+65

VOL. 3 — 2023

A NEW SPIRIT

A Journal by the Founders' Memorial on Singapore's Post-Independence History and Society

About the Founders' Memorial

+65 is presented by the Founders' Memorial, an institution of the National Heritage Board. The Founders' Memorial aims to commemorate how independent Singapore came to be, encourage reflection on its founding values, and inspire Singaporeans to contribute towards the nation's future. When opened, the Memorial will be an integrated gallery and gardens experience at Bay East Garden. Design and content development work is currently underway, and the public can look forward to opportunities to contribute towards the Memorial's stories, experiences, and programmes in the coming years.

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Images on cover (clockwise from top of collage)

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew delivering a speech at a National Trades Union Congress Rally, 18 March 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam delivering a speech at a television exhibition, 20 March 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Francis Thomas being hoisted by students of St Andrews Secondary School upon stepping down as Principal, 12 March 1974. Source: *The Straits Times* © Singapore Press Holdings. Permission required for reproduction.

Puan Noor Aishah viewing exhibits during the opening of a week-long family planning exhibition at Victoria Memorial Hall, 12 January 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Monorail train at Sentosa, mid-1980s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Minister for Interior and Defence Dr Goh Keng Swee reviewing the passing-out of officer cadets at Beach Road Camp, 23 August 1966. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Prima Flour Mills on its opening day, 18 August 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Yang di-Pertuan Negara Yusof Ishak being escorted by Brigadier T. Haddon, Brigade Commander of the Singapore Infantry Regiment, and Vellupillai, his Aide-de-Camp, at Paya Lebar Airport before departing for a state visit to Brunei, 21 September 1960. Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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Foreword:
A New Spirit

by *+65* Editorial Committee

Welcome to the third issue of *+65*, a journal by the Founders' Memorial on Singapore's post-independence history and society.

This issue is a special extended edition published in conjunction with the *Semangat yang Baru: Forging a New Singapore Spirit* exhibition.

Like previous issues, this copy of *+65* builds on the journal's editorial mandate to strengthen interest in Singapore's post-independence history, with a focus on the dilemmas and decisions confronted by our founding leaders and citizens. In this issue, we explore the notion of a "new spirit" as evoked in the phrase "*semangat yang baru*". What was the new Singapore spirit of the 1950s–1970s? How was it embodied and expressed? And how has this spirit evolved, or been reinterpreted and added to?

To explore the ideals and principles undergirding the Singapore spirit, this issue's content is divided into thematic chapters which echo the exhibition's curatorial framework of "pressing questions for a new nation": *What do we stand for? How do we move forward? Who could we be as a people?* An exception is an additional opening chapter titled *Which path should we take?* to capture the sense of ferment and dynamism presented in the exhibition prelude. Across all four chapters, you will find articles which complement, extend, and deepen the exploration of key issues and historical milestones presented in the exhibition proper.

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Enlistees to the Vigilante Corps being sworn in for National Service, 4 September 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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Merdeka rally at Farrer Park, 17 August 1955. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited.

Which Path Should We Take?

In *Which path should we take?*, you will come face to face with the dizzying array of alternative visions in post-war Singapore through two pieces that showcase the involvement of different communities in the upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s.

The first is an interview feature with Ambassador Gopinath Pillai that provides a retrospective account of the tensions and opportunities swirling in mid-20th century Singapore. A student at the University of Malaya who then became a journalist, businessman, and diplomat, Ambassador Gopinath Pillai's storied career richly captures the complexities of our nation-building journey.

Paul Tan, a well-known Singaporean poet, then picks up the narrative with an engaging survey of literary perspectives as articulated by writers and poets who lived through those times. In doing so, he brings into view a segment of society made up of intellectuals, artists, and creatives, all of whom played a major but often overlooked role in shaping national discourses.

What Do We Stand For?

The issue then proceeds with four articles in *What do we stand for?*, a chapter which collectively examines how leaders and citizens from all walks of life came together to establish the fundamental principles on which our fledgling nation was built.

Margaret Thomas, daughter of former Labour Front Minister Francis Thomas, opens this chapter with a heartwarming reflection on the values and vision that drove her father—originally an Englishman—to seek a new life in Singapore. Described by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew as an "honest man", Thomas's integrity, humility, and sense of service come through in Margaret's account of her father's contributions in politics and education.[1]

But if Thomas was agitating for a more just and equal society, so too were scores of other citizens, including the dozens of Malay women activists who Sarina Anwar identifies as bold and fearless advocates of family planning. As Sarina shares in her historical exposition on this issue, Malay women activists of the 1950s and 1960s may have come from different walks of life, but they were all bound by a common desire to better the fortunes of their peers.

The chapter then concludes with an article by Ashley Wong on the origins of Singapore's National Symbols, and a feature interview with legal expert and academic Professor Kevin Tan on the genesis of our Constitution. While both pieces delve into somewhat different subject matter, they both interrogate the representation of our shared values in tangible form: in symbols of state, and in legal texts that institutionalise the ideals we hold dear.

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Singapore's National Flag, 1960s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

How Do We Move Forward?

As Singapore attained the formal elements of statehood, our shared values were given depth and meaning as we confronted new challenges on the horizon. This process is examined in the issue's third chapter, which like its exhibition counterpart is titled *How do we move forward?*

Here, readers get a deeper appreciation of the difficult decisions and dilemmas presented in the exhibition, but from fresh angles and perspectives, and with a greater cast of leaders featured. A research piece on the establishment of the Vigilante Corps by Benjamin Mok, for example, complements the riveting story of our early defence forces presented in *Semangat yang Baru*. Another two articles on Sentosa (by Nicholas Phoon) and hawker resettlement (by Ruchi Mittal and Joshua Goh), similarly provide greater insight into subject matter covered in the gallery space.

Also of note is a joint piece by four students from the Ministry of Education's Humanities Talent Development Programme on Singapore's early efforts to grow its domestic food manufacturing sector. A product of the Memorial's continued engagement with schools and youth groups, this piece reaffirms that self-reliance and resilience are qualities that define Singaporeans both then and now.

↓
HDB Chief Executive Howe Yoon Chong showcasing housing plans to Secretary-General of Commonwealth Secretariat Arnold Smith, 30 November 1966. The comic strip titled *A Singaporean Dream* features an intergenerational conversation between a son and his father which revolves around the latter's experience moving from kampung to HDB. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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An artist's impression of the future Founders' Memorial when completed, 2023. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

Who Could We Be As A People?

The exploration of the new spirit culminates in the last chapter titled *Who could we be as a people?* Much like the *Coda* in the exhibition, this chapter adopts a forward-looking posture, with a focus on how the new spirit continues to be revisited, reinterpreted, and added to as Singapore grows.

Here, a specially commissioned comic strip by young illustrators Clyde Tan and Shannon Lim provides a refreshing take on what it means to dream in this volatile, uncertain, and yet possibility-filled world. Their message that the past may be a source of inspiration then finds expression in the issue's penultimate piece which examines the Founders' Memorial's scenario programme for youth. Co-written by Shawn Chua of the Civil Service College and Wong Lee Min of the Founders' Memorial, the piece highlights how roleplay and simulation may be one way to bring to life the very spirit that animated the thoughts and actions of our founding generation.

It is perhaps fitting, then, that the issue closes with an Epilogue examining how we, at the Memorial, have ourselves been challenged to embody a spirit of enterprise and dare in curating *Semangat yang Baru*. Like the new Singapore spirit that is continually remade, the Founders' Memorial continues to evolve and grow as we test and prototype new and exciting ways to honour the legacy left by our founding leaders. We hope you will join us on this journey.

NOTES

1 "The only honest man in the Labour Front", *New Nation*, 1 March 1971, 9.

Introducing *Semangat yang Baru: Forging a New Singapore Spirit*

— A Pilot Exhibition by the Founders' Memorial

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The entrance to the *Semangat yang Baru* exhibition, 2023. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

In mid-1958, Zubir Said, a popular composer for Malay films, received an invitation to write a song for Singapore's City Council to celebrate the re-opening of Victoria Memorial Hall following its renovation. *Majulah Singapura* ("Onward Singapore"), the event's theme as well as the City Council's motto, inspired him so greatly that he completed the eponymous composition in two weeks.

The "stirring song" spoke to the hearts of many, and in the following year, when the new fully self-governing state sought suitable national symbols to represent itself, the Legislative Assembly unanimously landed on the piece to be Singapore's National Anthem, albeit with some revisions to shorten it. The chorus remained unchanged in the revised version, and exhorts citizens to unite with a "new spirit" (or "new courage" according to an early translation[1])—*semangat yang baru*.[2]

Zubir Said understood a National Anthem as "a prayer of the Nation", and *Majulah Singapura* for him was specifically "a prayer for the progress of Singapore and its people".[3] But what was this "new spirit" that Zubir Said had aspired towards for the unity of Singaporeans? What values and ideals make up this "new spirit", and how does it remain relevant to Singaporeans today, some 55 years after its first articulation?

by Wong Lee Min

With these questions in mind, the Founders' Memorial presented our pilot exhibition, titled *Semangat yang Baru: Forging a New Singapore Spirit*, at the National Museum of Singapore between 21 April and 13 November 2023.

The exhibition captures the courage and dynamism of our early years, when the leaders and people of Singapore rallied together to build our fledgling nation between the 1950s and 1970s. Difficult decisions and adaptations had to be made in the face of dilemmas, as our founding generation strove boldly to build a society based on justice and equality. Guided by the foundational values of multiculturalism, integrity, and openness, our predecessors confronted the pressing questions of—*What do we stand for? How do we move forward? Who could we be as a people?*—which we adopted as the exhibition's curatorial framework. Just as the Singapore spirit was born out of adversity more than five decades ago, we invite visitors to reflect on what "*semangat yang baru*" means to us in today's world that is no less complex and tumultuous.

← *Prelude* of the exhibition, 2023. This is where visitors can catch a glimpse of themselves reflected in the scenes of the 1950s when looking into the mirrored pillars. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

A Walkthrough of the Exhibition

As a nod to the musical origins of its title, the exhibition begins with an introductory *Prelude* to Singapore in the 1950s, when the spirit of the nation gradually came into being against the larger backdrop of nationalist movements and decolonisation worldwide. Visitors are immersed in the sights and sounds of daily life in old Singapore, punctuated by electrifying scenes of never-before-seen election rallies and heartbreaking moments of violent riots that laid bare societal tensions. Mirrored pillars are scattered throughout the space to create a labyrinth-like effect, hinting at the multiple pathways that Singapore could have taken, as well as the sense of possibility, and yet uncertainty, in the air.

↑ *What do we stand for?* section with vignette set up in the form of a rally stage, 2023. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

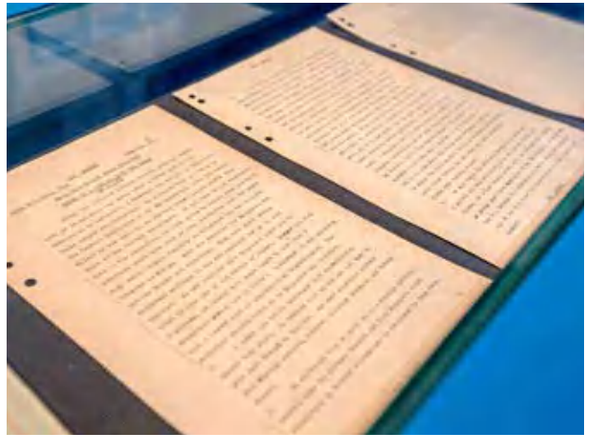
What do we stand for? is the first substantive question and section of the exhibition. In a setting reminiscent of an election rally stage where Singapore's nascent ideals were passionately espoused, we reference our national pledge and delve into stories of *justice and equality* in our country's struggle for independence, integrity, and women's rights; as well as interpretations of multiculturalism to build unity *regardless of race, language, or religion*.

Here, a number of lesser-known political and community leaders, both male and female, are highlighted in recognition of their contributions and values. These individuals include: First Chief Minister David Marshall, known for championing multiracialism; opposition leader and unionist Lim Chin Siong, remembered for his integrity and self-sacrificial commitment to ideals; philanthropist Tan Lark Sye, who established Nanyang University, the first Chinese-medium university in Southeast Asia; and women's rights advocate Mrs Shirin Fozdar, who fought for the one-man-one-wife law. Singapore's founding generation went far to defend our values, and most notably, the insistence on our interpretation of multiculturalism which eventually paved the way for Separation from Malaysia. Because of these "different outlooks", then-Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Tun Razak acknowledged that "merger had been a mistake" and sought a "looser form of confederation" for Singapore, as documented in a set of "TOP SECRET" meeting notes from the Albatross File which were specially declassified for display in this exhibition.[4]

The anguished moment of Singapore's independence segues into the exhibition's midpoint, *Interlude—We Pledge Ourselves*, which examines the making of our national symbols. Which values and ideals were deemed so fundamental to the Singapore spirit that they had to be emblazoned on our national symbols as a guide and inspiration to Singaporeans of all ages? At the interactive kiosks here, visitors may learn about the different designs that were considered for our national flag and their symbolism, as well as design their own flag using symbols associated with Singapore today.

How do we move forward? was the pressing question on the minds of Singaporeans post-independence, and the focus of the second half of this exhibition. Our young nation had to look outwards to make friends through diplomacy, attract overseas capital and markets in our drive to industrialise, and build up a credible defence force with the help of foreign advisors. As our first Minister for Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam pointed out in 1972, while there were "dangers" involved in transforming ourselves into "a new kind of city—the Global City" or "the world-embracing city", "the alternative to not moving into the global economic system is, for a small Singapore, certain death".[5]

Besides looking outwards, Singapore's first-generation leaders had to *take courage* to make decisions that were unpopular (e.g. compulsory resettlement and land acquisition), against conventional wisdom (e.g. pursuing a high-density high-rise public housing model decried by foreign experts), and seemingly unpractical and unimportant for our then-developing country (e.g. our arts, cultural, and sporting aspirations). This section of the exhibition features a colourful set of six TOTO lottery posters contributed in response to the Founders' Memorial's public call for artefacts in 2022. Dating to



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The convenors of the Barisan Sosialis, 3 September 1961. Prominent members of the Barisan Sosialis included (seated in the second row): Secretary-General Lim Chin Siong (sixth from left), Chairman Dr Lee Siew Choh (ninth from left) and Secretary Fong Swee Suan (seventh from right). Gift of Keng Ah Wong. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

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A Chinese edition of The Mirror《镜报》, 11 August 1967. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

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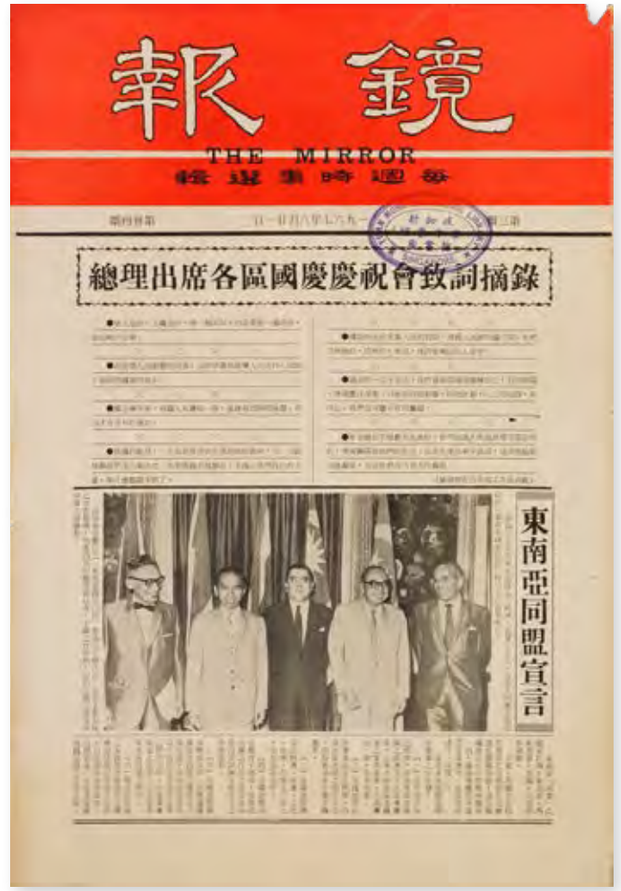
Albatross File and notes of meeting between Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye and Malaysia Deputy Prime Minister Tun Razak, 9 Feb 1965. Prime Minister's Office Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



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Look Outwards, with design inspired by the former Paya Lebar Airport, 2023. Paya Lebar Airport was Singapore's gateway to the world between 1955 and 1981. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

1968, each poster includes an illustration of the old National Stadium because TOTO was introduced to raise the $50 million required for the construction of the Olympic stadium, which would be among the best in Southeast Asia. Minister for Culture and Social Affairs Othman Wok argued that good facilities would spur interest in sports and raise fitness levels, and led the way, together with Minister for Law and National Development E. W. Barker, for the promotion of sports in Singapore to nurture a "rugged society". [6]

As for founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, there was "no other hallmark of success... more distinctive than that of achieving our position as the cleanest and greenest city in South [East] Asia", because "[o]nly a people proud of their community performance, feeling for the well-being of their fellow citizens, can keep up high personal and public standards of hygiene". [7] Spearheaded by Mr Lee himself, the initiative to *clean and green* was central to Singapore's story, and remains so, as we set an ever higher benchmark for ourselves, moving from a

"If we feel that the National Sports Complex is so important in building a rugged society, then there should be adequate provision in the Budget for the construction of this sports complex... If our Minister for Finance is unable to make adequate provision and calculate the cost of construction of the National Sports Complex, then we should try to raise funds from sports enthusiasts and rich businessmen who are interested in sports... This will be a better way than trying to obtain money through TOTO."

– Member of Parliament (MP) for Delta Chan Choy Siong in an adjournment motion titled "Discontinuation of TOTO" delivered in Parliament on 3 December 1968. She was one of several MPs who disagreed with the introduction of TOTO as a national lottery.

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Minister for Culture and Social Affairs Othman Wok with a scale model of the former National Stadium, 7 December 1966. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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A series of TOTO posters from 1968, with a bulb from the floodlights of the former National Stadium, 2023.

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Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's Red Box No. 1 as displayed in the exhibition, 2023. A 1970s map from his office showcasing current and future areas subject to pollution can be seen in the left background, with artefacts on the resettlement of hawkers on the right. A legacy of Singapore's British colonial heritage, this red despatch box contained Mr Lee's day-to-day documents as he shuttled between his residence and his office. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

"Garden City" to a "City in a Garden" and now, a "City in Nature". Even when Mr Lee was grieving over the passing of his wife Madam Kwa Geok Choo in 2010, he did not fail to give instructions regarding pieces of rubbish he saw floating on the Singapore River.[8] These instructions would have been ferried in Mr Lee's red despatch box displayed in this section of the gallery, which attests to his sense of duty and dedication to Singapore.

While Singapore has enjoyed successes along its nation-building journey, at times our people have had to sacrifice to varying extents for the larger good. Lightermen and farmers, for instance, had to find new livelihoods when their industries were phased out; resettled populations dealt with a sense of loss and dislocation; while the vernacular-educated and mainly dialect-speaking communities struggled to thrive amid the transitions in language policy that made English increasingly predominant in society. In the penultimate section

Difficult Moments—An Acknowledgement, visitors are invited to pen down hurts and painful trade-offs that come to their mind when looking back on Singapore's nation-building history. These notes, presented as a wall installation, enable visitors to tell their stories on their own terms, as a complement to the exhibition's narrative.

Who could we be as a people? is a forward-looking and aspirational question that greets visitors in the *Coda*, the final section of the exhibition. In this space, photographs of old and present-day Singapore are juxtaposed in video projections, highlighting continuities in our beliefs and ideals. The DREAM bench located here is fashioned from the old National Stadium's seating planks, and serves as an encouragement to all to continue the bold strides of our pioneers. How can the values that guided our founding leaders and generation continue to take us forward?

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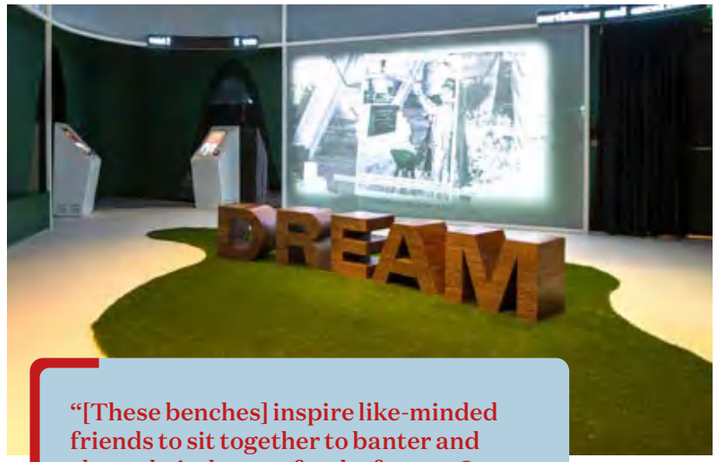
Coda section of the exhibition, with DREAM bench in the centre, 2023.



"[These benches] inspire like-minded friends to sit together to banter and share their dreams for the future. Our pioneer political leaders did just that and modern Singapore was born."

– Then-Minister for National Development Khaw Boon Wan, in a 2014 blogpost announcing the project to recycle old National Stadium seating planks into benches. He shared that his favourite design was the DREAM bench.

NOTES

1 "Maju-lah Singapura! (Translation)", in Opening Performance/New Victoria Theatre, CC 7033-3, 1958, National Archives of Singapore.
2 Zubir Said consulted Paul Abisheganaden on the music and Muhammad Ariff Ahmad on the lyrics. Rohana Zubir, *Zubir Said: The Composer of Majulah Singapura* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2012), 3, 5, 16; National Heritage Board, "National Anthem", https://www.nhb.gov.sg/what-we-do/our-work/community-engagement/education/resources/national-symbols/national-anthem (accessed 9 Jul 2023).
3 Rohana, *Zubir Said*, 218.
4 "Note from Deputy Prime Minister: Notes of a Meeting with Tun Razak on 9.2.65", Albatross File Vol. 1, 10 February 1965, Prime Minister's Office Collection, National Archives of Singapore.
5 S. Rajaratnam, "Singapore: Global City", Speech to Singapore Press Club, 6 February 1972, 3, 11.
6 Tan Seo Yean, "National Stadium", *Singapore Infopedia*, National Library Board, 11 September 2014, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1441_2009-02-09.html (accessed 11 July 2023); "Opening of the National Stadium", HistorySG, National Library Board, 2014, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/037c1b5d-bd5c-4aa6-85ac-e60e61c6caea (accessed 11 July 2023).
7 Lee Kuan Yew, Speech at the Inauguration of the "Keep Singapore Clean" Campaign, 1 October 1968, National Archives of Singapore, lky19681001.
8 *The Straits Times*, "Mr Lee Kuan Yew's Red Box: Heng Swee Keat", 24 March 2015, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/mr-lee-kuan-yews-red-box-heng-swee-keat (accessed 11 July 2023).

Wong Lee Min is Curator at the Founders' Memorial.

Which path should we take?

In post-war Singapore, a sense of possibility, mingled with uncertainty, hangs in the air. From students and workers to artists and writers, everyone is caught up in the tumultuous developments of the day. On streets and in coffeeshops, men and women debate an array of alternative visions, all claiming to embody the new spirit of the times. For some, socialism is the path forward, the antidote to colonial rule. Others attach less importance to ideology, advocating instead for practical solutions for the betterment of society. In this battle of beliefs and ideals, which path should Singapore take?

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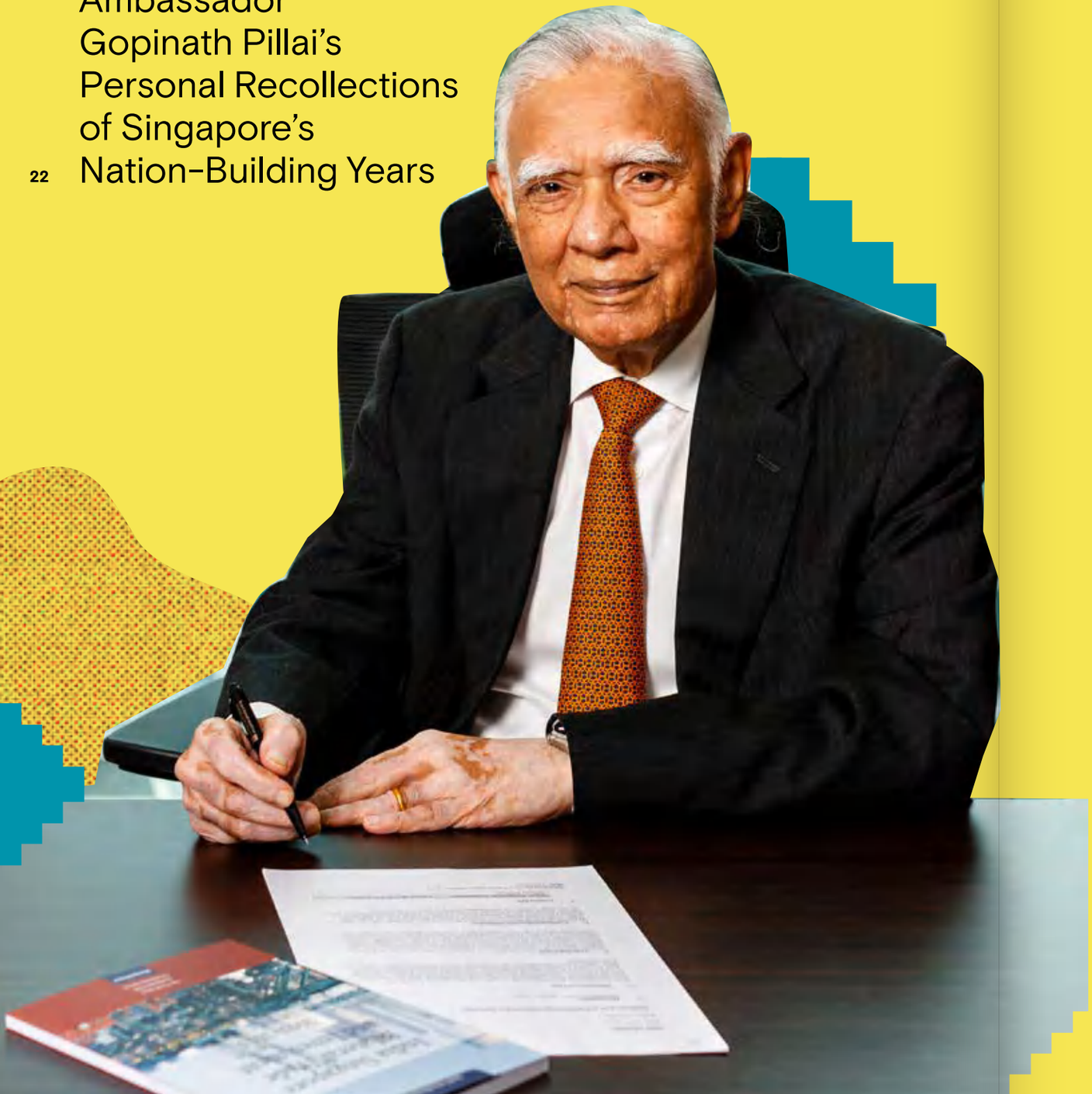
View at a polling station, 1959. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

An Era of Opportunities: Ambassador Gopinath Pillai's Personal Recollections of Singapore's Nation-Building Years



Recently retired from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he served as Singapore's Non-Resident Ambassador to Iran (1989–2008), High Commissioner to Pakistan (1994–2001), and Ambassador-at-Large (2000–2021), Ambassador Gopinath Pillai has had a long and storied career spanning six decades in both private and public sectors.

In this interview with the Founders' Memorial, Ambassador Pillai looks back on his student life and early career between the 1950s and 1970s. His vivid recollection of those heady and tumultuous days speaks to the courage and resolve of our early leaders and citizens, who had to find a path forward amid the upheavals of decolonisation and a changing post-war world order. The piece reproduced here is an excerpt of a longer interview which has been edited for clarity.

← Ambassador Gopinath Pillai, 2021. Courtesy of Gopinath Pillai and family.

by Nicholas Phoon and Brian Patrick Tan

Could you share about your time with the University Socialist Club at the then-University of Malaya?

There were two distinct batches of students in the University Socialist Club. The first one entered the public eye because the British charged the editors of *Fajar*—the newsletter of the Socialist Club—for sedition. The editors went to court and they were defended by a Queen's Counsel, Denis Pritt, who was assisted by a young lawyer called Lee Kuan Yew who had just returned from England. The case was eventually thrown out. I think the first batch of the Socialist Club and the People's Action Party (PAP) shared a very close relationship. People of this generation include Poh Soo Kai, Lim Hock Siew, M. K. Rajakumar. Then, slightly later, after 1959, came my batch.

This was after the first batch had graduated and left. This next batch that came in included Tommy Koh, myself, and a few others. As far as the University Socialist Club was concerned, we carried on with our own activities, with *Fajar*. We commented on various things but on the whole, I don't think there was any close contact with the PAP. That said, we did keep in touch with James Puthucheary and Poh Soo Kai, both of whom were part of the PAP, but our contact with them was based on the fact that they were ex-graduates who were able to provide us with help in understanding certain matters. At this point, we were not involved with any party.

One incident where we did support the PAP was in the 1961 Legislative Assembly by-election at Hong Lim. Ong Eng Guan stood as an independent candidate and Jek Yeun Thong from the PAP stood against him. At that time, I was president of the Socialist Club, and had formed a sort of loose alliance with the Polytechnic Political Society and Nanyang Political Science Society. So, we came out with a statement, drafted by me, to support the PAP. Then of course, the PAP lost, and Ong Eng Guan was elected.

