright famine during the Occupation years, it saw an increase in diseases relating to malnutrition and a spike in deaths. Between 1942 and 1945, the combined death rate for men and women more than doubled from 29,831 to 65,158.[10]

Queuing Up for Food

At the start of the Occupation in 1942, the Japanese seized the food stocks that had been set aside by the British. The appropriated stockpiles were reserved for Japanese military use with a smaller portion set aside for the general population.

The British defence strategy for Singapore in the face of an impending crisis was to hold out until naval ships came to the rescue. Part of this defence plan involved the stockpiling of food until help came, but this was never fully realised as Singapore's humid climate meant that food supplies could not be stored for long periods. In any case, in the final days preceding the fall of Singapore, warehouses and shops were looted. Immediately after the British surrendered, Japanese soldiers conducted house-to-house searches; if loot was discovered, it was confiscated, and the perpetrators had their heads promptly cut off.

Food import and export businesses in Singapore were taken over by Japanese companies, and the military administration began grouping suppliers of various commodities into distribution monopolies called *kumiai*. For instance, the import and distribution of rice was handled by Mitsubishi Shoji Corporation. The Cold Storage supermarket, which had a good refrigeration system and was a major importer of frozen meat, was made into a *butai*, a company linked to the military.

To exercise control over the population and the supply of food, a rationing system was instituted and the members of all households had to be registered to receive ration cards. As part of the rationing system, any movement of people from one household to another or out of Singapore had to be reported to the neighbourhood police. Rations would then be adjusted accordingly. Food and other related essentials were sold at controlled prices that were published in the newspapers daily. Theoretically, consumers could buy their rations at fixed prices although in practice, this was not the case.

Long queues for rations would form hours before the shops opened and people were rarely able to buy their quota of foodstuffs at the published prices. The quality, too, left much to be desired: rice was often weevil-infested and the sugar damp.

(Above) This sketch by the artist Liu Kang portrays the Japanese distribution system of essentials, which was widely seen as responsible for the black market, and the enrichment of the Japanese and unscrupulous businessmen. *Image reproduced from Liu, K. (1946). Chop Suey (Vol. I). Singapore: Eastern Art Co. Collection of the National Library Singapore (Accession no.: B02901746G).*

(Below) A provisions purchasing card issued to households during the Japanese Occupation for the purchase of items such as cereal, soap, matches, meat, etc. (except rice, sugar and salt) distributed by the Syonan Tokubetsu Si (Municipal Administration). *Mak Kit Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Bottom) A $10 bill in use during the Japanese Occupation. Known as "banana money" because of the motifs of banana trees on the bank notes, the currency became worthless due to runaway inflation coupled with black market practices. *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

Over time, the rations shrank in quantity as well. The rice ration, for instance, started at 20 katis (about 12 kg) a month per person, dropping to 8 katis for men, 6 katis for women and 4 katis per child towards the end of the Occupation. Even then, people were not allowed to buy the full month's entitlement all at once, but had to queue for them weekly or whenever new supplies were available.

Food became "cash" in the war economy. It became the practice for big companies to provide lunch for the staff as part of their wages. Cold Storage, being a *butai*, appeared to have been particularly generous in this regard. Chinese primary school teacher Tan Cheng Hwee, who used to work for Cold Storage during the Japanese Occupation, remembered his very big lunches at work:

> "That is the best part of our lives in Cold Storage, because our lunch, I think, is equivalent to that of the Commander-in-Chief of this Japanese Army in Singapore. Every day on each table, we had one [imported from the US] Rhode Island chicken. And we can pick and choose whatever liver we want. We had four plates and one cup of soup. And each bowl of vegetables is a very big one. We had so much to eat. So much so – there were about 20 people eating at the Cold Storage – every day they had enough remaining for eight people to carry home."[11]

On top of this generous lunch, Tan was given 1 kg of rice to take home every day. Bags of rice became prizes at competitive games and social functions as well as wages for work done. It was more valuable than "banana money",[12] the currency introduced by the Japanese for use in the Japan-occupied territories of Singapore, Malaya, North Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei.

Another form of "cash" were the vouchers that were given out for various things; especially valuable were vouchers for cloth and clothing. Couples who registered with the military government their intent to marry were given cloth vouchers that could be exchanged or sold for something else. Informal barter trade became common. If someone had harvested too much tapioca, he could exchange it with a friend or neighbour for sweet potatoes or vegetables.

Given the shortages, celebrations of annual festivals and weddings were invariably low key. In any case, the Japanese military police, or Kempeitai, frowned on large gatherings and imposed a nightly curfew. Celebratory meals, on the rare occasions that they took place, were usually lunches and it was not uncommon for guests to bring food to share at the table.

Rationing remained in full force even after the British returned in 1945 and more stocks of food and other essentials began coming in. *Image reproduced from Lee, G.B. (2005). The Syonan Years: Singapore Under Japanese Rule 1942–1945 (p. 159). Singapore: National Archives of Singapore and Epigram. (Call no.: RSING q940.53957 LEE-[WAR])*

Black Market Blues

Defined as the "illegal trading of goods that are not allowed to be bought and sold, of which there are not enough of for everyone who wants them", the black market was very active during the Occupation years. Scarcity led to hoarding and inflated prices even though hoarding was a crime. Corrupt officials in the monopolies set up by the Syonan administration were themselves responsible for hoarding and trading on the black market for personal gain.

Many people who survived the Occupation had no choice but to turn to the black market for much sought-after medicines, tinned milk for babies and better food for the sick, among other goods. The black market was the only recourse as people began to release their hoarded stockpiles in order to get their hands on other essentials they needed.

Although British propaganda was remarkably effective in persuading people that the outbreak of World War II in Europe in 1939 would not reach Singapore, the more far-sighted had begun hoarding essentials to see themselves through what could be a really difficult time.

The relatively wealthier segments of Asian society in pre-war Singapore accumulated assets such as gold, jewellery, household goods, furniture and clothes. Some converted fixed assets such as property or land into gold or Straits dollars, which they kept hidden until the need to use them arose. As existing stocks of essential goods in occupied Singapore depleted and shortages were more acutely felt, all manner of consumer goods surfaced in the black market.

As the Japanese administration printed more "banana money" to fund its war expenses, the value of the notes plummeted in value, made all the worse by the rise of counterfeit money. Spiralling prices meant that one had to carry large bags of notes just to buy the smallest items. Businessman Chua Eng Cheow said that when the banana notes were first introduced, the value was on par with the Straits dollar. Pre-war an egg cost 3 cents, but at the end the Occupation it was $100. A kati (600 g) of pork went from 30 cents to $1,500![13] The Straits dollar, gold and jewellery resurfaced on the black market in lieu of the "banana" currency.

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NOTIFICATION

MARKET PRICES

Syonan, Feb. 25th, 2602.

ACCORDING to a notification of the Administration Office of Syonan Island the following order prohibits the upward trend of the price of commodities from what they were before the Great Oriental War. This order takes effect from Feb. 23, 2602.

Hereunder are indicated the maximum prices of various commodities to be observed in Syonan Island.

Anyone who purchases or sells any commodity above the prices hereunder indicated will be severely punished.

BY ORDER.

MEAT

Beef steak	Kati	65
" stew or curry	"	60
Fillet steak	Lb.	90
Mutton, Australian	"	65
Java (Goat Flesh	"	55
Malacca	"	—
Pork, lean	Kati	65
" lean and fat (1st quality)	"	55

POULTRY

Capons (locally reared)	Kati	75
Ducks	"	50
Fowls	"	50
Ross (locally reared)	"	55
Pigeons, domestic, fledged	pair	—
Pigeons, domestic, unfledged	"	—
Pigeons, wild	Each	—

EGGS

Duck, fresh	10	11
Fowl, fresh	10	65
Duck, preserved Uncooked	10	37

FISH, FRESH

Ikwai Futeh (Pomfret)	Kati	1.50
Ikwai Ayer (inland small fish)	"	15
Chinchare (kapi kapi)	"	—
Kuwee, (Shrimpfish)	"	60
Merah (snapper)	"	60
Parang (dorab)	"	30
Pah (ray)	"	30
Tiuron, large, salt water	"	70
Tenggiri, (Spanish mackerel)	"	90
Terubok, (herring)	"	—

FISH, DRIED & SALTED

Aruan, (Ikan Stam)	Kati	50
Kuwee	"	55
Pecking	"	—
Pomfret, (1st quality)	"	67
" (2nd quality)	"	50
Sepat, Saigon large	"	50
Selang, (middle&h) Saigon	"	90
" Nippponese	"	—
Tenggiri	"	—
Terubok, (Sabroe)	"	—

VEGETABLES

Beans, French	Kati	55
" long	"	60
" sprouts (Taugeh)	"	60
Beetroots, Chinese	"	—
" Japanese	"	15
Brinjals, (Terong)	"	60
Cabbage, Batavia	"	15
" China	"	—

FRUITS

Bananas (pisang bijau)	10	15
" (" kelling)	10	15
" (" mas)	10	15
Coconuts	each	60
Limes, large (about 30 to kati)	Kati	60
Limes, small (about 60 to kati)	"	60
Oranges, sunkist	each	10
" Siam	Kati	35
Pineapples	Each	60

CURRY STUFFS.

Chillies, fresh	Kati	35
Cloves (Chingheh)	"	60
Coriander (ketumba)	"	75
Garlic (bawang putih)	"	35
Mace (bunga pala)	"	—
Nutmeg (buah pala)	"	—
Onions, Bombay	"	60
" Siam (small)	"	60
Pepper, black	"	150
" white	"	150
Tamarind (asam Java)	"	67
Turmeric fresh (kunyet)	"	60

SUNDRIES.

Blachan (No. 1)	Kati	35
Bread	lb.	10
Butter, Australian (in tin) Iceberg	"	65
Butter, Australian (fresh, Cold Storage)	"	65
Cocoanut Oil	Kati	60
Coffee Beans	"	—
Coffee, Ground (in tin) Jo hn Little Co.	lb.	75
Dhall (Chowpore, yellow)	Kati	60
Flour wheaten Prog Brand	"	60
" Australian	"	—
Ghee, No. 1 Madras	"	—
Cooking Oil	"	55
" No. 2 Calcutta, MOS	"	—
Ginger, fresh	"	35
Gula Malacca, large	10 pieces	60
" small	"	60
Ice	10 lbs.	60
Lard	Kati	50
Milk, fresh	pint	60
Rice No. 1 Rangoon	"	60
" " 2 Siam	"	—

A newspaper notice listing the prices of basic food items at the start of the Japanese Occupation. *The Syonan Times, 25 February 1942, p. 3.*

Black market trading was dangerous territory. If a nasty or desperate neighbour reported unusually lavish food consumption or the sudden availability of scarce medicine, the household could expect a visit from the dreaded Kempeitai, who paid for such inside information with cash or food. Because of the surreptitious nature of the black market, it provided numerous jobs for "runners", or people who made a commission whether in kind or cash by connecting buyer with seller. Tan Cheng Hwee described it thus:

> "If you have something [of value], you ask one after another whether you require this thing or not. And probably that chap will say 'Okay, I'll try and sell for you'. Then it goes like this, from one person knowing until, in the end, 20 people know about it. Then the sale will go through... anything from measuring tape... to gold."[14]

Chu Shuen Choo, another war survivor, recalled that things like food or medicines bought from the black market had to be hidden carefully, "otherwise you will be queried 'where did you get this?' and then you will get into trouble".[15]

Growing Your Own Food

In order to develop self-sufficiency, the Japanese administration held exhibitions that taught people how to cultivate their own food. Seeds for crops were sold cheaply or given away. Radio Syonan broadcasted talks about food cultivation, and detailed instructions were published in the daily newspaper, *The Syonan Shimbun*.

School fields were turned into vegetable plots and schoolchildren had to spend part of the time tending their vegetable plots. Any piece of land that could be easily used to cultivate food crops was made over. The best known of these conversions was the Padang fronting the Municipal Building,[16] which was turned into a tapioca field. Other common crops were sweet potatoes, various types of beans, *kangkong* (water convolvulus), *bayam* (spinach), mustard greens, and gourds such as bitter gourd and bottle gourd. All fruits, even tropical varieties such as rambutans, durians and mangosteens, were considered a luxury as fruit trees took time to mature and when they produced fruit, it was only seasonally.

There were several issues with developing food sufficiency in Singapore. Few people knew much about farming or keeping livestock and, to make matters worse, the island's soil for the most part was not rich in nutrients. As chemical fertilisers were not available, some resorted to enriching the land with human faeces and urine, but this practice ran the risk of contamination and the spread of intestinal parasites such as tapeworms and foodborne diseases.

Keeping livestock posed its own share of challenges as there was no access to animal feed. Food scraps were scarce too as practically nothing was thrown away and people usually cleaned off their plates when they sat down to a meal.

Necessity being the mother of invention, some were quite creative in addressing these issues. In an oral history interview, Lee Tian Soo, then a student living in Chinatown, recalled:

> "I kept 20 to 30 fowls. We used to buy small chickens and then we looked after them... We had to look for something to feed the chickens. So we used to go down the drains with a candle to look for cockroaches. We would put them in a bottle and the next morning, we fed them to the chickens. Those chickens grew very fast."[17]

Whatever that could not be eaten or was unpalatable was chopped up and fed to livestock along with duckweed to add bulk. Another survivor, Tan Sock Kern, nurtured a couple of goats that were given by an Indian friend into a small flock. Goats, she found, were easy to keep as they ate grass and, better yet, produced milk.[18] Stray cats and dogs sometimes disappeared from the streets and into cooking pots. Kwang Poh, who sold cats and dogs for food, even did the slaughtering when asked to do so.[19]

(Below) People were encouraged to grow vegetables, sweet potatoes and tapioca during the Japanese Occupation. *Image reproduced from Lee, G.B. (2005). The Syonan Years: Singapore Under Japanese Rule 1942–1945 (p. 165). Singapore: National Archives of Singapore and Epigram. (Call no.: RSING q940.53957 LEE-[WAR]).*

(Bottom) The ground in front of St Joseph's Institution on Bras Basah Road was turned into a vegetable garden as was every spare bit of land in Singapore including the Padang. *Image reproduced from Lee, G.B. (2005). The Syonan Years: Singapore Under Japanese Rule 1942–1945 (p. 163). Singapore: National Archives of Singapore and Epigram. (Call no.: RSING q940.53957 LEE-[WAR]).*

The military began a campaign to return people from Malaya who were not originally from Syonan to their hometowns up north. They were soon joined by residents from Singapore who, out of their volition, also travelled north to stay with relatives in Malaya where there was easier access to homegrown rice and food. To reduce the pressure on food supplies, the Syonan administration began resettling people outside Syonan in remote makeshift villages where they were encouraged to grow their own food.

There was at least one small settlement for Indians on Batam. The Eurasian and Chinese Catholic settlement was located in Bahau, in Negeri Sembilan. The largest and most successful was the Chinese settlement in Endau, Johor. Bahau was an unmitigated disaster. The land there was hilly and the soil poor with no ready access to water. Malaria was particularly rampant and killed off the very old and the very young. Apart from malaria, the settlers knew little about crop cultivation. Weakened by disease and malnutrition, farming became too difficult. Bahau saw some 3,000 settlers – men, women and children – moving from Singapore in search of a better life. By the time the Occupation ended, between 300 and 1,500 people had died in Bahau (the exact figures are unknown).

In Endau, malaria was less of a problem and the community had leaders who had some knowledge of agriculture. Endau settler Chu Shuen Choo said in her oral history interview:

> "We had fruits, we had vegetables. ... We had fish from the stream, eggs... a few ducks which, when we felt like eating, we just cut them up and ate them. ... We had pork... And I would buy *gula melaka* (palm sugar) because my children wanted to eat sweets. We had no money to buy sweets, so I would cut this *gula melaka* into small portions, put them in the bottle. So whenever they wanted anything to eat, my sister would say 'There is your *gula melaka*. Go and take'."[20]

At the end of the Occupation there were some Endau settlers who chose to remain there rather than return to Singapore. For the town dwellers, part of the

attraction of Endau or Bahau had been the freedom from Kempeitai surveillance even though they knew they were opting for an uncertain life as "farmers".

Wartime Victuals

With rice supplies drying up, tapioca, sweet potato and *ragi* (a type of millet) became the default staples in occupied Singapore. Tapioca and sweet potato were fairly easy to grow, especially tapioca, but it wasn't pleasant to eat on its own. Tapioca that was made into noodles became rubbery when cooked. Bread was made with non-wheat flours, which yielded a tough loaf that sometimes had to be fried to make it remotely edible.

Chu Shuen Choo described *ragi* as "black stuff like sago. And we used to cook it like sago. Put scraped coconut on top of it and make it sweet, and eat it like a sort of cake to substitute rice. Otherwise we would be so hungry the whole day."[21] Cooking oil was scarce, so people had to make do with palm oil. Chu's family would make their own coconut oil by boiling down coconut milk, and used their palm oil rations for lighting oil lamps instead.

The phrase "a tasty wartime meal" sounds like an oxymoron, but a tasty dish simply requires aromatic ingredients. Although shallots, onions and garlic did not thrive in Singapore and had been imported before the war, there were other traditional aromatics that fared well here with minimal fertilising. Among these were ginger, *serai* (lemongrass), *lengkuas* (greater galangal or blue ginger), *krachai* (lesser galangal or finger root), *limau perut* (kaffir lime), limes, turmeric and chillies. Some even grew wild. Other typical Southeast Asian ingredients such as dried shrimps, *ikan bilis* (anchovies) and *belacan* (shrimp paste), were also fairly accessible as both were produced in Malayan coastal fishing villages.

Tan Cheng Hwee said: "I used to cook long beans with a bit of dried prawns and *belacan*. I brought it to work and throughout this time, I was eating this sort of food."[22] With just a combination of three basic ingredients – salt, *belacan* and chilli – one could prepare a reasonably tasty dish of, say, sweet potato leaves. Adding coconut milk made the dish even tastier. Coconuts were easily available as there were coconut trees everywhere even though coconuts were a controlled commodity. Coconut pulp could be finely ground and used to thicken gravy as well as add bulk and dietary fibre to a dish, while coconut water is tasty and rich in vitamin C.

(Below) Painting of a hut belonging to Dr John Bertram van Cuylenburg and Mrs van Cuylenburg in the Bahau settlement. The painting was done by Mrs van Cuylenburg in 1945. In 1943, due to food shortages in Singapore, the Japanese administration launched resettlement schemes to relocate people to farming communities in Endau in Johor and Bahau in Negeri Sembilan. *F.A.C. Oehlers Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Middle) The first settlers to Bahau – mainly young, single men – had to clear the land, build a rudimentary road from the train station to the camp and set up basic infrastructure before the families started arriving (Japanese propaganda photo). *Courtesy of Father René Nicolas.*

(Bottom) William R.M. Haxworth was the Chief Investigator at the War Risk Insurance Department in Singapore when he was interned during the Japanese Occupation, first at Changi Prison then at Sime Road Camp. During his internment, Haxworth produced more than 300 paintings and sketches depicting the terrible living conditions in the prisoner-of-war camps. This sketch titled "Bread Ration" takes a humorous look at the fluctuating portion sizes of prison rations as well as the internees' attempts at baking, with their "scones" resembling "stones". *W.R.M. Haxworth Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Salt, an essential ingredient in food, was abundant, with Singapore surrounded by sea water. Palm sugar was used as a sweetener and, in lieu of soya sauce, there was fish sauce, also easily made by allowing small fish and salt to ferment in barrels placed in the sun. Coastal villages in Punggol, Pasir Ris and Pasir Panjang were inhabited by Malay fishermen who engaged in fishing. Because so much of the island was still rural, there was a small supply of chickens, ducks, eggs and pork as well as some market gardening produce.

The availability of such food was, of course, confined to those with the ability to pay for them. For most, the wartime diet was wholly inadequate. Many people, especially children, suffered from diseases caused by malnutrition, such as rickets, beriberi, pellagra, scurvy and anaemia. People fell ill easily because their immune systems were compromised. Malaria was rampant as were water-borne diseases like typhoid and dysentery. Water had to be boiled, requiring the use of fuel and matches that were difficult to come by.

The drugs necessary to treat various diseases were not available or hard to procure, and the food needed to keep people healthy or aid in the recovery of those who were ill were beyond the reach of the poor. All this had a profound impact on the survivors of the Japanese Occupation. Thereafter, their mantra would be "Do not waste food", repeated frequently to a post-war generation of young people who would grow up in the midst of relative plenty. ♦

LEMAK SWEET POTATOES AND KANGKONG

This recipe, courtesy of the late Kathleen Woodford of the Eurasian Association, Singapore, is a typical wartime dish that made use of ingredients that were easily available during the lean years of the Japanese Occupation. Both recipe and photo are reproduced from *Wartime Kitchen: Food and Eating in Singapore, 1942–1950* written by Wong Hong Suen and published in 2009 by Editions Didier Millet and the National Museum of Singapore (Call no.: RSING 641.30095957 WON).

Ingredients

500 g sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into pieces
500 g kangkong, cleaned and cut
2 cups coconut milk
Salt to taste
1 tablespoon oil
1 tablespoon dried shrimps
4 shallots
5 fresh chillies

Instructions

1. Heat the oil in a saucepan before frying the pounded ingredients for a few minutes.
2. Add the coconut milk and sweet potatoes and simmer till the latter are soft.
3. Add the *kangkong* and boil.
4. Adjust the seasoning to taste.

NOTES

1 Kwa, C.G., Heng, D., & Tan, T.Y. (2009). *Singapore: A 700-year history: From early emporium to world city.* Singapore: National Archives of Singapore. (Call no.: RSING 959.5703 KWA-[HIS])
2 Koh, T., et al. (Eds.). (2006). *Singapore: The encyclopaedia* (p. 24). Singapore: Editions Didier Millet in association with National Heritage Board. (Call no.: RSING 959.57003 SIN-[HIS])
3 Singapore. Department of Statistics. (1983). *Economic & social statistics Singapore 1960–1982* (p. 4). Singapore: Dept. of Statistics. (Call no.: RSING q315.957 ECO). The land use figure was taken from 1950. Pre-war figures would have been similar or even less.
4 Singapore. Department of Statistics, 1983, p. 7.
5 Huff, G., & Majima, S. (Trans. & Ed.). (2018). *World War II Singapore: The Chosabu reports on Syonan* (p. 4). Singapore: NUS Press. (Call no.: RSING 959.5703 WOR-[HIS])
6 The Chosabu was set up in Syonan by a team of Japanese academics and civil servants to collect statistics aimed getting a better understanding of Singapore, a key port city in the region. Such an understanding was critical to Japan's plans for the realisation of its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, a rationalisation for its military expansionism.
7 Huff & Majima, 2018, p. 4.
8 Lee, G.B. (2005). *The Syonan years: Singapore under Japanese rule 1942–1945* (p. 55). Singapore: National Archives of Singapore and Epigram. (Call no.: RSING q940.53957 LEE-[WAR]). The figure for British troops taken captive varies from about 100,000 to 130,000.
9 Kratoska, P.H. (2018). *The Japanese occupation of Malaya and Singapore, 1941–1945: A social and economic history* (p. 14). Singapore: NUS Press. (Call no.: RSING 959.5103 KRA)
10 Singapore. Department of Statistics, 1983, p. 10.
11 Low, L.L. (Interviewer). (1984, April 12). *Oral history with Tan Cheng Hwee* [Transcript of recording no. 000416/14/9, p. 112–113]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
12 The term "banana money" derived its name from the motif of the banana plant stamped on the $10 note. The initial issue of "banana money" had serial numbers and contained safety features such as a watermark and a security thread. Over time, these features were dropped as the Japanese military issued more notes and in larger denominations whenever it ran out of money. This led to hyperinflation and a sharp fall in the value of the currency.
13 Tan, B.L. (Interviewer). (1986, December 14). *Oral history interview with Chua Eng Cheow* [Transcript of recording no. 000722/16/10, p. 133]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
14 Low, L.L. (Interviewer). (1984, April 2). *Oral history interview with Tan Cheng Hwee* [Transcript of recording no. 000416/14/6, p. 72–73]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
15 Low, LL., & Tan, B.L. (Interviewers). (1984, August 22). *Oral history interview with Chu Shuen Choo @ Mrs Gay Wan Guay* [Transcript of recording no. 000462/12/5, p. 69]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
16 During the Japanese Occupation, the Municipal Building was made the municipal headquarters of the Japanese forces. When Singapore was granted city status on 22 September 1951, the building was renamed City Hall. Today, the former City Hall and the former Supreme Court adjoining it have been converted into the National Gallery Singapore.
17 Low, LL. (Interviewer). (1983, May 14). *Oral history interview with Lee Tian Soo* [Transcript of recording no. 000265/7/3, p. 31]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
18 Yeo, G.L. (Interviewer). (1993, October 20). *Oral history interview with Tan Sock Kern* [Transcript of recording no. 001427/20/15, p. 225]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
19 Ng, S.Y. (Interviewer). (1983, March 10). *Oral history interview with Kwang Poh* [Transcript of recording no. 000256/14/9, p. 110]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
20 Low, LL., & Tan, B.L. (Interviewers). (1985, March 25). *Oral history interview with Chu Shuen Choo @ Mrs Gay Wan Guay* [Transcript of recording no. 000462/12/9, p. 120–121]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
21 Low, LL., & Tan, B.L. (Interviewers). (1984, August 22). *Oral history interview with Chu Shuen Choo @ Mrs Gay Wan Guay* [Transcript of recording no. 000462/12/6, p. 79]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
22 Low, L.L. (Interviewer). (1984, March 3). *Oral history interview with Tan Cheng Hwee* [Transcript of recording no. 000416/14/5, p. 63]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

Photographs can capture subtext that is sometimes more evocative that the intended subject, as **Gretchen Liu** discovered when she explored the early work of the Photo Unit.

The National Archives of Singapore (NAS) houses an astonishing five million prints, slides and negatives that vividly tell the story of modern Singapore. With the Archives Online portal providing access to over a million of these images, anyone can easily explore Singapore's visual heritage with an internet connection and a few clicks.

While the collection includes photographs from private sources, a far greater number come from government departments. Of these, the vast majority are transfers from the Photo Unit, a small government department staffed by professional photographers and with its own in-house dark room for processing negatives. The history of the Photo Unit can be traced back with certainty to 1949. The photos are identified by the source line "Ministry of Information and the Arts"[1] (MITA).

The Photo Unit captured events, milestones and scenes of Singapore through the twilight years of the colonial era. With the attainment of self-government in 1959, the unit acquired a renewed sense of purpose: in the days before television, photographs were a vital means of communicating new ideas, goals and achievements. Given the rapid pace of change in Singapore's physical, social and economic landscape, these black-and-white compositions from the 1950s and 60s offer not only invaluable documentation but also captivating, sometimes surprising, and occasionally nostalgic, glimpses of the way we were.

Beginnings

The Photo Unit's first assignment book is a dark blue 1949 government-issued "Office Diary" – which is with the NAS. The first entry was penned on 3 January at 11 am as "Blood Transfusion. Fail" (the session was repeated at 12 noon, presumably a success). The use of four film packs and eight flash bulbs was logged. The subject matter is a poignant reminder of the seriousness of post-war health issues, with diseases caused by malnutrition and rampant

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poverty. Tuberculosis, a manifestation of slum conditions aggravated by the war, was all too common then.

The state of the health of the population was just one of many troubling issues. With the end of British military rule – that followed the surrender of the Japanese – on 31 March 1946, the Straits Settlements was dissolved and Singapore became a Crown Colony, though a poor and shabby one. The population was nearing the one million mark, and there was a larger proportion of women, children and the elderly. Post-war economic recovery was slow and the future uncertain. Threats both external and internal faced the colonial government – armed insurgency by communist groups in Malaya on the one hand, and the activities of left-wing groups operating in Singapore on the other. Harsh measures were imposed. At the same time, the inevitability of eventual independence from the British was already manifestly apparent, even as the journey to that goal was utterly unclear.

A first small step was taken on 1 April 1948 when the colonial structure was amended to include a Legislative Council comprising several elected local members. Public opinion now mattered, and photography was perceived as having a useful role to play.

"The creation of a public relations branch was a tacit recognition of the large and legitimate part which public opinion must play in shaping the future of the Colony," advised the 1948 Singapore annual report. The report acknowledged the need for the government "to keep the public informed of its policies and of the administrative details and functions arising out of the carrying out of those policies at a time of ever-growing public interest in public affairs and a readiness to assume responsibility for them".[2] The authorities were also cognisant of the need to instill allegiance by spinning a positive light on its affairs to promote "a common and active loyalty to the Colony, its security and its welfare".[3]

Browsing through MITA's online photograph collection from the 1950s is like taking a slow journey through a very, very different Singapore. There are the expected official events and VIPs but also plenty of images that offer a time capsule of the island and everyday life, and youthful versions of familiar faces. Many of these images were first displayed in official "photo boxes" erected around the island. Back then, photo boxes – literally glass cases displaying important notices and photographs – were used by the government as a means to disseminate

(Facing page) Top: A Chinese opera staged in Kampong Glam, 1966. Bottom: Flat dwellers waiting for then Prime Minster Lee Kuan Yew during his tour of Tiong Bahru, Delta and Havelock housing estates in 1963. *Both images from Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Above) Office diaries recording assignments taken by the Photo Unit – including the page with the very first entry on 3 January 1949. *Courtesy of Ministry of Communications and Information.*

(Below) Photo boxes containing images and notices were used to disseminate information to the public. This photo was taken at Collyer Quay, 1954. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Right) City Council News Photo No. 3 (text in English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil). *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

information to the public. In 1953, there were 53 such photo boxes and, by 1956, the number had increased to 93.[4]

The 1955 general election was the first time a majority of the seats in the Legislative Assembly were elected rather than appointed by the colonial authorities. After the election, the Public Relations Office was renamed the Department of Information Services on 1 January 1957, and relocated to the newly created Chief Minister's Office. Photographs became increasingly important to government publications and publicity campaigns. Two photographers were on staff to "keep a record of public functions and of departmental activities and to print material for overseas distribution and for use in the publications of the Department or other government publications". A generous 7,625 negatives were exposed during the year.[5]

Two years later, in the 1959 general election, Singapore attained full internal self-government when the People's Action Party (PAP) won the majority of the seats in the Legislative Assembly. The new leaders were in a hurry to engage the hearts, minds and imaginations of people living in a complex multiracial society with divided loyalties and the legacy of colonial rule. Housing, education, the economy and jobs were all hot topics. New policies and programmes needed to be conceptualised and conveyed to the public.

The Photo Unit Steps Up

The task fell to the new Ministry of Culture (MOC), whose goal was to "channel popular thinking and feeling along national lines and to re-organise the Information Services and the administration of mass media for the dissemination of information".[6] In effect, the MOC served as the government's public relations arm, educating newly minted citizens about government policies and rallying people around a Malayan national identity in anticipation of merger with Malaysia.

Sinnathamby Rajaratnam (1915–2006), or S. Rajaratnam as he was better known, a former journalist and a founding member of the PAP, served as the first minister for culture for six years, from 1959 until 1965. In that role, he was given the responsibility of formulating policies to create a sense of shared identity, a common Malayan culture and to keep the people informed. He soon earned a reputation as the government's chief communicator.

Rajaratnam grasped that government ideals and policies, no matter how brilliant, needed to be communicated effectively or they would fail: not abstract slogans, but something more concrete was needed. Photographs were the ideal medium. Perhaps more than any of his fellow cabinet members, Rajaratnam understood the power of pictures. Apart from being a gifted writer, he was also a keen amateur photographer. The hobby was acquired during his student days in London, from 1935 to 1947. Surviving images from this time attest to his aptitude as he framed everyday scenes from unusual perspectives or with a distinctly modern flair.[7]

Not surprisingly, the Photo Unit, now absorbed into the new ministry, became engaged in a flurry of activity. In 1959, over 9,000 negatives were exposed, covering major news events and keeping a record of the government's activities. Multiple copies of selected negatives were printed, a staggering 71,200, many of which were displayed in the ubiquitous photo boxes scattered around the island. Others were supplied to the press, local and overseas organisations as well as to the general public on request.[8]

Photographs also provided the raw material for other media, including Photo News, a series of large-format information posters with bright background colours and captions and explanatory notes in the four official languages. Over the next nine years, Photo News graphically conveyed the story of changing Singapore – the expansion of industry and housing estates, the launch of national service, cultural events and infrastructure projects. Ministers and members of parliament were featured opening schools, factories and community centres. Some issues were devoted entirely to foreign affairs, sharing the latest news on the prime minister's visits overseas or foreign leaders' visits to Singapore.