↑
Queen's Counsel Denis Pritt and Lee Kuan Yew, 1955. Tan Lai Huat Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew speaking at the University of Singapore Socialist Club's Seminar, 20 November 1964. By this time, the University of Malaya had split into two universities, with the Singapore campus renamed as the University of Singapore. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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Students from the University of Singapore Socialist Club, Polytechnic Political Society, and Ngee Ann College Students' Union demonstrating outside the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in support of student agitation at Nanyang University, 13 November 1965. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

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Jek Yeun Thong, the People's Action Party's candidate for the Hong Lim by-election, arriving at Empress Place to file his name on Nomination Day, 11 March 1961. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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A May Day Rally sponsored by the Trades Union Congress at Jalan Besar, 1 May 1961. Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Would you say that, in general, there was quite a strong sense of political consciousness among students in the 1950s and 60s?

Yes. It is unfortunate that following the political turmoil of the 1960s, political life became inconsequential, and low-level discussions that were just filled with complaints took the place of philosophical discussions. This is very unfortunate, but people were scared. A common perception at one time was that members of the University Socialist Club were individuals that others should be wary of. Students would say, "Oh, associate with him and you won't get anywhere, so better be careful." Subsequently, discussions became pretty much non-existent. Now, I see political discussions picking up again.

Was the political consciousness of the time anti-colonial in its motivations?

Anti-colonial, yes. But we already had a sense that the colonials were on their way out. So, who would take over? That was the more relevant debate.

↓
Gopinath Pillai (left) taking part in a pre-university debate session titled "That Malaya is Fit for Independence", c1950s. Courtesy of Gopinath Pillai and family.

Was the debate also influenced by developments in the region?

Yes, Indonesia was in the minds of many at the time. China, too, as it is today. But with regard to China, I see a difference in the China of today and the China then. At that time, propaganda from the People's Republic of China always labelled the Singapore government and politicians as lackeys of the imperialists, American stooges, and so on, but they always maintained that the Singaporean Chinese were Singaporeans. In fact, I used to listen to Beijing radio. Although the British intelligence jammed it, at certain parts of the island, you could get it. One such place was the old Ngee Ann building, where Ngee Ann City now stands. There used to be this very nice coffee shop there called Mont D'or, and if you went up to the terrace, you would get Beijing radio very clearly.

Wow, how did you even figure that out?

Ah, I had intelligence sources! One of my classmates was secretary of Ngee Ann Kongsi, and he told me that they listened to Beijing radio upstairs. So, I asked, "Okay, can you smuggle me up there?", and he did. The Chinese broadcast was very clear and they always wanted people who had migrated to become citizens of the country of adoption, rather than to look back to China. But now, that seems to have changed.

After graduating, you were a journalist at Reuters for a short stint and then taught at Raffles Institution, before moving to Thailand and Malaysia. Could you tell us more about your time abroad?

I worked in Malaysia for about five and a half years. 13 May 1969 was the day of the deadly racial riots in KL. That was a very traumatic period. At that point, my family and I were all ready to settle in Malaysia, and we had just bought a nice house with a soft loan from my company. My employer, Malaysian Industrial Development Finance (MIDF) Limited, a Malaysian government-owned firm, said, "We'll get you citizenship and everything else". But when this happened, we saw a different side of the country. There was a dramatic change. My wife was an English teacher and she felt that English was going to be relegated to a very nominal place. So, she said, "I think you better go back to your home, Singapore. Let's pack up and go." And that was what we did, we returned to Singapore.

When I wanted to leave, the Chairman of MIDF called me up and said, "Why are you leaving?" I said, "I think it's difficult for me. I'm a Singaporean—born a Singaporean." And he said, "No, no, no, I'll get you citizenship, don't worry." The General Manager then was a gentleman by the name of Geoffrey Leembruggen. Geoffrey had a First Class Honours in English and was previously acting Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Finance. However, as he and Lee Kuan Yew could not get along, he went to Malaysia and became my boss. He also called me up and he said, "Why are you going to Singapore? Singapore has no future!" I said, "Never mind. In Singapore, I can live my life, you know, so I will take a risk." "Have you got a job?" he asked. "I will find one, that's not difficult," I said. So, I came back.

↓
A young Gopinath Pillai taking part in a debate titled "Beware of Colonial Stooges!" as a student at Choon Guan Presbyterian School, c1950s. Courtesy of Gopinath Pillai and family.

↑
Deputy Prime Minister Dr Goh Keng Swee and Gopinath Pillai at the Singapore Fair, c1970s. Courtesy of Gopinath Pillai and family.

TOP Gopinath Pillai welcoming Minister for Finance Hon Sui Sen to the Raya Mills stall at the Singapore Fair, c1970s. Courtesy of Gopinath Pillai and family.

After returning to Singapore, you worked in the corporate sector.

Yes, I worked at and ran a textile mill called Raya Mills that was a knitting factory. The company was partially owned by the Singapore government. After that, I worked at United Industrial Corporation and Intraco.

While working with these government linked companies, did you work very closely with any of the permanent secretaries or ministers of that time?

Yes. One of the directors at Raya Mills whom I worked closely with was Ngiam Tong Dow. He was a very good director and assisted me in the decision to export our products. The mill was basically designed for the local market but after a short while, I realised it was not viable to focus only on the Singapore market, as it was challenging to make money with no economies of scale. Back then, our salesmen would go out in the day and in the evening, he would place a small order. It was hard to keep stock in this way as when we manufacture, we need to produce garments at a certain quantity.

↑
A full page feature in *The Straits Times* on the latest developments at Raya Mills, 27 July 1968. Source: The *Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

So, I told the board, "This won't do. We must go out to the wider world." Fortunately, I made contact with some cooperatives in Sweden, and I told the board that they were prepared to buy from us, and that I had sent some samples. On top of that, to encourage sales, I told the board that we should pay the salesmen on a commission basis instead of a fixed salary. This suggestion did not sit well with the salesmen and they complained to my bosses, and suggested that they should get rid of me as I was inexperienced in the factory and textile industry.

But Mr Ngiam said no. It was not that he thought I was going to be a great textile businessman but he was prepared to take the risk. He said, "Ok. You go to Europe or wherever you want, and see whether you have a market, and then we make a decision."

That was a very critical decision because we received large orders and we were then able to produce with economies of scale.

Then, there was Howe Yoon Chong, the Chairman of the Development Bank of Singapore (DBS), whom I knew as my bankers were from DBS. There was also Herman Hochstadt, who was a very good friend from university days, one of those who always came for University Socialist Club functions but never became a member. (*Editors' Note: Hochstadt was appointed as Deputy Secretary to the Treasury in 1970, and then Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Communications in 1973*). When the government decided to remove protectionist measures on garments, I thought that was the end of the world for us. Thankfully, because we had access to the foreign markets, we did not have to worry.

Singapore underwent drastic physical transformations in the post-independence years. Could you tell us what it was like living through that transformation?

By the late 1960s, the change was already taking place. The roads were different, being lined with greenery. We grumbled that the government was wasting so much effort planting trees, but it really made a difference. Look how wonderful it is today! You have to witness it, be part of it, to feel how impactful it is.

↑
Tree planting along roadside in Alexandra led by Minister for Social Affairs Othman Wok (left), 2 February 1964. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

→
Union members attending an NTUC rally, 18 March 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

I had a Dutch customer who would travel to Southeast Asia and Taiwan, and always made Singapore his last stop. So, I used to ask him, "Why do you always come to Singapore last? You end up not ordering much from me." He would order whatever he wanted from other places and by the time he got to Singapore, he would only place small orders with me.

So I said, "Why don't you start here?" He said, "Mr Pillai, if I leave from Taiwan, or I leave from some other place, I don't want to go back there again. But if I leave from Singapore, I want to come back to Singapore. Because every time I come, there is some improvement, something beautiful. And I see it's such a healthy and safe place. When I'm working here and my wife goes shopping somewhere, I don't have to worry about her. So, I make sure that I stay longer, but this means, I visit Singapore last." So, he said, "You'll have to bear with me—you'll only get small orders."

Having been through years of dramatic changes, how do you think the story of Singapore's early post-independence years should be told?

I wouldn't overemphasise the struggle. It puts people off, you know, especially those who didn't live through those times. We had an internal... I won't call it a struggle. What I would call it, I'm not sure. I would say that there was a diverse set of expectations of what the ultimate product was going to be. And there was a no-holds-barred sort of situation. Of course, I think the better side, the clever side, won. Because I think the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew was crucial—and his group prevailed. The other side did not. But we should not minimise their role. I'm also all in favour of being inclusive. And I wouldn't think of writing anything of this period without mentioning, for instance, people like Lim Chin Siong, and James Puthucheary.

I think I would tell the story of Singapore's early post-independence years subtly, in a way that emphasises how the past is relevant to the future, to convey that an understanding of the past is necessary for us as a nation.

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Finding the New Spirit in Singaporean Poetry

The books, a few mildewed with age, sit, an imposing stack, for weeks on the table where I work, almost as if in accusation. Invited to contribute a reflective essay, I have pulled out the various anthologies of Singaporean poetry on my shelves. But the going is slower than I had anticipated.

My mind wanders across the expanse of poetry before me: some are new, some I have skimmed casually, and others are akin to old friends. So I embark on a meandering process of reading and rediscovery, letting the inspirational creative life behind the verses beckon. Many of the lines have informed (or challenged) my sense of self; there is wisdom distilled through wit and lyrical turns of phrase, as well as the pleasant surprise from the conjunction of seemingly divergent images.

It's easy to get lost in the happy rabbit hole of reading, so focus is critical: how do I respond to the expressions of nationhood in this nation's poetic output, dealing with its exultation, anxieties, and contradictions? While poetry can be intensely personal, capturing introspection about mortality and spirituality, at the same time, a poet's material existence is anchored in a time and place. And in today's world, most of humankind belongs to a nation-state that shapes our self of sense even as it may circumscribe it. Poets, thus, are also subjects affected and shaped by the vicissitudes of history and political development.

But poets play a unique role: while products of their time and societies, they can stand outside the immediate world. Sense-making independently, they are well-placed to hold up a mirror to our lived realities and make connections to a larger humanity through their imagination. The best poems—and we have to concede there is also banal, superficial, and jingoistic poetry—touch us, defamiliarise what is familiar, evoke a new depth of our feelings, or plant seeds of new ideas.

Here in Singapore, in reading across the many poems composed on the island before and after Independence, I wonder how did poets respond to the heady era of decolonialisation? What did being Singaporean mean? After all, in the 1950s, writers were more likely to speak of a Malayan voice or sensibility.

← A plaque inscribed with Edwin Thumboo's poem, "Ulysses by the Merlion", with the Merlion Park as its backdrop. Courtesy of National Heritage Board, 2023.

by Paul Tan

← Zubir Said, 1957. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

↓ Vinyl record featuring *Majulah Singapura*, c1960s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Pak Zubir and *Majulah Singapura*

Pak Zubir Said's 1958 composition, now well-recognised as Singapore's anthem, is a good place to start. He wrote the song lyrics—which are poetry too!—as a paean of love to the place he called home. Born in Sumatra, Pak Zubir is like many of the diverse peoples who immigrated to Singapore over the centuries and settled here. With its simple lyrics and stirring melody belying an important call for unity and progress, it's interesting that the song was composed before the establishment of a sovereign Singapore.

The "*semangat yang baru*" in the lyrics is more elusive than it appears. It is translated into "a new spirit" but "*semangat*", an evocative word from the Malay world, doesn't neatly equate to "spirit". Both "*semangat*" and "spirit" point to the idea of an essence that animates our lived existence. "Spirit" has its root in Latin for "breath" and over the centuries, developed association with Christianity. While both words share the idea of a life-force, "*semangat*" seems to accord more personal agency in its meaning; imbued into the word are connotations of passion, enthusiasm, and purpose.

→ Citizenship registration in progress at Fort Canning, 1957. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Translation is always a careful enterprise, much more so when we are unpacking such important lyrics. This endeavour is also a reminder of our unique multilingual environment, Singapore's place in Southeast Asia, and the status of Malay as our national language.

Aliens, Subjects, and Citizens

The poets around this time had survived the war and experienced a new Malayan consciousness as decolonialisation accelerated throughout a fading British empire. Identities were more amorphous then: while many saw Singapore as home and wanted to shape their own political destinies, others, born British subjects, were still in thrall of a Western colonial mindset. Within the Chinese community, a group saw themselves as part of a diaspora with strong ties to China. They dreamt of returning to the home of their forebears, like others from India and other parts of the Malay archipelago. For such sojourners, Singapore was not a permanent home.

Poets from this period bore witness to history, the complex tussle of allegiances, as well as the birth of a self-governing nation. I reflected on the Citizenship Ordinance of 1957 which offered citizenship to residents born in Singapore or the Federation of Malaya, as well as anyone who had lived in Singapore for ten years and was prepared to renounce allegiance to any foreign state. This Ordinance evolved into the present-day citizenship laws.

Prior to 1957, many people residing on the island were considered as "aliens" by the colonial authorities. I imagine my two sets of late grandparents getting more information from a government official in pasar Malay or Teochew, hands gesturing animatedly, as if to close any gap in translation. Or perhaps there was no debate at home—citizenship was the best option in those uncertain times, the surest way to put food on the table and raise children.

↓
Koeh Sia Yong, *Studying at Equator*, 1966. Oil on canvas, 65 x 94.5 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

Finding a New Poetic Voice

This discussion on citizenship and active commitment to a new polity casts new light on the poems written in the 1950s. Here we encounter resistance and rage against unequal colonial hierarchies, and the determination behind the forging of a new society. Published poets of the time include Singapore's unofficial laureate Edwin Thumboo, James Puthucheary, Hedwig Anuar, and Wang Gungwu. They all wrote in a time when the idea of a Singaporean was a barely-formed one. (Indeed some of the early poets who studied and worked in Singapore did not take up citizenship in the end.)

We start with Puthucheary's high-minded "Song of the Workers" (1950), which takes a Marxist-tinted lens as he decries,

We have gone on and on
As shadows silhouetted against time.
We the toilers in the factories.
The tillers of the soil.
...
This cannot go on forever.
When we turn we shall no longer be worms
We shall ride the electric driven chariots
Or shatter them.[1]

In contrast, Wang adopts a more dispassionate stance in his poems of the period, describing physical landscapes, its residents, and festive celebrations. Rather than polemics, he evokes a rustic scene as we see in "To Tigerland" (1950):

The lallangs leer at the breed
of mosquitoes,
The parangs rust in their sheaths.
There the wood-smoke has turned to dust,
There the children make their wreaths.[2]

But even such lines belie some emerging political consciousness; Wang eventually calls on the reader to "seek new beginnings" against the "rugged tint" of the new world. Elsewhere, Wang points to the immigrant's precarious status, describing Chinese New Year in the poem "Plus One". He observes "antique rites survive" like the letting of fireworks and offerings at the altar but notes these take place underneath "a foreign sky / In this alien night."[3]

Of course, a discussion of poetry of this period cannot ignore the works of Edwin Thumboo, the nation's first Cultural Medallion recipient and the most prominent poet of his generation. His famous anti-colonial poem "May 1954"—a personal response to the Fajar sedition trial in which he was charged—was only published in 1979 but clearly embodied the zeitgeist of the day.

We ask you see
The bitter, curving tide of history,
See well enough, relinquish,
Restore this place, this sun
To us... and the waiting generations.
...
Depart:
You knew when to come;
Surely know when to go.[4]

↓
Edwin Thumboo, 1968. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Thumboo, in particular has a rich lodestone of poems with a distinct public voice, which captures the complex emotions involved in the forging of a new nation. Some of these may appear as an exercise in legitimising the government's actions or the evolving paradigm of governance. For example, "Catering for the People" takes readers back to "delinquent days", contrasts the challenging circumstances of other countries with Singapore's, and asserts, "we have to work at a destiny. We stumble, / Now and then. Our nerves are sensitive. / We strive to find our history… There is little choice – We must make a people."

But others published in volumes like *Gods Can Die* (1977) and *Ulysses by the Merlion* (1979), chronicle ambivalence, marginal voices, and the trade-offs made during the pre-Independence and early nation-building years. For instance, in "The Exile", Thumboo humanises a Chinese-educated Communist youth, and fleshes out his familial and cultural circumstances even as his fate to be exiled is sealed. A young man "not made for politics" but idealistic and self-sacrificial, the protagonist is eventually caught up in the throes of the heady youth activism. The tone of the poem is not righteous, but empathetic, a nod to those who fought on a different side and lost.

Thumboo also reminds readers that a nation's success is not just premised on the economic imperative and material comfort. We see a gentle polemic in poems like "The Way Ahead" and more famously, in "Ulysses by the Merlion" where the speaker Ulysses, drawn from Greek mythology muses about the materialism of the "strange" traders he encounters. He notes their diversity, their "unequal ways" but also senses a deeper spiritual need. The "half-beast, half fish" of the Merlion, Ulysses wonders, could evolve into a powerful representation of the peoples who settled in Singapore: "Perhaps having dealt in things / Surfeited on them / Their spirits yearn again for images."

The accidental creation of Singapore, precipitated by the cleaving of Malaya from the island means the anti-colonial angst from a decade before is replaced by a different anxiety. Both Thumboo and Robert Yeo offer their personal take in two poems with "9th August" in their titles. Thumboo's poem is more pensive while for Yeo, the Separation is more visceral, a "hasty hurricane" that divides Singapore and Malaysia with "barbed wire", with the emotions he experiences akin to a "chill" and "a clutching of the heart".[5]

Poetic Sensibilities Post-1965

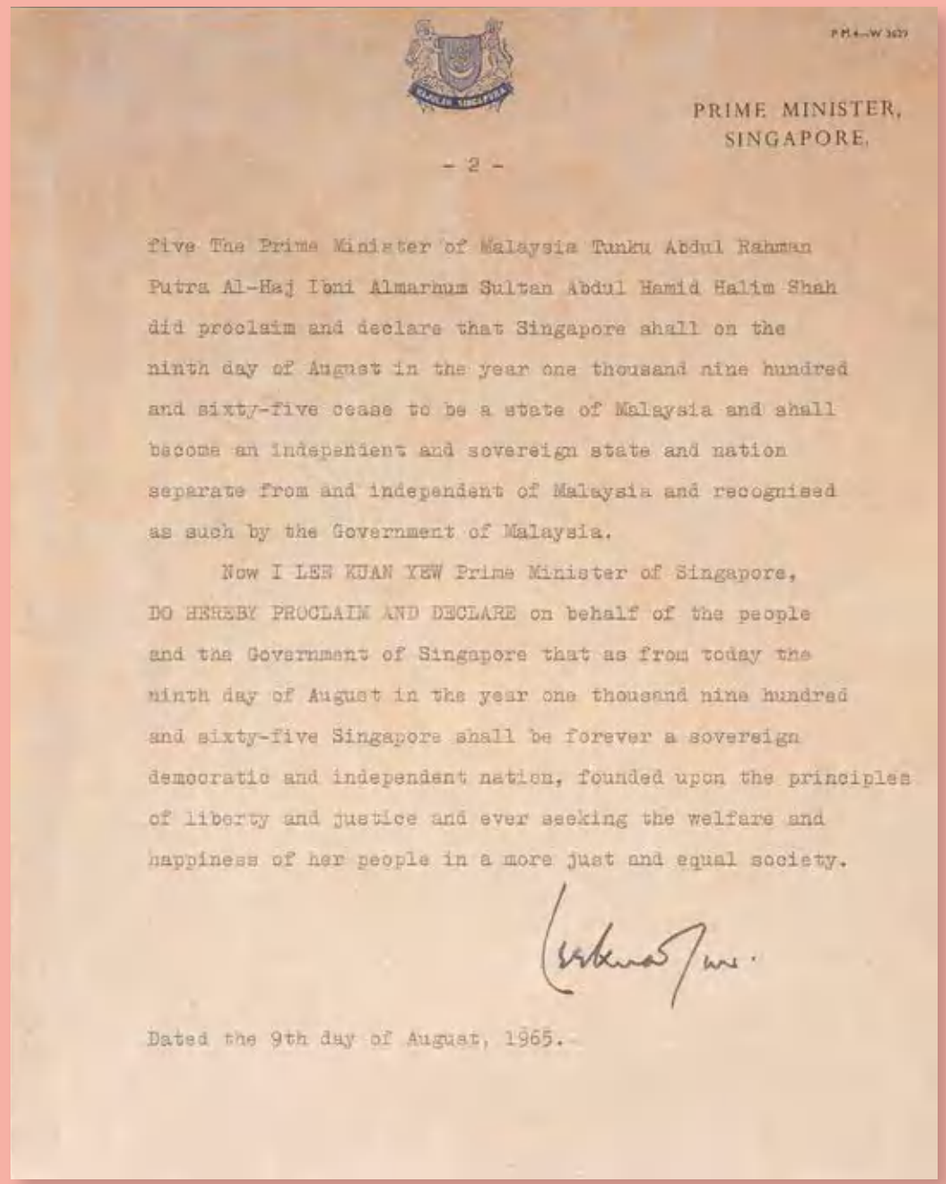
The decades that follow are part of the well-told national narrative: economic growth, political stability, and a nation's growing confidence of its global position. How did Singapore's poets respond with their creative energies? How did they articulate their personal relation to the nation state?

Certainly, one common theme was the dramatic change to the island's physical landscape: from land reclamation to widespread public housing, from the clearing of urban slums to the establishment of industrial zones. This came with the loss of old architectural icons and changes to the way of life, much of which were keenly felt by many Singaporeans, not least the next generation of poets. Whether it was a precinct one grew up in or a beloved landmark, local geography was clearly part of one's self-formation.

From Lee Tzu Pheng to Koh Buck Song and Boey Kim Cheng, many poets evoked disappearing landscapes in their writing. The best of these poems succeed in capturing a palpable sense of alienation and dislocation while questioning what was lost in the pathway to progress and prosperity. Lee in "Singapore River" wryly likens the clean-up of the polluted river to the latest technology in medical science: a heart by-pass. She suggests the patient may be alive after the procedure but remains troubled, potentially amnesiac:

> **We cleaned out**
> **her arteries, removed**
> **detritus and silt,**
> **created a by-pass**
> **for the old blood.**
> **Now you can hardly tell**
> **her history.**[6]

↓
The second page of the Proclamation of Singapore, 9 August 1965. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



PRIME MINISTER,
SINGAPORE.

- 2 -

five The Prime Minister of Malaysia Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj Ibni Almarhum Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah did proclaim and declare that Singapore shall on the ninth day of August in the year one thousand nine hundred and sixty-five cease to be a state of Malaysia and shall become an independent and sovereign state and nation separate from and independent of Malaysia and recognised as such by the Government of Malaysia.

Now I LEE KUAN YEW Prime Minister of Singapore, DO HEREBY PROCLAIM AND DECLARE on behalf of the people and the Government of Singapore that as from today the ninth day of August in the year one thousand nine hundred and sixty-five Singapore shall be forever a sovereign democratic and independent nation, founded upon the principles of liberty and justice and ever seeking the welfare and happiness of her people in a more just and equal society.

Dated the 9th day of August, 1965.

↓

Ong Kim Seng, *Singapore River from the Raffles Landing Site*, 1989. Watercolour on paper, 51.5 × 72 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

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Cleaning out the arteries of the river, 1980s. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Boey is even more pointed in plaintive poems like "Change Alley" where he laments the loss of a landmark weighted with personal significance and memory:

> **All is utterly changed, the map useless for navigation in the lost city. Only an echo remains, the man haunting and sniffing where the alley had been, measuring its absence till the spirit of place returns**[7]

While some have argued that the themes of the post-1965 poetry did not seem as urgent as the existential questions posed by the previous generation of poets, they seem to me to reflect the society and politics of the day, documenting the ephemeral against the tide of constant change. For sure, they provide an emotional counterpoint to pragmatic state policies. One interesting observation: by this time, nationality as an idea was accepted by the writers, even taken for granted; almost a tacit nod to the success of the nation building enterprise.

But it can also be dangerous to overgeneralise. Poetic themes do become more diverse as more poetry get published, in tandem with a growth in readership. There is certainly introspection on numerous timeless themes: love and loss, mortality, familial relationships, international travels, as well as inspirations from engaging with other art forms.

Certainly when we look at the poetry by those born in 1970s and after, there is a cosmopolitan overlay as Singaporeans travel, study, and live abroad. Perhaps the new spirit is a transnational mindset, able to absorb the best from different global cultures, while staying rooted in Singapore's multiethnic cultures?

I'm not so naïve to assume everyone sees the world through my lens. I think about our national identity and am intrigued by it. But imagination is after all boundless, and some poets and writers, like any global talent, have embarked on different life journeys taking them to new shores, loosening themselves from the bonds of a small island. Perhaps we can take the broader view here: good literature speaks to our common humanity and transcends the colour of one's passport. For the émigré, Singapore could be a cherished piece of one's cultural DNA, or a dream that haunts them in their writing, or even a launchpad into bigger, more exciting literary worlds.

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The last days of Change Alley, 1989. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction

Poetry in Our Other Official Languages

So far, I am keenly aware that my focus has been on English-language writings. We must also acknowledge the poetic legacies of those who write in the mother tongues—Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. The pre-eminence of English in the poetics of Singapore has come at a price. The dominance of English in day-to-day life, reinforced by an English-medium education, has meant that many literary writers in the vernacular feel marginalised.

While I cannot access the writings in their original languages, one consolation is that we do have their English translations, where their feelings of anguish, resignation, or even rage quickly come through.

Looking back, it was indeed easier for the pioneer English-educated poets to rally readily to the call to move beyond communal identities, given that the language belonged to no specific ethnic group. But as English became the language of government administration, business, and universities in Singapore, English also evolved into the language of privilege. Poets who only wrote in the vernacular would have seen the declining readership for their writings and chafed at the sense of diminished value of their literary culture.

This essay cannot possibly do justice to their writings and the following are based on my limited reading. For a sense of the Malay literary perspective, I can commend poems like "*Jalan Permulaan*" ("The Way of Beginning") by Suratman Markasan and "*Melayuku, Melayumu*" ("My Malayness, Your Malayness") by Mohammed Latiff Mohammed, which chronicle the loss of a traditional way of life from the perspective of a minority community. From the Tamil world, poems like K. T. M. Iqbal's "The Children of Robinson Road" quietly recall an older, lost Singapore, while Murugathasan's earthy lines in "The Mute Veenai" lambasts those in the community who do not sink their roots or honour the sacrifices of the pioneers before them.

↓
Suratman Markasan, 2015. Source: *Berita Harian* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

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Robinson Road street sign, early to mid-20th century. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

↓
K. T. M. Iqbal, 2014. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

↓
Chua Mia Tee, *National Language Class*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 112 × 153 cm. Gift of Equator Art Society. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

The Chinese language poets I encountered who write self-reflexively about their Chinese identities include Guo Yongxiu, Pan Zhenglei, and Yuan Dian. For instance, Guo Yongxiu in 筷子的故事 ("The Story of Chopsticks") deploys the eating utensils as an extended metaphor about Chinese culture and observes how these may not be fully appreciated by the fork and knife wielding youngsters. Elsewhere, the narrator in Xi Ni Er's 南方的堕落 ("The Degenerate South" translated by Clarissa Oon) declares, almost in an air of resignation:

> **The disputes of the soil**
> **I grasped from early on; the Great**
> **River's melancholic eastward flows**
> **across shrinking emotional terrain,**
> **had formed**
> **a single bittergourd vine on the equator**
> **lowly yet steadfast.[8]**

These poems come from the translated anthologies I know of. There must be a wealth of others out there, printed by vernacular presses, many no longer in circulation. Hopefully more of them can be translated into the coming years. These voices are a critical part of Singapore's poetic canon.

What is common among the different generations of poets is how the best of them transcend the chosen language of their craft. It is their ability to stand apart from the crowd, perhaps even out of sync with the ethos of the day, and their commitment to tap on aesthetics in order to communicate alternative ways of looking and thinking about the world. These poets —whether they grappled with colonial and postcolonial politics of a new nation or let their imaginations traverse beyond the island or wrote in their vernacular tongue of loss and marginalisation—all take pride in the independence of their voices. Their personal lens also gesture to the universal—the poems which have endured must surely have found resonance with readers everywhere, speaking to humanity's frailties, foibles, as well as its best impulses.

A poem that I wrote in 2015—technically unpublished since it has only appeared on my personal Facebook page—brings us full circle, given that I had titled it "*Semangat yang Baru*". As someone squarely in the post-Independence generation, the modern nation-state has become intertwined with my sense of self. With age, years of working here and abroad, I have come to better appreciate this multicultural country that sometimes seems a bundle of contradictions.

Written after the death of founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, this poem honours the enterprising spirit that characterised the first generation of leaders but also suggests it is an energy and purpose we can continue to harness: new meanings are waiting to be made and new visions to shape the society we live in.

I believe a good poem must have rigour and some measure of craft and discipline. The best endure, and continue to yield insights on repeated readings. But I leave it to those of you, dear reader, to decide if this poem ultimately lives up to Adrienne Rich's high bar for poetry, and approximate "art reaching into us for what's still passionate, still unintimidated, still unquenched".[9]

↑
Merdeka rally at Farrer Park, 1955. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Semangat yang Baru

And then Monday arrived,
as it always would.

The wet grim hours behind us,
the roads resume their industry,
our pace quickens, engines restart
to deferred destinations,
rooms get used to new voices,
echo with the choked notes
of unbridled feeling; but we know
the flowers need to be cleared,
books closed, their words to
be meditated on another day,
the living demands do not stop.

Wherever we stood that day,
the hope that must give anybody
succour is the realisation of the
power of a singular purpose
and what it can accomplish,
and knowing when to hold steadfast,
like a rock in a maddening tide,
or when to yield and adapt,
like water embracing obstacles;
truly, what meanings beyond oneself,
await commitment in the days ahead.

(30 March 2015)

Scan this QR code to access online copies of poems referenced in this article.

Paul Tan was formerly Deputy Chief Executive at the National Arts Council. He is currently pursuing his PhD in Creative Writing at the Nanyang Technological University and working on a historical novel. An earlier draft of this essay was read by Dr Gwee Li Sui, who offered useful insights.