The 1960s was a decade of turbulence and transformation, and the Photo Unit was kept busier than ever. The work of the photographers continued to be reproduced in booklets, posters and various promotional materials and publications circulated by the ministry's Publicity Division. Even with the advent of television, photography continued

Workers at a pineapple canning factory, 1952. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Fishermen with the day's catch, 1951. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

to play an important role. The first television broadcast took place on 15 February 1963 and regular broadcasting started a few weeks later. But few households owned television sets due to their high cost, and broadcasting was limited to only a few hours in the evening.

Data published in the Singapore annual reports record the prolific output of the Photo Unit. In 1960, some 8,835 film negatives were exposed and 71,864 photographs printed.[9] By 1965, negatives were no longer counted but printed photographs were – some 209,800 that year. These serviced "53 photo boxes in markets and display boards in Government offices and 1,388 photo display boards in bus shelters and coffee shops".[10] In 1966, the unit printed 241,500 photographs. There were "some 53 photo boxes in markets as well as 53 photo boxes and display boards in Government Offices and 1,383 photo display boards at bus shelters and coffee shops which carry the Weekly Photo News posters published by the Division".[11]

Keeping Up with the Times

By the end of the 1960s, however, there was a distinctive shift. The use of photography for nation-building purposes was superseded not only by the widespread ownership of television sets, but also by the changing requirements of an increasingly sophisticated society. Photo News as a medium of communication was deemed outdated and ceased publication in 1968. The once omnipresent photo boxes were gradually dismantled. The very last photo box to be removed was on the High Street side of the Supreme Court building, sometime at the end of the 1980s. At the same time, a stronger awareness of the need to preserve the country's history emerged. An important milestone was the establishment of the National Archives and Records Centre in 1968,[12] which was tasked with the custody and preservation of public records, including photographs.

The Photo Unit has, however, continued in its work to photograph Singapore. Today, the unit is part of the Ministry of Communications and Information, and housed at the Old Hill Street Police Station building. Veteran photographer Goh Lik Huat, who joined the Photo Unit in October 1977, recalls that six or seven full-time photographers have manned the unit at any one time over the years. Over time, the nature of the assignments undertaken has evolved. Originally, the unit covered a wide range of activities, but the focus has narrowed down to the office of the president, prime minister and some key members in the Prime Minister's Office.

Cameras are government-issued – from Rolleiflex film cameras in the 1950s to Leica cameras from 1965, and Canon digital cameras today. Black-and-white film continued to be used until the 1990s, but overlapped with and was eventually replaced by the use of colour film. The switch to digital cameras took place in the early 2000s. Each year, the unit organises its collection of photographs for transfer to the NAS where they are catalogued and made accessible to the public. In the early days, negatives were sent together with a printed contact sheet for easy reference. Today, the files are saved in compact discs. Technology has changed, but there is one endearing example of continuity: daily assignments are still manually recorded in an office diary.

Capturing the Bigger Scene

A photograph captures a moment in time and can be rich in unintended documentation – background shophouses, littered streets, barefoot children. In striving for the perfect shot, many of the less-than-perfect photographs have a gritty spontaneity that seem to fit the subject and the times. As William Henry Fox Talbot (1800–77), the English scientist and inventor who was one of the pioneers of photography, observed in *The Pencil of Nature,* the first photographically illustrated book published commercially: "It frequently happens, moreover – and this is one of the charms of photography – that the operator himself discovers on examination, perhaps long afterwards, that he had depicted many things he had no notion of at the time."[13]

That the photographs from this era were taken with the idea of swaying public opinion or rallying citizens is in itself of historical interest. While only a few photographs from the collection can accompany this essay, the full sweep of history can be enjoyed by exploring the images on Archives Online. Alongside historic moments and iconic personalities, the MITA photograph collection offers insights into ordinary people and everyday affairs. Preserved, documented in place and time, they can be exhibited, reproduced, studied, interpreted, re-evaluated and, above all, enjoyed. ♦

NOTES

1 The predecessor of the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA) was the Ministry of Culture, which was formed in 1959. In 2001, MITA was renamed the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, but retained the acronym MITA. In 2004, the acronym MITA was changed to MICA. In 2012, MICA was renamed the Ministry of Communications and Information

2 Singapore. Ministry of Culture. (1949). *Colony of Singapore annual report 1948* (p. 14). Singapore: Information Division, Ministry of Culture. Available via PublicationSG.

3 *Colony of Singapore annual report 1949*, p. 2.

4 *Colony of Singapore annual report 1953*, p. 180; *Colony of Singapore annual report 1956*, p. 233.

5 *Colony of Singapore annual report 1957*, p. 257.

6 *State of Singapore annual report 1959*, p. 189.

7 For more on Rajaratnam and his interest in photography see Ng, I. (2010). *The Singapore lion: A biography of S. Rajaratnam. Singapore:* Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. (Call no.: RSING 327.59570092 NG) and Rajaratnam, S. (2011). *Private passion: The photographs of pioneer politician and diplomat S Rajaratnam.* Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. (Call no.: RSING 779.092 RAJ)

8 *State of Singapore annual report 1959*. See Chapter VIII, "Cultural Affairs, Information and Publicity".

9 *Singapore annual report 1960*, p 206

10 *Singapore yearbook 1965*, p. 207.

11 *Singapore yearbook 1966*, p. 228.

12 The National Archives and Records Centre, the predecessor of the National Archives of Singapore, marks the beginning of the first independent archives institution in Singapore. Prior to this, the archives office was part of the former Raffles Museum and Library.

13 *The Pencil of Nature* was published in instalments between 1844 and 1846. The quote appears in Newhall, B. (1982). *The history of photography: From 1839 to the present day* (p. 246). New York: The Museum of Modern Art. (Not available in NLB holdings)

WHEN DISCO FEVER RAGED

Pulsating music, strobe lights and postage-stamp dance floors packed with shimmying bodies. **Tan Chui Hua** gives you the lowdown on the history of the disco scene in Singapore.

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

(Facing page) The 1977 hit film *Saturday Night Fever* epitomised the global discotheque scene in the 1970s and early 80s. Starring John Travolta in his breakout role and Karen Lynn Gorney, and featuring music by the Bee Gees, the film played in Singapore cinemas for weeks to sell-out crowds. Needless to say, discos here saw an immediate spike in patrons, with many replicating the slick moves of Tony Manero (the character played by Travolta) on the dance floor.

(Above) The Pink Pussycat at Prince's Hotel Garni on Orchard Road began rebranding itself as a discotheque with resident bands to draw the crowds. Featured here is local band The Hi Jacks in a photo taken on 30 May 1973. *Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.*

"you watch this gyrating throng
caught slow-motion
by insidious search-light eyes
as phantoms writhing
drowning in a wet haze
of a multi-coloured dream
gone psychically mad
a nightmare born out of wailing voices
washed away unheard
for some prehistoric rites"

– Chen Nan Fong, 1971[1]

When Gino's A-Go-Go, Singapore's first discotheque – or disco for short – opened along Tanglin Road in 1966, it seemed like a laughable idea to many locals. Accustomed to live bands and tea dances, they thought grooving to the canned music of British teenage pop sensation Bee Gees at Gino's was a strange thing. In fact, the press described the upstart's debut as having an "atmosphere of closed camaraderie that you can only find on a postage-stamp size dance-floor packed too tightly to waltz in".[2]

But Gino's, bankrolled by Herbie Lim, grandson of rubber king Lim Nee Soon and riding the discotheque fever sweeping across fashionable cities of the world, soon began seeing long snaking queues of mainly young people every night.

Ronald Goh, whose family business Electronics and Engineering installed the discotheque's state-of-the-art sound system, recalled: "The DJ was not much of a DJ, except that he played… you know there was two turntables, and he alternate[d] sounds from one vinyl to another." Goh explained: "The DJs were university students, they came in the evening and ran the disco… this was just the beginning, where they actually play vinyl, or records, over a sound system with a dance floor and started this disco fad."[3]

Despite Gino's success, disc-jockeys (or DJs as the word later became abbreviated) – whose job was to spin gramophone records or discs on a turntable – would remain an anomaly in Singapore for a while longer. It was, after all, the heyday of live bands in Singapore and they were not going to be upstaged so easily.

Discos, Discos Everywhere

There was a lull until 1969, when two disco clubs opened – Fireplace on Coronation Road and The Cosmic Club on Jervois Road. As the revelry from Fireplace continued until the wee hours each night, a series of complaints by irate neighbours led the police to shut it down.[4] The Cosmic Club was short-lived too: the police declared it an unlawful club on the grounds that the club was "prejudicial to public peace and good order" and that "such a club would attract young Singaporeans in their impressionable years… to demoralise and create a sense of false values".[5]

The warning came too late. When the hotel development boom of the late 1960s and early 70s descended upon Singapore, hoteliers caught on to the fact that having an in-house discotheque would be a sure-fire way to attract young Singaporeans looking for novel ways to entertain themselves. A slew of new discos opened in quick succession in various hotels in town: Ming Court's Barbarella (1969), Equatorial's Club Crescendo (1969), Cuscaden's The Eye (1970), Hilton's Spot Spot (1970), Shangri-La's Lost Horizon (1971), Mandarin's Boiler Room (1971) and several others.

Existing nightclubs and lounges, such as Pink Pussycat in Prince's Hotel Garni, began rebranding themselves as discotheques with resident bands to draw the crowds. Psychedelic lighting and loud décor became must-haves. The hype rose to fever pitch when Pierre Trudeau, then Canada's prime minister, was seen "getting down" on the dance floor with a local former model at Spot Spot during his visit to Singapore in January 1971 to attend the meeting of the

Commonwealth Heads of Government.[6] The press had a field day with the story.

The flurry of discos opening inevitably led purists to question – what *exactly* is a discotheque? The word "disco" is derived from a French word *disque,* which means discs or gramophone records, so if one goes to a library or *bibliothéque* in France to read books, then by extension a *discothéque* is where one goes to listen to records.

"There should be no live band in a discotheque," Kim Khor, then manager of Soundbox at Hotel Miramar, sniffed. "Our locals don't appreciate discotheques. They prefer live bands, something which is difficult to understand."[7] Soundbox, which opened in 1971, was touted as Singapore's second discotheque in the truest sense of the word.

For disco fans in Singapore, however, what really mattered was a good party: loud music, light effects and a small dance floor packed to the brim.[8] Disc jockeys, it seemed, were not the main attraction. A 1971 tabloid noted:

> "When is a disco not a discotheque? When there is a live band but no discs. Which means that all the swinging joints in town are not discos in the true sense of the word. This controversy over the definition of this particular brand of night clubs has been aired. But who cares? A squeezy dancing floor with an electronic band blasting away the ears and walls has got the discotheque label slapped on it."[9]

War of the Dance Floors

As more discotheques opened, the share of the disco-goer pie began shrinking in proportion. By 1970, business owners were complaining that the industry was no longer a "paying proposition".[10] The long queues outside star establishments, however, kept the hopes of new entrants into the disco scene high.

Staying on top of the game called for more innovation and offerings. The owners of Barbarella at Ming Court Hotel sank more than $300,000 to set up the three-level establishment, with its iconic space-age design inspired by its Jane Fonda movie namesake – somehow looking at odds with Ming Court's staid Oriental-inspired décor. Every month, $30,000 went towards the cost of hiring live bands, and another $4,000 for renting psychedelic slides for 16 projectors.[11]

Not to be outdone, Spot Spot plastered its walls with thousands of sparkly red sequins and imported an antique bartop from Malacca for serving cocktails and alcoholic drinks. Lost Horizon took discotheque fantasy up a notch with a seafaring theme, complete with custom-built gondolas, Chinese junks, Portuguese fishing boats and a French man-of-war. Winsome female greeters dressed in nautical gear, while slide projections of Venetian scenes and themed drinks ensured an over-the-top experience.[12]

Discotheques began scouting for better, newer and more famous bands (see text box on page 37), many of them from overseas, to the point it was noted that "very few local bands can make it to the nightclub scene these days" as "there are so many bands around – some very good, some above average, others average and of course some below average".[13] Discotheques also began holding lucky draws, costume parties and games to bring in the crowds. The Boiler Room, for example, started weekly disc jockey contests and tied up with record companies to hold launch parties for new album releases.

But the proverbial pot of gold, for most disco operators, turned out to be mere wishful thinking. Disco clubs became trapped in a web of spiralling costs. The disco set was, after all, made up of Singapore's young, with plenty of aspiration but limited fiscal power. While popular bands cost more to hire, cover charges had to be priced affordably for young people. Gino's, which had rebranded itself Aquarius, was one of the few exceptions because it did not hire bands.[14]

(Below) Radio and Rediffusion stalwart Larry Lai, 1975. Together with Mike Ellery, Rediffusion's manager for English programmes, Lai started a mobile disco called Moby Dick in 1970. *Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.*

(Right) Bikini-clad a-go-go girls and DayGlo body painting were part of the package offered by Moby Dick, Singapore's first mobile discotheque. *Image reproduced from The Straits Times, 20 September 1970, p. 6.*

S'pore gets first mobile discotheque

(Right) Brian Richmond in his element, 1976. He started out as a mobile disco DJ and became a household name in the 1970s and 80s. *Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.*

(Bottom right) Barbarella discotheque advertising performances by its foreign band, The Pitiful Souls. *Image reproduced from The Straits Times, 3 January 1970, p. 20.*

Disco-on-the-Move

In the late 1960s, when it became clear that hiring live bands was unsustainable in the long run, Larry Lai, a Rediffusion DJ,[15] began toying with the idea of the mobile disco, calling his outfit Moby Dick.[16]

> "For an initial fee of $250, Moby Dick performs non-stop for four hours and gives you that 'disco' setting in your own parlour, club, or simply 'where-you-want-it' – complete with ultra-violet and strobe lights and a disc-jockey who will act as MC for your party, plus these two a-go-go girls."[17]

His idea, however, was met with scepticism: the general response was "What! Pay you to dance to records? You are crazy. I can do that free at home."[18] Ignoring the naysayers, Lai teamed up with Mike Ellery, Rediffusion's manager for English programmes, and registered Moby Dick as a partnership in 1970.

Having a great business idea was one thing; making it work is another. Technical challenges had to be overcome – from nailing the right sound and volume to the right lights and effects. Hagemeyer, the distributor for National products in Singapore, sponsored the company's speakers, amplifier and turntables. Lai's engineer colleagues at Rediffusion reconfigured the equipment into a mobile disc jockey station.[19] Next came the lighting effects. Lai explained:

> "The technology was there but we needed more than just flickering colour lights. We needed something to 'wash' walls and stuff like that. So the simplest thing that we could do was to buy a slide projector and then do our own colourful psychedelic slides… and then Mike had the brainwave of getting an all-beat-up speaker with no sound, but if you put in a signal, a sound input, and you turn up the volume a little bit, the speaker cone would vibrate. So we stuck little pieces of broken

> mirror... then we paint[ed] it... the mirrors with little bit of DayGlo paint, then we shone a spotlight on to the speaker cone[s] which then reflected little flickering light[s]."[20]

Moby Dick rolled into action. Pamphlets were sent to prospective clients, such as clubs, hotels and military camps. Lai and Ellery found two Ford Falcons – large cars with bench seats – and piled the equipment in the back while ferrying a sexy go-go girl each in the front. Friends in the press wrote up articles on the "new fad" to generate public interest. Then calls started coming in. Lai said:

> "The only people who knew what mobile discos were all about were the British military, the Australians, all the Caucasians from either Australia or Europe or America.
>
> "Only they would give us the business. So we played [at] the British military camps, the Kiwis in Sembawang. Then we played at the American Club, the Tanglin Club, Singapore Cricket Club... the memberships were all heavily foreign."[21]

To create a disco night mood, Ellery and Lai imported psychedelic posters of icons such as The Beatles and Jimi Hendrix painted in luminous colours and ran an ultraviolet light over them: the effect was surreal. The song list was peppered with bubblegum favourites to get feet tapping. When the go-go girls in bikinis got up to dance on tabletops, DayGlo paints were provided and male patrons were invited to paint the girls' bodies. As Ellery described it: "Getting pretty girls involved, greater traction... well it's a show! It makes a better show, more fun."[22]

Word got around. The hotels finally caved in, scaled back on live bands and engaged DJs instead. Moby Dick started landing contracts with hotels, clubs and restaurants. Ellery and Lai found themselves having to hire more DJs and roadies to run the shows, and this was how DJs such as Brian Richmond, Victor Khoo and Bernard Solosa – who later became household names in the 1970s and 80s – first cut their teeth. Mobile disco businesses opened one after another, and Brian Richmond launched his own outfit a few years later.[23] The age of true discotheques had finally kicked off.