NOTES

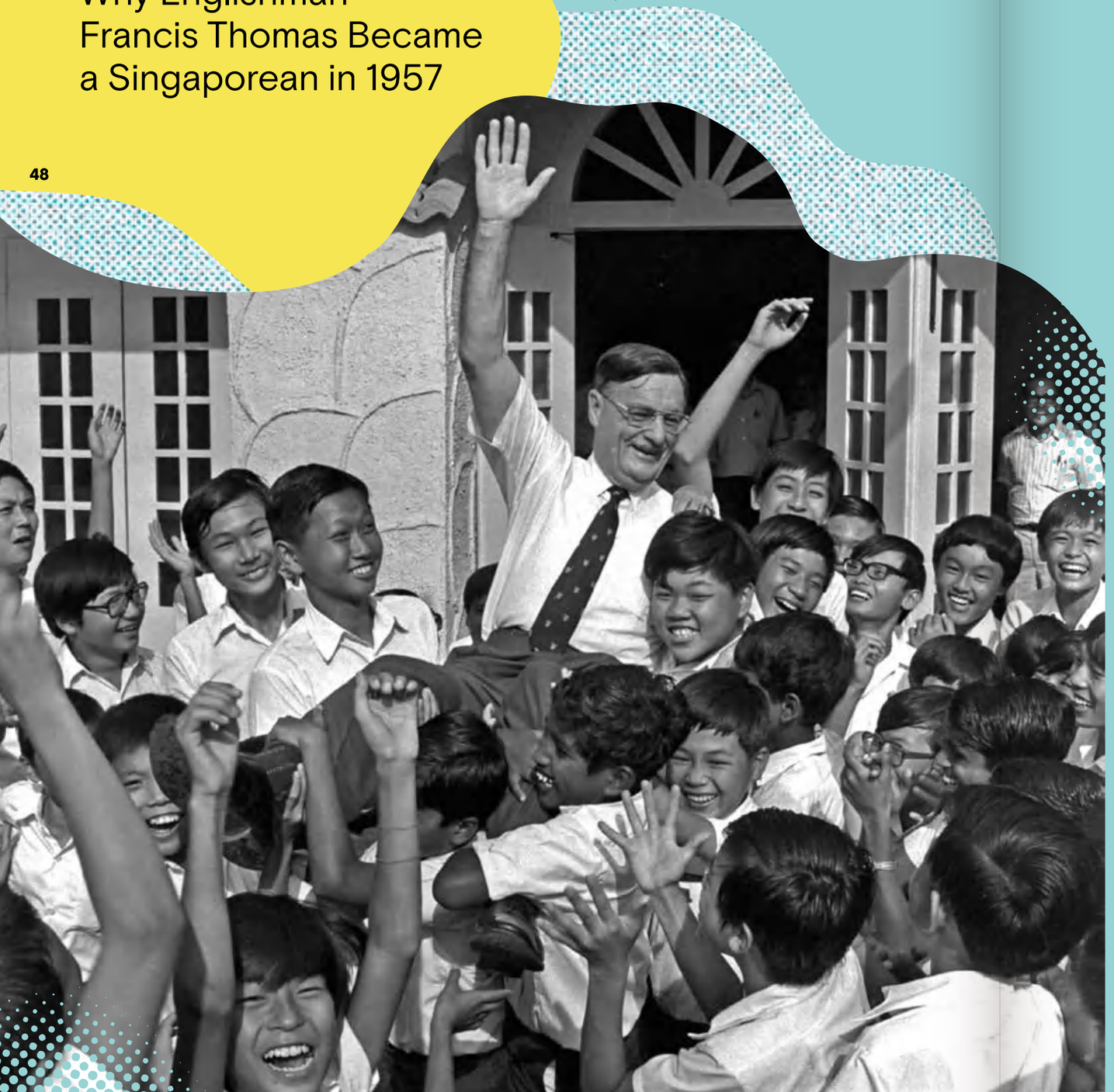
1 First published in the literary magazine *The New Cauldron* in 1950–51, the poem was anthologized in *& Words: Poems Singapore and Beyond* (2010), edited by Edwin Thumboo and published by Ethos Books.
2 First published in Wang's first collection of poetry, *Pulse* (1950) Beda Lim. The poem can currently be accessed in the poetry repository, poetry.sg.
3 Also first published in *Pulse*, this poem was anthologised in *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature (2009)*, published by US Press edited by Angelia Poon, Philip Holden, and Shirley Geok-Lin Lim.
4 First published in Thumboo's collection *Ulysses by the Merlion* (1979), this poem, like many of Thumboo's, has been variously anthologised, including in *& Words: Poems Singapore and Beyond* (2010), edited by Edwin Thumboo and published by Ethos Books.
5 Both poems can be read side by side in *Written Country: The History of Singapore through Literature* (2013), edited by Gwee Li Sui, published by Landmark Books.
6 First published in *The Brink of An Amen* (1991), this poem has been variously anthologised, including in *Memories and Desires: A Poetic History of Singapore* (1998), edited by Robbie Goh, published by UniPress. It can also be accessed on poetry.sg.
7 First published in Boey's collection *Days of No Name* (1996), this poem was anthologised in *No Other City*, edited by Alvin Pang and Aaron Lee and published by Ethos Books in 2000.
8 This poem and its translation was anthologised in *FIFTY on 50* (2009), edited by Edwin Thumboo et al, and published by the National Arts Council. Another anthology of multilingual poetry I referred to for this essay is *Rhythms: A Singaporean Millennial Anthology of Poetry* (2000), edited by Kirpal Singh et al, also published by the National Arts Council.
9 Adrienne Rich, "Legislators of the World", *The Guardian*, 18 November 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/nov/18/featuresreview.guardianreview15 (last accessed 23 April 2023).

What do we stand for?

The 1950s and 1960s: a time of hope, but also a time of discontent. While many profess high ideals and grand visions, the reality of everyday life in Singapore is much more sobering. Rampant poverty, corruption, and the injustices of colonialism persist. Amid these profound realities, a new generation of leaders emerges, seeking the mandate of a new nation in the making. Their cry: "Merdeka!"; their vision: a nation forged regardless of race, language, or religion. But how will these leaders rally a disparate citizenry to come together, with a new spirit?

←
Chief Minister David Marshall speaking to supporters at Empress Place, 21 March 1956.
Source: *The Straits Times* © Singapore Press Holdings. Permission required for reproduction.

A Kind of Second Birth: Why Englishman Francis Thomas Became a Singaporean in 1957



He had a degree from Cambridge and had no idea what he wanted to do in life other than to get out of an England that he felt was stagnating under inept leadership. Then he heard about a teaching position at an Anglican school in Singapore. He did not know where Singapore was, and for a long time, he could not find it in the atlas. But he was ready to go anywhere so he applied for the job, got it, and in late 1934, he set sail for Singapore.

Francis Thomas, my father, found in Singapore the sense of purpose and hope that he could not find in his home country. He settled happily into the life of a teacher at St Andrew's School, teaching English to the secondary school students, producing plays, and organising inter-school art exhibitions. He wrote in his *Memoirs of a Migrant*: "For the first time in my life I felt fully part of a living human community, where I wanted to be and where I was wanted as a useful member."

Unlike many of his compatriots in Singapore at that time, my father came here as a migrant. He left England in search of a life with more meaning, a society that was forward-looking and purposeful rather than one mired in the ways of the past and floundering. When in 1934, his ship arrived in the Malacca Strait and made its way from Penang to Singapore, he knew he was in a place he could call home.

←
Francis Thomas being hoisted by students of St Andrew's School upon stepping down as Principal, 12 March 1974. Source: *The Straits Times* © Singapore Press Holdings. Permission required for reproduction.

by Margaret Thomas

After the Second World War, during which he was a prisoner of war made to work on the Death Railway in Siam and then in a factory in Japan, he spent a year back in England with his parents recovering from the physical and emotional trauma of the war years.

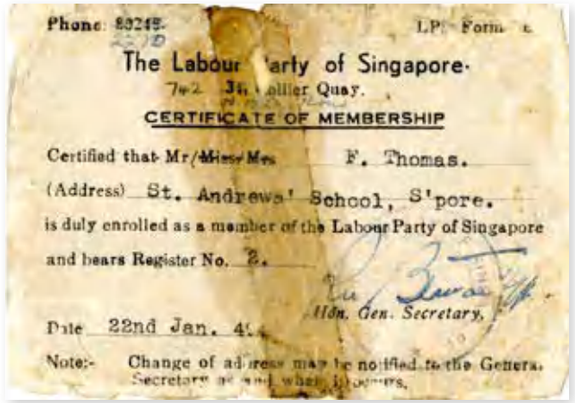
In 1947, he returned to Singapore, planning simply to continue teaching. He said in *Memoirs of a Migrant*: "Teaching is a job that demands all one can give, and that was what I wanted." But change was afoot in post-war Singapore, as in other parts of the weakening British empire, and soon my father found himself being called upon to do more than teach.

In 1948, he took two life-changing steps. He married Catharine Lee Eng Neo, who was the Matron at St Andrew's Boarding House where he was Housemaster. And, having seen a notice in *The Straits Times* about a meeting being called to form a Labour Party, he went along to see if he could help in any way.

He expected to be turned away from the meeting as a British colonialist. Most of the political parties that were mushrooming then had one goal in common, and that was to break free from British colonial rule. But my father was not only welcomed; he was asked to join the committee of the Labour Party of Singapore.

And so began just over a decade of the rather unusual situation of an Englishman being fairly prominently involved in local politics. Indeed, *The Straits Times* report about the formation of the new party was headlined 'Englishman in new Labour Party'.

My father saw his role in politics as temporary. He believed Asian voters needed Asian leaders, so his plan was to stay in the background, keeping his distance from intra-party squabbles and providing guidance and support until someone else was ready to take over. The first Legislative Assembly election was due in 1955 and his plan was to quit politics after that and concentrate on his teaching career.


Phone: 83245. LP. Form c.

The Labour Party of Singapore.

7a2 3[illegible] ollier Quay.

CERTIFICATE OF MEMBERSHIP

Certified that Mr/~~Miss/Mrs~~ F. Thomas.

(Address) St. Andrews' School, S'pore.

is duly enrolled as a member of the Labour Party of Singapore and bears Register No. 2.

Hon. Gen. Secretary.

Date 22nd Jan. 4[illegible]

Note:- Change of address must be notified to the Genera. Secretary at once when it occurs.

↑
Francis Thomas' certificate of membership as the second member of the Labour Party of Singapore, 22 January 1949. Courtesy of Margaret Thomas.


SINGAPORE

LABOUR FRONT

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE:
VICTOR J. MENDIS
FRANCIS THOMAS
KOH CHOON HONG

ITS
PRINCIPLES AND AIMS
(RELEASED TO THE PRESS ON 7TH SEPT, 1954)
AND
FOUR-YEAR PROGRAMME
(RELEASED TO THE PRESS ON 5TH DEC, 1954)

SINGAPORE LABOUR FRONT
IX, RAFFLES PLACE, SINGAPORE.

↑
An early political document released by the Singapore Labour Front, bearing Francis' Thomas name as a member of its Executive Committee, 1954. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.


←
Chief Minister David Marshall announcing the members of his Cabinet under the 'apple tree' at Empress Place, which included (from left to right) Minister for Health A. J. Braga, Assistant Minister for Commerce and Industry J. M. Jumabhoy, and Minister for Communications and Works Francis Thomas, 1955. Courtesy of Margaret Thomas.

As it turned out, the Labour Front (as the Labour Party was named after a split in 1953 and a regrouping ahead of the election) under the leadership of David Marshall won enough seats to form the government. But it was a struggle for Marshall to find all the people he needed for his Cabinet, and he asked my father to accept nomination to the Legislative Assembly and appointment as the Minister for Communications and Works.

My father did not want this; it went against his principles and plans. But he knew he had to put aside his personal wishes. Explaining in *Memoirs of a Migrant*, he said: "...selfish power-seeking is wrong and dangerous. But power-shirking is also wrong and dangerous, and at least equally selfish." Marshall needed his support, so he agreed to step forward. Marshall later explained that the Communications and Works Ministry handled the largest amount of public money, and he wanted as its Minister "a man on whose integrity I could rely without any qualms".

As the Minister for Communications and Works, my father was "very ignorant and incompetent at first", he said in *Memoirs of a Migrant*. But soon, he learnt enough about aviation, engineering, and telecommunications to be able to do his job, which included overseeing the completion

↓
Minister for Communications and Works Francis Thomas visiting Kallang and Paya Lebar Metereological Stations, 8 June 1955. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

← Minister for Communications and Works Francis Thomas initiating works for a dam at Ulu Bedok, 23 November 1955. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

↓ Office workers travelling along Merdeka Bridge–Nicoll Highway, 18 August 1956. Source: *The Straits Times* © Singapore Press Holdings. Permission required for reproduction.

of two projects started by the British administration: the construction of Paya Lebar Airport and Merdeka Bridge–Nicoll Highway. It was his idea to name the road leading to Merdeka Bridge after the British Governor then, Sir John Nicoll, to symbolise Singapore's path through colonialism to merdeka, or freedom.

The hardest and most rewarding part of his work, he said, was the weekly Meet the People session in Hylam Sua, a very rural area in Upper Thomson. At each session, he would listen to the complaints and requests of up to 20 people, and on Sundays, he followed up on the interviews by walking around the area to see for himself the problems that had been brought to him.

This contact with the lives of ordinary people, the people he as a politician was supposed to serve, meant a great deal to him. He wrote in *Memoirs of a Migrant*: "Some were very poor, many suffered injustices or undeserved difficulties. In all one could see the unconquerable human spirit that refused to surrender to fate."

It was this spirit that he sensed when he first arrived in 1934 and that made him want to make Singapore his home. In 1957, when the Singapore Citizenship Ordinance was passed, my father and my Pahang-born mother became Singapore citizens.

In early 1959, my father resigned from his Ministerial post at the request of the Chief Minister, Lim Yew Hock. Lim had taken over when Marshall, after about a year as Singapore's first Chief Minister, quit when he failed to secure self-government for Singapore. The political arena had become very confused and chaotic during 1958 as the parties got ready for the 1959 general election. My father thought Lim's political moves unwise and his readiness to turn a blind eye to corruption dangerous, and relations between the two of them got increasingly strained.

A few days after quitting as Minister, my father was back at St Andrew's. He had not, however, quit politics. He and two others from the Labour Front contested the 1959 general election. It was his first and only election campaign. My father stood in the Thomson constituency, a rural and predominantly Chinese-speaking area. At one of his rallies, he asked my mother and me to join him on stage, presumably to show his Chinese audience that he was an *angmoh* (a Hokkien term referring to a Caucasian) who was fully connected and committed to Singapore.

Our appearance at the rally might have got him a few votes, but it was not enough to win him the seat. The victor was the People's Action Party candidate (S. T. Bani), an Indian man, who got nearly 55% of the votes. My father, the Englishman, got 28%, while the last candidate from the Singapore's People's Alliance (Yap Chin Choon), a Chinese man, got just 17%. It was proof of what my father firmly believed. He said in *Memoirs of a Migrant*: "Race has always played a very small part of elections here. The voters have shown again and again that they are willing to vote for someone who is not of their race and who does not speak their language."

← Mr and Mrs Francis Thomas's Citizenship Registration Certificates, 7 November 1957. Courtesy of Margaret Thomas.

→ Francis Thomas, his wife Catharine Eng Neo Thomas, and a young Margaret Thomas at an election rally, 1959. Courtesy of Margaret Thomas.

An election rally crowd hoisting a banner promoting Francis Thomas, the Labour Front candidate for Thomson, as an "honest gentleman", 1959. Courtesy of Margaret Thomas.

A year or two later, the Labour Front was dissolved. Over the years, my father was asked by various people to return to politics, but he always declined. "I am better suited to work on a smaller scale", he said in *Memoirs of a Migrant*.

Back at his St Andrew's job, he was initially a teacher and, from 1963 to 1974, Principal of the secondary school. He was also very active in community work, and started several services and organisations. In addition, he chaired or sat on a range of committees, some in the government sector and others in the non-profit sector. In 1970, he was appointed a permanent member of the Presidential Council (later renamed the Presidential Council for Minority Rights). Mentioning this in a letter to his brother Michael soon after he was asked if he would accept the appointment, he described the Council's task as "...to scrutinise all new legislation and speak up if we find in it anything which is unfair or discriminatory against the minority races or any other kind of minority group...". Then he added: "I should think at this time it will have no real work to do...". Clearly, he was confident that Singapore's policymakers would not pass discriminatory laws.

The St Andrew's School Clinic at work, from a page in the school's yearbook, *Up and On*, 1951. Courtesy of St Andrew's Secondary School.

David Marshall, Dr D. D. Chelliah, and Francis Thomas receiving their letters of appointment to the Presidential Council (later renamed the Presidential Council for Minority Rights), 2 May 1970. Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The Anglican Welfare Council, now known as Singapore Anglican Community Services. He was asked to get it going in 1967 because of his experience with the St Andrew's School Social Work Group and its predecessor, the St Andrew's School Clinic Club.

The St Andrew's School Clinic Club came about because of my mother, who was a trained nurse. After my parents married, they lived in a house within the St Andrew's compound at Woodsville. One day in 1950, my mother noticed an elderly man from the nearby Potong Pasir village plucking leaves from the hedge. He needed herbs for his leg sores, he said. She looked at his legs and took him into the house, cleaned and treated the sores, and told him to return a few days later for a new dressing. When he came back, he brought several other villagers who needed medical attention, so my mother set up a makeshift clinic in our garage.

Potong Pasir then was a squatter area with no electricity or piped water, and no nearby government clinic. My mother's free clinic was meeting a real need. After some months, it became too much for her to handle so my father started a Clinic Club. The free clinic, run by the students and staff of St Andrew's with the help of volunteer nurses and doctors, served the Potong Pasir villagers until 1959 when a government clinic was opened. The Clinic Club evolved into the Social Work Group that continued to lend assistance to the villagers.

The Anglican Welfare Council's main work was initially the School's Counselling Service which employed professional social workers to help students with difficulties. "If anything is the high point of my life, the establishment of our School's Counselling Service is it," said my father in *Memoirs of a Migrant*.

As a school principal, he was much more concerned about the laggards, rebels, and misfits than the academically gifted and high-achieving students. The latter were likely to do well in life no matter what; it was the underachievers and troublemakers who most needed the support and guidance of teachers and schools if their potential and their lives were not to be wasted. In the closing pages of *Memoirs of a Migrant*, he wrote: "We must not close our minds and hearts to the needs of those who do not neatly fit the schemes of our changing society. The schemes change rapidly; what we reject today may be the keystone of the next thing we have to build."

My father left England in the 1930s because he felt the leadership there was "fumbling and mumbling" with "no real intention of making the world a better place". When he arrived in Singapore, he found a society with a strong sense of purpose. He made Singapore his home because it offered him the prospect of a new kind of life and an opportunity to contribute to the shaping of a new nation. In everything he did as teacher, politician, principal, and community activist, Francis Thomas' aim always was to try to make the world a better place.

↑ Catharine Lee Eng Neo tending to a boy as matron of St Andrew's School, 1947. Courtesy of Margaret Thomas.

→ Minister for Communications and Works Francis Thomas taking the oath of citizenship, 7 November 1957. Courtesy of Margaret Thomas.

SEEN AND HEARD IN
SEMANGAT YANG BARU

SEMANGAT YANG BARU
FORGING A NEW SINGAPORE SPIRIT

The sixth clip in this multimedia series features Francis Thomas speaking with Dr Maggie Lim (President of the Singapore Family Planning Association) as part of a 1963 radio series titled *Opinion: Is There an Urgent Need for Family Planning in Singapore?* In this conversation, both argue that there is an urgent need for family planning to ease the burden and health problems of mothers.

"We are all born into this world as strangers, carrying with us an inescapable inheritance from our family and race. Migration is a kind of second birth, in which we can to some extent choose what parts of our inheritance we will carry forward and use in our new lives. I am proud of much of my inheritance as an Englishman. Especially, that it has been found acceptable and useful by my fellow citizens. But I am more glad to have been able to move on into the freedom of a new kind of life."

.....

Francis Thomas, in
Memoirs of a Migrant

+

Margaret Thomas was a journalist for more than 25 years at *The Business Times*, *The Singapore Monitor*, *SPH AsiaOne*, and *TODAY*. She now works primarily on book projects, and in various voluntary roles on the pursuit of gender equality and an open, informed, and inclusive society. Her father's memoirs, titled *Memoirs of a Migrant*, was published by Ethos Books in 2013.

How Dare You Say Such a Thing Openly: Malay Women Advocating for Family Planning, 1950s to 1970s

How many children to have, and when to have them, are intimate fertility decisions to make in private. Yet, in the decades following World War Two, these decisions became a matter of urgent public consideration in Singapore, and bound up with wider debates ranging from women's rights to discourses on national survival and progress.

During this time, modern family planning was thrust into public debate by advocates from different communities who challenged deep-seated beliefs about women's roles and reproductive capacities.[1] Among them were trailblazing Malay women leaders who mediated between the private and public domains of their community. They actively shaped and normalised discussions on family planning, boldly agitated social change, and paved the way for future generations of Malay women to explore a myriad of opportunities within and beyond the home.

←
Puan Noor Aishah (front row, third from left) with Singapore Family Planning Association committee members and community leaders at the Istana, 12 July 1963. Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

by Sarina Anwar

← Women seeking advice at the Singapore Family Planning Association, 25 March 1957. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Family Planning in Malay Public Consciousness during the 1950s

> "*Too often am I asked by mothers of families of five, six or more children, to give them* obat *["medicine"] to prevent them from having more children, for me not to feel that birth control is the answer to the social problems of Malaya today.*"

— A European lady medical officer in a letter to *The Straits Times*, 27 March 1948[2]

Public debates over modern family planning in Singapore had their roots in the 1930s and intensified in the immediate post-World War Two period as the peacetime population boom across Asia caused widespread alarm.[3] There were scores of undernourished children. Multiple pregnancies and births on top of childrearing responsibilities were taking a toll on women. Troubled, women's rights advocates championed the organised introduction of modern contraception to space out births or prevent pregnancies.[4] They were met with resistance from those who were wary of its novelty and unconvinced of its appropriateness as a solution to Singapore's post-war challenges.[5] Nonetheless, these advocates had enough local and international support to establish the volunteer-run Singapore Family Planning Association (SFPA) in 1949 to dispense free family planning advice.[6]

As SFPA volunteers were setting up clinics and organising talks across the island, Malay public spaces were concurrently simmering with discussions on family planning. A core concern was the Islamic permissibility of family planning. When advocates first brought it up after World War Two, the Chief *Kathi* (Muslim judge) was initially against family planning. However, he unilaterally ruled in 1955 that it was permissible for Muslims to space out births to safeguard the mother's health. He also stated that abortion, as a form of birth control, was allowed within three months of conception though it was religiously displeasing.[7]

The male-dominated Malay/Muslim intelligentsia was split on the Chief *Kathi*'s new ruling. Some supported it out of pragmatism and concern for mothers and families, while others questioned his authority to dispense such a ruling without consultation.[8] A few, such as the writers of the well-regarded Islamic *Qalam* magazine, provided their own theological opinions through a series of detailed articles. In particular, they took issue with the Chief *Kathi*'s ruling on abortion. The complexities in reaching a religious consensus over modern family planning and birth control within the intelligentsia signalled the religious gravity of the matter to the community during that period.[9]

Nonetheless, there are multiple historical sources revealing that many Malay women were in fact publicly supportive of the use of modern contraception, or at least accepting of it. For one, the SFPA was represented by a Malay doctor as one of its vice-presidents and had in its ranks a Malay nurse as a staff member.[10] Furthermore, *Fashion*, a popular Malay weekly fashion magazine promoting modern manners and clothing to Malay women, ran advertisements for birth control pills in the 1950s, suggesting that there was a viable market for the pills among their target audience.

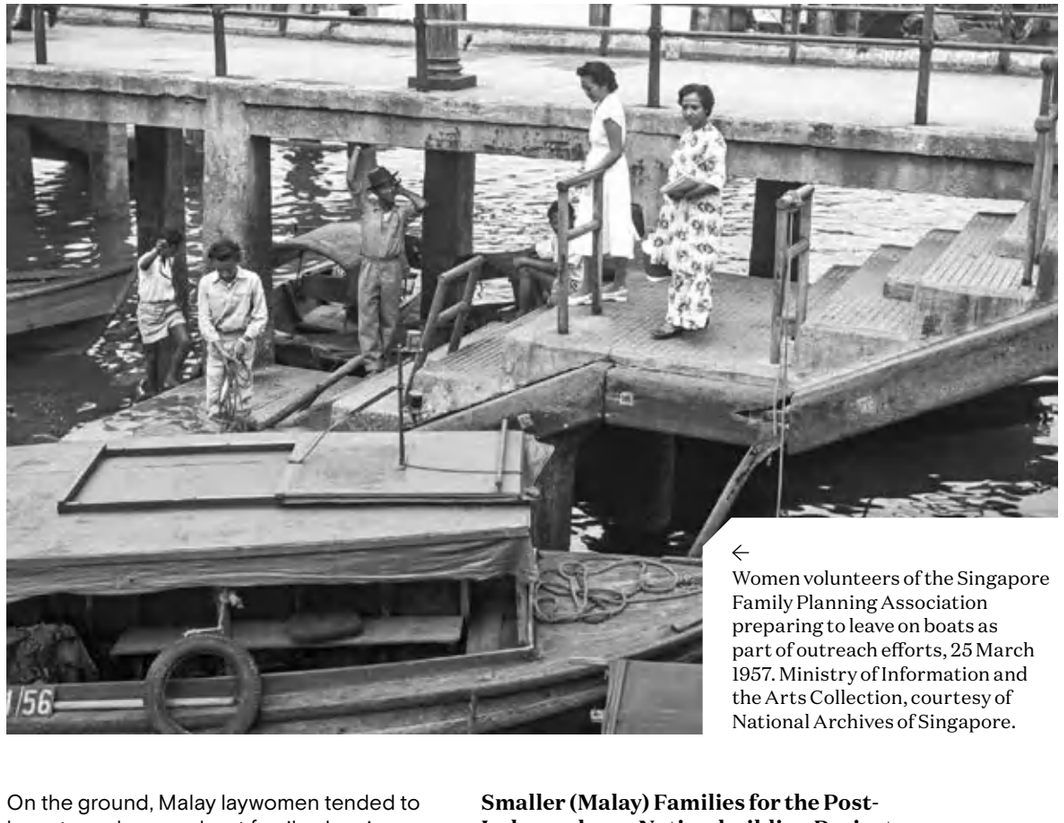
Malay women's public voices, however, were subdued. For example, in 1956, radio personality Che Zahrah Za'aba spoke in support of family planning on Radio Malaya, seeing it as a way to minimise the number of women who resorted to dangerous abortions by unqualified midwives. Unfortunately, she was met with harsh criticism from the older generation, highlighting the cultural taboo for Malay women to speak publicly on the matter.

> "*Elderly people have been tackling me about it and asking me* ***how I dared to say such a thing openly.***"

— Che Zahrah Za'aba on the reactions to her public support of family planning on radio, 29 April 1956[11]

↑ An issue of *Fashion*, c1950s-1970s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

TOP Issue 54 of *Qalam* featuring a mosque at Klang, Selangor, on its front cover, January 1955. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



← Women volunteers of the Singapore Family Planning Association preparing to leave on boats as part of outreach efforts, 25 March 1957. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

On the ground, Malay laywomen tended to be extremely wary about family planning. This was despite the availability of more permissive religious interpretations towards the use of contraception and the public support of Malay women. All in all, modern family planning in the 1950s had an uneven start within the Malay community, with SFPA volunteers struggling to educate Malay women about the benefits of family planning.

> *"Some of them [Malay women] won't listen to us. They keep on telling us, 'dosa, dosa' ['sin', 'sin'] and all that... You see, the women are more on the religious thing, they are frightened... The men is [sic] not bothered about religion."*
>
> — Mrs Khatijun Nissa Siraj, an Indian Muslim SFPA volunteer in the 1950s, recounting her experience in an interview with the National Archives of Singapore, 14 May 1997[12]

Smaller (Malay) Families for the Post-Independence Nation-building Project

> *"The government works ahead but it can only plan for so many new families a year... It is up to us to limit population growth to the level which our island state can support, and which we can support as parents... Plan for your happy family. You will be helping both your country and yourselves."*
>
> — A voiceover in a Singapore Family Planning and Population Board (SFPPB) film, 1968[13]

Modern family planning subsequently experienced another turning point following Singapore's independence. In September 1965, a White Paper on Family Planning was tabled in parliament by the PAP government, detailing a five-year plan to manage the unsustainable crude annual birth rate through family planning. The paper stated that having smaller families would protect women and their families. Furthermore, the state would be able to release public funds for more ambitious economic development programmes, and in turn increase job opportunities and ensure eventual progress and happiness for all.[14]

In line with this, the Singapore government then took over the SFPA's operations in 1966 and established the Singapore Family Planning and Population Board (SFPPB). This marked the official merging of what was originally a women's rights endeavour into a larger nation-building project. With this, smaller families became explicitly equated with Singapore's progress, and family planning transformed into a nation-building rallying call.

← A Malay language poster stating "One, two... that is ideal", 1966. This was part of a campaign by SFPPB to promote smaller families. Later, in 1972, the government officially introduced its two-child policy. Courtesy of Singapore Family Planning and Population Board.

> **"The least and most passive contribution Singaporeans can give is to help make a success of the Government's efforts to keep the birth rate down. By doing this you will also be helping yourselves and your children. By planning your family, you will be helping to plan Singapore's future."**
>
> • • • •
>
> Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Rahim Ishak, in a speech made during a community event at Aljunied to celebrate Prophet Muhammad's birthday, 24 June 1968

> **"Most religions have no objections to the idea of family planning... Plan for a small and happy family!**
>
> • • • •
>
> Parliamentary Secretary (Culture), Sha'ari Tadin, in a speech at the opening of a family planning exhibition at Pulau Ubin/Pulau Tekong on 18 and 21 August 1970

↑
Puan Noor Aishah viewing exhibits during the opening of a week-long family planning exhibition at Victoria Memorial Hall, 12 January 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

↑
"After the Honeymoon" family planning booklet in four official languages to reach out to newly-wed couples from different communities, 1970s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

The call was particularly resounding for the Malay community to play their part in adopting family planning alongside other ethnic communities.[15] Displacing the community's fervent 1950s public debates, Malay/Muslim political leaders of the ruling government took a unified stand that family planning did not go against Islamic teachings. In tandem, the voices of Malay female public figures started emerging loudly as well, in support of family planning. For example, Puan Noor Aishah, the wife of President Yusof Ishak, used her platform as a Malay woman figurehead in our fledgling multicultural nation to support the state's family planning policies.

> "*There is without doubt a great awareness and appreciation among our people in the planning of their families; this reflects their deep concern over better welfare for their children. We must continue to aim at smaller yet happier families in Singapore.*"
>
> — **Puan Noor Aishah at a government family planning exhibition, articulating the official stance of valuing quality over quantity when having children, 12 January 1967**[16]

The nation-building era also saw a top-down shift in social expectations of Malay women. In 1972, Che Dah Mohd Noor, the wife of Minister for Social Affairs, Mr Othman Wok, addressed the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) survey results which revealed that only 50% of the Malay community practised family planning even though 87% of them had received instruction.[17] Speaking at a Hari Raya party organised by Persatuan Pemudi Islam Singapura (PPIS) (the Muslim Women's Association), Che Dah called out Muslim women who remained recalcitrant in adopting "progressive social values and practices". According to Che Dah, the ideal Muslim woman was a modern woman with universal values who recognised the importance of smaller families for her personal benefit as well as societal good. Thus, Malay women, in balancing their religious and national identities, had to reshape and realign their social roles alongside nation-building efforts.

> "*The stubborn minority must change their attitude and learn to accept the requirements of new social responsibilities.*"
>
> — **Che Dah, addressing Muslim women at a Hari Raya party organised by PPIS, 18 November 1972**[19]

Other than public figures such as Puan Noor Aishah and Che Dah, Malay women journalists also played a part in leading discussions on family planning through their women- and family-oriented columns and reports. For example, Ratnamala (pen name of Azah Aziz), in her *Dewan Wanita* (Women's Hall) column, provided a detailed and balanced review of the pros and cons of contraceptive pills in 1967. Such an article not only complemented SFPPB's Malay language materials but more importantly, normalised Malay women speaking publicly about family planning.

> "*Most doctors agree that even though there are dangers, these dangers are small. And it must be balanced with our need to control the current global population.*"
>
> — **Ratnamala, "The birth control pill and its future", 21 February 1967**[19]

Malay women journalists also negotiated healthier discussions within the community. In 1970, journalist Zawiyah Salleh investigated the misunderstandings of Malay women in rural areas who tended to be less receptive to family planning compared to those in urban settings.[20]

→
PPIS committee members with Che Dah Mohd Noor (front row, fourth from right) during the Hari Raya party where she addressed the 1972 survey results. 18 November 1972. Che Dah was the benefactor of the association. Source: *The Straits Times* © Singapore Press Holdings. Permission required for reproduction.

Fellow journalist Salma Semono continued the discussion with her own investigation after the 1972 ECAFE survey results.

One of Salma's interviewees, Zanariah Mudjono, pointed out that many Malay women practised family planning but tended to conceal it from other women. As a result, these other women felt cautious about family planning. Furthermore, they tended to only share negative side effects of contraceptives. This thus led to the spread of unfounded rumours, exacerbated by the women's shyness to ask for professional medical advice. Considering the hushed nature of conversations about family planning, Zawiyah and Salma as Malay women themselves were well-placed to lay out these difficult conversations in public forums to be addressed further as a community.

> "*Recently I surveyed a number of women who lived outside the city, such as in Bukit Timah, Woodlands, and such. They believed that family planning was not important… Women, especially those outside the city, must follow the latest developments and achievements regarding daily matters such as the problems of big families and such.*"
>
> — **Zawiyah Salleh in her article focusing on Malay women in rural areas, 14 March 1972**[22]

> "*The effort to explain about family planning needs to be extended to the villages and the officials who visit there should consist of Malay women themselves who are good at enticing mothers to accept the good advice [of practising family planning].*"
>
> — **Salma Semono's suggestion on how to further promote family planning among Malay women, 24 September 1972**[23]

To counter misinformation, Malay women medical experts also addressed the effects of contraceptives within the community. In a televised forum in 1970, Dr Saleha Johari (a doctor from Outram General Hospital) and nurse Puan Salamah Baharuddin (a SFPPB member), provided matter-of-fact explanations on the health benefits of family planning based on their expertise and experience. Dr Saleha, for example, firmly stated that family planning did not bring about health problems as was feared by many Malay women, and explained that women needed to utilise the most suitable contraceptive method for their own bodies.[24]

← Che Zahrah Za'aba (second from left) at a private dinner hosted by President Yusof Ishak (second from right) and Puan Noor Aishah (right), 19 November 1968. She became supervisor of the Malay programme at Radio Singapore in 1958 and was inaugurated into the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame as a pioneer of Malay broadcasting in 2019. Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

> "*Everything should be adapted to a woman's own body.*"
>
> — **Dr Saleha Johari, explaining the key principle in using contraceptive during a televised forum, 20 September 1970**[25]

In addition, Malay women advocates had to overturn old customs and traditions. Despite the reiterations from Muslim leaders that family planning was not against Islamic teachings,[26] many Malay women remained wary.[27] Speaking to Salma Semono, Juliana Kamaruddin, a community researcher and advocate from the SPFFB, pointed out that many Muslim women who had feared sinning from the use of contraceptives ended up terminating their pregnancies. Juliana urged women to take a broader and longer-term outlook, shifting their focus beyond their fears to the happiness of their existing children.[28]

> "*So which is a bigger sin? Planning the birth of a child, or aborting the child?… The purpose [of family planning] is… for the happiness of the children who have already been born.*"
>
> — **Juliana Kamaruddin in a newspaper interview, 24 February 1974**[29]

Conclusion

> "*With my small family, I am able to continue in my career and ensure our family has enough to maintain our daily expenses which are indeed quite high.*"
>
> — **Aisha Akil, a teacher with two children, exemplifying the pragmatic attitude of the 1970s regarding family planning, 28 March 1976**[30]

↑ A poster titled: "The more you have, the less they get. Two is enough", 1978. It highlights the resources needed to raise children. Courtesy of Singapore Family Planning and Population Board.

TOP A Malay language poster stating "Girl or boy, two is enough", 1978. Courtesy of Singapore Family Planning and Population Board.

As religious and medical questions regarding modern family planning were systematically addressed, other concerns such as the changing roles of Malay women alongside the desire for economic security moved to the forefront of Malay public consciousness. Consequently, smaller families became increasingly attractive for Malay women.[31] From 1964 to 1976, the total fertility rate of the Malay community dropped a remarkable 75% from 1964 to 1976.[32]

The actual achievement of the Malay women advocates of family planning lies not in the quantitative change in fertility trends but the mindset shift towards the roles and reproductive capabilities of Malay women. Many Malay women had started making more informed fertility decisions with their husbands, balancing their family and career aspirations.[33]

> *"Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it also takes a community to collectively nurture and groom a pipeline of future women leaders. Female role models and mentors engender a multiplier effect in society... I sincerely believe that only when women progress much further will we see stronger families and a better society."*
>
> — President Halimah Yacob at PPIS Harmony Raya 2023, an interfaith PPIS event commemorating mother figures who paved the way for future generations of women, 14 May 2023[34]

Though recent studies found that women (including Malays) in Singapore still disproportionately shouldered household and caregiving responsibilities which affected the opportunities they could pursue, the multiplier effect of Malay women advocates between the 1950s and the 1970s should not be underestimated.[35] Despite the restrictive cultural landscapes of their times, they spoke up for what they believed in and remained resilient. Their attitude, beliefs and actions set foundational examples of leadership for younger Malay women and beyond.

SEEN AND HEARD IN
SEMANGAT YANG BARU

SEMANGAT YANG BARU
FORGING A NEW SINGAPORE SPIRIT

This video interview features a group of students from Chua Chu Kang Secondary School conversing with Madam Tan Ai Kheng (b. 1946), who experienced the Stop at Two campaign in the 1970s. Madam Tan received a fine after delivering her fourth child, and decided to be sterilised after her fifth child. This video was produced as part of the Student Archivist Project 2022 conducted by the Founders' Memorial.

Sarina Anwar is Manager (Research and Engagement) at the Founders' Memorial. She is often found rummaging through archival sources, hoping to recover voices which have been pushed to the cobwebbed corners of our collective memories.

NOTES

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Hold Up the Sky of the Land Where You Live: Symbols and Songs of Singapore

The sights and sounds of our national symbols may be familiar to all Singaporeans today, but how much do we know about their origins? In many ways, the stories of their creation mirror Singapore's journey to nationhood—a product of careful consideration, tough choices, and hard work.

THE NATIONAL ANTHEM

While Zubir Said is best known as the composer of Singapore's National Anthem, *Majulah Singapura*, in many ways, the song was crafted as part of an extensive collaboration between many parties.[1] Originally intended as an official song for the functions of the Singapore City Council, it was approved by a specially formed committee when it was commissioned in 1958.[2] Zubir Said also consulted Malay language teacher, Muhammad Ariff Ahmad, on the lyrics, noting "...the difficulty is in such a short melody...it must be simple [and] understandable for all the races in Singapore".[3]

When Singapore later attained self-independence in 1959, a high-level government committee headed by Dr Toh Chin Chye requested that the song be updated as Singapore's National Anthem, with the lyrics shortened and the tempo sped up.[4] As befitting of Singapore's cosmopolitan and multicultural nature, the music was further refined with help from Paul Abisheganaden, conductor of Singapore Chamber Ensemble; Dick Abel, a Filipino conductor with Radio Singapore Orchestra; Military Forces Band as well as the visiting Berlin Chamber Orchestra.[5]

←
Participants carrying the National Flag as part of Kota Raja Community Centre's National Day Procession, 12 August 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

by Ashley Wong

MAJULAH SINGAPURA!

Mari kita ra'yat Singapura,
Bangun dengan bersatu sama-sama.
Rukon damai dan bantu membantu,
Supaya kita sama-sama maju.
Kita hidop aman dan sentosa,
Kerja sama menuju bahagia!

Chita-chita kita yang mulia:
BERJAYA SINGAPURA!
Mari-lah kita bersatu,
Dengan semangat yang bahru.
Samua kita berseru:
MAJU-LAH SINGAPURA!
MAJU-LAH SINGAPURA!

←
Scoresheet for *Majulah Singapura* bearing its former lyrics when it was first composed as the City Council Song, 1958. Gift of Kelvin Ang Kah Eng. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

However, composing the National Anthem was only half the battle won—the next challenge was winning over people's hearts and minds. When the song was first released, there were complaints that people did not stand up when it was played before shows in cinemas, with many accused of failing to show proper respect.[6] As late as 1986, a letter was submitted to *The Straits Times* suggesting our anthem be changed entirely to *Count on Me Singapore* instead.[7] Fortunately, many others came to the defense of *Majulah Singapura*.[8] More recently, in 2021, the Citizens Workgroup for National Symbols recommended sparking lively dialogue around our national symbols, including the Anthem, to raise awareness and appreciation of their history.[9]

Though Zubir Said was not born in Singapore, he had a great and abiding love for Singapore, as the country where he had chosen to live and earn his bread. He believed in the adage "*di mana bumi dipijak, di situ langit dijunjung*"—you should hold up the sky of the land where you live.[10] He refused to accept any monetary compensation for *Majulah Singapura*; for him, the honour of being the composer of Singapore's national anthem was enough.[11] Many of his other songs, such as *Semoga Bahagia* and *Orang Singapura*, spoke to the ideals and values he believed in for Singapore, which included an emphasis on courtesy and hard work to achieve peace and happiness. Today, his legacy lives on every day through the radiowaves at 6am and in morning assemblies across the island.[12]

The National Flag

Singapore's National Flag is so ubiquitous in the minds of Singaporeans today that it is hard to imagine it could have looked any other way. The original design process actually took two months of research that involved looking at the flags of other nations, and many revisions. [13]

When Singapore attained full internal self-governance in 1959, a specially appointed committee, headed by Deputy Prime Minister Dr Toh Chin Chye, was tasked with designing a flag that would represent the beliefs of the new self-governing state.[14] The multiracial and multicultural make-up of Singapore was at the forefront of Dr Toh's mind, and he endeavoured to create "a flag around which the three different communities of Singapore [could] rally around".[15] For these reasons, certain design choices were rejected as they were thought to be too closely

↑
Deputy Prime Minister Dr Toh Chin Chye with the National Flag, 1959. Source: *The Straits Times* © Singapore Press Holdings. Permission required for reproduction.

aligned with only one race or religion. For instance, a green background with a white star was deemed too Islamic.[16] Geopolitical tensions also had to be navigated and accounted for. While Dr Toh was initially reluctant to use the red and white colour scheme as he felt it was excessively similar to Indonesia and Poland's national flags, the alternative of an all-red background had strong Communist associations, which Singapore was keen to avoid considering the political climate of the Cold War.[17]

After several months of intensive research and design, the National Flag was first unveiled to the Singapore public in 1959 on the occasion of National Loyalty Week, to rousing cries of "*Merdeka!*".[18] Barely a year later, it was hoisted at the Olympic podium for the first time when weightlifter Tan Howe Liang won Singapore's first silver medal at the 1960 Rome Summer Olympic Games.[19] However, there was a disastrous muddle during the ceremony as the officials mistakenly raised Japan's flag instead, and the ceremony had to be repeated![20] Thankfully, Singapore's flag has gained greater recognition in the subsequent years, with the flag having been raised at many milestone events such as Singapore's induction to the United Nations in September 1965.[21] Aspects of the National Flag's design have also been incorporated into military ensigns such as the Singapore Naval Ensign, which was hoisted in the presence of Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Interior and Defence, George Bogaars, for the first time on 5 May 1967.[22]

Most recently, the National Symbols Bill passed in parliament has granted greater flexibility in the use of our national symbols, including the display of our national flag.[23] Previously, public display of the flag was limited to National Day celebrations from July through September. However, under the new bill, exceptions to the display period can be made with approval from authorities. This is in recognition of the flag's importance as a symbol of solidarity and national pride during momentous occasions such as the Olympics and in times of crisis such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic.[24]

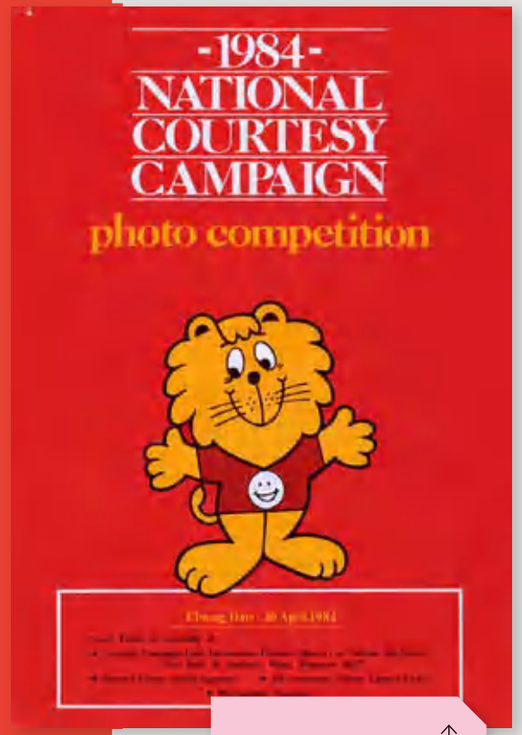
→
Yang di-Pertuan Negara Yusof Ishak receiving a salute at the launch of National Loyalty Week, 3 December 1959. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

←
Singapore's Naval Ensign being hoisted for the first time at Telok Ayer Basin, 5 May 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

↓
Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Interior and Defence George Bogaars inspecting sailors of the Singapore Naval Volunteer Force, 5 May 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Joseph Teo
Designer of the National Flag and State Crest

While Dr Toh was the main brains behind the committee tasked to design the National Flag and State Crest, it was Joseph Teo—at the time a 25-year-old artist at the Ministry of Culture—who actually produced the artwork. He was awarded a Public Administration Medal (Bronze) for his work in 1963, and would go on to design artwork for many other national campaigns, including the iconic mascots Singa the Courtesy Lion (now known as Singa the Kindness Lion) and Teamy the Productivity Bee.



↑
Courtesy campaign poster featuring Singa the Courtesy Lion, 1984. In 2014, the mascot was rebranded as Singa the Kindness Lion. Courtesy of Singapore Kindness Movement.

←
"Bee" A Team poster produced by the National Productivity Board, featuring Teamy the Productivity Bee, 1985. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

←
M. P. D. Nair (second from left), then Assistant Minister to the Chief Secretary in the Labour Front coalition government, visiting citizenship registration centres, 31 August 1958. He is accompanied by Deputy Chief Secretary Stanley Stewart (first from left), who would later become Head of Civil Service. Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The State Crest / National Coat of Arms

Singapore's State Crest, also known as the National Coat of Arms, was designed by the same committee led by Dr Toh Chin Chye that gave birth to the National Flag. It was likewise launched at National Loyalty Week in 1959, alongside the installation of Yusof Ishak as our first Malayan-born Yang di-Pertuan Negara.[25]

The red shield at the centre of the State Crest bears the same emblem of a crescent moon and five white stars that appears on the National Flag, but with the moon shifted to the bottom to create a more balanced design.[26] The shield is flanked by a lion on the left and a tiger on the right. The lion symbolises Singapore and the tiger represents the then-Federation of Malaya, in acknowledgement of Singapore's close economic and political ties with our geographical neighbour.[27] Dr Toh once said that he felt the Crest looked unbalanced and that having a crown on top would be better, but it would not have been appropriate as we were no longer a colony under a monarchy.[28]

At the bottom of the State Crest is a banner bearing the words "*Majulah Singapura*". Derived from Sanskrit, "*majulah*" is a literal call for Singapore to move onwards, but it more broadly expresses a wish for Singapore to flourish, prosper, and grow.[29]

Although the phrase is now best known as the title of Singapore's national anthem, the term "*Majulah Singapura*" first gained popularity in post-war Singapore and was adopted as the motto of the Singapore municipality in the early 1950s.[30] Indeed, the City Council (the successor to the Municipal Council) requested that Zubir Said name his song after their motto when they commissioned him. This was not the first time a motto had been developed for Singapore—the municipality had previously used the phrase "*Biar-lah Untong Singapura*" (Malay for "May Singapore Prosper"), and before that, the Latin phrase "*Auspicium Melioris Aevi*" ("Hope For a Better Age").[31] The Latin phrase remains the motto of Raffles Institution to this day. Interestingly, when the motto "*Majulah Singapura*" was first proposed, public opinion was split on its suitability, but the City Council stood firm in its decision.[32] At one point, City Councillor M. P. D. Nair even suggested that Singaporeans should greet each other with "*Majulah Singapura*!", in order to foster a stronger sense of belonging.[33]

Today, the State Crest can be found hanging on the walls of government ministries, in addition to being emblazoned on government documents, including every Singaporean's passport.

SEEN AND HEARD IN
SEMANGAT YANG BARU

SEMANGAT YANG BARU
FORGING A NEW SINGAPORE SPIRIT

State Crest (National Coat of Arms) made by the Baharuddin Vocational Institute, 1965. Gift of the Parliament of Singapore. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Previously displayed in the Old Parliament House, this State Crest was a gift from the Baharuddin Vocational Institute (1965–1990), which was named after the late Baharuddin bin Mohammed Arif, the PAP Legislative Assemblyman for Anson (1959–1963). The institute was Singapore's first tertiary school dedicated to manual and applied arts, established to train skilled workers to support the nation's rapid industrialisation programme.

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew touring Baharrudin Vocational Institute, 19 June 1965. Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The Pledge

The idea for a pledge to inculcate greater national consciousness was first surfaced in October 1965, by Principal Assistant Secretary for Administration to the Ministry of Education (MOE) William Cheng—mere months after Singapore's separation from Malaysia in August. His proposal was supported by Minister for Education Ong Pang Boon, and two initial drafts were sent to Minister for Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam for his comments.[35] Rajaratnam created his own draft based off the first two, sent them to Cabinet and MOE for a final round of revisions, and the rest, as they say, is history.[36]

Unlike the National Anthem and the National Flag, Singapore's pledge was conceived only after the country attained independence. While our collective belief in the importance of a multicultural state was a strong influence in the creation of both the Anthem and Flag, it is in the Pledge that we first see it being explicitly articulated.

In the aftermath of years of racial tensions and rioting, culminating in the traumatic and unwilling separation, it is unsurprising that Rajaratnam felt strongly about the need to set aside identity markers that in his mind could conceivably pull the nation apart.[37] In fact, the draft Pledge by Rajaratnam, prior to final revisions, expressed this ideal in rather explicit terms: he exhorted Singaporeans to "forget differences of race, language, and religion". His counterpart, Ong Pang Boon, similarly referenced the prevailing concern then that the lack of a common language might be "inimical" to "racial unity" when he made a call in November 1965 for "the breaking down of the language barrier" to be intensified.[38] Indeed, this idea of forgetting our racial differences takes on added significance given that the Pledge was to be recited by students daily, at a time when Singapore was shifting from vernacular education to bilingualism and integrated schools.

A PAP electoral leaflet about Ong Pang Boon, 1959. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

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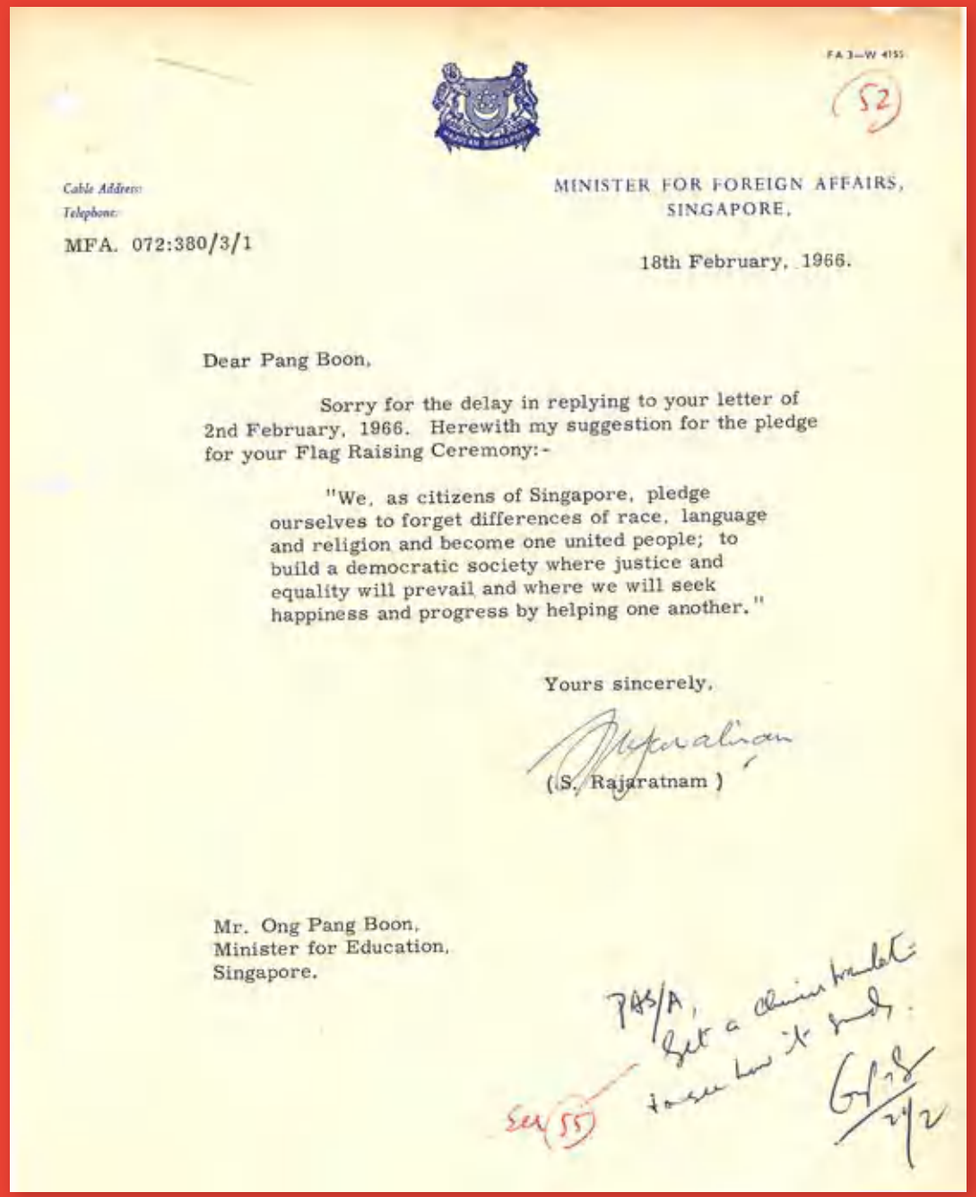
A letter written by S. Rajaratnam to Ong Pang Boon regarding the drafting of the National Pledge, 18 February 1966. Ministry of Education Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



FA 3—W 4155

(52)

Cable Address:
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MFA. 072:380/3/1

MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
SINGAPORE.

18th February, 1966.

Dear Pang Boon,

Sorry for the delay in replying to your letter of 2nd February, 1966. Herewith my suggestion for the pledge for your Flag Raising Ceremony:-

"We, as citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves to forget differences of race, language and religion and become one united people; to build a democratic society where justice and equality will prevail and where we will seek happiness and progress by helping one another."

Yours sincerely,

(S. Rajaratnam)

Mr. Ong Pang Boon,
Minister for Education,
Singapore.

PBS/A,
Get a clean translation
for me to see.
GPB
24/2

Sec (55)

Interestingly, while working drafts of the Pledge did make references to values such as justice and equality, it was only from Rajaratnam's draft onwards that the concepts of happiness and progress were mentioned, and were ultimately articulated in the line imagining "happiness, prosperity, and progress for our nation" in the final version.[39] While these words may seem unremarkable today, their significance can be understood if we consider how many founding leaders like Rajaratnam and Lee Kuan Yew did not initially believe that an independent Singapore was viable.[40] Cast out of Malaysia and suddenly alone, the Pledge was not merely paying lip-service to empty promises. Rather, as Rajaratnam himself said, the Pledge was an earnest and genuine search for "real ideals" that could pull Singapore through the uncertain times ahead.[41]

Since then, numerous attempts have been made to ensure that the Pledge remains relevant to newer generations of Singaporeans. Perhaps the most popular example would be the national song, *We are Singapore*, which incorporates the pledge into one of the song verses.[42] In addition to such attempts to popularise formal national symbols, there have also been moves to christen a range of informal national symbols, ranging from discussions about a national bird (the Crimson Sunbird) to proposals for a national tree (proposed by some to be the Tembusu tree).[43] One successful attempt to formally recognise a popular icon as a national symbol occurred in 1981, when Singapore's national flower, *Vanda* Miss Joaquim, was chosen.

SEEN AND HEARD IN *SEMANGAT YANG BARU*

SEMANGAT YANG BARU
FORGING A NEW SINGAPORE SPIRIT

This multimedia series features archival footage of various leaders, including S. Rajaratnam and Dr Toh Chin Chye, speaking about the creation of Singapore's national symbols.

Vanda Miss Joaquim the popular choice

NATIONAL FLOWER PICKED FOR ITS RESILIENCE

Hitch over 'staff' participant delays award of prizes

Dispute over tycoon's will: Judgment reserved

Man charged with robbery

↑
An article in *The Straits Times* announcing that the *Vanda* Miss Joaquim has been selected as Singapore's National Flower, 16 April 1981. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

The National Flower: The *Vanda* Miss Joaquim

Commonly referenced on print designs and tourist souvenirs, the *Vanda* Miss Joaquim was chosen as Singapore's National Flower in 1981 after a rigorous round of selection between some 40 other blooms, including the much rarer *Arachnis hookeriana*.[44] Bred by its namesake, Miss Agnes Joaquim, it was the first officially recorded hybrid orchid to be bred in Singapore in 1893. Though it was a popular contender to be Singapore's national flower from the start, some were less than thrilled by the choice.[45] One passionate letter to *The Straits Times* even staunchly declaimed the *Vanda* Miss Joaquim in favour of another local orchid, the *Vanda* Tan Chay Yan.[46] Nevertheless, the flower was chosen for its vibrant colours, resilience, and ability to bloom year-round, with its historical significance likely having played a role in its selection as well.[47]

The *Vanda* Miss Joaquim's significance lies in its role in spearheading Singapore's cut-flower industry, as its resilience and ease of propagation allowed local growers to cultivate more orchid hybrids for export.[48] Notably, even before the selection of the *Vanda* Miss Joaquim as Singapore's National Flower, Singapore had an Orchid Series of currency notes which circulated from 1967 to 1976—a testament to the prominence of Singapore's orchid industry.[49] It is unsurprising, then, that 30 out of the 40 contenders for the title of National Flower were all orchids.

Today, the *Vanda* Miss Joaquim and orchids in general continue to enjoy great popularity and significance in Singapore. As of 2022, the *Vanda* Miss Joaquim has been officially recognised as a national symbol of Singapore, and orchid cultivation has been shortlisted for the next round of Singapore's UNESCO intangible cultural heritage nominations.[50] Singapore also practises its own brand of "orchid diplomacy", whereby visiting dignitaries and personages are gifted with specially bred hybrid orchids named in their honour.[51] Like the *Vanda* Miss Joaquim, the hybrid nature of these gifted orchids is intended to represent Singapore's multiculturalism and resilient spirit.[52] Indeed, Singapore is the only country in the world to have a hybrid as its National Flower, and this is another example of the many things that make this little red dot unique.[53]

Conclusion

Like other facets of Singapore's building journey, our national symbols did not appear overnight. Instead, they were born out of a process of hard work, and careful, deliberate thought by our founding generation of leaders and citizens, as they sought to create a nation that they could proudly call home. As this piece has explored, these symbols reflect the ideals and aspiration that define the Singapore spirit, while bearing testimony to the challenges that defined our nation's turbulent birth. Perhaps it is up to current and future generations of Singaporeans to continue translating these ideals into reality, and in so doing, hold up the sky of the land where we live.