In retrospect, the shift was unsurprising as Ellery noted:

> "Mobile disco is consistent and affordable. And we always got the latest pop tunes straight off the charts. We fly them in. ... Sometimes I believe the hotel would have its own system already in, and we would probably add on a bit to it, the speaker systems and all that."[24]

In an article that Brian Richmond wrote on the golden age of disco, he said:

> "It is hard to describe the magic of those days. DJs were entertainers. For instance, I used to play the congas, sometimes we would rap between songs; the onus was on us to get the crowd warmed up, and their feet and bodies moving. We would sing the chorus, play the favourite songs of regulars, and greet people we recognised. These were tricks of the trade – to make someone feel good, welcoming them by name; also to know when to keep mum because someone was there and not wanting to be seen! We would do the fast music, then at some point, dim the lights and do the lovey-dovey music for people to smooch to... then we would bring up the tempo again. The DJ was king, and he dictated the scene."[25]

The Clamp Down

The permissive 1960s gave way to the puritanical 70s when the government decided it was time to stem the tide of – or at least the perception of – rising immorality in Singapore. Discotheques,

(Left) With the revival of discotheques in the late 1970s, the former Lost Horizon at Shangri-La Hotel was revamped to become Xanadu. Opened in 1981, the million-dollar discotheque boasted complex laser effects, a high-tech sound system and plush interior décor. *Courtesy of Shangri-La Hotel, Singapore.*

(Below) The X-periment, which was formed in 1967, performing at the Baron Night Club on Upper Serangoon Road where it held a lengthy residency. *Courtesy of Joseph C. Pereira.*

JUMPING ON THE BAND-WAGON

In the early years of discotheques, bands were a big part of the attraction. Getting "better and better bands" was a strategy to hold the attention of fickle crowds.[1] Popular local bands, such as The X-periment, Flybaits, The Hi Jacks, Blackjacks, the X'Quisites, and Heather and the Thunderbirds, landed lucrative contracts.[2]

For instance, in 1973, Heather and the Thunderbirds signed an 18-month contract worth $144,000 with The Pub in Marco Polo Hotel.[3] Many local bands, after establishing themselves in Singapore, were offered attractive contracts to perform overseas in cities such as Hong Kong and Bangkok.[4]

By 1970, the demand for good bands was so intense that many discotheques turned to foreign bands. Performers were brought in from the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, the United States and even Europe. While local bands cost a minimum of $3,000 to $5,000 a month, imported bands cost at least three times as much. Filipino and Indonesian bands were said to be cheaper than non-Asian bands, which commanded around $10,000 a month, with one nightspot reportedly paying $18,000 a month for its foreign resident band.[5]

Such heady days were soon to pass, however, with the introduction of mobile discos as well as the government crackdown on nightspots.

The Thunderbirds was formed in 1962 and evolved over time to include lead vocalist Heather Batchen. (an English girl living in Singapore who adopted Harvey as her second name after she married fellow band member Harvey Fitzgerald). Featured here is their album released by Philips subsidiary Pop Sound in 1970. *Courtesy of Joseph C. Pereira.*

NOTES

1 Tan, T. (1970, September 16). No glam profits in a disco. *The Straits Times*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG..
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3 Chua, M. (1973, November 3). Discos may open again, but no music or dancing. *The Straits Times*, p. 11. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
4 *New Nation*, 30 Aug 1971, p. 9.
5 Har, N. (1971, March 27). Lousy bands or good records? *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

with their predominantly young crowds, unsavoury reputation and association with drugs, brawls and "permissive behaviour", became prime targets.[26]

In 1971, a 100-percent increase in entertainment tax was imposed on all venues with live bands, and nightclubs in the central district were forbidden from remaining open after 1 am on weekdays, except on the eve of public holidays.[27] In 1972, the Ministry of Home Affairs ordered a three-night surveillance on nightspots on Orchard Road. The ministry said that entertainment places doubled as drug distribution centres, in particular for Mandrax or MX pills (a type of hypnotic drug) and *ganja* (cannabis), and concluded that "these nightspots and youthful customers have common characteristics: psychedelic lights, abstract art, loud 'soul' music, long hair (or wigs), coloured T-shirts, denim jackets with badges and signs, bell-bottoms, loose blouses and jockey-caps".[28]

In July 1973, then Minister for Home Affairs Chua Sian Chin delivered a stern warning to nightlife establishments, singling out discotheques in particular. He said:

> "I am informed that our discotheques are places which are predominantly patronised by local youths, especially long-haired teenagers, who go there to revel in star-wandering rock and soul-moving music in a hallucinatory atmosphere so familiar with the drug and hippie cult."[29]

Following his warning, six discotheques were closed down in November that year, including Mandarin's Boiler Room and Ming Court's Barbarella. Twelve highly popular discotheques, such as Lost Horizon and The Eye, lost their liquor licences. Hotel discotheques providing public entertainment were no longer allowed to serve alcohol.[30]

For nightspots that remained opened, a long list of strict conditions was imposed for their continued operations. These included the prohibition of alcohol, psychedelic lighting, private cubicles and lewd images. Persons under 18, long-haired men and patrons not sporting a tie or wearing a national dress were denied admission. In addition, operating hours had to cease at midnight, with an hour's extension on Saturdays and public holidays; in the event of breaches, the payment of a substantial cash deposit would be totally or partially forfeited.[31]

Mervyn Nonis, a musician with popular local band The X-periment, recalled those grim days. He said: "...

all the clubs were just… All closed, you know, so there was no entertainment, you know. At all… You could just imagine the scene. All the bands were jobless…"[32] And then, in a final death knell to the disco scene in Singapore, dancing was banned in most discotheques by end 1973.[33]

These curbs hit the discotheques hard. The fierce competition among nightspots in the early 1970s had already taken a toll. Some, such as The Eye, tried to adapt by hiring extra guards to turn away undesirable patrons and raising cover charges and the prices of drinks. Some, such as Spot Spot, had already closed down in 1972 due to market stresses and increasing government surveillance. The others converted into cocktail lounges and bars that were less stringently monitored by the authorities.[34]

Nonis remembered that bands and DJs took turns to perform on the dance floor after the dance ban:

> "… the clubs were allowed to open. But no dancing was allowed… You just watch. And we used to alternate with Brian Richmond… So Brian Richmond, the equipment, was on the dance floor… Just music and then… so when we came on, it was like a show band sort of thing… What we felt was the public was not getting enough. Like, when they used to go to the clubs, that means they couldn't let themselves… go. Or let the [their] hair down… So… I think it was a bit boring… Because how long could you just listen and do nothing, you know what I mean?"[35]

It was only in 1975 that the government began rolling back some of the restrictions. Male patrons without ties were no longer barred, business hours were extended and liquor licences were reissued. Strobe lights and private cubicles, however, were still a no-no and projectors were not allowed. The damage, however, had been done. The disco scene was a shadow of its former self. In 1977, the grand dame of discotheques, Barbarella, closed for good.[36]

Can't Beat 'Em, Then Join 'Em

When the American musical drama *Saturday Night Fever*, with John Travolta in his breakout Hollywood role and songs by the Bee Gees hit Singapore's cinema screens in 1978, all things disco – fashion, music and slick dance moves – resurrected with a vengeance. New discotheques opened, and demand for disco dance classes grew. The national hunt for representatives in Singapore to take part in EMI's annual World Disco Championship in London was launched in 1979.[37]

Realising that there was no trumping the popularity of Hollywood, the government took a different tack. In 1978, community centres began organising disco nights for young people, to the point that disco dancing, "once associated with shady discotheques", was fast becoming a rage in Singapore's community centres". The main difference was that only sugar-spiked soft drinks were served.[38]

The first disco dance organised by Bedok Zone 4 Residents' Committee at the Bedok Central Area Office in 1986. The event was officiated by then Minister for Home Affairs S. Jayakumar. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

"Respectable" folks began jumping on the bandwagon. The Singapore Armed Forces started disco dance classes. Charities, festivals and other events held disco nights to attract young people. Even the Young Men's Christian Association got into the act, launching its own version of a "clean" discotheque that did not serve liquor in 1975, and organising Singapore's first disco queen competition in 1978, complete with fog and bubble-making machines as competitors danced in cages.[39]

In 1979, the *New Nation* made the following observation:

> "Saturday night has never been so feverish in Singapore. The disco industry sustains a baker's dozen of discotheques in top hotels – with prices to match. There… the energetic generation gets its exercise on postage-stamp-sized dance floors. Lower down the socio-disconomic ladder, thousands flock to the Leisuredrome to disco rock the weekend away at Kallang. Even community centres have seen the strobe light."[40]

And as a final feather in the cap for the industry, the police embraced disco. In December 1985, the first police disco for teenagers was held during the school holidays, and the response was "quite positive". In February the following year, the police force launched a mass disco Lunar New Year party for 4,000 young people at World Trade Centre, featuring Dick Lee and his All Star Variety Band, a fashion show, and appearances by local artiste Jacintha Abisheganaden and bands such as Tokyo Square and Culture Shock.[41]

It had taken over a decade since Gino's, but discos in Singapore had finally made it to the mainstream. ♦

Top Ten Discotheque in Orchard Towers, c. 1985. *Singapore Tourism Board Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

NEW-AGE DISCOS

Discotheques in Singapore continued to adapt to changing times in their bid to attract partygoers. Starting with the Top Ten club in Orchard Towers in 1985, discotheques did away with their postage-stamp-sized dancefloors and opted for mega spaces instead. Techno pop and remixed pop and rock replaced Bee Gees and Boney M, and live bands and singers were reintroduced.

Outside the English-language circuit, the 1990s also saw a series of Cantopop discotheques and clubs popping up as Hong Kong's music industry swept the region. These new establishments, notably Canto at Marina Bay, differed from the Mando-pop and Cantopop joints of the 1970s in catering to the young fans of Hong Kong celebrity singers rather than to ageing Chinese businessmen.

Meanwhile, the concept of discotheque reached new heights when nightlife veteran Deen Shahul launched the teenage-friendly disco Fire in Orchard Plaza in 1989 and Singapore's biggest discotheque, Sparks, in Ngee Ann City in 1993. At their peak, Fire had branches in Indonesia and Malaysia, while Sparks occupied the entire seventh floor of Ngee Ann City and came equipped with separate arenas for different music genres as well as some 30 karaoke rooms.

While none of these discotheques of yesteryear have survived, their legacies – from state-of-the-art sound and lighting systems to over-the-top and in-your-face interior designs – continue to influence those that followed in the years to come.

NOTES

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Researching S. Rajaratnam

Writing a biography can be tedious, painstaking work. But the effort can also be uplifting and inspirational, as **Irene Ng** discovered when she began researching the life of S. Rajaratnam.

When I embarked on writing the biography of S. Rajaratnam in 2005, I did not realise that it would take over my life. A project that originally involved just one book became two volumes[1] – one already published, another in the making – and a third, an anthology of Rajaratnam's short stories and radio plays,[2] published as a surprise baby in between. And who knows, there might be a fourth book.

It has been a long research journey. I started with the question: how does one capture the complex life of a man who was one of Singapore's founding leaders, the first minister for culture (1959) of self-governing Singapore, the first minister for foreign affairs (1965–80) of independent Singapore – and the ideologue who wrote the country's National Pledge in 1966?

In trying to answer this question, I turned to the archival materials at the National Archives of Singapore (NAS), aptly situated at the foot of the historic Fort Canning Hill. The building, a former schoolhouse, had the feel of, well... an old school with a run-down air (at least when I visited it between 2005 and 2015 for my work). Within the building itself, however, was a treasure trove of old documents, photographs, maps, radio broadcasts and television footage. It is hard to describe the sense of anticipation I feel each time I enter its reading room, ever hopeful that I would come across new insights and learn new ways of understanding the past.

Over the years, I have built a respectful relationship with the NAS as I gained a deeper appreciation of the challenges it has faced in fulfilling its mission. It plays an indispensable role in preserving the primary records of our past, the very essence of our heritage. I don't think I overstate the importance of the NAS when I say that it is a bastion of social memory and national identity. Yet, all too often, its role is neglected and underappreciated by the public.

I had known Rajaratnam since my days as a journalist and had interviewed him in the 1980s and 90s. Writing his biography may have been the furthest thing on my mind then, but those encounters gave me a sense of the kind of man he was: his thinking, his values, his mannerisms.

By the time I started on his biography in 2005, he was already 90 and suffering from late-stage Alzheimer's disease. With the permission of the trustees of Rajaratnam's estate (his Hungarian wife Piroska Feher had died in 1989; they had no children), I browsed his personal library and private papers in his old bungalow in leafy Chancery Lane, a process that continued until some months after his death in February 2006. Other than his vast collection of books, there were the boxes upon boxes of papers, files and photos, all gathering dust.

I became worried that the materials would deteriorate in the heat and humidity, or worse, be misplaced or destroyed. After Rajaratnam passed away, I recommended that important items be donated to the archives for preservation. So imagine my despair when, during one visit to his house, I saw hundreds of books smouldering in a bonfire in his garden. Thanks to the actions of the NAS and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), however, most of his books and other important items, such as his armchair and typewriter, found a new home in their premises.

The experience reinforced my conviction that the images, voices and documents of our founding leaders should be systematically preserved for the benefit of the present and future generations.

Writing Rajaratnam's biography for me is part of the larger endeavour to preserve memories. Biography is the form through which writers recreate life from archival documents such as letters and diaries, TV and radio recordings, newspapers and official records – in this case, Hansard documents (transcripts of parliamentary debates). This work is vastly different from my previous job as a newspaper journalist. Journalists write the "first draft" of history, chronicling people and events with speed and immediacy in mind. In contrast, biographers may take years – in my case, more than a decade – to complete their account of a subject's life. I am grateful to all those who have helped me and believed in me throughout the arduous process, particularly my patient bosses at ISEAS.

During my research journey, NAS staff very kindly steered me through their vast collection. They organised dozens of boxes of materials, provided an outline of the files in each box, and even highlighted which boxes might contain the most interesting files that would aid my research.

Pitt Kuan Wah, then director of the NAS, and Ng Yoke Lin, senior archivist, both shared with me useful historical insights into the defining moments of the post-independence era, such as the drafting of the National Pledge. They also alerted me to newly acquired resources, including audiovisual materials, and tracked down additional items to help in my writing – these led me to unexpectedly valuable files. More recently, for the second book on Rajaratnam I am working on, staff at the NAS made it possible for me to access secret files that had to be declassified first.

With their help, I ploughed through thousands of documents, including declassified British and Australian records as well as documents from Singapore's Ministry of Culture and Cabinet files. I spent hours listening to Rajaratnam's sound recordings. I watched video footages of him at work, observing his body language, listening to his tone, imagining the emotions – both the elation as well as the angst – of the moment. These multifaceted resources

(Facing page) S.Rajaratnam during an election mass rally at Fullerton Square, 1 April 1959. Seated sixth from right is Secretary-General of the People's Action Party, Lee Kuan Yew. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) S. Rajaratnam, c. 1970s. *S. Rajaratnam Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Irene Ng is a writer-in-residence at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute and a former member of parliament of Singapore (2001–2015). She was a senior political correspondent with *The Straits Times* before entering politics. She has written a biography of S. Rajaratnam and is working on a second volume.

helped me build a nuanced and complex portrait of the man, and to write what I hope is an engaging and authoritative account of his life.

How did I know that Rajaratnam wore a relaxed smile and exuded confidence at the controversial event on 31 August 1963 marking Singapore's *de facto* independence? From the archival television footage.

How did I know that he sounded somewhat diffident when he spoke to journalists in his first press conference as foreign minister in 1965? From the sound recordings of the interview.

How did I know that he courted the Hungarian girl, who would later become his wife, in late-1930s London, with romantic picnics by the beach, rowing a boat and swimming? From his photos in the archives.