↓

The $25 note from the Orchid Series of Singapore's currency, featuring the *Renanthopsis* Aurora. This specific note bears the signature of Hon Sui Sen, Minister for Finance (1970–1983). Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

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Constituting a New Nation: An Interview with Professor Kevin Y. L. Tan

Professor Kevin Y. L. Tan, 2019.
Courtesy of Kevin Y. L. Tan.

Kevin Y. L. Tan specialises in constitutional and administrative law, international law, international human rights, and Singapore's legal history. He graduated with a Bachelor of Laws (Honours) degree from the Faculty of Law at National University of Singapore and subsequently obtained Master of Laws and Doctorate of Juridical Science degrees from the Yale Law School.

He is currently Adjunct Professor at the Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore, and Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University where he teaches constitutional and legal history and international human rights. Between 2001 and 2011, he was also President of the Singapore Heritage Society. He has published widely in his areas of specialisation and has written and edited over 60 books on law, history, and politics.

In this edited excerpt of an interview with the *+65* team, Professor Tan talks about the relevance, origins, and evolution of Singapore's constitution, and shares his thoughts on the new Singapore spirit and how it is embodied.

by Nicholas Phoon and Brian Patrick Tan

You are a renowned expert in constitutional law. How would you explain the significance of a constitution to a layman?

The constitution is the mother of all laws. It is, in Tolkienian terms, the ring that controls all the others. It is the supreme law. All constitutions establish two things. Number one, the structure of government within a polity—how powers are to be divided, utilised, shared, and controlled. Number two is the safeguarding of fundamental liberties or human rights, which, in my view, is perhaps the more important role of the two.

If someone were to ask you, "How is the constitution relevant to me, and what impact does it have on my daily life?", what would your response be?

Well, I would put it this way: a lot of things that are not patently obvious to us, have a direct impact on us, despite their relative invisibility.

In a way, the law is exactly like that. You may not know what the law of contract is, but each of us undertakes several contracts a day. When things go right, you forget about the law, and that's how it works. With constitutional law, the whole point is to protect society when virtue fails. If you have a good government, and people's values are respected, then nothing happens and nobody goes to court. You don't even think about the Constitution.

However, if something bad happens, then at least there's a fallback which says, "Hang on, you can't do this… the Constitution says you can't!" Since no person is above the law, and you have the rule of law here, a process kicks in to fix the problem. So, in a way, the less you see of the Constitution, the better it is, because that means society is functioning properly.

Speaking of the Constitution of Singapore, could you tell us more about its origins?

When Singapore became independent for the first time, in 1963, we joined the

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Souvenir programme for the Singapore Constitution Exposition organised by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce at the former Kallang Airport, 1959. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

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A Samuel Withers safe used by E. W. Barker and subsequent political office holders at the Ministry of Law to store documents, 1960s. Gift of Ministry of Law. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

↑
Minister for Law E. W. Barker (left) visiting Kallang Gasworks, 11 November 1964. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Federation of Malaysia as a constituent state. As a result, we had two constitutions—a State Constitution and a Federal Constitution. Upon Separation in 1965, the State Constitution followed us along, but there were of course several missing provisions pertaining to the judiciary and the safeguarding of fundamental liberties.

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and E. W. Barker, who was then the Minister for Law, announced that a new constitution would be drafted. Barker even met up with the Chief Justices of New Zealand, India, and Australia to seek their assistance in drafting the text. Despite some preliminary efforts, this new constitution never came to pass. Eventually when Parliament sat in December 1965, lawmakers passed the Republic of Singapore Independence Act, which brought into force provisions of the Federal Constitution that were missing.

Essentially, these were the exact fundamental liberties provided for in the 1957 Federal Constitution of Malaya (subsequently Malaysia) save one, the constitutional right to property. In fact, in 1964, Barker had wanted to make amendments to the Land Acquisition Act, but the legislation had to be withdrawn because the moment it was put forward, Attorney-General Ahmad Ibrahim warned that its provisions conflicted with the Federal

S'PORE LAND BILL GOES TO SELECT COMMITTEE

THE controversial Land Acquisition Bill, which proposes certain changes in the law relating to acquisition of private property for public purposes, was referred without debate in Parliament today to a select committee of eight.

The second reading of the Bill was proposed by the Minister for Law, Mr. E. W. Barker.

He said the provisions of the Bill should come as no surprise to the House.

In June 1964 a similar Bill was sent to select committee, but its passage was delayed because of constitutional difficulties.

The present Bill embodied both the provisions in the existing law and those in the previous Bill which had lapsed.

Mr. Barker referred to two major departures in the present Bill from existing legislation. These were:

Compensation

THE ASSESSMENT of compensation provisions have been redrafted on the basis of two principles

SINGAPORE, Wed.

Mr. Barker said that there were other changes in the proposed legislation which widened the powers of acquisition to meet various situations envisaged with urban renewal and industrialisation.

A more expeditious procedure for taking possession of land in cases of extreme urgency had also been provided for.

Rotary installation

MUAR, Wed.—The High School headmaster, Mr. D. P. Perera, will be installed as president of the Rotary Club here on June 28

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An article announcing that the Land Acquisition Bill would be referred to a Select Committee for further study, 23 Jun 1966. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Constitution. The Land Acquisition Act was only amended in 1966, after independence. Another interesting aspect to this story is that the State Constitution of 1963 did not actually provide for a judiciary in Singapore. Hence between 1965 and 1969, effectively 1970, there was the unique phenomenon of the Federal Court of Malaysia sitting in Singapore. Why was this the case? I suspect that Mr Lee Kuan Yew wanted to give some confidence to Malaysian investors owning property in Singapore, as well as to foreigners in general. That's possibly also why we retained the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council as our final court of appeal all the way until 1994. It was as though Mr Lee was trying to signal to foreigners that the newly-independent Singapore was not some "banana republic" with some kind of beholden judiciary. We were not. So, this was a strategic thing.

It sounds like there were many practical considerations, besides legal ones.

Oh yes. In fact, when I interviewed E. W. Barker in the '90s for my *book Lee's Lieutenants*, I actually asked him, "Mr. Barker, why didn't you all make good your promise to the Singapore people to draft a new constitution?" And his answer shocked me completely. He said, "Listen, whether we have a new constitution or not, government will carry on; life carries on. But we had other priorities... we were being harried from pillar to post!" And I asked, so what was so important to you at the time? He said, "Air services agreements." He had to make sure that he had secured all the air services agreements because the moment you are a new state, you are contracting as a separate entity altogether. So, there must be some level of continuity. If not, Singapore would have been like Berlin during the blockade!

Our founding leaders were also very realistic about which practices should be adopted from foreign countries. A good example was the British practice of "crossing the floor" in Parliament. In British practice, a Member of Parliament holds on to his or her seat, regardless of the political party he or she is in. So, one can, as a matter of conscience, walk over and join another party. But Lee Kuan Yew said, "No. Never again, I paid a very high price for this." He was referring to what happened in 1961, when the People's Action Party split, and the Barisan Sosialis was

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A Malayan Airways plane on the tarmac at Paya Lebar airport, 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

BEGINS HERE: THE BIG DEBATE

Hushed Legislative Assembly is told of PAP's steadfastness in the face of British and Communist-Left 'manoeuvres,' meetings and endeavours

Premier Lee opens debate on his motion of confidence

Rules broken

'Our duty'

'Decency'

New attack

'Fancy things'

The choice

AUSTRALIA IS LESS THAN A DAY AWAY

Kuan Yew talks of bid to engineer collision between two factions

A collision

'Why oppose?'

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An article from *The Straits Times* on the motion of confidence called by Lee Kuan Yew in the Legislative Assembly which paved the way for the formation of the Barisan Sosialis, 21 July 1961. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

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A letter from Lee Kuan Yew to Tunku Abdul Rahman, Prime Minister of Malaysia, clarifying the terms on which Singapore was to enter the Federation of Malaysia, 10 July 1963. The second point in this letter confirms that the Federal Government would not seek to overturn the anti-party hopping law which was passed in the Legislative Assembly of Singapore. Courtesy of Parliament of Singapore.

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PRIME MINISTER,
SINGAPORE.

10th July, 1963.

My dear Prime Minister,

I refer to our discussion on the evening of 8th July at the Ritz Hotel as a result of which we agreed:

(i) in respect of the loan for the development of the Borneo States, no labourers will be engaged from outside Malaysia for the development projects and that 50% of such labourers shall be supplied from Singapore;

(ii) that the Federation will not object to the amendment of the Singapore Constitution so that where a member of the Legislative Assembly resigns or is expelled from the political party for which he stood as a member, he shall vacate his seat, so long as this does not conflict with Parliamentary practice;

(iii) that where the Federation enacts any law restricting movement or residence such order shall be reciprocal as between Singapore and the States of Malaya; and

(iv) that the power of detention under the Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Ordinance be delegated to Singapore.

... I attach a photostat copy of the notes of the agreement which you signed.

Yours Sincerely,

Lee Kuan Yew.

Y.T.M. Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, K.O.M.,
Prime Minister,
Federation of Malaya.

formed as an opposition party, and suddenly there was a huge opposition bloc in the Legislative Assembly. They could do that because they crossed the floor with their seats. So, the Constitution was amended to insert the clause that you will find now, wherein if you are no longer a member of the party under which you were elected, you will lose your seat.

We understand that a commission under Chief Justice Wee Chong Jin was also formed to study the terms of the new constitution.

Well, post-1965, the government was anxious to ensure that minorities in Singapore were taken care of and protected. It was decided that a Constitutional Commission led by the Chief Justice would be established to look into how to safeguard minority rights.

Interestingly, it was made up entirely of lawyers of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. The final report was fascinating because the Commission tied in the protection of fundamental liberties for all with the protection of those of the minorities.

You see, what some other countries do with minorities is to have mechanisms like a system of reserved representation. However, some felt that was not ideal because it would prove more divisive. During the parliamentary debate on the recommendations of the Constitutional Commission, Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam argued that the best way to protect minority rights was to protect everyone's rights equally.

In the end, we borrowed an idea from Kenya. Our Presidential Council for Minority Rights is based on the Kenyan Council of State. The Council scrutinises legislation to ensure that it is not discriminatory for racial, religious, and linguistic minorities, both via omission and commission.

Apart from legal mechanisms, since the law cannot solve all problems, you can try using policy mechanisms. For example, having a Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs,

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Chief Justice Wee Chong Jin presenting the Report of the Constitutional Commission to President Yusof Ishak at the Istana, 27 August 1966. Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

giving more money to education, and trying to raise education and income levels. The way it is done in Singapore is quite clever because it is a clear recognition that the law itself can only do so much, and that after a certain point, it becomes a matter of politics and policy.

Actually, the concept of Singapore being a multiracial and multireligious state can be traced back to David Marshall. In a memo to the Colonial Office way back in 1956, Marshall had already expounded on his idea, and had mentioned Malays, Eurasians, and other minorities. The language used in this memo eventually made its way into the preamble of the 1958 State Constitution, and now, in a modified form, in Article 152 of the Constitution. One could also argue that Marshall's cabinet was the most multiethnic one Singapore has ever had! So, this concern about ensuring that minority groups are represented and fairly treated has long been a major political concern in Singapore.

How fascinating! It does seem that the Constitution encapsulates the new spirit of our early nation-building years, especially the commitment to building a multicultural society.

Yes, I think if you look back, even to the post-war years, the idea of a multiethnic, multiracial, multireligious society and polity was evident from Day One. None of our political parties was ever an ethnic-based political party. Now that tells you something—that as a polity, even in the '50s, people would not stomach a racial party.

Even the Democratic Party, led by rich Chinese *towkays* (Hokkien/Teochew for businessmen), which sought to appeal to the Chinese as a constituency, only won two seats in the 1955 election. Then came the Labour Front government, which had a very balanced slate—including even an Englishman, Francis Thomas.

Later, we had Yusof Ishak as our first Malayan-born Yang di-Pertuan Negara, followed by Benjamin Sheares, a Eurasian, and Devan Nair, a Malayalee Indian. We also

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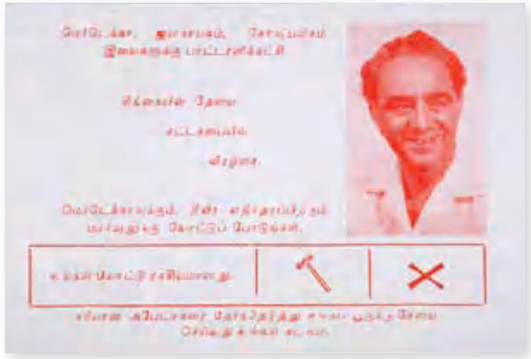
Tamil language election pamphlet used by David Marshall, 1961. Gift of Jean Marshall. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



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The Constitutional Commission conducting hearings at the Supreme Court, 2 March 1966. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

had S. Rajaratnam as our Minister for Foreign Affairs, which was a clear demonstration that Singapore is not a Chinese state.

We've talked about the role of E. W. Barker and Wee Chong Jin. Could you share with us more about the role and contributions of other pioneer legal luminaries?

Kenny Byrne was important because he was able to mobilise the English-educated. Along with Goh Keng Swee, he was one of the two most senior local civil servants who resigned to join politics. Byrne was a contemporary of Lee Kuan Yew and was not afraid to stand up to him. He also presided over the rolling out of the Women's Charter, which of course included Madam Kwa Geok Choo's inputs as well.

There was also Ahmad Ibrahim, a Queen's Scholar who joined the local legal service and rose to be Advocate-General (of the State of Singapore) and was independent Singapore's first Attorney-General. He was responsible for the Administration of Muslim Law Act. Ahmad Ibrahim was smart, a good draftsman, and he had an eidetic memory. After Ahmad Ibrahim left for Malaysia, Tan Boon Teik became the Attorney-General.

Which development or constitutional moment of the '50s to '70s do you think has had the most wide-ranging ramifications for Singapore?

In 1972, there were a number of constitutional changes introduced, the main one being what is now known as Part Three, which concerns the surrender of sovereignty over Singapore. This was introduced because one of the smaller political parties of that era was advocating re-merger with Malaysia but Lee Kuan Yew said, "No, no, no!" So, a clause was introduced that requires the

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Minister for Labour and Law Kenny Byrne speaking at a rally, 1959. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

support of two-thirds majority at a national referendum for any amendment concerning the surrender of sovereignty or control over Singapore's military or police forces.

To me, as somebody who also works in international law, this is really important. This means that Parliament cannot on its own accord decide to negotiate on behalf of Singapore to join another country.

We've been speaking a lot about our founding leaders and their contributions, especially with regards to law. How do you see the role of the Founders' Memorial in commemorating the legacy and values embodied by our leaders?

The Founders' Memorial should be about individuals who embody a set of founding values that has shaped Singapore. I see it as an ongoing project that is never complete. There will be new stories to be told, there will always be people who have been forgotten and who should not then be closed off. It should be dynamic. Every time I come, I should see something new—new but the same—where we feature individuals who embody things that we value as Singaporeans, as a state, and as a people. And this is what you should find all the time.

On the new spirit—we wanted to hear from you, what you think the essence of this new spirit is, then and now, and how we reinterpret or live it.

Wow, that's a big one. I think the creation of the Singapore state is quite remarkable. Not just the economic aspect, because nobody thought we could survive economically, but also, the fact that we, a divided society in colonial times, could somehow cohere as a polity.

← State Advocate-General Ahmad Ibrahim inspecting the 26th Gan Eng Seng scout group during the opening of the school's annual exhibition, 1964. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

← Audience members at the National Day Parade, 9 August 2017. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

So, here was a real effort to forge a new nation. It all sounds like some civics lesson, but a new nation was forged out of sojourners. I mean, my grandfather never intended to stay. He was sending money back to China to buy more and more farmland until the Communists came. Then, he realised that he had no farmland to go back to. You've got people like that figuring out how to forge a new country, and I think that is the spirit.

It is a spirit of modernity, with a much more egalitarian society founded on the idea of equality. You have no royalty here. And so that is the new spirit. I think that makes Singapore really quite remarkable, and not a country that is shackled to the past. We always want to move forward because we want to be part of the modern world, but at the same time, because of our own respective identities, that is where the past sort of comes back in to define and gird us for the future.

Of course, always having to negotiate this is a work in motion. So, we are still moving towards that new spirit. We may have succeeded in creating a state, but perhaps we have not quite yet created a nation.

Nicholas Phoon is Assistant Curator at the Founders' Memorial.

Brian Patrick Tan is Senior Assistant Director (Curatorial & Engagement) at the Founders' Memorial.

How do we move forward?

Having attained the formal elements of statehood, Singapore now has to find a way to survive and thrive. After all, the new spirit does not exist merely as abstract principles, but finds meaning as we rise to the challenges confronting our young nation. Our response: to punch above our weight by going boldly where no one else has trod before. Looking outwards to the world is one aspect of this response, but so too is building up our self-reliance and resilience. The goal: creating a safe, liveable, and clean environment where Singaporeans can live, work, and play. But do we have the courage to make the tough decisions that will get us there?

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Yang di-Pertuan Negara Yusof bin Ishak, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Economic Development Board Chairman Hon Sui Sen, and Public Service Commission Chairman Dr Phay Seng Whatt looking over landmarks at Jurong Industrial Estate, 10 May 1964. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Standing on Our Own Two Feet: Konfrontasi and the Formation of the Vigilante Corps

On the night of 16 June 1964, two volunteers on patrol approached a suspicious figure at a construction site on Victoria Street.[1] These volunteers were members of the Vigilante Corps (VC), an organisation only recently instituted amid the ongoing Konfrontasi waged by Indonesia.[2] As the pair approached the clanging which emanated from within the construction site, memories of recent bombings, such as one at a Housing and Development Board block in Jalan Rebong two months before, must have run through their minds.[3] And yet, armed with nothing more than batons and torchlights, they approached—for if not them, then who?

Fortunately, the suspicious figure turned out to be nothing more than a thief pilfering steel bars.[4] The two patrolmen, Tan Jee Juan and Toh Eng Cheong, were later awarded commendation certificates for their prompt action.[5] All across Singapore, similar stories played out during this period of heightened tensions—ordinary civilians, unarmed and given six days of basic training, stepping up to safeguard communities.[6] Indeed, the contributions of the Vigilante Corps were particularly significant to Singapore's security then, as the tightly-strapped police force was facing difficult choices in prioritising the protection of infrastructure and military targets, versus patrolling soft targets such as residences and parks. Vigilante Corps volunteers who stepped forward to assist in patrols and operations were thus prime examples of the people of Singapore coming together to realise our nation's collective aspirations of standing on our own two feet. As this article will explore, courage and resolve did not exist just as abstract principles during this era of tumult and ferment, but often found concrete expression in citizens doing their part for the greater good.

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Recruitment handbook for the Vigilante Corps, 1967. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

by Benjamin Mok

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Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew speaking at the opening of a vigilante post at Gulega Road during his tour of Changi, 19 May 1963. The Gulega vigilante branch was a ground-up initiative established before the Vigilante Corps was officially formed. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Konfrontasi: A Deadly Security Threat

Volunteer neighbourhood patrols, such as those at Tiong Bahru, Somapah Road, and Gulega Road, existed in Singapore as isolated groups prior to 1964, operating as government-sanctioned but unofficial outfits.[7] These outfits consisted of ordinary residents of Singapore, not directly subject to central command, but instead taking cue from their own community leaders.[8] Some relied upon the resources granted by their local communities in order to function, with many given the label "vigilante" in recognition of their protective functions.[9] One such group, at Gulega Road, even grew to possess a physical post which was opened by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in 1963.

The official establishment of the Vigilante Corps as a formal outfit can however be traced back to the inception of Konfrontasi, a period of low-intensity conflict launched by Sukarno's Indonesia against Malaysia (with Singapore as a constituent part) from 1963 to 1966. Indonesia under the leadership of President Sukarno saw the formation of Malaysia as a British imperialist plot to dominate Southeast Asia. As political tensions heightened, Sukarno launched covert operations and terror attacks in Malaysia and Singapore in an effort to "*ganyang Malaysia*" (crush Malaysia).

From the start, soft targets such as residences and high-traffic areas were among those targeted for the bombing campaign. One of the earliest bombings in Singapore occurred in Sennett Estate on 9 December 1963, when a vehicle-borne explosive claimed the lives of two bystanders.[10] It was only in May the next year that a successful attack was carried out against a military target in Singapore: the Changi Royal Air Force base.[11] As such, it is likely that the attacks on civilian targets were a first rather than a last resort, part of a strategy embodying one of the core definitions of terrorism—"the deliberate creation of a sense of fear… to influence the political behaviour of a given target group".[12]

The potentially ubiquitous nature of the threat called for enhanced vigilance from the public. Such community vigilance, however, would have been unreliable without a wider security framework—such as an effective reporting system and kinetic response outfits—in which to operate.[15] Yet the police force was stretched thin amid the terror campaign, and could not alone bear the weight of operating such a security framework. Their work was already cut out for them—substantial police resources were dedicated to maritime patrols as part of a sea curfew established in August 1964, with the police also involved in efforts to provide protection for Malaysian fishermen from hostile Indonesian gunboats.[16] Furthermore, officers were stationed throughout Singapore on 24-hour standby.[17]

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Aftermath of the bomb explosion at MacDonald House in Orchard Road, 10 March 1965. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

And fear it caused—a scar on Singaporeans' memory that remains till today. Reverend Yeo Suan Kim, a survivor of the 1965 MacDonald House bombing, lost an eye as a result of the incident, which also left him with cuts all over his body. Speaking to *The Straits Times* in 2014, Yeo commented that it was years before he could walk past the area without fear, and that he had suffered from claustrophobia ever since.[13] Apart from Macdonald House, a whole spate of terror attacks was launched by Indonesian saboteurs throughout Singapore, claiming the lives of dozens and injuring many others. Among the lives claimed were two shopkeepers at Sennett Estate, a mother and daughter at Kampung Ubi, two bank employees, and a driver at Macdonald House.[14] The horror of these casualties, and the fear that these attacks could occur anywhere, no doubt preyed on the minds of people living in Singapore then.

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A baton used by members of the Vigilante Corps, c1960s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

← Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Home Affairs and Prime Minister's Office Stanley Stewart (second from left), with (from left to right) Acting Permanent Secretary to Ministry of National Development Sim Kee Boon, Prime Minister of Malaysia Tengku Abdul Rahman, Attorney-General Ahmad Ibrahim, and Cabinet Secretary Wong Chooi Sen, c1963–1965. Stanley Toft Stewart Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Taking Action: High-Level Discussions Begin

In December 1963, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew revealed in a ministerial statement to the Legislative Assembly the extent of the terror operations being carried out in Singapore at the time. In part, this was to assure the public that counterintelligence and national security forces were doing all they could to respond to the threat. By then, at least 24 persons had been detained, three dummy commercial organisations used as cover for operations discovered, and explosives and weapon caches found in various places—including a hedge behind a house near Chief Justice Wee Chong Jin's residence.[18]

The shorthandedness of the police prompted the government to take action. In Prime Minister Lee's statement, he spoke of the pressing need for the public to "give prompt and quick information on any suspicious movement of persons or cars."[19] This required eyes on the ground, and the creation of a supplementary outfit attached to the police force that could report incidents before kinetic force was applied. A few months later on 14 April 1964, Prime Minister Lee met Malaysian Federal Minister for the Interior Ismail Abdul Rahman in Kuala Lumpur, during which it was determined that actions should be taken in Singapore to safeguard areas around vital installations and to protect congested areas amid the Konfrontasi bombing campaign.[20]

↑ Deputy Commissioner of Police A. T. Rajah speaking at a Vigilante Corps meeting at the People's Association headquarters in Kallang, 19 September 1964. Source: *The Straits Times* (c) SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

It was with these requirements in mind that a meeting was chaired by Stanley Stewart, Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Home Affairs and Prime Minister's Office, to discuss the official formation of the Vigilante Corps (VC). This first meeting, held on 15 April 1964, brought together representatives from the Public Utilities Board, the Ministry of National Development, the Housing and Development Board, the Police, the People's Association, and the Singapore Work Brigade. Stewart opened the discussion by bringing up a past example of volunteer corps operating in Singapore—the system of home guards operating in Singapore during the Japanese occupation, known as the *Jikeidan*. He noted that the basis of recruitment into the *Jikeidan* was "coercion and fear", and that membership in it was, "for all practical purposes, compulsory and carried no renumeration". He then made it clear that "it was neither possible, nor desirable, to adopt this system"—indicating that the Vigilante Corps was not conceptualised as a burden placed upon the people by the government. The conversation then turned to ten informal vigilante groups that were already operating in Singapore then. Deputy Commissioner of Police A. T. Rajah responded that these groups, which were formed on the initiative of local residents alongside their legislative assemblymen, were noticeably effective in suppressing crime. The wheels were thus set in motion for the Vigilante Corps to be established, with the Ministry of Culture and the Housing and Development Board agreeing to publicise the initiative.[21]

Two days later, on 17 April 1964, the Prime Minister's Office announced that the Prime Minister had looked through the initial proposals and had given the green light to go ahead with the plan. With the broad strokes of the policy agreed upon, subsequent meetings then delved into the issue of publicity, training procedures, coordination of patrol duties by police divisions, equipment, and even the provision of refreshments for Vigilante Corps members during their patrols.[22]

→ Registration for the Vigilante Corps in progress, 22 April 1964. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Places and People: Drawing Together the Vigilante Corps

These policy discussions, however, only reveal half of the story behind the formation of the Vigilante Corps. The government had laid the groundwork and built the organisation's structure. But now, it had to give substance to the structure. To do so, it relied on two factors: places and people.

In terms of places, Community Centres (CCs) throughout Singapore, which were under the charge of the People's Association, arguably played a key role in the formation of the Corps. In fact, at the 15 April meeting, it was agreed that the island-wide network of CCs would be leveraged upon to coordinate the activities of the Corps. These centres thus served multiple purposes.[23] Firstly, they were the main centres of recruitment. The supervisor of a CC, which was always a full-time employee of the People's Association, coordinated with the officer-in-charge of the local police division to determine which volunteers should ultimately be selected for recruitment into the Corps.[24] Beyond that, CCs served as bases for the Corps' operations, where members reported at the start of shifts, and where they underwent their training.[25]

One resident of the Moulmein area, Chua Lai Teck, recounted in an oral history interview with the National Archives of Singapore in 2000 that the Corps' parades at Moulmein Community Centre resulted in other members of the community giving them the nickname *pak ngeow ci* (Hokkien for "hitting rats"), which was a reference to their nightly patrols with batons.[26] This points at a final, but perhaps most important purpose served by these community centres: public awareness. The Vigilante Corps and its activities were well-known, with parades carried out in the same building as housewives taking sewing classes, or folks watching communal TV.[27] Such publicity served to counteract the fear generated by the Konfrontasi terror campaign by creating a sense of safety—an act of fighting back against the saboteurs just as important as physical patrol.