Oral history interviews were another rich resource. When I first started my research in 2005, most of the recordings had yet to be transcribed or digitised – forget about instantaneous online access – so it was a slow and painful slog. For access to records, I had to fill in a form, "Request to Access Oral History Interviews", which took time to process. All this has now changed. The expansion of the Oral History Centre's digital platforms and services over the years has greatly eased the work of researchers, especially for those based overseas.

While I conducted my own interviews with more than 100 people, including Rajaratnam's one-time political opponents, for the book, they were supplemented by oral history interviews from the NAS. These provided me with different perspectives and useful anecdotes that helped to enrich the narrative.

But a caveat: some of the oral history interviewees may have been inaccurate, biased or forgetful in their recollections. Equally, some of the interviewers may not have been as probing as they could have been – they are not journalists after all. In short, the oral histories are as useful – and as fallible – as any written record, so one must sift through the records with a critical mind. But without them, the narratives of the past would be all the greyer.

Then there are Rajaratnam's personal notebooks of various vintage. From his days as a journalist – at *The Malaya Tribune*, the *Singapore Standard* and *The Straits Times* – he developed a habit of neatly copying out salient or interesting parts of the books he had read into a personal notebook. These included quotable quotes, definitions of theories and ideologies, and references drawn from history. His notebooks, which mirror his constant preoccupations, were particularly rich with references to Lenin, Marx, democracy, nationalism and race-related issues.

In the process, Rajaratnam's handwriting became as familiar to me as my own. From the size and shape of the letters in his copious handwritten notes, I learnt to distinguish those written in his later years, when his mind was no longer what it was, and make my judgment on their use accordingly.

In addition to the materials in the NAS, I was given special permission to access files kept at the Special Branch – the predecessor of today's Internal Security Department – on condition that I adhered to the rules of the Official Secrets Act. These files gave me useful leads on the people he associated with when he was a radical left-wing activist in the 1940s. I discovered that, because of the revolutionary company he kept and his subsequent anti-colonial activities, the Special Branch listed him after the war, quite mistakenly, as a Trotskyist and later as an anti-British, anti-government agitator.

In order to trace his earlier life in London, I visited King's College, where Rajaratnam had studied law at his father's behest, to retrieve his university records. I discovered, among other things, that, having lost all interest in law during the war, he dropped out of university in 1940 to pursue his passion for writing. I also spent time sifting through British colonial papers at the Public Records Office in Kew and the British Library in London.

All the materials I find shed new light on one or another aspect of my research. They add to the evidence – check one against another, weigh the biases, examine the angles, follow the trail. The evidence, however, is often complex and occasionally contradictory. After all, historical records themselves are not entirely neutral. Reconciling conflicting accounts and interpretations become a constant challenge.

To give a simple example: on the fateful day of 7 August 1965, how did Rajaratnam travel from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur to meet Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew where he received the shocking news of Singapore's separation from Malaysia? It is a crucial point in my narrative as it is one of the darkest days in Rajaratnam's political career. In his oral history interview, Rajaratnam said he travelled by plane. But there are conflicting accounts in other published sources. Then Minister for Social Affairs Othman Wok recalled driving Rajaratnam in his car to Temasek House in Kuala Lumpur. Lee himself recalled asking Rajaratnam to take a plane and not to inform anyone of his trip, but he was told years later of Othman's recollection that they had travelled by car. Othman's version is the one that has been used in the media. Now which version should I use, and how do I justify it?

All this places a greater demand on the skills of the writer to manage complexity and ambiguity in the narrative. However rigorous one's research, one must be prepared for a certain degree of controversy.

I find it most satisfying when I make a new discovery during the research process, or see a new pattern, or am able to add depth to a current historical record. Few people, for example, knew until fairly recently that the young Rajaratnam found fame as a fiction writer in London, where he lived for 12 years from 1935 to 1947. He wrote short stories that met with critical acclaim, and was regarded as a leading Indian short-story writer of English works at the time – a pioneer of Malayan writing in English.

I found out that his short stories were praised by no less than E.M. Forster in a BBC broadcast on 29 April 1942.[3] His work also drew the attention of George Orwell, who invited Rajaratnam to write for the weekly BBC series, "Open Letters", to explain the different aspects of war in the form of a letter to an imaginary person.

In a broadcast introducing the series on 4 August 1942, the BBC announced that "Raja Ratnam, who is well known among the new Indian writers in Great Britain, will address his letter to a Quisling".[4]

My heart fluttered when, sifting through a musty cardboard box buried under piles of books in his house, I spotted some of the literary magazines containing his published works. How precious they were. With the permission of his estate, they have since been entrusted to the National Library of Singapore.

Even fewer people know that, while working as a newspaper journalist, Rajaratnam had freelanced for Radio Malaya, writing news scripts and radio plays. I discovered among his private papers the scripts for the six-part radio play, "A Nation in the Making", which explores the controversial issues of race, language, religion and national identity. The pages were yellow, dusty and crumbling from age. At my urging and with the assistance of the NAS, the scripts are now preserved in the ISEAS library.

To restore Rajaratnam's literary legacy, I compiled seven short stories and seven radio scripts into an anthology, *The Short Stories and Radio Plays of S. Rajaratnam*, which was published in 2011.

It is gratifying to see the younger generation taking a fresh interest in Rajaratnam's fiction and adapting it for a contemporary audience. The latest effort was in 2017 by a young filmmaker, Jerrold Chong. He adapted one of Rajaratnam's stories, "What Has to Be", into a short animation film for the annual Singapore Writers Festival's initiative, "Utter 2017: SingLit Unearthed", which adapts the best of Singapore writing into film.

There were, of course, frustrating moments during the research process. For example, besides his radio plays, Rajaratnam also wrote and presented programmes on Radio Malaya on a range of other subjects, including international issues, before he stood for his first general election in May 1959. I know this because I found payment invoices for his scripts in his old Samsonite briefcase in his house. There were about 50 receipts from 17 September 1956 to 7 March 1959, detailing the titles of the scripts and his fees (between $25 and $40 for each work). Unfortunately, not a single recording of these scripts can be traced anywhere. This experience, among others, highlighted for me the heavy responsibility that our national archives bears.

Speaking out as a member of parliament, I began pressing for greater government support and funding for the work of our national archives. During the budget debate in 2006, for example, I called for major renovations to the NAS building as it was not purpose-built for a modern archives. I said: "It is to the credit of the excellent staff there that the NAS has been able to deliver good service to the public, despite its cramped workspace and tight funding." I contrasted it with the British National Archives at Kew, which is "a modern airy building, a state-of-the-art building, with large research areas, with proper lighting for reading and research". It also has a free museum and a cafeteria.

I repeated my calls in parliament over the following years. By 2010, I was beginning to sound like a broken record: "We should do more to develop our National Archives and ensure it has the resources to keep up with the expanding demands. Despite its importance, the archives still failed to attract interest as part of our heritage, and suffers from under-funding and neglect." Again, I called for its building to be renovated "so that it is at least on par with the standard of our National Museum and Library".

I am sure mine was not the only voice calling for greater national support for our archives. It is indeed good news that renovation works to the building have finally been completed and it recently opened, in time for Singapore's bicentennial celebrations this year. But more important than the building itself, of course, are the precious resources within, both human and historical.

The challenge going forward is how the national archives can bring all its resources together to engage the public. It must be a place not only of reflection, but also of imagination. It must not become merely a venue for scholarly research, but a platform for public discussion: to help us understand the past, make sense of the present, and draw lessons for the future.

Rajaratnam could not have described my thoughts on this subject more succinctly when he wrote in an unfinished speech I found among his private papers: "Coping with the future calls for a different kind of intellectual discipline – an imaginative leap, based on past facts, on how to shape a desirable future." ♦

(Facing page) S. Rajaratnam outside his flat at 12 Steele Road, London, 1930s. *Image reproduced from Ng, I. (2010). The Singapore Lion: A Biography of S. Rajaratnam. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. (Call no.: RSING 327.59570092 NG).*

(Left) S. Rajaratnam and his Hungarian wife, Piroska Feher, relaxing at home with an unnamed friend (left), c. 1980s. *S. Rajaratnam Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

NOTES

1 Ng, I. (2010). *The Singapore lion: A biography of S. Rajaratnam. Singapore:* Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. (Call no.: RSING 327.59570092 NG)

2 Ng, I, (2011). *The short stories and radio plays of S. Rajaratnam. Singapore:* Epigram Books. (Call no.: RSING S823 RAJ)

3 Lago, M., Hughes, L.K., & Walls, E.M. (Eds.) (2008). *The BBC talks of E.M. Forster, 1929–1960: A selected edition.* Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press. (Not available in NLB holdings)

4 Orwell, O. (2001). *All propaganda is lies, 1941–1942* (p. 446). London: Secker & Warburg. (Call no.: 828.91209 ORW). The book compiles George Orwell's letters and commentaries related to his radio programmes. [Note: Quisling, named after Norwegian politician Vidkun Quisling who assisted Nazi Germany to conquer his own country during World War II, is a term used to describe traitors and collaborators.]

Stories of the Little People

Oral history is often considered as "little" – personal accounts of humble folk, as opposed to "big" or written history on serious topics. But "little" does not mean negligible or inferior, says **Cheong Suk-Wai**.

Cheong Suk-Wai is a lawyer and a journalist who works now in public service. She has five books to her name and is presently writing a biography of the late president of Singapore, Dr Wee Kim Wee.

If you delve into the Oral History Centre (OHC)'s trove of some 4,900 interviews with Singaporeans and foreigners of diverse backgrounds, you will encounter one constant – the following disclaimer that prefaces every interview transcript:

> "Readers of this oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a verbatim transcript of the spoken word and reflects the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Oral History Centre is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge."

This disclaimer is necessary as oral history accounts could fuel lawsuits arising from family or business feuds or, if the interviewee's memory is foggy, suggest what is actually wrong as right. Worse still, if interviewees deliberately lie in their accounts, leading those who assume the untruth as fact down the garden path.

Alas, such a disclaimer can deter prospective users from the OHC's collection. After all, they might wonder: "Why should one pore through a story that might be riddled with factual inaccuracies?"

For this reason, some people who plumb history for a living have traditionally looked askance at oral history, believing its interviewees to have less veracity, ergo, their interviews to be of less value than written history simply because the interviewees are relying on memory and therefore prone to give vent to their feelings and emotions in recalling incidents in the past.

Learning

Those critical and disdainful of oral history tend to view it as being little better than gossip, rumours and tall tales, which were all grist for the graffiti on the walls of ancient Rome, as British journalist Tom Standage documented in his book, *Writing on the Wall: Social Media, the First 2,000 Years*. Yet, as Standage noted, such brazen communications were what ultimately kept all levels of society on the same up-to-date page, thus enabling Roman society to be open, informed and thriving.[1]

But while it is wise to be circumspect about the authenticity of an oral history account, it does not mean that an oral account in itself is unreliable or, worse, inferior to the written text. If it was so, then why does a witness's oral testimony in a court of law still hold water and, indeed, sometimes become the deciding factor on whether an accused person in the dock gets to live or die?

Those who deride the value of oral testimony against written or printed accounts would do well to take a leaf from The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Trial. This fire that took place in a garment factory broke out on 25 March 1911 in the 10-storey Asch Building off Washington Square in New York City. It killed 146 people, most of whom were factory employees who had jumped through the building's windows to their deaths because the factory's escape door was locked.

The fire is considered one of the worst industrial accidents in American history. The factory's owners were put on trial between 4 December and 27 December 1911 for manslaughter. Their lawyer Max David Steuer – who, like the factory employees, was an immigrant in America – succeeded in getting them acquitted by demolishing the credibility of the prosecution's star witness, Kate Alterman.

Steuer did so by making Alterman, who was illiterate, repeat four times in court her account of how her friend Margaret Schwarz died in the fire. Each time Alterman retold her story, she rehashed faithfully evocative phrases such as "curtain of fire" and described a man in a panic as being "like a wildcat". It soon dawned on the jury that the prosecution had likely made Alterman commit to memory a written account of the fire as the prosecution believed it to be.

The trial turned on the question as to whether the factory's owners knew that the escape door had been locked. Through his relentless cross-examination of Alterman, Steuer cast enough doubt on what she described of the fire to absolve his clients. Thus, putting down certain assertions on paper – as what the prosecution did in this case – does not in and of itself make those assertions any more verifiable and authoritative than oral testimony.[2]

The greater trust in textual as opposed to oral historical sources these days is even more befuddling when you consider that humankind has, for the better part of its 300,000 years on earth, used the oral tradition to pass down the roots of their tribes, their family trees, chronicles of births, deaths, wars and conquests, and how territories changed hands over time.

Writing in the magazine *History Today* in 1983, British sociologist and oral historian Paul Thompson[3] noted that early societies that could not read or write made storytellers their "tradition-bearers". For example, he points out that "the griots of African villages recite by heart the genealogies of landholding", as do the Chinese of dynastic succession or community roll calls of natural as well as political disasters.[4]

Thompson further noted that even after humankind became literate, its intellectual luminaries still had great regard for oral accounts. Among them was the Greek historian Herodotus (c. 484 BC–c. 425 BC) and the French man of letters Voltaire (the pseudonym of Francois-Marie Arouet). Voltaire (1694–1778), who was as cynical as they come, wrote his biography of France's Sun King, Louis XIV, after interviewing those who knew the monarch well. No less than Samuel Johnson (1709–84), the English moralist and a literary lion like Voltaire, praised the latter's collation of oral testimonies on the Sun King.

Thompson demonstrated that professional historians and top thinkers have long used oral testimonies that uphold strong, scholarly standards.

Valuing

Now, if we accept that oral testimonies are valuable, just what about them is so valuable then? Well, to begin with, such interviews offer us rich, layered perspectives of people from all walks of life that simply cannot be replicated by textual sources

The image below shows an oral history interview being conducted in the 1980s, while the one at the bottom was done in the 2010s. The basic techniques of conducting an oral history interview remain largely the same. However, the recording equipment used has changed significantly. In the 1980s, interviews were recorded using high-fidelity reel-to-reel tape recorders and open-reel tapes. These tapes typically could only record 30 minutes on each side and required special care to prevent deterioration. Today, digital recorders and flash memory cards provide better sound quality, allow for longer recordings and are more compact and easier to preserve. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

because the latter format is founded on structure and objectivity, not serendipity and epiphanies.

The importance of having the perspectives of oral history, however, becomes clear when, for example, you compare two accounts about the areas in Singapore that were targeted by Japanese fighter pilots in the days leading to the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942. The interviewee in the first account who, understandably shall remain unnamed in this instance, said that the Japanese shelled the Cathay Building off Orchard Road because it was the tallest building in Singapore then.

Veteran journalist Khoo Teng Soon, however, recalled otherwise in his oral history interview:

> "In those days, the tallest building in Singapore was the Cathay Building. And that used to be the landmark for the Japanese. They never bombed the Cathay Building because it was a very useful building for them to know their bearings. They knew that once they flew over the Cathay Building, they were on their way to any spot they wanted to bomb."[5]

Khoo should know. He worked in that very building for wartime Japan's Domei (now Kyodo) information agency.