As for people, individuals from all walks of life were instrumental in the formation of the Corps. Among the political leadership, it was arguably Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye who was most publicly and directly involved with the VC, speaking often at local VC meetings.[28] However, community leaders on the ground also rose to the occasion. The initial recruitment process relied on over 200 such individuals, who served as vital links in establishing the working relationship between the police force and the general populace, and who took on various leadership positions within the Corps.[29] One such community leader was Quah Wee Ho. When the government decided to set up the Corps, Quah was one of the first points of contact within his community, going out with his team to the nearby kampungs to recruit a total of 538 volunteers for the VC. He then went on to serve as a group leader for the VC's Boon Teck division, which oversaw 12 Corps stations. Every alternate day, Quah would check the attendance at each station, before reporting the numbers and any relevant information to the police.[30] By the end of the first registration period on 16 May 1964, the efforts of men like Quah had led to a total of 14,822 registrations for voluntary service.[31]

↑
Vigilante Corps members practising judo at People's Association facilities in Kallang, 31 August 1966. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

↑
Vigilante Corps members patrolling a building site, 16 June 1964. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

↓
Deputy Prime Minister Dr Toh Chin Chye donning the Vigilante Corps armband during a visit to Beach Road Community Centre, 2 May 1965. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

↓
Deputy Prime Minister Dr Toh Chin Chye delivering his speech at a Vigilante Corps gathering at Kranji Community Centre, 18 May 1965. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The Vigilante Corps' Operations and Modus Operandi

How did the Vigilante Corps operate and what tasks did they take on? Primarily, members of the Vigilante Corps were tasked with carrying out night patrols, with the first shift from 6pm to 9pm, and the second from 9pm to midnight. Considerations for the welfare of these members, who still had to work at their day jobs, as well as the large number of volunteers, meant that each Corps member was only on duty once a week.[32] They were deployed in groups of four, six, or eight, or in larger numbers as required, and were to bring on patrol their Letters of Appointment, endorsed by the police.[33] For early batches of volunteers, training involved a six-day course in unarmed combat and first aid.[34] Part of this training period also involved a series of lectures on criminal law.[35]

Quah Wee Ho, the aforementioned group leader of the Boon Teck division, recounted in an oral history interview with the National Archives of Singapore in 1993 that the Corps was particularly effective due to their familiarity with the local community. In tight-knit kampung communities, it was easy for Corps members to spot strangers. Thus, they knew who to question, and ensured that strangers were not allowed to loiter in public places, lest they turn out to be saboteurs.[36] Corps members also carried out duties that the police force was too busy to handle, such as the "recovering of subversive documents scattered on our public roads by enemy agents".[37] While less glamourous than the arrest operations and discovery of arms caches, these duties were nevertheless crucial in acting against the primary goal of the Konfrontasi terror campaign, which was to sow fear and discord within the general populace. At times, they also assisted in the maintenance of law and order, assisting the police in the arrest of robbers, house breakers, and thieves.[38]

↑
A Vigilante Corps contingent from Yio Chu Kang participating in the VC's 1st anniversary celebrations at Jalan Besar Stadium, 12 June 1965. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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Vigilante Corps on patrol at Bukit Panjang, 1 July 1964. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

A Sense of Service and Sacrifice: The Vigilante Corps' Legacy

By 1967, the nature of the Vigilante Corps had changed dramatically, as the threat of Konfrontasi subsided. The passing of the Vigilante Corps Act in September 1967 ensured that it was no longer a non-statutory voluntary organisation, but rather a part of a National Service scheme in which both servicemen and volunteers would assist the police force in the maintenance of law and order.[39] More recently, in 2022, the Singapore Police Force announced that all remaining officers under the VC scheme would be transferred to the Special Constabulary scheme. This marked the formal end of the Vigilante Corps, after a remarkable 55 years.[40]

An examination of the VC's brief history, however, showcases that the Corps played a critical role in nation-building, even after the end of Konfrontasi. Between the 1960s and 1980s, the government recognised that the Corps represented an opportunity for building community cohesion, especially among youths. In a speech at Tanjong Pagar Community Centre in December 1966, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew spoke about how there were no longer saboteurs for the Vigilante Corps to catch, but there were still other problems to solve, such as the threat of gangsters and illegal immigrants. More importantly, he highlighted how time spent in the Corps would help members "learn how to be a good citizen; how to be fit; how to be honest, effective and deserving of belonging to a community with the highest social and living standards in Southeast Asia."[41]

The early impetus behind the Corps' formation—helping a young nation to stand on its own two feet—thus found expression in new initiatives to keep Singapore secure. One member of the reorganised Vigilante Corps in the late 1960s, Steven Teo, recalled in an oral history interview with the National Archives of Singapore in 2018 that his time was mostly spent assisting the police in drug busts. With two volunteers assigned to larger police squads, VC members provided auxiliary assistance to the police, helping them detain substance abusers.[42]

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A shirt, name badge, whistle, and cap belonging to Haji Adam Pasiman, an officer in the Vigilante Corps, c1960s–1980s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

In hindsight, the Vigilante Corps stands out as a bold initiative demonstrating the importance of self-reliance and resilience in safeguarding our nation's sovereignty and security. Although the Corps began as a government initiative in response to the challenges of Konfrontasi, it must be remembered that it was preceded by neighbourhood watch groups formed as self-help groups by inhabitants of crime-prone areas. Whether formed organically by concerned citizens, or enlisted in response to a call from the government, the participants in these volunteer security forces shared a common purpose of keeping their communities safe. By stepping forward and putting themselves in harm's way to protect their neighbours and fellow citizens, the VC exemplified the sense of service and sacrifice imbued in our pioneering generations—the very values which are at the heart of the Singapore spirit.

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Yang di-Pertuan Negara Yusof Ishak presenting certificates of commendation during the VC's 1st anniversary celebrations at Jalan Besar Stadium, 12 June 1965. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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SEEN AND HEARD IN
SEMANGAT YANG BARU

SEMANGAT YANG BARU FORGING A NEW SINGAPORE SPIRIT

Apart from the Vigilante Corps, another security outfit formed during this period was the People's Defence Force (PDF), which came into being following the passage of the People's Defence Force Bill on 30 December 1965. Like the VC, the early PDF was primarily made up of volunteers, who stepped forward to safeguard Singapore's sovereignty at a time when conscription-based National Service had yet to be introduced. The PDF was later integrated into the Singapore Armed Forces.

↑
First People's Defence Force (PDF) Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) orientation course at Maju Camp, 1968. Gift of Seet Ah Bah. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

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Food for Thought: Grit, Gumption, and Growing a Global City

Buying groceries at the supermarket: a weekly ritual that we often take for granted. This predictable routine was interrupted a few times in the last few years, when global and regional events threatened to disrupt the availability of daily essentials.

In Singapore, many of us witnessed the mass panic buying of goods such as rice and noodles during the COVID-19 pandemic, which left brimming supermarket shelves looking rather empty and sad. Later in 2020, Malaysia suspended the export of live chickens to Singapore for weeks, while more recently, the war in Ukraine has resulted in rising global food prices from which we have not been spared.

Thankfully, food shortages did not materialise given the resilience of Singapore's food supply, as we have been diversifying our food sources and stockpiling essential supplies for years. The instability of this period nevertheless brings to mind the early days of our nation-building years, when we similarly had to safeguard our food sources amid a volatile and unpredictable economic climate. At that time, it was believed that the development of local food processing industries would strengthen Singapore's food security. Later, when Singapore shifted to export-oriented industrialisation, these companies and their workers had to adapt rapidly to new economic realities.

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Clockwise from left to right:

Advertisement poster for prawn crackers, early–mid 20th century. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Advertisement for Prima Limited's Flour Mills, c1980. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Tray advertising Yeo Hiap Seng's chicken essence, 1970s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Thye Hong Red Lion biscuit tin, 1980s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Soy sauce bottle from the Amoy Canning Corporation, c1960s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

by Maegin Ma, Yashica Manesh Moolachandani, Adena Ho, and Rion Oh

For this project, a company we were able to find out more about was Woh Hup Food Industries, a local sauce manufacturing company that produces ready-mixed bottles of Asian sauces. The founder of the company, Mr Chou Yeng Lan, initially ran a noodle shop in New Bridge Road but saw an opportunity to go into food manufacturing as Singapore was rapidly integrating into the global economy in the 1970s. One of Woh Hup Food Industries' staff during this time was Mrs Elen Chow, the company's operations manager from 1969 to 1994 and grandmother of one of our co-writers, Maegin Ma.

Our conversation with Mrs Chow gave us an interesting perspective on how self-reliance and resilience are deeply intertwined with being open and interconnected with the world. As our subsequent reflections will show, far from being two mutually opposing qualities, it was the collective act of individuals and businesses standing on their own two feet that allowed Singapore to weather the storms of a young nation-state finding its place in the world.

Locally Processed Food for Local Markets

While not widely known, establishing a domestic food manufacturing capability was a significant part of Singapore's early industrialisation drive in the 1960s. At that time, it was thought that processing and producing simple consumer goods could reduce our reliance on potentially costly imports.[1] Further, food processing industries did not require huge capital investments or advanced technological capabilities. As such, it was decided that Singapore would embark on domestic food manufacturing and the early 1960s was thus marked by the rapid opening of complexes such as flour mills, biscuit factories, sauce manufacturing firms, creameries, and even sugar refineries.[2]

What motivated companies to set up factories and plants across Singapore was the granting of pioneer certificates by the Economic Development Board (EDB), which provided tax breaks and tariff exemptions. Another compelling motivation for these companies was the dream of a common market with Malaysia, which would facilitate the export of goods to consumers in the region.[3]

Dr Goh Keng Swee, Singapore's Minister for Finance from 1959 to 1965 (and later from 1967 to 1970), ardently supported the drive to build a local food processing sector. Week after week, he opened factory after factory with the belief that Singapore could operate as a hub for processing raw materials from the Malaysian hinterland and beyond. At the opening of Khong Guan Flour Mill on 31 March 1964, Dr Goh noted that Singapore had previously been reliant on flour from wheat-growing countries such as Canada and Australia. Looking to the future, he expressed his delight that biscuit factories and bakeries were now able to "procure locally milled flour, and at a lower cost too".[4]

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A tin of biscuits produced by Khong Guan Biscuit Factory, 1950s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Prima Limited

Prima Limited's $10 million flour mill, located at the Singapore Harbour Board, was opened by Dr Goh Keng Swee on 18 August 1963. The mill had 26 silos which could store 15,000 tons of wheat. It processed and milled grain arriving from ships into wheat flour that was used in the manufacturing of bread, noodles, and biscuits. Six months after the opening of Prima Flour Mill, Khong Guan Flour Mill opened for business.

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Catalogue for Prima Limited's Flour Mills, 1985. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

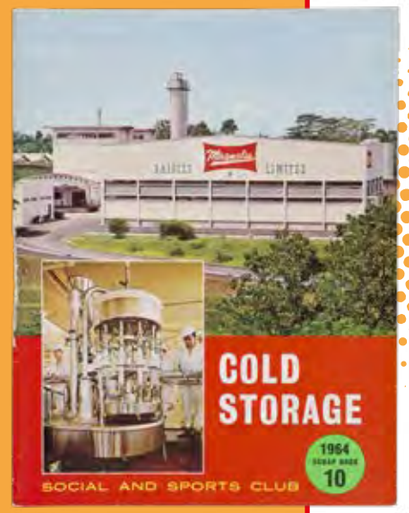
Sugar Industry of Singapore

In 1963, Singapore consumed 68,400 tons of sugar, representing 28% of total sugar consumption in Malaysia. This prompted the Economic Development Board to examine the viability of a sugar refinery which could process, pack, and distribute sugar to the rest of Malaysia. Eventually, a joint venture between entrepreneurs from Singapore and Japan led to the opening of Sugar Industry of Singapore (SIS). The foundation stone for the company's plant at Jurong Industrial Estate was laid by Dr Goh on 24 October 1964.

←
Minister for Finance Dr Goh Keng Swee at the opening of the Sugar Industry of Singapore's factory in Jurong three years after he laid its foundation stone, 17 November 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Magnolia Diaries

In the 1960s, Magnolia Diaries, a subsidiary of Cold Storage, embarked on the production of sweetened condensed milk and reconstituted milk at its complex in Bukit Timah. At the opening of the company's reconstituted milk plant on 24 August 1964, Dr Goh spoke about how the production of local tinned milk, a high-volume product, would reduce reliance on the need for them to be imported over thousands of miles.



→
Cold Storage *Social and Sports Club Scrap Book* Issue 10 featuring the Magnolia Dairies factory at Hillview, Bukit Timah, 1964. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

General Food Industries

General Food Industries started operations at Redhill Industrial Estate on 9 August 1964. With a labour force of 33 workers, the plant commenced operations producing 10,000 packets of Smith's Potato Crisps daily. These crisps were exported throughout Peninsular Malaysia and Borneo. At its opening, Dr Goh spoke about a future in which Singapore could produce *wanton*, *dimsum*, and *bakkwa*.

←
Minister for Finance Dr Goh Keng Swee touring General Food Industries, 9 August 1964. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

> **"We already have [the] beginnings of food processing in Singapore... But these are very limited compared with the prepared foods that are imported from other countries. When one thinks of the sponge cakes and meat pies which have found their way [from] thousands of miles to Singapore shops, one cannot help asking whether we could not, in turn, [produce] more of our local delicacies."**
>
> Minister for Finance Dr Goh Keng Swee at the opening of General Food Industries, 9 August 1964

Looking Outwards: Tensions and Debates in Opening to the World

After 9 August 1965, the dream to produce for local and regional markets became infinitely more complex as Singapore's separation from Malaysia meant the loss of a natural hinterland and export market. All of a sudden, food processing companies had to cast their eyes further afield for suitable markets, while contending with new Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) drawn here by Singapore's investor-friendly environment.

It was in this context that Woh Hup, the company which our interviewee worked in, was officially incorporated in 1971. Formally trained as a nurse, Mrs Chow only joined the family business as her father-in-law, the company's founder, was in ill health. She then became part of an industry which then boasted major names such as Amoy Canning Corporation, Tai Hua, and Yeo Hiap Seng Limited, all of which grappled with the unpredictable changes and tensions that came with a rapidly globalising Singapore.[5]

According to Mrs Chow, the decision to open Singapore's economy to technologically-advanced foreign companies was a major challenge that confronted local companies like Woh Hup in the 1970s and 1980s. Although local companies were supported by EDB through funds to mechanise and modernise, a few struggled with the pace at which Singapore was globalising as a city and economy. Indeed, this bold policy of opening our doors wide to the world went against the grain of accepted economic logic back then. At times, there were even concerns if this was the right strategy for Singapore's development, and if local industries would be adversely affected.

Records from the 1970s showed that Members of Parliament had expressed concern about competition between local goods and foreign-made ones. In a parliamentary speech in 1973, P. Govindaswamy, the Member of Parliament for Anson, commented, "Foreign manufactured articles are allowed to compete with locally-made products at prices where the difference is small. Surely some form of tariff can be imposed on foreign products so that they can be priced out of the market."[6] This showed us that the tension between local and global, which we see even today in debates on foreign workers and trade agreements, is

联合晚报

Lianhe Wanbao

6 联合晚报 行情 农历壬申年正月十四 1992年2月17日（星期一）

从传统面食店到现代化工厂

和合蚝油畅销海外

制作生面和面干

生产酱料与罐头

隔邻扩建新厂房

本地企业的成功故事

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An article in《联合晚报》(*Lianhe Wanbao*) on Mrs Elen Chow and her role in developing Woh Hup Food Industries. The title of the article speaks of Woh Hup's transformation from noodle shop to modern factory exporting to customers worldwide. Source:《联合晚报》(*Lianhe Wanbao*) © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

not entirely new. Even as late as the 1980s, prominent businessmen such as former Minister for Commerce in the Labour Front government J. M. Jumabhoy argued that Singapore should adopt a more selective policy towards foreign investment:

> If they (foreign investors) want to build motor-cars here, certainly we [should] allow because we don't know [how to]. But if they want to make biscuits here, we [should] not allow.[7]

Bringing Singapore to the World

For all the pain it caused, in retrospect, the decision to open Singapore to the world was the catalyst that allowed local companies and Singapore to survive and thrive. This was because local companies were compelled to go out to find new markets, and compete with major enterprises on the international stage. As Mrs Chow reflected, "Singapore is a small country. You have to go out and do export. That's the only way we can survive." Her words echoed that of S. Rajaratnam, independent Singapore's first Minister for Foreign Affairs, who mentioned in his 1972 Global City speech that "the alternative to not moving into the global economic system is, for a small Singapore, certain death".[8]

For Mrs Chow, selling to the world meant being adaptable and enterprising in devising new products, and pairing this with a relentless, never-say-die attitude. She shared an incident in which a prospective American customer came to her with a business proposal. Faced with the daunting task of creating a new product for the US market, she spent days and nights in the laboratory, experimenting and testing with various sauce concoctions, until the American customer was satisfied and awarded her company the contract. In her words, "We could not just stand still doing local products like oyster sauce and soya sauce and all those stuff. So we developed a range of products for the overseas market."

What we found in the National Heritage Board's National Collection was evidence of other local companies innovating in a

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Export catalogue for Yeo Hiap Seng products, 1985. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

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A set of two original Yeo Hiap Seng canned drinks, 1980s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

similar way as well. For example, an export catalogue by Yeo Hiap Seng Limited from the 1980s lists dozens of items from canned asparagus and lettuce, to jackfruits in syrup, and even five different flavours of instant noodles! Our guess that these items were Yeo Hiap Seng's response to global demand was corroborated when we listened to a 1983 oral interview conducted by National Archives of Singapore with Yeo Thian Seng, the second-generation owner of the company. Like Woh Hup, Yeo Hiap Seng had to contend with foreign competition and it responded by adapting to the times, expanding into Hong Kong, Kuching, and England in the 1970s. Mr Yeo expressed the importance of ceaseless innovation with this anecdote:

"Our chicken curry, mutton curry were our famous products. But in Hong Kong, people there could not take food that are too hot, unlike people here in Singapore. So these products of ours were specially made not so hot, the amount of chillies used were reduced to suit their taste buds. [We also introduced] sambal dried shrimps, sambal ikan bilis, satay sauce, and kaya. All these were what they didn't have in Hong Kong then."[9]

Coping with Change: Human Stories of Grit and Gumption

Ultimately, while companies and institutions were on the frontlines of change, it was the grit and determination of individuals such as our interviewee, Mrs Chow, that made possible Singapore's growth as a global city. In a 1986 interview with *Lianhe Zaobao*, Mrs Chow shared that in Woh Hup's early years, she was often brought to tears at

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Women packing and labelling products at a cocoa and chocolate factory, 30 January 1966. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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Women workers at the Singapore Timepiece Manufacturing Company, 19 July 1969. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

the immensity of the task she faced. Yet, she persevered, believing that "whatever you do, do it with determination, do it well, or don't do it at all".[10] Her courageous words led us to wonder if there were more examples of such women—whether in management roles or on the factory floor—embodying this spirit of grit and gumption.

We found in the archives that there were indeed many stories of women boldly adapting to the challenges of a globalising Singapore. As MNCs flooded into Singapore in the 1970s and 1980s, women worked in industries ranging from garment factories, to metalwork, and even armament production. One example we came across in the archives was the story of Lina Koh, who was just 19 when she started working at a toy factory in Ayer Rajah in 1981. A few years later, the factory shuttered its doors when its parent company in Hong Kong wound down, and laid off 300 workers, Ms Koh included. Undeterred, she found a new job in the service industry, and picked up new skills by obtaining a Certificate in Business Studies.[11] Another story came from Vasanthara Devi. Madam Devi worked in the bonding department at the Fairchild factory in Toa Payoh for 18 years, from 1973 to 1991. For almost all of this time, she worked the night shift from 11pm to 7am, and rarely saw her children during the daytime. When automation was introduced, she quickly adapted and became the "lead girl" in charge of training and giving materials to other workers on the factory floor.[12]

Of course, working in factories was not without its hazards and sacrifices. Mrs Chow, for example, suffered burns as a result of a work-related accident. When we dug deeper, we found that industrial accidents and risks to life were not uncommon for workers in rapidly industrialising Singapore. Yet, many of these men and women pushed on with grit and resilience. These were the individuals whose collective efforts brought Singapore onto the world stage.

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The writers of this piece (from left to right: Rion, Maegin, and Yashica) with our interviewee, Mrs Elen Chow (third from left).

Self-Reliance and Resilience in a Global World

Today, as the world weathers multiple economic and health storms, we sometimes hear talk of "deglobalisation"—a trend in which individuals and societies respond to global ills by looking inwards and decoupling themselves from global flows of trade, people, and ideas.

Our journey through history has revealed that at least for Singapore, such a situation may neither be feasible nor ideal. To be sure, global forces will continue to ebb and flow, constantly throwing up unexpected challenges that will require us to reinvent ourselves. Yet, as a small island-nation, we cannot exist without the world as our hinterland. We thus need to be resilient to shocks and turbulence, and stand ready to seize new opportunities when they come our way. A spirit of self-reliance and being open to the world are thus two halves of the same whole, just as how Singapore is both a nation at its core, and a global city looking outwards to the world.

Maegin Ma, Yashica Manesh Moolachandani, Adena Ho, and Rion Oh were student participants in the 2022–2023 run of the Ministry of Education's Humanities Talent Development Programme. The Founders' Memorial is a regular partner of the programme, and provides its students with opportunities to be involved in programmes, workshops, and research tasks. This reflective piece was written in conjunction with the Founders' Memorial Curatorial team, which provided research and writing guidance.

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An Island of Possibilities: Deliberations and Decisions in Sentosa's Birth

An island off the coast of Singapore, dotted with military buildings and cut off from the mainland. No, not Pulau Tekong, but Pulau Blakang Mati, better known today as Sentosa. The same island which is now home to world-class hotels and attractions, and delights visitors with sun, sand, and sea. So how was the Blakang Mati of yesteryear transformed into the Sentosa of today?

For younger generations of Singaporeans, Blakang Mati is perhaps known for the myth that the guns used during the Battle of Singapore in 1942 were positioned wrongly and faced the wrong direction. Blakang Mati then disappears from our historical consciousness until its reappearance as Sentosa, complete with monorail and cable car.

One could thus say that no part of Singapore had undergone as dramatic a change in landscape as Sentosa. Even then, there was nothing inevitable about the final form the island took. A fortress, a deep-water port, an oil refinery, a casino, and a tourist destination were among the possibilities considered when the British handed Blakang Mati over to the Singapore government in 1967. Not many visitors would be aware of this, but it was a process of careful consideration of the trade-offs inherent in each potential choice, coupled with foresight and decisive action, which led to the island we know today as Sentosa.

←
Monorail train and cable cars at Sentosa, 1980s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

by Nicholas Phoon

← Topographic map of Pulau Blakang Mati, 1953. Mangrove swamps, denoted by blue dashes, cover what is now Serapong Golf Course and Sentosa Golf Club. Courtesy of Singapore Land Authority.

↓ Governor Sir Robert Black visiting Royal Artillery troops at Pulau Blakang Mati, 20 November 1957. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Post-war Blakang Mati: From the British Army to the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF)

When the British Army returned to Singapore after the Second World War, business-as-usual resumed on Pulau Blakang Mati, at least for a time. The island continued to be used as a British military base until 1967, with its last British occupants coming from the Royal Artillery.[1] With regular drill sessions and soldiers housed in wooden and brick barracks, conditions were not too different from other British bases on the mainland, such as Seletar or Changi, apart from the need for a ferry to reach Singapore. For British soldiers stationed on Blakang Mati, a boat was also the easiest way to reach the other side of the island.[2]

1967 saw the first of many dramatic changes come over Blakang Mati. Having played host to the British Army for the past eight decades, the island was returned to the Singapore government on 1 September 1967 as part of Britain's gradual retreat from the Far East.[3] In fact, four years prior, in 1963, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations Duncan Sandys had already reached a written agreement that the island constituted prime land that should be returned expeditiously for Singapore's future development.[4] Blakang Mati's eventual handover was thus no surprise, but more dramatic was Britain's announcement in July of the same year that they would withdraw from Singapore entirely by the mid-1970s. Later, in January 1968, this end date was brought forward dramatically to 1971.[5]

↓ A letter from Lee Kuan Yew to Duncan Sandys, the United Kingdom's Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, outlining future plans for the island of Blakang Mati, 9 July 1963. Courtesy of Parliament of Singapore.

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PRIME MINISTER,
SINGAPORE.

9th July 1963.

Dear Secretary of State,

I refer to your letter of 8th July, 1963, confirming the intention of the British Government to release to the Government of Singapore the lands set out in the schedule attached to your letter.

With regard to Blakang Mati, the Singapore Government wishes to point out that large areas of the Island is unoccupied and under jungle. However, the Singapore Government is agreeable to your request for time until August, 1966 to vacate the Island completely, provided that in the meantime the Singapore Government is given access to carry out preliminary development work required.

I have noted the arrangements you propose to make regarding cultivation of the land in the Sembawang Naval Base area.

With regard to the three other areas, I have to inform you that agreement has been reached with the Federation Government.

I wish to state that after Malaysia day, state lands made available, which remain in the possession of the Services Authorities, will require to be transferred to the Federal Government on 31-year leases with nominal premium, and that the Federal Government will have the authority to issue sub-leases to the United Kingdom Services Authority.

Finally, I note the new paragraph which you propose to add to Annexe G (now re-numbered Annexe F) and have no objection thereto.

Yours sincerely,

Lee Kuan Yew.

The Rt. Hon. Duncan Sandys, M.P.
Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations.

> **The whole island is yours, now you're the Governor of the island...**
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> • • • • •
>
> A comment by a British Royal Artillery Major at the handing-over of Blakang Mati to the Singapore Naval Volunteer Force representative, Roland V. Simon, on 1 September 1967.

At first, little changed with the handover of Blakang Mati to the Singapore government. With long-term plans for the island still in the making, the government continued using the island for military activities for a time, with a Naval School (1969–1973)[6], engineer training courses, and one of the Army's Basic Military Training facilities sited there.[7] The Naval School hosted trainees of the newly-established Singapore Naval Volunteer Force, which was formed on 1 January 1966 with just two ships.[8]

Jaswant Singh Gill, the first Commander of the Singapore Naval Volunteer Force, found himself concurrently the Commanding Officer of Blakang Mati Camp. In a 2001 oral history interview, he recalled: "It was something new to me [...] to be responsible [as] commanding officer. Before this my responsibilities were at a lower level, there was always a captain and somebody to report to, to tell us what to do. [...] Once I took over Pulau Brani and Blakang Mati, I was on my own to run it at its best." Mr Singh Gill more than rose to the occasion, and put the British facilities to good use in growing the nascent SAF.

←
P. O. Anvar leading a Singapore Naval Volunteer Force parade on Blakang Mati, 1968. MRNVR/Singapore Naval Volunteer Reserve Confrontation Veterans Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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An aerial view of oil tanks at Pulau Bukom, 1986. Gift of Yeo Choon Ho. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

As soldiers and seamen sweated it out on the island, plans were put in motion for Blakang Mati's transformation. As early as August 1967, a month before the island was handed over by the British, *The Straits Times* reported that Blakang Mati was being considered for industries, deep-water berths, and tourism, with an option for a casino. Speaking in June 1967 at a dinner hosted by the Singapore Tourist Association, Minister for Law and National Development E. W. Barker described the deliberations as follows: "The Defence Minister wants the security guns there first. The Finance Minister wants part of the island for industries and the Port of Singapore Authority needs it for more deep water berths. I sincerely hope tourism will not be left out."[9]

Petrochemicals and Port Facilities—An Industrial Blakang Mati?

One possible future for Blakang Mati that was likely on Barker's mind was the creation of a petrochemical hub. By 1967, the multinational oil company, Shell, had already been operating its refinery on Pulau Bukom, an island situated further off the west coast of Singapore for the preceding six years. This first refinery had been originally designed to process a million barrels of crude oil per year but by 1967, it was processing two million barrels per year and works for a second refinery that would be able to process three million barrels per year had already begun.[10]

With the success of the Shell project, officers at the Economic Development Board (EDB), who were responsible for attracting foreign investment to Singapore, were on the lookout for similar projects. When Esso, another multinational oil company, expressed interest in establishing a refinery on Blakang Mati, EDB leapt at the opportunity. The Esso facility would bring in more foreign investments, provide job opportunities for locals, and help promote Singapore as a stable and attractive place to do business. Dr Albert Winsemius, a United Nations Development Programme official who was then serving as Chief Economic Advisor to the Singapore government,

Economic Development Board (EDB) Press Conference chaired by EDB Director Lim Ho Hup (second from right), announcing the commencement of study led by Canadian company McNamara Engineering Limited to investigate usage of Pulau Blakang Mati, 24 August 1966. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

recalled: "The Shell and Esso projects were really the first large projects with which our EDB representatives could say, well if these firms with their experience all over the world have sufficient confidence in Singapore to invest such amounts of money, you can rely on them [to have made a good decision]."[11]

At around the same time, a Canadian team of professional engineers was also surveying the southern coastline of Singapore. In February 1967, hydrometers for measuring current and tide patterns were placed at three points—one between Sisters' Islands and St John's Island, one south of Blakang Mati, and one at Tanjong Terlitip off Jurong. The results of the survey would help to determine the specific location of Singapore's new industrial harbour. Given the favourable depth of the waters off Blakang Mati, members of the engineering team had already indicated that Blakang Mati was a favoured location for the new port.[12] By September, it seemed all but certain that specifically the southern coast of Blakang Mati—where Sentosa's beaches are situated now—would become a new port area.[13]

Amid these swirling possibilities, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB, now known as the Singapore Tourism Board) was preparing plans for a tourism complex, including a casino, to be built on Blakang Mati.[14] The competing port and petrochemical complex proposals meant that any tourist areas on Blakang Mati would have to be sited with extreme care, as they would be sharing the island with a number of relatively unsightly and potentially pollutive uses. The brother-in-law of Macau gambling magnate Stanley Ho even hinted at the possibility of Mr Ho's casino chain expanding to Singapore if given the green light by the government: "Money is the least problem. If the Singapore government is prepared to give us the franchise, we will spare nothing to build a first-class casino on Blakang Mati."[15]

Green Lung, Tourism Island: Blakang Mati becomes Sentosa

Why, then, did these visions of Blakang Mati not come to pass? Arguably, two of the key players involved in creating the Sentosa of today were United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Advisor Dr Albert Winsemius, and Head of the Urban Renewal Department Alan Choe. As the government's Chief Economic Advisor, Dr Winsemius recognised the importance of the proposed Esso project on Blakang Mati, but later recalled that he was "dismayed" when he heard about it. By 1967, Dr Winsemius saw that Singapore was on the road to affluence, which would result in expectations among Singaporeans of a higher standard of living and with it, more areas for recreation and leisure.[16]

Dr Winsemius sought the help of Alan Choe (who later became Chairman of Sentosa Development Corporation) to think of an alternative use for Blakang Mati. "I told him I can't think of anything else," recalled Mr Choe. "The only thing the island can do—we know it's the only green lung we have—is we turn it into a tourism island."[17] Thus, over the course of one weekend, a basic, but ambitious proposal to turn Blakang Mati into a holiday destination was prepared for Dr Winsemius to present to Minister for Finance Dr Goh Keng Swee.[18]

> **Although we were at the very beginning of our economic development, I was quite sure that we had taken off and it was just a matter of a few years before we would have full employment[.] [...] That meant that we had to take into account that over 10 or 20 years from [1967] we would have a much higher level of living than we had at the time. That meant that we needed room for people to spend their time and [...] money.**
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> Dr Albert Winsemius, in a 1982 oral history interview with the National Archives of Singapore

Former UNDP Advisor Dr Albert Winsemius (third from right) being briefed by Chairman of Sentosa Development Corporation (SDC) Alan Choe (second from right), 15 December 1993. Albert Winsemius Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

But Cabinet and Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew still had to be convinced. To come to a decision, PM Lee decided to bring the proponents of the various proposals to Blakang Mati for a site visit. Armed with a "beautiful drawing", Dr Winsemius argued his case for a tourist island. He was aided, he recalled, by the sight of a discarded beer can spotted by PM Lee near several buildings occupied by the SAF: "I had the impression, that [was the] moment he decided: don't give it to the military."[19] As to the alternative suggestion for a petrochemical complex, Dr Winsemius promised that he would convince Esso to resite their refinery—a bold, even risky promise, given that Blakang Mati had been specifically chosen by the oil company, but one that paid off in the end.[20] With the help of the Canadian team that had been surveying Blakang Mati, an alternative site for Esso in Jurong was found. Eventually, Dr Winsemius successfully convinced Esso executives in New York that Jurong was a better place for the refinery, as it was further away from the city and thus, offered more space for growth.[21]

Once the decision had been made by PM Lee and Cabinet, likely during or shortly after the fateful site visit to the island, Mr S. Dhanabalan, who was working at EDB as its first industrial economist, recalled that the announcement was met with some unhappiness among EDB officers. However, Dr Goh Keng Swee overruled any suggestion of Esso building its refinery on Blakang Mati, insisting that it be kept for recreation.[22] As Minister for Finance, Dr Goh, saw tourism as a way to boost Singapore's economy, and hence championed the proposal to turn Sentosa into a tourist destination. That said, he also had an appreciation for the more intangible facets of Singapore's development, as evidenced by his later involvement in the creation of Jurong Bird Park and the Singapore Symphony Orchestra.[23] The Esso refinery was eventually built on Pulau Ayer Chawan, now part of Jurong Island.[24]

> **I'm glad that I tackled it rather drastically at that time because it would [...] have been a major mistake to have [Blakang Mati] full of factories.**
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> Dr Albert Winsemius, in a 1982 oral history interview with the National Archives of Singapore

↑ The seven-man UNDP team led by Dr Albert Winsemius (centre) arriving in Singapore 4 October 1960. Source: *The Straits Times*, © Singapore Press Holdings. Permission required for reproduction.