Similarly, the availability of a variety of views on a historical event lends its context greater definition, colour and, most importantly, nuances. A fuller context, then, gives readers a fuller and firmer grasp of a particular period in the past. For example, in his oral history interview, former Director of Education Chan Kai Yau lamented how, as a boy in the 1930s, he hardly played with his friends after school because he had to queue for hours just to buy a precious loaf of bread – which was very light, brown and did not taste of much.[6] His compatriot Mrs Gnanasundram Thevathasan, a former Justice of Peace, backed up his recollection by recounting how everyone made cakes from rice flour because wheat was too expensive for most households then.[7]

It was ironic, then, that the onset of the Japanese Occupation in February 1942 brought with it a seemingly abundant supply of wheat flour to Singapore. Chan Kwee Sung, a columnist for *The Straits Times* between 1998 and 2002, and the author of *One More Story to Tell: Memories of Singapore, 1930s–1980s*,[8] recalled that the Japanese distributed so much wheat flour as rations that "at almost every corner of Chinatown, you would find a *wanton* noodle stall because of the abundant supply of flour".[9]

Or take Muslim Religious Council of Singapore pioneer Haji Mohamed Sidek Bin Siraj's account of how people fleeing China began settling in Kampong Glam, which was predominantly Malay, from the 1920s. The casual observer might assume tension among the communities there from then on, but Haji Mohamed Sidek clarified as follows:

> "They didn't come in hordes. They just opened sundry shops… and they acquired the Malay language. And as shopkeepers in Jalan Sultan, they catered to the satay sellers who were Javanese. The Chinese there could speak Javanese too."[10]

Experiencing

Beyond a greater understanding of how Singaporeans evolved amid changing circumstances, the vivid, personal insights afforded by oral history allow readers to experience the force of the very human drama that is real life. Plastic surgeon Lee

(Below) Cathay Building on Handy Road, 1941. During the Japanese Occupation, the building housed the Japanese Broadcasting Department, Military Propaganda Department and Military Information Bureau. Cathay Building was gazetted as a national monument on 10 February 2003. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Bottom) Koeh Sia Yong's oil painting titled *Persecution* (1963) showing innocent men dragged to execution grounds by Japanese soldiers. Operation Sook Ching, which took place in the two weeks after the fall of Singapore to the Japanese on 15 February 1942 saw thousands of Chinese men singled out for mass executions. According to some estimates, as many as 50,000 men died in the bloodbath. *Courtesy of the National Gallery Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

Seng Teik, for one, recounted effectively the horrors of the *Spyros* ship explosion – still one of the worst industrial accidents in Singapore history – when he recalled "truckloads" of victims arriving at the Singapore General Hospital's newly minted Accident & Emergency wing on 12 October 1978. He said:

> "I was to meet an officer, Dr Kenneth Cheong, who was supposed to give a talk that day. But at 2 pm, we had the very first indication of disaster… someone notified everyone of the possibility of a major disaster and to get ready.
>
> "The meeting with Kenneth was off. Within half an hour, the first casualties arrived. We knew we had a true disaster – the casualties were in truckloads, lorries, not ambulances because there were too many casualties.
>
> "As a director, I had never seen anything like it and, hopefully, will never experience that again."[11]

Injured victims being rushed to hospital after an explosion and fire on board the Greek oil tanker, *S.T. Spyros*, on 12 October 1978. Seventy-six people died and 69 others were injured in the accident. *Ministry of Health Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Lee and his colleagues worked "flat out" for three days, trying to cope with the onslaught of burn victims. "We didn't go home for three days," he added. "I almost passed out on my way home after three days."

Those who have documented such tragedies in their writing sometimes leave gory details out. But an oral history interviewee, when asked to tap his memory on that, would invariably say what they see in their mind's eye – and the more articulate the interviewee, the more graphic, or nuanced, the account is likely to be. The difference between an oral history account and a textual one, then, is the difference between a fully fleshed-out portrait of a person and a stick figure sketch of him. In this way, oral history not only fills in the gaps from details omitted in written form, but restores the highlights and shadows of the past.

The historian's work is often like that of a detective; they both track down truths of the past. And the greater the range of critical clues they have, such as those provided by the "I was there" insights of oral history, the better their chances of getting to the bottom of what, where, why and how something actually happened.

Now, you might ask, why should that matter? Why should one dig out such details about a person's past? Mark Wong, Senior Specialist of Oral History at OHC, has a good answer to that. In an interview with me for my upcoming book on OHC's 40th anniversary, Wong said: "History is why we are in this building now, why the chairs we are sitting on are shaped this way, why we are wearing shirts and jackets and trousers." Or, as the aforementioned Paul Thompson noted in his book, *The Voice of the Past*, the value of all history is its "social purpose", which is about helping everyone make sense of the present by understanding what shaped it.[12]

Singapore's Speaker of Parliament Tan Chuan-Jin said as much in his reflection on Singapore's bicentennial year in *The Straits Times* on 13 February 2019. "As a former student of history," Tan wrote, "I do often consider: What if no one saw our potential as a landing point, a site for trade and exchange, a home? What if we hadn't appeared useful, to anyone? What if the economic issues of the time had tripped us up along the way? Or the weight of commerce had shifted and rendered our geopolitical position worthless?"

He added that "little history, the local stories of people and communities" is as "vital" as "big history, the nation-building stuff". If big and little histories are woven together, he added, that would give Singaporeans a better sense of who and where they are. "In an age of globalisation," he noted, "our shared histories, memories and affections link us and give us relevance and access to so many places and people. And in those links too, we find common ground to move ahead, make progress."[13]

Verifying

Those who prize fairness, balance, social justice and democracy would also find much to recommend about oral history. As noted earlier, most grand historical texts tend to record the accounts of winners, not losers. Oral history collections, on the other hand, are a great leveller: it is adamant that the lives of the gravedigger, the nightsoil carrier and the street opera actor matter as much for posterity as those of presidents, politicians and tycoons. Thanks to OHC's dedicated interviewers, users of the collection can now say with confidence that they have access to a layered and multidimensional view of Singapore history.

Such a view is particularly relevant for Singapore society when you consider that many among its most accomplished, sometimes considered as society's elite, actually had a keen grasp of how those on the ground had to live. Among them is James Koh Cher Siang, a former permanent secretary in the education, national development and community development ministries. An alumnus of Oxford and Harvard universities, he recalled how, as a boy, he was waiting

at a bus stop with his schoolmates near Tiong Bahru when several fire engines whizzed past them. Koh recalled: "One of my friends told me, 'Oh, maybe my house is on fire'. So we took a bus and rushed there and indeed, it was true, his house had burnt down."[14]

All told, and in addition to OHC's intellectual rigour and unstinting professionalism in preparing, conducting, assessing and processing its interviews, I have learnt three rules of thumb that could help determine the veracity of someone's oral statements. These are:

❶ Select the accounts of those who admit to what is of no conceivable benefit to them

People are wont to save their ego instead of saying sorry whenever apologies are due. So when someone shares something that would not put him in the best light, his account is more likely than not to be truthful. Writer Felix Chia, who escaped the Imperial Japanese Army's execution of Chinese men during the Sook Ching massacre[15] at the start of the Japanese Occupation in Singapore, recalled in his interview how he pilfered daily provisions meant for Japanese households. He would take along a *tingkat*, or tiffin carrier, every day and at 3 pm, when he and a Malay colleague divided up the spoils – deliveries of fresh meat, fish and vegetables for the Japanese – he would hide some of the food in his *tingkat* and take it home.[16]

Then there is Vernon Cornelius, lead singer of The Quests, one of the most popular local bands in Singapore in the 1960s. Dubbed Singapore's Cliff Richard, Cornelius recalled in his interview:

> "I met Cliff Richard in Kuala Lumpur in 1995… I was embarrassed that my friend introduced me to Cliff Richard as 'the Singapore Cliff Richard'. I felt like an idiot because we're grown-ups now."[17]

❷ Veer towards those who are able to recall happenings in specific detail

The more detailed a story, the greater the chances that it is true. Among the most popular entertainment game shows on British television today is *Would I Lie To You?* Now into its 12th season, it revolves around two teams of celebrities trying to decide if the yarn each is spinning is fact or fiction. Invariably, and unless they are habitual pathological liars, whenever participants are able to back up their story in great detail, they are most likely telling the truth.

In one uproarious instance – viewed 2,094,573 times on Youtube as at 14 February 2019 – the British comedian James Acaster claimed that Mick Trent, a 12-year-old guest on the show, was his "sworn enemy" after the boy put cabbage leaves in Acaster's bed, causing an almighty stink. The comedian added that Mick later sent him a parcel in the post containing half a cabbage, wrapped in cling film. Acaster asserted further that his friends and fans began ribbing him about being "cabbaged" and took to hiding cabbages around his dressing room. "One even started a Twitter feed with the hashtag #OyOySavoy," he huffed. As revealed later, every word he uttered was true.[18]

In contrast to this hilarious story, we have the disquieting OHC interview of a certain Social Welfare Department officer, whom I shall also not name here, on the likely cause of the ruinous fire at Bukit Ho Swee on 25 May 1961. The officer said: "I think it was some cooking utensil which, somehow or other, fell. And the whole place was a burning inferno in minutes because the place was all *attap* and wood." His account on this point, which was already woefully short on details, trails off with no further mention of the alleged utensil. I should add that the actual cause of the fire was never determined.

For my upcoming book on OHC's 40 years, I combed through more than 300 complete oral history interviews in its redoubtable collection. I found most of these bracingly unvarnished, satisfyingly detailed and often heartfelt. One of the best examples of these attributes is the interview with Liak Teng Lit, who was the chief executive of Alexandra Hospital during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) crisis in 2003.

My mother, who read excerpts from Liak's interview in the first draft of my book, was in tears when she read of his recollection of how furniture store IKEA's then general manager, Philip Wee, and his team set up beds in a disused building for a group of hospital nurses, with "compliments from IKEA for helping the country fight SARS". That was right after the nurses' landlords had kicked them out of their flats for fear that the nurses might infect them with SARS.[19]

❸ Trust those who recall things in ways you yourself would

Often, what an oral history interviewee recalls instinctively rings true because that would be similar to how you would experience something yourself. This, of course,

Vernon Cornelius (pictured on extreme right) lead singer of The Quests, was touted as Singapore's Cliff Richard by the press. The Quests were formed in 1961 and went on to become one of the most successful bands of the era. May 1966. *Photo by Peter Robinsons Studios, courtesy of Vernon Cornelius.*

Residents with their belongings gathering outside the fire area in Bukit Ho Swee on 25 May 1961. The fire, which razed a 0.4-sq km area consisting of a school, shops, factories and *attap* houses, was one of Singapore's biggest fires. The fire left 16,000 *kampong* dwellers homeless and claimed the lives of four people. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

would depend on how much you have in common with an interviewee: age, gender and ethnicity, and your views on myriad issues all come into play. For example, Singaporeans of a certain age would nod knowingly to dramatist, writer and choreographer Richard Tan Swee Guan's lament about how his aunt used to drag him to her favourite Hindustani film matinees, even though neither of them understood Hindi.[20]

And national servicemen today, who break off corners of their styrofoam lunchboxes to use as makeshift spoons, would warm to Sally Liew's account of how she and her colleagues shared packets of *char kway teow* (fried flat rice noodles). Liew, who was among the pioneering ground crew at Changi Airport, said they used the chits torn off boarding passes to scoop the noodles into their mouths when they did not have any cutlery to hand.[21]

This last point about how the same experiences can bridge generations would earn Paul Thompson's approval. Noting how all history began with the oral tradition, and how people still enjoy accounts of lived experiences, Thompson's sagely advice that "Oral history is the newest and oldest form of history" are words that all writers of history would do well to remember when they begin their research. ♦

Cheong Suk-Wai's book, *All You Have to Do is Listen: Recordings from the Oral History Centre*, based on the collection of the National Archives of Singapore's Oral History Centre and published by the National Archives and World Scientific Publishing, will be out in July 2019.

NOTES

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3 Paul Thompson graduated with a First Class Honours in Modern History from Corpus Christi College, Oxford University. He is a research professor at the University of Essex and in 1988 published the classic oral history textbook, *The Voice of the Past*. He has played a leading role in shaping the international oral history movement.

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13 Tan, C.J. (2019, February 13). When history leaps from textbooks onto our streets and into our lives. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from The Straits Times website.

14 Lim, J. (2008, May 16). *Oral history interview with Koh, James Cher Siang* [Transcript of recording no. 002847/6/1, p. 13). Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

15 Sook Ching is a Chinese term meaning "purge through cleansing". Operation Sook Ching was a Japanese military operation aimed at eliminating anti-Japanese elements from the Chinese community in Singapore. From 21 February to 4 March 1942, Chinese males between the ages of 18 and 50 were summoned to report at mass screening centres and those suspected of being anti-Japanese were summarily executed.

16 Chou, C. (1994, September 1). *Oral history interview with Felix Chia* [Transcript of recording no. 001553/8/2, pp. 6–7). Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.

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MAKING HISTORY

A treaty that sealed Singapore's fate, a contract for the sale of child brides, and a drawing of an iconic theatre are among the items showcased in a new book, *50 Records from History*, published by the National Archives of Singapore.

Title: Record of the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, 2 August 1824
Source: National Archives of Singapore
Year created: Copy made in 1841
Type: Document
Accession no.: SSR R7

A Treaty Most Unfriendly

Singapore came under the control of the British East India Company (EIC) on 2 August 1824. This was after the second Resident of Singapore, John Crawfurd, had signed a treaty with Sultan Hussein of Johor and Temenggong Abdul Rahman to officially transfer their sovereignty over the island to the British.

This 1824 Treaty of Friendship and Alliance replaced the agreement that Stamford Raffles, representing the EIC, signed with the Malay chiefs in 1819. Unlike the earlier agreement which only permitted the EIC to set up a trading post on the island, the Sultan and Temenggong now ceded "in full Sovereignty and property to the Honourable the English East India Company, their Heirs and Successors for ever, the Island of Singapore... together with the adjacent seas, straits, and islets to the extent of the ten geographical miles, from the coast of the said main island of Singapore".

The British could sign this new agreement in part because of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty that had been inked only months earlier, on 17 March 1824, which clearly

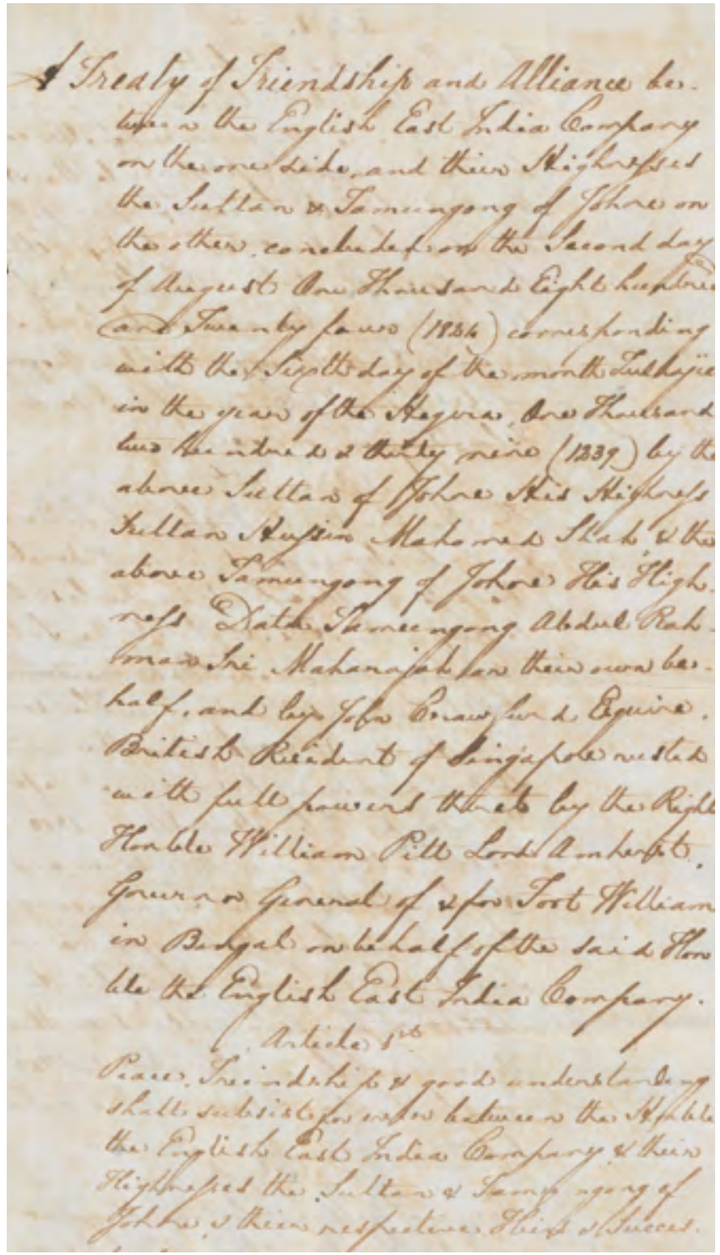
(Below left) This map of Singapore was created using information gathered during John Crawfurd's 10-day sail around the island after the conclusion of the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance in 1824. The map was published in his 1828 book, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin-China. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below right) This map shows how the Malay Peninsula was divided between the British and the Dutch prior to the 1824 Anglo-Dutch Treaty. Malacca, which is flagged as Dutch, would eventually come under British rule upon the conclusion of the treaty. *© The British Library Board (C11074002 IOR 1/2/1 Folio No. 345).*

The three historical records covered in this essay were written by **Kevin Khoo**, **Fiona Tan** and **Yap Jo Lin** respectively. Kevin is an oral history specialist, while Fiona and Jo Lin are archivists. All three work at the National Archives of Singapore.