↑ Deputy Prime Minister Dr Goh Keng Swee inspecting a cable car during the opening of Sentosa's cable car system, 15 February 1974. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

→ Sentosa cable cars travelling between Mount Faber and Jardine Steps stations, mid-1970s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Proceeding with Tourism

Having decided on the tourism island concept, STPB announced in November 1969 that a contest would be held to select a new name for the island, with the winning entry standing to win $500.[25] Ultimately, the prize was shared equally among five individuals who separately came up with the name Sentosa, which means "tranquillity" in Malay.[26]

Recognising that the development of Sentosa would be a major undertaking that would require a permanent organisation, Mr Hon Sui Sen, who had taken over the Finance portfolio from Dr Goh Keng Swee, moved the Sentosa Development Corporation (SDC) Bill in Parliament in March 1972. Upon its incorporation on 1 September 1972, SDC took over the whole Sentosa project. Prior to this, the responsibility of developing the island was split among various agencies such as the Jurong Town Corporation (JTC) and the Urban Renewal Department.[27] In its early days, SDC found itself taking over the implementation of projects which had been started by these other agencies, such as Fort Siloso. Plans for a gun museum at the fort were being drawn up by JTC as early as 1970, though the fort was eventually only opened to the public in 1975.[28]

Since then, the physical transformation of Sentosa over the years has been dramatic. Connected to the mainland by road, promenade, and monorail, the island is frequented by locals and tourists alike. The tourism island concept has since been expanded to include housing at Sentosa Cove, and the casino idea, first mooted in the 1960s, has now been realised in the form of Resorts World Sentosa.

With the benefit of hindsight, the island's current state acquires a sense of inevitability. Ideally situated close enough to the city centre to be convenient, yet at a distance suitable for a getaway; dotted with heritage buildings with a connection to both colonial and wartime Singapore; covered in lush greenery a world away from the busy shipping lanes just off its shores—it is easy to assume that the decision to turn Blakang Mati into Sentosa was a clearcut, natural one to make.

Perhaps it would do well for us to remember that Blakang Mati was indeed an island of possibilities. If not for a process of hard deliberations to negotiate those divergent

Map of Sentosa showing latest attractions, mid-1970s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

I hope Sentosa Development Corporation will try to keep this island as a retreat for those who seek a place where they can walk, without competing with cars, lorries and buses; a place where they can swim in the sea without bothering about tide-tables; and, most important, a place where they can get away from the noise of machines.

• • • • •

PM Lee Kuan Yew speaking at the opening of the Sentosa Golf Club, 14 July 1974

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew playing a round of golf at the opening of Sentosa Golf Club, 14 July 1974. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

A panoramic view of Resorts World Sentosa, 2022. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

possibilities, that same shoreline may look very different today. Perhaps, like Tekong, Blakang Mati might still be off limits to the public, hidden behind gates and barbed wire; like Bukom, an island dedicated to the petrochemical industry; or, like Tuas Port, covered in cranes and shipping containers.

To this end, a present-day observer is obliged to acknowledge that setting aside prime real estate for a green lung amid the turbulent 1960s was a bold and visionary move. This move planted the seeds for Sentosa's transformation into a sustainable lifestyle destination, a mantle which continues to inspire and drive its development in the present. The Sentosa story, therefore, is much more than sandy beaches and pristine waters—it is also about the courage and tenacity of our early leaders which defined the Singapore spirit of the time. Like Sentosa, the Singapore spirit is continually being reinvented by each generation, with endless possibilities on the horizon.

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Siloso Beach, 2022. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

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“Hawkers Prohibited”: Twists and Turns in the Evolution of the Hawker “Problem”

At the 2017 World Street Food Congress, American celebrity chef and travel host Anthony Bourdain observed that, “shockingly, scandalously enough, we [in New York] don’t have a real market. We don’t have a place like Singapore has, or Hong Kong with their *dai pai tongs*... a democratic space where people value a good bowl of noodles for a dollar ninety-five just as much as [something fancier] because they are equally good... Singapore understood that street food is a good thing and tried to find a way to save it”.[1]

Yet this desire to “save” street food by moving it into today’s unanimously loved hawker centres was not the primary impulse driving the resettlement of hawkers in Singapore. Nor does it at first glance appear to fit with the role of a hawker as conventionally defined. Indeed, the Oxford dictionary defines a hawker as “a person who travels about selling goods, typically advertising them by shouting”.[2] And so, to move such persons into a permanent centre, making travelling and shouting unnecessary, was arguably not the most obvious solution. Moreover, as late as half a century ago, signs denoting the prohibition of hawkers were not uncommon across Singapore. Clearly, in the not too recent past, hawkers were perceived as a “problem” rather than a cultural asset to be treasured.

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A public health inspector checking on street hawkers near Arab Street, 22 February 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

by Ruchi Mittal and Joshua Goh

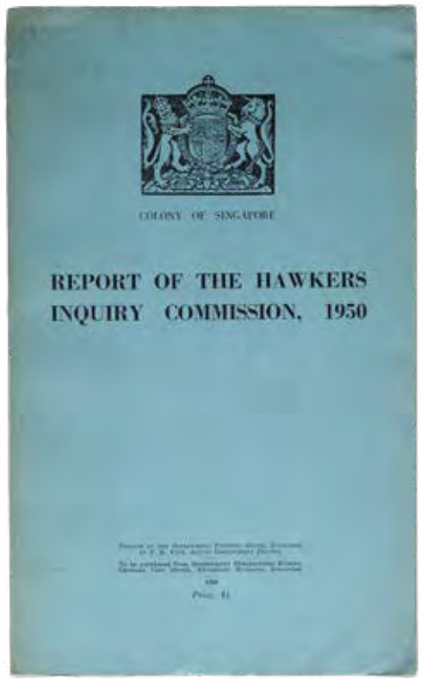
A look back at how hawking in Singapore has morphed into the cultural institution it is today is thus revealing for several reasons. Besides demonstrating the hidden complexities behind an often-simplified narrative of success, the hawker story also brings to the fore the innovation and ingenuity of successive governments, working with civil servants and citizens on the ground to tackle one of Singapore's most longstanding and intractable environmental problems. In the process, tough decisions and sacrifices had to be made. Many hawkers found themselves at the mercy of rapid socio-economic changes and shifts in policy decisions that had a profound impact on their livelihoods.

The evolution of the hawker trade in Singapore, then, has been the product of regulation balanced with compassion, of tradition intermingled with innovation and constant adaptation. Far from being a straightforward story of enforcement, Singapore's hawker story illustrates the non-linear journey that was taken to build a clean and green city. Similar to our nation-building journey, it was a process of trial and experimentation, one in which setbacks and reversals were met with a keen determination to adapt and evolve amid the inevitable challenges.

The Colonial Legacy: Conflicting Approaches

As early as 1922, the British colonial government had trialled purpose-built hawker shelters, after prior attempts at licensing and regulating street hawkers did little to address public health and hygiene concerns. In the same year, however, the number of licences issued to eating shops and coffee shops was reduced dramatically as hygiene standards were raised. This ironically resulted in the proliferation of street hawkers selling cooked food.

Colonial efforts at solving the hawker problem were thus marred by ineffective and conflicting approaches. Nevertheless, amid the confusion, the 1931 Committee Appointed to Investigate the Hawker Question in Singapore recognised that hawkers served a need for readily-available and affordable food, especially among manual workers who were unable to cook in their places of residence, and among those who lived or worked in suburban areas. Post-war, the 1950 *Report of the Hawkers Inquiry Commission* echoed this view, recognising the importance of hawking as a social phenomenon despite the public nuisance it caused. It thus recommended an increase in licensing, enforcement, and designation of specific streets for hawking. This began to be implemented in 1953, but the colonial authorities struggled to secure cooperation from hawkers.



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MUNICIPALITY OF SINGAPORE.
1934
ITINERANT HAWKERS LICENCE.
Section 188 Ordinance 135.

No. 10692

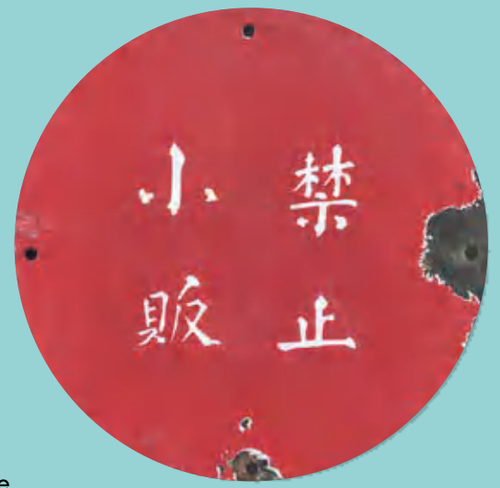
Sitiyam binte Haji Idris
of 97 Silgie Road
whose photograph is attached hereto is hereby licensed to ply as an itinerant hawker for the year ending 31st December, 1934, under Section 1 of the Hawker's By-Laws.
Nature of article sold Cakes
Handcart No. nil
R. CAUNCE,
Licensing Officer.
see over
Fee $1.00 paid.
Receipt No. 1881
Date issued 7/1/34.

←
Itinerant hawker licence for the sale of cakes issued by the Municipality of Singapore, 1934. Gift of William Neo. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

SEEN AND HEARD IN
SEMANGAT YANG BARU

SEMANGAT YANG BARU
FORGING A NEW SINGAPORE SPIRIT

This sign belonged to the Singapore Municipal Commission, which managed the downtown area of Singapore from 1887 to 1951. The Chinese characters printed on its face indicates that hawkers are prohibited. It was likely hung in areas or along streets where itinerant hawkers were obstructing traffic or pedestrian flow.



↑
"Hawkers Prohibited" sign in Chinese, 1950. Gift of Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

From Delicensing to Resettlement: Debates and Experimentation in Post-War Singapore

Upon coming to power in 1955, the newly-elected Labour Front government recognised that the hawker problem was a potent political issue which needed to be addressed. Partly, this was in response to the emergence of powerful lobby groups such as the Singapore Hawkers' Association and the Singapore Hawkers' Union, both of which proved to be influential players in the turbulent post-war political scene.[4] The government thus set up a special Hawkers Committee to review hawker policies, and more specifically, the radical possibility of delicensing hawkers to reduce resources spent on their management.

After studying the issue, the Hawkers Committee eventually recommended general delicensing except for hawkers of specific types of food and drink.[5] However, the recommendation was adopted only to a very limited extent by the City Council in 1955.[6] An inordinately large number of hawkers continued to be ticketed and fined, with no improvement in congestion and hygiene conditions.[7]

1957 then saw the establishment of the Markets and Hawkers Department as a division of the City Council, albeit with very limited resources.[8] The question of delicensing was raised again at this time, and was so divisive that the Labour Front's Assistant Secretary-General Mrs G. C. Smith (née Neo Wee Kiat) quit the party owing to her belief that hawkers should not have "a free and unrestricted run of the city".[9] The delicensing motion was later defeated in December 1957, which led to the decisive policy change of again registering and licensing as many hawkers as possible.[10] One such hawker was Mr Tan Chin Kim, who sold kueh tutu from his trishaw cart and was first licensed in 1957.

> **"Will [the] Government do something to alleviate the difficulties of the hawkers? They are arrested for obstruction and suffer heavy and frequent fines. I put it to you, Sir, that if you eliminate hawkers by arresting them, you will have yet another problem on your hands. These poor people will have no means of supporting themselves and it is more than likely that they will turn to crime in order to secure the money necessary to keep themselves alive."**
>
> Lim Choon Mong, the Liberal Socialist Legislative Assemblyman for Serangoon, speaking at the debate on the Governor's Address, 5 September 1956

↑
Koeh Sia Yong, *Illegal Hawking*, 1957. Woodblock print on paper, 20.5 x 15 cm. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Kueh tutu (steamed rice flour cake with coconut, sugar or peanut fillings) is a local snack which derived its name from the sound of horns used by hawkers to attract customers. The owner of this trishaw cart, Mr Tan Chin Kim, used to work as an itinerant hawker selling kueh tutu at South Bridge Road, Geylang, Changi, Hougang, and Joo Chiat from the 1950s onwards. He obtained his hawking license on 20 March 1957 from the Singapore City Council. From the 1950s, all handcarts used for itinerant hawking had to be licensed and registered by law and could not exceed 40 by 30 inches in size. Mr Tan later moved to a hawker centre in Bedok in the 1980s, where he continued selling *kueh tutu*.

←
Kueh tutu cart, 1950s. Gift of Tan Chin Kim. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

SEEN AND HEARD IN
SEMANGAT YANG BARU

SEMANGAT YANG BARU FORGING A NEW SINGAPORE SPIRIT

This card belonged to Chew Hee Chuan, a Chinese immigrant who arrived in Singapore in 1935 as a labourer, and who later became a hawker. It was issued by the Markets and Hawkers Department and gave Chew, then 47, the right to set up a stall at Sims Avenue Market Extension. While some hawkers were allocated proper stalls in markets, others were allocated "pitches" (fixed positions along roads) to sell their goods.

↑
Hawker stall/pitch allocation card, 18 October 1960. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

The election of Mayor Ong Eng Guan to office a year later brought into view yet another approach based on education and self-regulation.[11] Together with representatives from the City Council and the Markets and Hawkers Department, Ong set up a Hawkers' Advisory Committee, where hawkers themselves could study the issues and find solutions. He even considered devolving authority to street committees run by hawkers themselves to look after problems of sanitation, traffic, and proper disposal of refuse. One of Ong's longer-term legacies was the institution of a public ballot for hawker licences and stalls, which aimed to reduce corruption. This practice continued well into the 1980s, with a public ballot being a familiar scene each time a new hawker centre was constructed.[12]

Despite these early efforts, by 1959, there were still over 30,000 illegal hawkers on Singapore's streets.[13] The persistence of the hawker problem thus called for innovative approaches that would shape the future of hawker resettlement. In February of that year, legal action against hawkers was suspended, and an "education policy" was fully implemented.[14] Hawkers were urged not to obstruct traffic and to dispose of refuse appropriately. Loudspeaker vans were introduced to educate both hawkers and the public.[15] To accommodate licensed hawker activity, certain roads were closed to traffic during specific times of the day, starting with Syed Alwi Road and Queen Street.[16]

The following year, the work of resettling hawkers began in earnest, which included introducing a new scheme where "priority cases" involving bona fide hawkers were given stalls without balloting. Established hawkers along popular areas such as Trengganu Street and Sago Street were issued with temporary licences. Other hawkers like those at North Bridge Road were resited to nearby backlanes.[17] There was an uptick in the number of licences issued for the first time in six years, a trend which would continue.[18]

> **"I think all of us accept the fact that, because of the huge number of hawkers in Singapore [...] we have in Singapore more rubbish than usual and sometimes unfortunately hawkers hawk [in a way] that it is not possible to clean up their pitches. We hope we will be able to get hawkers to be conscious of the fact that they are as much responsible for the public health in Singapore as other people."**
>
> Yong Nyuk Lin, Minister of Health, in the debate on the Public Health Division's budget, 13 December 1963

↑ Hawker stalls being demolished at St Michael's Estate, 26 September 1962. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

← Anti-Littering Campaign Pamphlet, 1958. One visionary move by the City Council was the introduction of the Mass Health Movement for public education. This movement aimed to educate not just hawkers on the importance of hygiene, but the broader public who were their customers as well. This poster, produced as part of the movement, aimed to curb littering. There were anti-pest and anti-spitting campaigns as well. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

←
Lim Sew Yong, *Hainanese Western Food Stall*, c1995. Watercolour on paper, 50.9 × 40.5 cm. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

A Whole-of-Society Approach: Tempering Enforcement with Compassion in the Post-Independence Years

After Independence, the hawker issue was tackled in a holistic and organised way that had not been attempted previously. This encompassed the rapid construction of hawker centres across the island, as well as encouraging and assisting hawkers to move out of the trade by finding alternative employment in growing industries. Although many of the solutions subsequently implemented were not in themselves novel, they had not previously been implemented in tandem with good coordination, and with consideration of the specific circumstances of each locale.[19] Earlier efforts at public education had also laid important foundations. Indeed, four years before Independence, the Markets and Hawkers Department had already been moved to the Ministry of Health in recognition of hawking having significant public health impacts.[20]

In adopting a whole-of-society approach to the hawker problem, the government became aware that its aim of moving all hawkers off the streets could not succeed without cooperation from the hawkers

↑
Lim Sew Yong, *Hainanese Western Food Kitchen Preparation*, c1995. Watercolour on paper, 50.9 x 40.5 cm. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

→
Parliamentary Secretary for Health Chor Yeok Eng officiating at a balloting ceremony for 52 hawker pitches at Princess Elizabeth Estate, 15 September 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

themselves. In many instances, hawkers themselves banded together to petition their Members of Parliament to seek redress for their circumstances. Members of Citizens' Consultative Committees were then roped in to find creative solutions.[21] Licensing thus took a constituency-by-constituency approach, in tandem with conditions on the ground.

A telling example involves the case of hawkers in Tiong Bahru. By the 1970s, the large number of illegal and itinerant hawkers clustered around the length of the simply-built Seng Poh Road Market had posed a public health problem. Ch'ng Jit Koon, Member of Parliament for Tiong Bahru, brought the hawkers together to contribute funds (ranging from $180 to $210 each) towards a permanent market and food centre (the Seng Poh Road Open Air Market) where they could be legalised and licensed. The complex would then be handed to the government to manage. The Seng Poh Road Open Air Market Hawkers' Association, set up in 1971, was also registered upon the completion of the new structure. As the hawkers and stallholders had a collective interest in the upkeep of the complex, they looked after it well and were commended for keeping it cleaner than other markets. This was a unique success story where the hawkers managed to get legalised through their own efforts and with Ch'ng's assistance.[22]

Another figure who was key to the resettlement of numerous hawkers was Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Health Chor Yeok Eng. Chor, whose own father had been a hawker, was able to connect with many hawkers owing to his Chinese-speaking background. He came up with the idea of converting a carpark along Orchard Road into a space for night-time hawkers as there were many more night hawkers than day hawkers at Cairnhill. This space became known as Glutton's Square, and brought together hawkers formerly peddling in back streets and side lanes.

> **[At] that time, our mode of service was mobile, you could sell your goods wherever you carried them. Give a shout, and a crowd of people would come out to eat. So… the first consideration was that people in our area were used to eating whenever they wanted. [Now] they had to travel there [to the hawker centre], which was quite a distance on foot. And for one bowl? A lot of hawkers could not accept it back then. When the first hawker centre appeared, no one could accept it.**
>
> Lee Soo Leong, a teacher whose father was an itinerant hawker selling *tau suan* (split mung bean soup) at Bukit Ho Swee in the 1960s, recollecting the transition to hawker centres in a 1996 interview with the National Archives of Singapore

Interestingly, this idea encountered initial resistance from hawkers as they felt their business would be affected. However, within days of some hawkers setting up their stalls, most of the remaining hawkers approached Chor to request spaces at the carpark as well. One hawker was said to have mentioned to Chor, "Those at the carpark were right beside a main road, they start selling at 7pm and by 8pm had finished selling everything, so they ran over to buy our things to continue selling. Now we knew that their business is good, we wanted to go over." Chor and his department were pleased with this development because it meant that the hawkers would not be obstructing traffic or access to residents' homes.[23] Glutton's Square operated from 1966 to 1978, after which hawkers sited there were relocated to the purpose-built Newton Hawker Centre and Cuppage Food Centre.[24]

Separately, in the 1970s the government also began encouraging younger hawkers to take up other jobs, including new employment opportunities in factories. Besides helping prospective hawkers to secure other modes of employment, hawking was concurrently made less attractive by the gradual reduction of stall rental and licensing subsidies. It was at this time that the Ministry of Environment took over responsibility for the hawker problem from the Ministry of Health, after the former was established in 1972. In a 2010 interview with the National Archives of Singapore, former Deputy Secretary at the Ministry of Environment Param Ajeet Singh Bal shared that "[we] were [then] building more hawker centres. At the same time, we [were] revising the rates upwards so that the people who don't find it worthwhile, they can give up."[25]

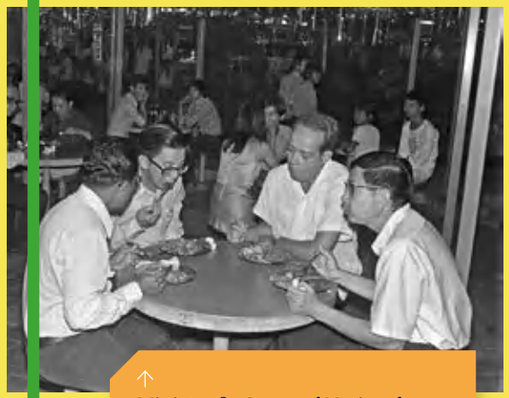
Notably, Param Ajeet also spent considerable time in his interview elaborating on the importance of compassion and empathy in the drive to resettle hawkers. In one specific anecdote, he related how Minister for Law and the Environment E. W. Barker granted an exception for a handicapped hawker who made a living from selling cigarettes. Barker, popularly known as the People's Minister, was in Param Ajeet's words "very sympathetic to such cases". Clearly, for the resettlement of hawkers to succeed, regulation had to be implemented with compassion, and rules balanced with care.

← Chua Mia Tee, *Newton Hawker Centre*, 1979. Oil on canvas, 68.8 x 81.2 cm. Gift of Times Publishing Limited. Collection of National Heritage Board.

↑ *Hawkers and the Health Law* pamphlet, 1980s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

> **Previously there were old and shabby hawker stalls clustered around the bus terminus. The new Hawker Centre is indeed a welcome replacement. We have already built other hawker centres in Singapore—one at the junction of Adam and Dunearn Roads and the other at the junction of Newton and Clemenceau Avenue. We intend to build more—near the Thomson-Whitley Roads Flyover, the Kampong Java Park along Bukit Timah Road, the Central Park at Fort Canning, the Park at Mount Faber, the Sembawang Park and on the East Coast reclaimed land.**

Minister for Law and National Development E. W. Barker in a speech at the opening of Serangoon Gardens Hawker Centre, 6 May 1972. Barker later took on the Environment portfolio from 1975 to 1979.



↑ Minister for Law and National Development E. W. Barker eating at Adam Road Food Centre on its opening day after its relocation from across the road, 28 September 1974. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Intangible Cultural Heritage: The Continued Evolution of Hawker Culture Today

Ultimately, the combination of push and pull factors worked effectively to reduce the number of hawkers in Singapore. By 1986, all hawkers were legalised and relocated to permanent facilities.[26]

This, however, was not the end of the story. By the 1990s, in an interesting twist, it became apparent that eliminating street hawking was not to the country's benefit in terms of its attractiveness to tourists who wanted to experience street culture. Additionally, by the 2000s, concerns arose that the effectiveness of earlier policies alongside new opportunities for less physically demanding work meant that fewer young people were inclined to take up the hawker trade. Ironically, it was at this time that hawker culture gained recognition as an important part of Singapore's cultural heritage, which brings Singaporeans from different walks of life together. The hawker "problem" had now evolved into one of preserving the future of the hawker trade.

While there were some continuities such as the emphasis on hygiene, the 2000s saw a reversal of various hawker policies. After a period of almost 25 years when no new hawker centres were built, in 2011 the building of hawker centres resumed to meet the needs of new population centres.[27] A Hawkers' Development Programme was also launched in 2020 to encourage young people to take up hawking. Singapore subsequently launched a successful bid for its hawker culture to be recognised internationally under UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, signalling our nation's intention to safeguard and promote its practices locally.[28]

This dramatic shift in Singapore's approach to hawking shows how the hawker "problem" has evolved over time. Today, the government has recognised the importance of hawker culture as a vital aspect of our identity and social fabric. Yet this was in no way a pre-determined outcome.

Rather, as this piece has examined, the transformation of hawking from an environmental problem to a cultural institution was fraught with setbacks and reversals, as both government and citizens responded and adapted to evolving circumstances and policies. Much like how the Singapore spirit is neither static nor cast in stone, hawker culture—as a cultural expression of what it means to be Singaporean—continues to evolve, with new generations adding to and redefining aspects of the trade. Looking ahead, it is perhaps this continued ability to adapt, and to continually balance between the forces of tradition and innovation, that will ensure hawking remains relevant and viable in Singapore of the future.

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Joshua Goh is Assistant Curator at the Founders' Memorial.

→ Maxwell Hawker Centre, 2021. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

↓
Glutton's Square, 1970s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

↑
Hawker Chan, one of the world's first Michelin-starred hawkers, 10 December 2017. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

NOTES

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3 Committee Appointed to Investigate the Hawker Question in Singapore, *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Hawker Question in Singapore* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1932), 2.
4 "Hawkers back Marshall", *ST*, 4 August 1955, 8; "Hawkers join in the 'war'", *ST*, 18 February 1954, 5.
5 *Colony of Singapore Annual Report 1955* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1956), 179–180.
6 L. A. Marcus, *Annual Report of the Markets and Hawkers Department 1957* (Singapore, Government Printing Office, 1958), 1.
7 A. J. Vaz, *Annual Report of the Cleansing and Hawkers Department 1956* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1957), 16.
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21 Lo Hong Ling, interview by Patricia Lee, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession Number 002770, Reel 13, 29 June 2003.
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Who could we be as a people?

Today, the ever-changing and often unexpected challenges of our world call to mind the tumult and upheavals of our nation's formative years. Indeed, the new spirit of independent Singapore was forged in moments of crisis, not unlike the volatile, uncertain, and complex world we face today. Yet, looking back, our founding leaders never despaired, but always approached the future with vigour, enterprise, and dare. How can the values that guided them inspire us to dream and hope for an even brighter future?

←
Schoolchildren on the Southern Islands cheering and waving Singapore flags, 28 April 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

“Role-play as a Heritage Practice”[1]: Embodying a New Singapore Spirit in the *Semangat yang Baru* Scenario Experience

> “[H]eritage is primarily not about the past, but instead about our relationship with the present and the future.”
>
> Rodney Harrison, Professor of Heritage Studies in *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (2012)[2]

A time of courage and dynamism amid uncertainty and upheaval. A people who rallied together to forge common values and ideals. A home built with passion and sacrifice.

These words expressed in the *Semangat yang Baru: Forging a New Singapore Spirit* exhibition paint an electrifying atmosphere of Singapore during its heyday of nation-building between the 1950s and 1970s. But how might youths today make sense of the significant milestones that moulded our nation? How might we invite youths to engage with the values that guided our country through difficult decisions in its early years, and which continue to shape our identities today and beyond?

←
Character packages designed for the *Semangat yang Baru* Scenario Experience, 2023. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

by Shawn Chua and Wong Lee Min

The *Semangat yang Baru* (SYB) Scenario Experience, designed by the Founders' Memorial in consultation with the Civil Service College Applied Simulation and Training (CAST) team, harnesses the potential of historical role-play to facilitate dialogues among youths on Singapore's founding values, governance, and leadership. Launched in June 2023 for a mixed group of around 700 students aged 17 to 23 from Institutes of Technical Education, polytechnics, and universities, the programme was conducted as a segment of the National Youth Council Leaders Course, which is part of the inaugural year-ong Ministry of Education (MOE) Singapore Young Leaders Programme. This article delves into the making of the SYB Scenario Experience, in which role-playing was employed as an embodied heritage practice—a creative engagement that stimulates historical empathy—and explores how youth participants discovered contemporary resonance in this programme.