(Left) John Crawfurd, the second Resident of Singapore (1823–26) threatened to deny Sultan Hussein Shah and Temenggong Abdul Rahman of their allowances in order to get them to sign the 1824 Treaty of Friendship and Alliance that would strip them of their rights over the island. *Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

(Below) The 1841 copy of the original "Record of the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, 2 August 1824" signed between John Crawfurd, the second Resident of Singapore (1823–26) and Sultan Hussein and Temenggong Abdul Rahman. This treaty replaced the 1819 document that Raffles signed with the Malay rulers, which only permitted the British to lease a two-mile stretch of land along the northern shore and allowed them to start a trading post, or "factory", within its confines. With this 1824 treaty, Singapore was effectively ceded to the British in its entirety. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



demarcated the territorial interests of the British and their Dutch rivals in Southeast Asia. Following the ratification of this treaty, the Dutch withdrew their claims to Singapore and ceded Malacca to the British. In return, they gained sovereign control over Bencoolen (Bengkulu) and other British possessions in Sumatra.

Gaining sovereignty over Singapore gave the British a free hand in determining its future. In 1826, barely two years after the agreement was signed, Singapore, Penang and Malacca came to be ruled as the Straits Settlements, with English law introduced through a royal charter backed by the full authority of the British Crown. The charter provided the three territories with a proper and enforceable legal framework that would greatly facilitate growth in local commerce and trade.

However, the British held the view that Sultan Hussein and Temenggong Abdul Rahman were unsuitable partners in advancing Singapore's further development. Under the terms of the first agreement, the three signatories – the EIC and the two Malay chiefs – shared power. However, the British felt that the authority shared with the Sultan and Temenggong were disproportionate in comparison with their contributions.

The Sultan and Temenggong were initially reluctant to sign the treaty as it would strip them of their sovereign rights over Singapore, which had been passed down from their ancestors. When they hesitated, Crawfurd held back their allowances until they agreed to sign the treaty three months later. The Malay chiefs relented as they had become dependent on the British for their monthly stipends and also needed British military protection from the Sultan of Riau who regarded Sultan Hussein as a usurper.

In exchange, the Sultan and Temenggong each received a lump sum of money,

had their allowances increased, and were guaranteed due respect and personal safety in Singapore and Penang. A year after the treaty was concluded, Crawfurd sailed around Singapore to mark the anniversary of official British control over Singapore and its surrounding waters and islands. A 21-gun salute was also fired on Pulau Ubin to commemorate the event.

There were three original signed copies of the ratified 1824 treaty: one for the British India government, which is now archived with the British Library's India Office collection, and the other two for the Sultan and Temenggong.[1] The copy belonging to the National Archives of Singapore was created in September 1841 at the request of then Governor of the Straits Settlements Samuel George Bonham.

Title: 契约 Indenture of Selling Daughter
Source: Tan Boon Chong Collection, National Archives of Singapore
Year created: 1939
Type: Document
Accession no.: 135

Child Brides for Sale

Before the 1950s, it was common for impoverished Chinese parents in Singapore to sell their daughters as child brides, especially if they had too many children to feed. This relieved the parents of the expenses of raising another child, while the typically wealthy family who bought the child paid a lower dowry for the young bride-to-be and, at the same time, procured her services as a maid.[2]

This social practice of buying and selling young girls is documented in this contract (契约; *qi yue*) dated 8 September 1939. The girl in question is Tay Ai Lan (郑惜兰), a 12-year-old child bride (童养媳; *tong yang xi*), who was sold for a dowry of $88. The contract specifies her date of birth as the 18th day of the ninth lunar month. It also lists the names of her parents, the representative from the other family as well as the two matchmakers who witnessed the transaction.

Child brides in Singapore were known by different dialect names: the Hokkiens referred to them as *sim pu kia*, while the Cantonese called them *san po tsai*. Both can be loosely translated as "little daughter-in-law". Despite its namesake, the practice of child marriages was more accurately described as an adoption rather than a marriage, as the young girl usually worked as a domestic servant for the family before she finally got married to her intended husband.[3]

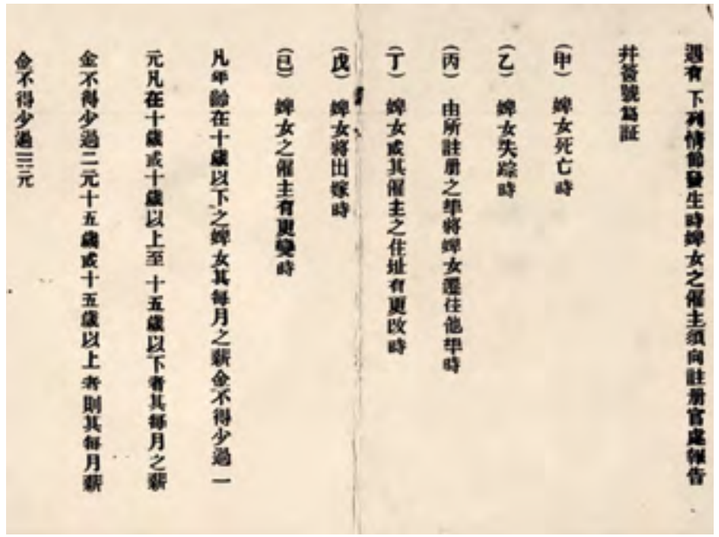
A contract, like the one for Tay, may have been drawn up to legally bind both parties to the betrothal until the girl reached puberty. However, a child bride might not eventually marry her intended husband for a variety of reasons, one of which could be his objection to the marriage.[4] Fortunately in Tay's case, she did go on to marry the second of three sons in the family when she turned 18. It was a union of "few dramatic ups and downs", and the couple eventually had many children and grandchildren.[5] Tay's contract was donated to the National Archives of Singapore by her son Tan Boon Chong in 1991.

The practice of giving up an unwanted child for financial reasons was carried out not only in Singapore but also in rural communities in Hong Kong and other parts of Southeast Asia. In Singapore, child marriages continued to be practised until the mid-20th century by "debt-ridden, gambling, opium-smoking fathers or those who needed money to fulfill filial duties like paying for medical or funeral expenses for elderly parents", noted Koh Choo Chin, a social worker in the Social Welfare Department in 1948.[6] She observed that superstition was also one of the reasons why parents were willing to sell their daughters as child brides. To the Chinese, a girl born in the Year of the Tiger, for example, was believed to bring bad luck to the family.

Girls could be sold as child brides even while they were still babies or between the ages of nine and mid-teens. Compared with a typical bridal dowry, child brides cost significantly less. In the 1950s, the family of a child bride in Singapore was paid around $40, while regular brides received a dowry of between $150 and $200.[7]

In those days, the practice of child marriage was often conflated with the *mui tsai* ("little sister" in Cantonese) system, in which young girls were sold to affluent Chinese families as domestic servants but without a pledge of marriage to a son of the family.[8] As with child marriages, a document was drawn up between the two parties, and the girl would be transferred to the new household. All ties with her parents were cut once the purchase money was handed over.[9]

While the British colonial government attempted to prohibit the acquisition of *mui tsai* through the 1932 Mui Tsai Ordinance, they did not attempt to push for similar legislation for child marriages.[10] This document offers a rare glimpse into this social practice in 1930s Singapore.


選有下列情節發生時婢女之僱主須向註冊官處報告
并簽號爲証
(甲) 婢女死亡時
(乙) 婢女失踪時
(丙) 由所註册之華將婢女置住他甲時
(丁) 婢女或其僱主之住址有更改時
(戊) 婢女將出嫁時
(己) 婢女之僱主有更變時
凡年齡在十歲以下之婢女其每月之薪金不得少過一
元凡在十歲或十歲以上至十五歲以下者其每月之薪
金不得少過二元十五歲或十五歲以上者則其每月薪
金不得少過三元

(Left) The practice of selling child brides is not to be confused with that of the *mui tsai*. *Mui tsai* (younger sister in Cantonese) were young girls who were sold as domestic servants to rich Chinese families. Child brides (or *san po tsai* in Cantonese), on the other hand, who were sold to Chinese families in return for a dowry, usually ended up marrying one of the sons of the family she was bought into. Pictured here is an identification card for a *mui tsai* issued by the Chinese Protectorate in 1932. The reverse of the card shows the terms and conditions that employers had to agree to upon registering their *mui tsai*. *Lee Siew Hong Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) 契约 "Indenture of Selling Daughter", 1939. This contract was made between the family of 12-year-old Tay Ai Lan who was "sold" for a dowry of $88 to a wealthy family. Tay ended up working as a domestic servant for the family she was indentured into – as many child brides did – before she married the second son in the family when she turned 18 years old. *Tan Boon Chong Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.*

Title: Architectural Design Drawing of the National Theatre: Perspective View
Source: Alfred Wong Partnership Collection, National Archives of Singapore
Year created: 1960
Type: Architectural drawing
Accession no.: 19990003367 IMG0001

The People's Theatre

On the slopes of Fort Canning Hill, facing Clemenceau Avenue, once stood the iconic National Theatre, which was built to commemorate Singapore's attainment of self-government in 1959.

At the theatre's opening on 8 August 1963, Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Head of State) Yusof Ishak explained that the building was "dedicated to the ideal of a harmonious development of a diversity of cultures within the framework of national unity".[11]

This architectural drawing shows the open-air theatre with its distinctive facade featuring five vertical diamond-shaped bays. A fountain was later erected outside the theatre in 1966. While these features have been said to symbolise the five stars and crescent moon on Singapore's state flag respectively, its architect Alfred H.K. Wong has commented otherwise.

In actual fact, the building was designed such that the brick infill facade could structurally reinforce the back wall of the stage house. Wong arrived at this design as he wanted to avoid the use of a conventional rectangular grid. While the National Theatre Trust suggested adorning the diamond-shaped elements with national symbols of some kind, this did not happen in the end as Wong explained:

> "Fortunately, no agreement came of this suggestion, as I'd much prefer to leave the brick work with its varied dark orange colour as a symbol of a material that was made out of the soil of Singapore."[12]

The plan to build a national theatre that could provide cultural entertainment for the masses was first announced in 1959 by then Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam. The theatre was subsequently dubbed the "People's Theatre" as a third of its $2.2 million price tag came from public contributions. The funds were solicited through various donation drives, most notably the "a-dollar-a-brick" campaign.

Wong's theatre design was selected through a competition. The theatre, with its open-air concept complemented by a cantilevered roof providing shelter for the overall structure, was described by the acclaimed ballerina Margot Fonteyn, who performed there in 1971, as the "perfect one for this sort of climate".[13] Wong would later design other prominent buildings such as Singapore Polytechnic and Marco Polo Hotel.

When the National Theatre officially opened on 8 August 1963, it was the largest theatre in Singapore with a seating capacity of 3,420. The theatre even had a revolving stage that cost $10,000 a year to maintain, although it was rarely put to use.

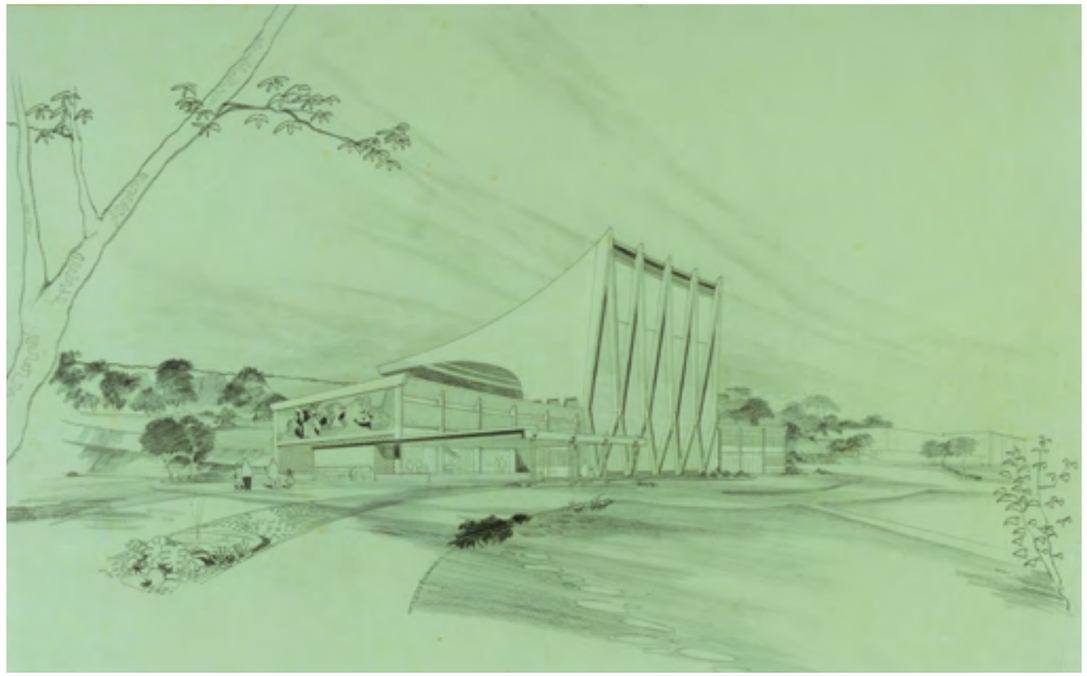
The first show performed at the theatre was the Southeast Asia Cultural Festival, and included performances by Cambodian royalty and Hong Kong film stars. Wong recalled that regional countries sent "their best" to the festival, which was touted as the "greatest show in the East".[14] He later said in an oral history interview in 2012:

> "I tell you, it was unforgettable. I mean, for me it was like the experience of my life because when the curtains opened – I mean – you had [a] full house, you had probably about 8,000 behind in the open air all clapping and yelling away. You know, it was tremendous. I mean – I've never seen an audience react to that."[15]

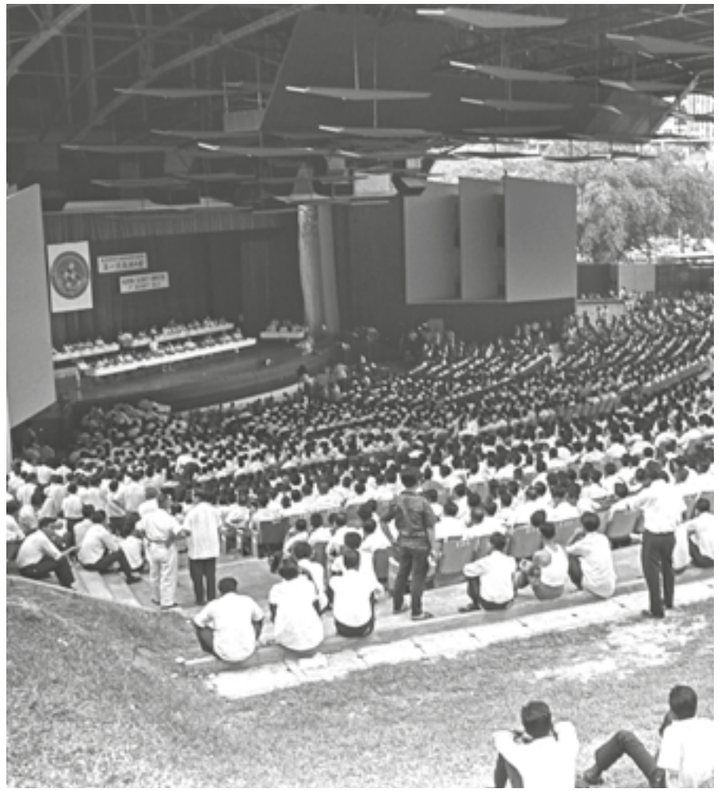
The festival was held in the theatre even though it had yet to be completed. A canvas was put up where the roof was still unfinished – and Wong noted that "(at) night time when it's all lit up, it was all right".[16]

Over the next two decades, the National Theatre hosted various national and cultural events. These included National Day Rallies (1966–82), university convocations as well as performances by world-famous names, such as the British pop group Bee Gees and the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet.

"Architectural Design Drawing of the National Theatre: Perspective View", 1960. *Alfred Wong Partnership Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



The National Theatre, as seen during the 1965 Malaysian Solidarity Convention. The open-plan design of the theatre had a particular quirk; it allowed non ticket-holders perched on the hill outisde the theatre to watch the events for free. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Popular events were sometimes "attended" by more than just ticket-holders, as the theatre's location at the base of Fort Canning Hill allowed people to position themselves strategically on the hillside above the building to enjoy the same events for free. The theatre's open-air design also invited complaints about noise from passing traffic, inadequate shelter from heavy rain, and the presence of rats, bats and cockroaches.

The National Theatre was demolished in 1986 amid concerns that the building was structurally unsafe. The government also had plans to construct an expressway nearby, which eventually became part of the Central Expressway.

Despite its demolition, the Ministry of Culture noted that the National Theatre had played an important part in nation-building by inculcating "a spirit of self-help and a sense of nationhood". In 2000, the location of the National Theatre was declared a historic site by the National Heritage Board.[17] ♦

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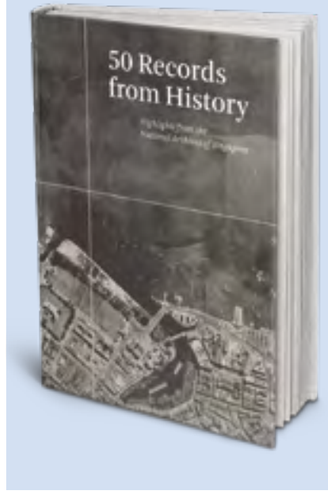
This essay is reproduced from the book *50 Records from History: Highlights from the National Archives of Singapore*. It features 50 short essays written by archivists on selected records from the archives that commemorate major milestones in Singapore's history. The book is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 959.57 HUA-[HIS] and SING 959.57 HUA-[HIS]).



Feeding the Hungry

CHILDREN IN POST-WAR SINGAPORE

In the aftermath of the Japanese Occupation, the colonial government set up feeding centres to address malnutrition among children in Singapore. **Cheryl-Ann Low** has the details.

The Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942–45) brought about acute shortages in basic necessities such as food as well as disruptions to health, educational and financial services.[1] The interim British Military Administration in Singapore, set up in the wake of the Japanese surrender in September 1945, and the British civilian government that subsequently took over from 1 April 1946, had their work cut out for them: to rehabilitate Singapore's economy, and figure out how to alleviate the pressing problems of overcrowding, poverty, disease and malnutrition.

One of the more pressing issues was the severe shortage of food. Rice production in Burma, Thailand and Indochina had declined drastically during the war and the export of rice to Singapore would remain significantly below pre-war figures until 1947.[2] The colonial government tried to address the problem by implementing various feeding schemes in Singapore, including one for children, to provide people with at least one nutritious meal a day at an affordable price and also help counter the black market, where basic staples such as food items were being sold at grossly inflated prices.[3]

Poring through the old files of the Social Welfare Department (SWD), we find detailed accounts of how the children's feeding scheme began and how it laid the foundations for the Children's Social Centres, which went beyond feeding to eventually providing care and education for children.

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Free Meals for Children

To meet food shortages, the British Military Administration started a feeding scheme in November 1945, providing free meals to children in three schools – Rangoon Road School, Telok Kurau Road School and Pearl's Hill Road School – as well as to preschool-age children at Prinsep Street Clinic and Kreta Ayer Street Clinic.[4] The scheme was implemented by the Education Department, which had extended the provision of meals to children under the care of the clinics upon the request of the Medical Department.[5] The programme proved to be a success and was later expanded to include more schools and clinics, such as Outram Road School, Telok Kurau Malay School, New World School and Joo Chiat Clinic.[6]

When the British civilian government returned in 1946, the clinics run by the Singapore Municipal Commission continued to provide milk for babies until they turned one but, unfortunately, did not have the funds to feed older children of preschool age. The SWD, which had experience in running various feeding programmes, initially declined taking over the feeding scheme for preschool aged children.

T.P.F. McNeice, Secretary for Social Welfare, was concerned that managing the scheme might jeopardise the progress of its existing feeding programmes. However, seeing that there was no other solution, he tentatively committed to the task in a letter to the Child Feeding Committee in September 1946, writing "... should your Committee be able to show to the satisfaction of the Government that no one else can undertake this work, and should the Government wish me to do so, I am prepared to reconsider what my Department can do."[7]

On 7 October 1946, the various powers-that-be agreed that the SWD would operate the feeding scheme for children aged two to six years of age. The department also went one step further by offering to feed older children who were not attending school, although there was no scheme planned for this yet.[8] The SWD went to work quickly, undertaking to supply a free meal a day to selected children at two existing crèches – one on Victoria Street and another on New Market Road – both of which were operated by the Child Welfare Society.[9]

The SWD's child feeding programme was officially launched on 2 January 1947 at these two crèches even as it was preparing to open more feeding centres across the island. When a new centre on Havelock Road began operations on 7 January 1947, the feeding service at the nearby New Market Road crèche moved over. More child feeding centres soon opened in subsequent months – totalling 12 by the end of May 1947 – in areas such as Joo Chiat, Kampong Kapor, Arab Street, Prinsep Street and Beach Road.[10]

It should be noted that the child feeding scheme was not a mass-feeding programme for the poor, but targeted at addressing the effects of widespread malnutrition among children. As such, only undernourished children were eligible for the daily free meal at the child feeding centres. Singapore's College of Medicine provided advice on nutrition and menu-planning. For example, in December 1946, Dr C.J. Oliveiro from the college sent the SWD the chemical analysis of a list of foods that were high in nutritional value and beneficial to children if included in the diet.

These food items included wild boar meat, lean beef, broad beans, *kacang hijau* (green beans), blue Prussian peas and Brazilian black beans. Oliveiro also gave tips on food preparation methods. The peas and beans, he advised, "must be ground to a fine meal before cooking otherwise they are indigestible. If there is difficulty in grinding... then they ought to be soaked for one night in clean water..."[11]

(Right) The Children's Social Centres sought to teach children daily living skills and good habits such as cleaning up after themselves, 1952. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) A committee appointed to review the child feeding scheme in 1950 assessed that it was no longer necessary to provide full meals for children at Children's Social Centres. Hence, the meal was replaced with a snack consisting of a vitaminised bun, a milk drink and fresh fruit such as an apple, 1952. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Each eligible child was issued an authorisation card that also contained a record of when the child was measured, weighed or medically examined. Two volunteer doctors visited the feeding centres regularly to check on the children, and records were kept of such visits.[12] The records were carefully studied to assess the impact of the meals on the health of the children. It was reported in May 1948 that although some 60 percent of the children had gained weight, 28 percent showed no improvement and 12 percent had actually lost weight.

Concerned that the meals were not having sufficient impact, Oliveiro made several recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the feeding scheme. He acknowledged that the menu was monotonous at times and proposed removing items like *ikan bilis* (anchovies) as they were hard and indigestible. Suspecting that the food was consumed by those it was not meant for, he cautioned against allowing children to take their meals away from the feeding centres. Similarly, he reminded the SWD that the centre supervisors should advise family members not to eat the meals provided for their children.[13]

(Right) Girls learning how to knit at a Children's Social Centre, 1951. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) A carpentry lesson for older children in progress, 1962. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Bottom) Baby cots and floor mats for naptime at a crèche, 1963. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Help from Volunteers

Voluntary workers were critical to the operations of the feeding scheme, which was run with a minimum number of paid staff.[14] In January 1947, McNeice drafted a letter for Lady Gimson, wife of then Governor of Singapore Franklin Gimson, for her to invite volunteers to assist with the work at the feeding centres. The duties included supervising clerical, serving and cleaning staff; keeping simple records; taking the weight of children; and making suggestions on how to improve the centres and better meet the needs of the children.[15] By late October 1947, there were more than 150 workers volunteering their services at the 20 children's feeding centres. In reality, the commitment and contributions of the volunteers went beyond the duties listed by McNeice.

In June 1947, some of the volunteers organised a bridge and *mahjong* drive to raise funds to purchase materials for "handwork" (vocational lessons) at the centres. This effectively was the start of the Children's Centre Fund. Other fund-raisers included concerts and charity shows. In another project, 17 volunteers got together once a week to sew garments for the children at the centres. Fabrics were bought using the Children's Centre Fund, and some volunteers even carted their own sewing machines from home.[16]

The dedicated volunteers committed themselves to the cause and tackled the challenges head on. May Wong, a volunteer who helped to set up and run the feeding centre at Pasir Panjang, recalled the problems that she and her fellow volunteers faced when the centre was first set up, with some people even using the facilities as a public toilet!

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However, the volunteers did not lose hope and soldiered on until the situation improved. Wong said:

> "In the beginning, we had a terrible time. No matter what we did, we cleaned it up and had all the children and everything [sorted out]. The next morning we go, everything would be turned topsy turvy and sometimes they used them [the centre] as a bathroom even, as a toilet. Well, we cleaned it up, we persevered... well it was really quite difficult to get to educate them [the children] but finally we managed so that they would understand that it was for their own good, and not for ourselves, and they should not destroy things like that."[17]

Besides feeding, the voluntary workers also engaged the children in activities. Lady McNeice, wife of the aforementioned Secretary for Social Welfare T.P.F. McNeice, was a volunteer in charge of the centre at Mount Erskine. She recalled:

> "Because there was no education, they [the children] had nothing to do, nothing to occupy them... But a whole batch of volunteers taught the boys carpentry, and lessons in English and Chinese; and the girls would have also lessons in Chinese and English and learned to do knitting and sewing... I felt we were helping the children who were needy."[18]

Going Beyond Food

In the early days of the child feeding scheme, the SWD envisaged opening a series of centres that would go beyond feeding the children to keeping them engaged with various activities and facilities, such as hygiene classes, crèches and playgrounds. This vision was elucidated in a script dated 11 January 1946 for a radio talk given by T. Eames Hughes, Deputy Secretary for social welfare. The script further informed, with a touch of humour, that several centres were already being developed along these lines, with furniture and fittings that were custom-made according to the measurements of some "temporarily kidnapped" children![19]

Other than plans to expand the functions of the centres, the SWD also widened the pool of children who were entitled to the free services. Within two months of the commencement of the child feeding scheme, it was observed that many of the eligible children were often accompanied by older siblings whose ages ranged from about eight to 14 and who were similarly undernourished.

Lady McNeice recalled that these older siblings would "look longingly at what was being done for the younger children".[20] Since older children were not entitled to free meals at the centres, volunteers collected money to buy them food from Family Restaurants (see text box below). The volunteers also organised meaningful activities for the older children, such as training in carpentry, sewing, handicraft and laundry work.[21]

In June 1947, the Finance Committee approved the SWD's proposal to employ full-time paid staff at selected centres so that these could be kept open throughout the day as clubs for children as well as provide older children with daily free meals – with the proviso that the number of such children not exceed 25 percent of the number of children aged between two and six.[22] Thus, over time, the services at these centres were expanded to meet the nutritional, social and educational needs of older children up to 14 years of age.

The SWD noted in 1949 that this expansion was initiated and largely carried out by the centres' volunteers. This was not the only group of people who supported the child feeding scheme. Generous private donors and organisations also chipped in by providing space for the feeding centres to expand.[23] A feeding centre at Geylang Serai, for instance, was located within one of the houses belonging to a Tungku Putra. When the possibility of expanding the feeding centre into a club

FAMILY AND PEOPLE'S RESTAURANTS

Family Restaurants were one of the communal feeding schemes managed by the Social Welfare Department after the Japanese Occupation. The first Family Restaurant was opened on 18 December 1946 at Maxwell Market, serving eight-cent meals consisting of rice, potatoes, salmon, green peas, gravy and iced water or Chinese tea. By then, People's Restaurants (another communal feeding scheme) had been in operation for half a year, charging 35 cents a meal.

People's Restaurants catered primarily to wage earners wanting a mid-day meal at a reasonable price, while Family Restaurants sought to provide healthy meals at the cheapest possible price to those of lesser means. The Social Welfare Department discontinued feeding schemes from late 1948 onwards as demand had fallen due to improved economic conditions.

Having a square meal for 35 cents at a People's Restaurant, c. 1946. The first of such restaurants opened on 29 June 1946 to provide lunch for workers at subsidised rates. *Ministry of Culture Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

for children was raised with Tungku Putra, he kindly agreed to have an extension built to accommodate additional activities and even provided the labour required to carry out the work.[24]

Children's Social Centres

As the functions of the children's feeding centres evolved over the years, most volunteers voted to rename the centres as Children's Social Centres. So, from 29 October 1948, the feeding centres became officially known as Children's Social Centres. In addition to the provision of free meals, the centres now provided educational and recreational activities, such as classes in English, Mandarin, arithmetic, knitting, sewing, wood modelling, basket-making, painting, hygiene, gardening, doll-making, book-binding, physical training and games.[25]

Picnics, parties and cinema outings were also organised to keep the children entertained.[26] Much care and thought went into organising Christmas parties at the centres. The organisers sought out sponsors for treats and gifts, taught the children to put up performances and also arranged for visits by Santa Claus.[27] For the 1952 Christmas celebrations, C.E. MacCormack of the SWD wrote to the managing director of Rediffusion, requesting that his staff Jimmy Choo, who was known for his magic tricks, be given leave of absence on 11, 17 and 18 December to perform magic shows at Christmas parties held at the Children's Social Centres. The request was granted.[28]

Instructors were also hired to provide training in vocational subjects such as tailoring, carpentry and rattan-work.[29] Alongside these training programmes, the SWD organised events in the 1950s, such as the annual sale of handicrafts made by the children at the centres.[30] The handicrafts included woodwork, basketry, toys, knitted items and needlework.

Some centres also set up food stalls at the events, and companies such as Fraser and Neave and Cold Storage sold drinks and ice cream, pledging part of the profits to charity. Cathay, Shaw, Rex and other cinemas also chipped in by screening publicity slides of the events in their theatres. Most of these fund-raising events would take place in the final months of the year when people did their annual Christmas shopping.

In time, feeding children became less of a concern than it had been in the immediate post-war period. A committee appointed to review the child feeding scheme in 1950 assessed that it was no longer necessary to provide full meals for the children. Instead, a snack consisting of a vitamin-fortified bun was now dispensed together with a milk drink and fresh fruit.[31] Education now became the focus of the Children's Social Centres, and the SWD organised classes to train staff so that they would be better equipped to nurture the children and help develop their fullest potential. The topics included lessons in teaching and learning, planning kindergarten activities, art and craft, music, dance, identifying common children's diseases as well as child development.[32]

In the years to come, as the government opened up more primary school places for children, the Children's Social Centres faced falling enrolments and started closing down in the 1960s. Conversely, with more women joining the

A Christmas party in full swing at a Children's Social Centre, 1955. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

workforce, the SWD began to build more crèches for preschool-age children.[33] These crèches provided childcare services to families in the lower income groups. The National Trades Union Congress took over the running of these crèches in the late 1970s.[34]

A Village to Raise a Child

While the records of the SWD trace the history and development of child feeding centres and their subsequent incarnation as Children's Social Centres, a story of humanity and generosity emerges, bringing to light different parties that contributed to the well-being of children in Singapore between the 1940s and 60s.

There were the staff of government departments as well as voluntary workers who collaborated in the running and funding of the centres and crèches, property owners who allowed children's centres to be set up on their premises, businesses that supported the sale events, philanthropists like Lee Kong Chian who paid for items sold at the sale events,[35] and various sponsors of gifts and treats.

As the familiar proverb goes, "it takes a village to raise a child", these files offer a first-hand look into the "village" that helped to feed and nurture the children of Singapore in the decades following the Japanese Occupation. ♦

Lady Anne Black (wearing hat), wife of then Governor of Singapore Robert Black, at the annual sale of works organised by voluntary workers of the Children's Social Centres, 1956. The items for sale were made by children at the centres. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

SINGAPORE POLICY HISTORY PROJECT

This article was inspired by a collection of government files available on the Singapore Policy History Project website (www.nas.sg/archivesonline/policy_history/). This is an ongoing project to present various policies introduced by government departments and agencies over the course of Singapore's history. The feature on child care in Singapore in the early years (1946–1976) (www.nas.sg/archivesonline/policy_history/child-care) includes resources such as files from the Social Welfare Department, newspaper articles, speeches, audiovisual materials and photographs.

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