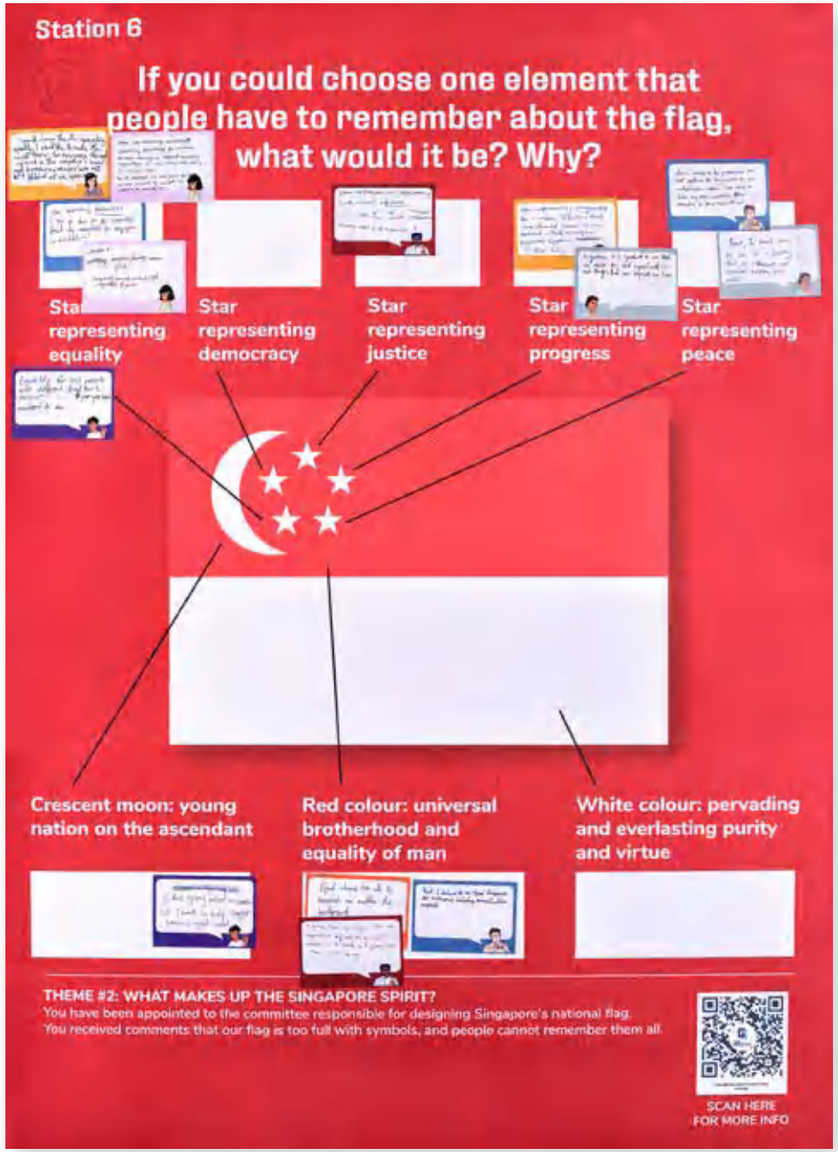
The programme immersed participants into storyworlds based on the SYB exhibition, animating historical artefacts and situating participants in an interactive narrative. Participants were randomly assigned one of seven characters, and received a card fleshing out the key memories and concerns of that role. Each of these characters was a fictionalised composite of historical figures which span an eclectic diversity of lived experiences. In the exhibition, they also serve as digital companions—selectable virtual guides that appear in interactive kiosks to provide a personal story associated with historical milestones—thereby bridging the SYB exhibition with the scenario experience. The fictional dimension was critical in affording us the creative licence to adapt these characters to enhance playability and post-game reflection, and opened up room for participants to inhabit the roles in emotionally authentic ways. At the same time, the rigorous historical grounding of these characters imbued the experience with a foundation of heritage authenticity and evoked in participants a more intimate curiosity of the source material. The inspiration behind the ensemble of characters included Mrs Shirin Fozdar, an early advocate for the one-man-one-wife law; Mr David Marshall, Singapore's first Chief Minister; and Mr Goh Tong Pak, a former Economics teacher who had to switch from teaching in Chinese to English.

↑
Participants responding to a scenario in the exhibition gallery, 2023. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

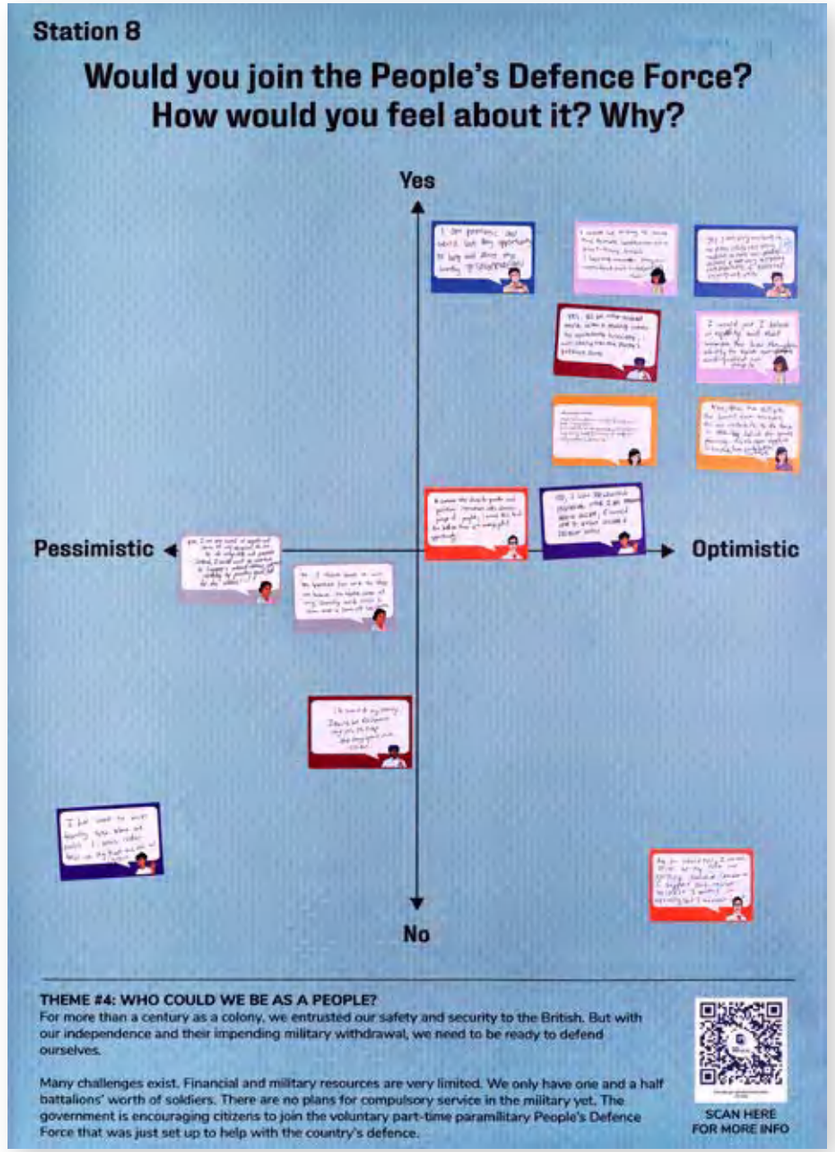
As participants inhabited their characters, they were guided to explore how key memories and concerns mentioned in their cards might shape their worldview, and to consider how the lens of each character might influence their interaction with different people and scenarios. At each station, participants encountered a scenario and discussed their responses in pairs/trios, as they attempted to reconcile their characters' values and internal conflicts before penning down their thoughts on stickers and pasting it on posters. This role-playing reframed their perspective of historical narratives. From passive observers, they became active agents embodying a first-person perspective as they grappled with historical dilemmas and trade-offs, and deliberated about issues such as resettlement, the impact of language policy transitions, or even aspirations for the future of Singapore. The scenarios drew on stories and artefacts presented in the exhibition, and were aligned to larger themes that echo the exhibition's curatorial framework of pressing questions that confronted Singapore in its infancy, but still remain pertinent today: What do we stand for? What makes up the Singapore Spirit? How do we move forward? Who could we be as a people?

↑
The inner pages of Mei Ling's character card which participants referred to, 2023. Mei Ling was inspired by the real-life story of Mr Chong Nam Soy, a former production technician from Rollei, a German company which produced optical instruments in Singapore. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

Scan this QR code to access a video on Mr Chong's recollections of his time in Rollei. This video was produced in conjunction with the Travelling Exhibition and Public Call for artefacts organised by the Founders' Memorial in 2022.



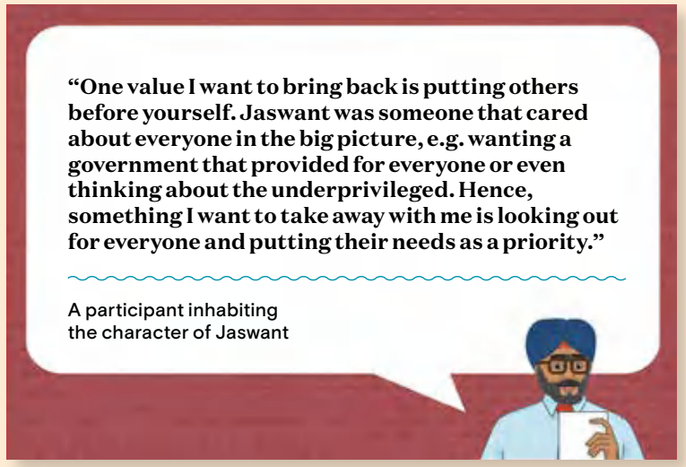
Poster with participants' responses in the form of stickers, 2023. In this scenario, participants were asked to vote for an element from the Singapore flag that they would like people to remember. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.



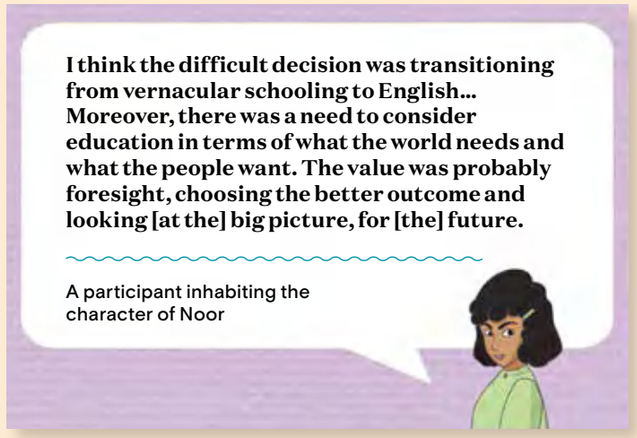
Participants' responses to a scenario about joining the People's Defence Force, 2023. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

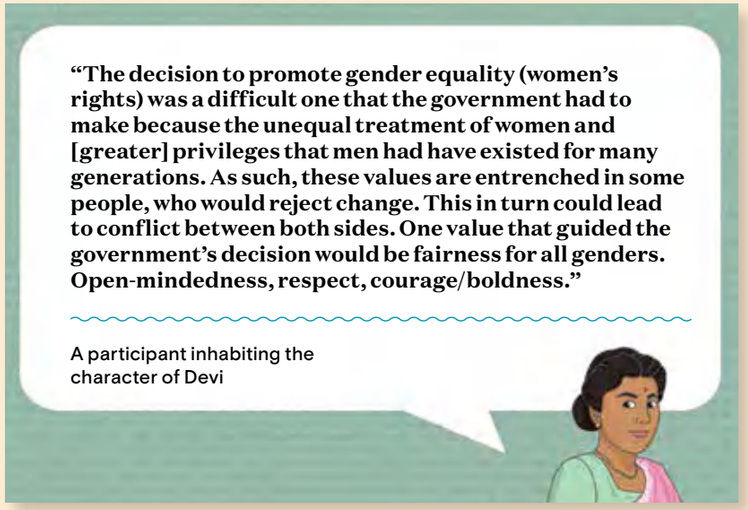
A vital aspect of the programme was the facilitated discussions after the role-playing segment, which were a platform for participants to reflect on their experiences and share their insights. Drawing parallels between their characters and their own lived experiences, participants discovered resonances between historical circumstances and contemporary issues, and engaged in deeper introspection about their own values and identities as Singaporeans.

They were first invited to speak about a value that their character stood for, which they would like to bring away with them after the experience. This highlighted how participants and their characters functioned as separate entities, and helped them to shed their character after the role-play. Responses from participants attest to the value of role-playing in encouraging one to embody and pick up traits that they find admirable:



Next, participants were invited to recall the three stations they visited in the exhibition gallery and to point out a difficult decision that the government had to make. Participants shared why they found the decision difficult and the value that could have guided the making of that decision. Their responses showed an appreciation of the complexities of governance (e.g. the need to empathise with various communities and balance trade-offs); qualities of good leadership (e.g. foresight and empathy); and how Singapore’s founding values (e.g. equality, boldness and openness) have guided us through dilemmas:





Finally, participants were drawn back to themes central to the stations they visited, leadership values such as resilience and openness, as well as issues in contemporary Singapore. Responses indicated that Singapore's founding values of equality, multiculturalism, and openness resonated especially well with youths in their aspirations for the nation:

> **I hope Singapore will embrace its multiculturalism further and be more transparent with our flaws/weaknesses to address [accessibly for] PWDs [Persons with Disabilities]/special needs. I think acceptance and open-mindedness is something Singapore should be steadfast in upholding. Only then can we trust one another and live in a selfless, others-minded society.**
>
> A participant of the SYB Scenario Experience

> **I want Singapore to be more fair and promote equality so that more people can be heard, and will not be shunned away, just because they are different, especially since Singapore has multiple cultures, religions and even sexualities. People should not be judged and discriminated just because of that.**
>
> A participant of the SYB Scenario Experience

In sum, immersive storyworlds built on authentic historical contexts encouraged participants to incorporate their prior knowledge—narratives learnt in school, information gleaned from the museum exhibition, or impressions of historical representation in pop culture—into lived experiences. This process fostered introspection and empathy, both historical and beyond. The SYB Scenario Experience demonstrates the potential of historical role-playing, coupled with facilitated discussion, as an avenue for youths to critically explore the meaning and relevance of Singapore's founding values in a non-didactic manner. It augments MOE's *Singapore Perspectives* curriculum which participants are exposed to in schools, wherein students develop an understanding of our country's unique contexts, diverse perspectives, and trade-offs in decision-making to enhance their leadership capabilities.

By embodying historical perspectives in first-person, participants in the SYB Scenario Experience navigated the macro-events of historical narratives, as they negotiated personal stories, motivations, and feelings that emerged through the narrative agency derived from role-playing. In fact, participants inhabited a dual consciousness in which historical characters became reflexive filters through which they interpreted their present

→ Participants responding to the scenario in the exhibition gallery, 2023. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

concerns and reflected on their personal resonance with national narratives. This interplay between past and present, as well as character and self, inspires curiosity about what really happened, and the thoughts and motivations of people who lived in the past. Ultimately, historicity imbued in the SYB Scenario Experience—whether in terms of oral histories, artefacts, or primary documents—offers opportunities for educators looking for different approaches to engage students.

As participants reflected on their SYB experience and their leadership journeys, we glimpse the forging of a new Singapore spirit:

> **One key takeaway is the values that I learnt from the *Semangat yang Baru* Scenario Experience, from the characters that were inspired by real-life historic[al] figures. The values that they held dear in times of crisis and change in Singapore are values that can help me as a leader and to push my boundaries. One such example is the willingness to embrace change in [the] face of adversity that I feel that I can learn from instead of being aware of the limitations and not daring to break through.**
>
> A participant of the SYB Scenario Experience

Beyond the SYB Scenario Experience, the Founders' Memorial will continue to present historical role-playing experiences—in the form of the Scenario Room Programme, the Memorial's flagship education initiative—to encourage deeper conversations on Singapore's founding values.

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The writers would like to thank Pearl Wee, Manager (Curatorial and Engagement) at the Founders' Memorial, for her contributions in analysing participant responses from the SYB Scenario Experience.

NOTES

1 Michał Mochocki, *Role-play as a Heritage Practice: Historical Larp, Tabletop RPG and Reenactment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021).
2 Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 4.
3 J. Tuomas Harviainen, "Information, Immersion, Identity: The Interplay of Multiple Selves During Live-Action Role-Play", *Journal of Interactive Drama 1, 2* (October 2006), 9–51.


1 Growing up in Singapore, I've been taught to do whatever it takes to achieve...
BLACK CARD
THE GROVE
THE SINGAPOREAN DREAM
by Clyde & Shawn
INTERNSHIP
CLIMBING THE CORPORATE LADDER
SIDE HUSTLE
2 However, inevitable setbacks...
CORPORATE CAREER
RECESSION
TECH LAYOFFS
SIDE HUSTLE
3
SPLAT!
Boy, what happened?!
can easily bring one down.


4
Sounds like what I said too,
62 YEARS AGO
It's all gone now... How will I move on?
5
62 years ago? What do you mean?
Ah gong didn't always stay in an HDB
Bukit Ho Swee Kampung
Life was simpler back then
6 But one day, everything changed.
Everything that was familiar to me, they were all gone.
THE BUKIT HO SWEE FIRE has resulted in many losses... we will be rehousing the victims of the fire to HDB flats in QUEENSTOWN.
7 As I watched my whole life go up in flames, I wondered the same thing...
How will I move on?

'OPERATION SHIFT' GETS INTO STRIDE:

6,000 VICTIMS REHOUSED

By LIM BENG TEE

SINGAPORE, Mon. — A big "Operation Shift" of about 30,000 fire victims began here this morning.

Almost 1,000 families evacuating were 6,000 people were moving from Singapore Housing Board flats in Queenstown, Tiong Bahru, Alexandra, and an old Kallang airport.

There was an air of urgency in the Government's operation to get them out of the most crowded of the Bukit Ho Swee fire victims' camps.

The Deputy Minister, Enche Ahmad bin Ibrahim, had ordered earlier that every effort be made to avoid any repeat of the congested conditions in the affected areas where they were housed.

The Straits Times, 4 June 1961, 4.
Source: The Straits Times (c) SPH Media Limited.
Permission required for reproduction.


12 I realised that the fact I even had a SINGAPOREAN DREAM to aspire towards is a result of the foundation laid by our forefathers – people just like my grandpa.
13 I may not have achieved my SINGAPOREAN DREAM yet, but what I have now is already far beyond what our forefathers had imagined for us.
14 Maybe it is our collective hustle in the face of adversity that keeps the hope of the SINGAPOREAN DREAM alive for future generations.
The hope that spurs us to keep bringing singapore to greater heights.


After all, what is a dream, except for the courage to hope for a better future, that keeps us going?
COLOUR THIS PAGE & SHARE YOUR DREAMS WITH US!
HOPE
COURAGE
A BETTER TOMORROW
NEW SPIRIT
Clyde Tan and Shannon Lim are two ordinary zoetyles who were born and bred in Singapore. They somehow survived the hyper-competitive education system here and were promptly thrust into adulting in a (post) pandemic world.
This comic encapsulates some of their struggles as young adults who are still trying to find their footing in Singapore. They choose to believe that their experiences have given them a healthy amount of skepticism in their perspectives but are still cautiously optimistic about their future on this island-home.

Epilogue:
The Making of *Semangat yang Baru: Forging a New Singapore Spirit*

> “I think it’s important to remember the founding generation of leaders… they have put in a lot of effort and sacrifices, discussing ideas and putting them into action.”

Rita Lopez, a participant of the Founders’ Memorial Dialogues, 2016

> “[The Founders’ Memorial] signifies a work in progress. It carries the vision, aspirations, and ideals that we will keep working towards.”

Alfian Yasrif Bin Kuchit, a participant of the Memorial’s experience design workshop, 2020

> “Because the term “Founders’ Memorial” refers to founders in plural form, I think [the Memorial] should reflect plural voices, and present different groups that are involved in the nation-building process.”

Tan Guan Fan, a participant of a *Semangat yang Baru* pre-exhibition engagement session, 2022

←
Participants taking part in an exhibition user testing session which allowed them to interact with low-fidelity configurations of digital interactives, 2022. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

by Wong Hong Suen and Joshua Goh

←
Participants taking part in an exhibition user testing session which sought their opinion on different ways of presenting content and writing exhibition text, 2022. Stakeholders from diverse backgrounds including academics, educators, students, working adults, and volunteers participated in these sessions. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

Ever since plans for a Founders' Memorial were announced in 2015, citizens across Singapore have come forward to articulate their hopes and visions for this landmark institution. While an array of opinions has been expressed, there is broad agreement that the Memorial should commemorate the values embodied by our founding leaders, which were critical to the building of independent Singapore. At the same time, many have opined that the Memorial should be forward-looking, and explore how these values continue to remain relevant in today's context.

The Semangat yang Baru: Forging a New Singapore Spirit pilot exhibition was an opportunity for the Memorial's Curatorial team to testbed how such a narrative could be crafted. In doing so, we were challenged to fulfil the Memorial's mandate of honouring our founding leaders, but in a way that speaks to present Singaporeans, and with Singapore's future in mind. This is challenging to say the least. Aside from ensuring that diverse perspectives are acknowledged and represented, the team also had to think creatively about presenting weighty historical issues in an interactive and relevant manner.

This piece thus explores the making of *Semangat yang Baru*—a two-year long process in which the Memorial had to bite the bullet and make difficult curatorial decisions, amid a chorus of harmonious and discordant voices. While many ideas and suggestions came with the best of expertise, experience, and intentions, the team had to navigate trade-offs and choices in the crafting of the exhibition narrative. To this end, while *Semangat yang Baru* showcases the boldness and resilience of our early generation of leaders and citizens, we were ourselves spurred to demonstrate courage and grit as we pressed on to make this exhibition happen. This was especially so given that the exhibition was designed as a prototype to elicit feedback, which the team understood would include criticisms as well as comments on "what we should have done instead".

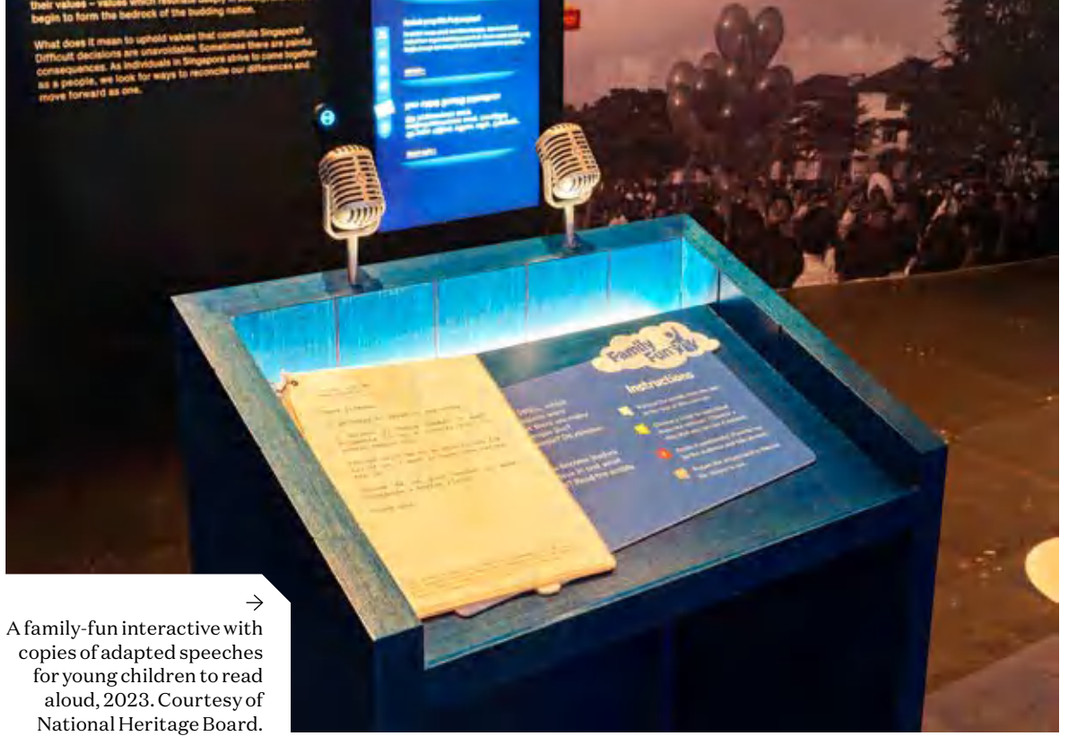
Interpreting and Co-Curating the New Spirit

From the outset, we at the Founders' Memorial were acutely aware that this pilot exhibition had to meaningfully engage stakeholders such as community groups, academics, civil society representatives, educators, and the general public. More than just a symbolic nod to inclusivity, co-curating in the form of co-conceptualising, collaborating, and co-creating allows us to draw on subject-matter expertise and lived experiences possessed by relevant stakeholders, whose views represent a broad swathe of Singapore society. Importantly, it also allows us to present a more authentic exhibition that resonates with visitors.

It was for this reason that we conducted multiple pre-exhibition engagements and user-testing sessions, each seeking input on areas ranging from narrative frame, to design, and even user experience. For example, early engagement sessions saw participants deliberating and ranking topics they wished to see featured. This gave us a clear indication that participants wanted to see lesser-known stories, apart from those which have often been told in history textbooks and official narratives. Later sessions saw participants coming together to interact with simple prototypes of exhibition material, such as samples of texts, design renders, and digital interactives. With the helpful comments that participants provided on our initial work, we were challenged to rethink our assumptions, and to improve accessibility and user experience. It was from these user-testing sessions that the team gained confidence to present the exhibition text in present tense and active voice, so as to convey a sense of immediacy and relevance to key themes.

Broad-based public engagements aside, the team also embarked on in-depth one-to-one conversations with thought leaders and academics to solicit views on specific content areas. These consultations proved to be invaluable ballast as we negotiated the presentation of difficult issues in our nation's history.

↑
A Mentimeter poll from our pre-exhibition engagement session with youth, 2022. Interestingly, although urban transformation and urban renewal is a key aspect of nation-building history, many youth expressed that this was a topic of least interest. This may be because it has been extensively covered in public discourse. Land acquisition may also be a topic that resonates less with from youth, as compared to older generations. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.



A family-fun interactive with copies of adapted speeches for young children to read aloud, 2023. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

For example, conversations with representatives of the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations challenged us to give greater attention to the role played by women leaders in addressing issues such as polygamy, child marriages, and family planning. Similarly, dialogues with subject matter experts such as Professor Kevin Y. L. Tan, Dr Ho Chi Tim, Associate Professor Yeo Kang Shua, and Professor Chua Beng Huat helped us better understand the nuances behind sensitive issues such as land acquisition, the Stop at Two campaign, and urban renewal.

What's In A Title?

Looking back, one key challenge that was consistently at the top of our minds was the complexity of condensing a sizeable chunk of our nation-building history into a mere 600 square metres of gallery space. How could we do so coherently, while making consistent reference to our nation's founding values, and the leaders who embodied these ideals, in a digestible and accessible manner?

Our inspiration came from Singapore's National Anthem, in which the line "*dengan semangat yang baru*" provides a poetic yet succinct articulation of the tenor of our nation-building years. As our engagements with various groups progressed, it dawned on us that the phrase furnished both an apt exhibition title as well as an organising framework around which to structure our multi-layered content. As explained in the earlier introductory article to the exhibition, *Semangat yang Baru* captures the dynamism, ferment, and pluralism of our nation-building years—a time when shared values were forged by leaders and citizens finding their way ahead as one.

Some participants at our user engagement sessions expressed reservations that the title could be potentially alienating for visitors unfamiliar with the Malay language. However, our team saw the title as an opportunity to build public knowledge on our national symbols, and the historical significance of the National Anthem being written in Malay. Moreover, with the addition of an English subtitle, "Forging a new Singapore spirit", we were able to communicate our core message that the Singapore spirit remains active and present, and continues to be revisited, reinterpreted, and remade as we look to the future.

Values, Stories, and People

Having landed on the exhibition title and narrative frame, we then turned to the core of the exhibition—the presentation of specific stories, artefacts, and leaders. From the perspective of the Memorial, it was important that *Semangat yang Baru* spoke to the values and principles that were foundational to the making of independent Singapore. How, though, could we articulate these ideas and values in an engaging and dynamic way, to bring to life often abstract and intangible ideals and principles?

For one, in terms of content, it was clear that we needed to present lesser-known aspects of our nation-building history which could capture the tense, often riveting moments of debate and deliberation. The story behind Sentosa's birth is a perfect example that illustrates this. In the 1960s, civil servants such as Alan Choe worked with foreign advisors, including Dr Albert Winsemius, to keep polluting industries away from Pulau Blakang Mati. They spoke truth to power, and eventually convinced Cabinet to keep the island green and pristine. The exhibition brings to life such stories that are intriguing and exciting for visitors to learn about.

↓
Curator showing a visitor the exhibition text which is available in Singapore's four official languages, 2023. This was an experimental attempt to make translations more accessible, and to give visible expression to multiculturalism as one of our founding values. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

Beyond just lesser-known stories, a more fundamental premise that we hoped to convey was the inherent complexity and tensions in our nation-building endeavour. From disagreements over the introduction of TOTO as a national lottery, to policy reversals such as the Stop at Two campaign, it was important that we presented the evolution of the Singapore spirit as one punctured by unforeseen detours and meanders. Indeed, highlighting the difficult trade-offs made amplifies the importance of guiding principles that can serve as a wayfinding compass when we are faced with tough choices. In *Semangat yang Baru*, the significance of values taking our nation forward comes to mind when we reflect on the moral courage demonstrated by early leaders to acquire land for development, or to resettle farmers in the pursuit of a cleaner and greener city. These were decisions that entailed great sacrifice on the part of the affected, and thus were politically costly.

One other aspect that deserves mention concerns the cast of leaders and citizens featured in the exhibition. As a Memorial dedicated to honouring the legacy of our founding leaders, our primary focus naturally revolved around the core team whose leadership, vision, and foresight proved critical to independent Singapore's nation-building years. For this reason, we featured wall quotes and large mural photos of first-generation leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew, S. Rajaratnam, Goh Keng Swee, Othman Wok, Lim Kim San, and E. W. Barker.

←
Take Courage section of the exhibition featuring a mural image of Minister for Law and National Development E. W. Barker and a quote from Minister for Culture and Social Affairs Othman Wok, 2023. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

↑
Minister for National Development Lim Kim San, Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam, and Member of Legislative Assembly for Moulmein Mrs C. V. Devan Nair (neé Avadai Dhanam) touring Moulmein and Farrer Park, 1 August 1964. This photo is used as a large mural in the exhibition. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

At the same time, we did not shy away from giving due recognition to contributions made by other political parties, community groups, and civil society. Visitors, for example, will notice that policies and institutions enacted by the Labour Front government are referenced prominently, whether in relation to David Marshall's proposal for simultaneous translation to be implemented in the Legislative Assembly, or with regard to the institution of Meet-the People Sessions (MPS) in the 1950s. Indeed, many visitors were surprised to discover that the idea of MPS did not start with the People's Action Party. Also displayed are artefacts and multimedia items relating to the leaders of the Barisan Sosialis, which was one of several groups espousing a vision for an independent Singapore. Today, the men and women of the Barisan Sosialis are still remembered for their dedication to cause, and how their spartan and disciplined lifestyles matched their campaign against corruption and extravagance.

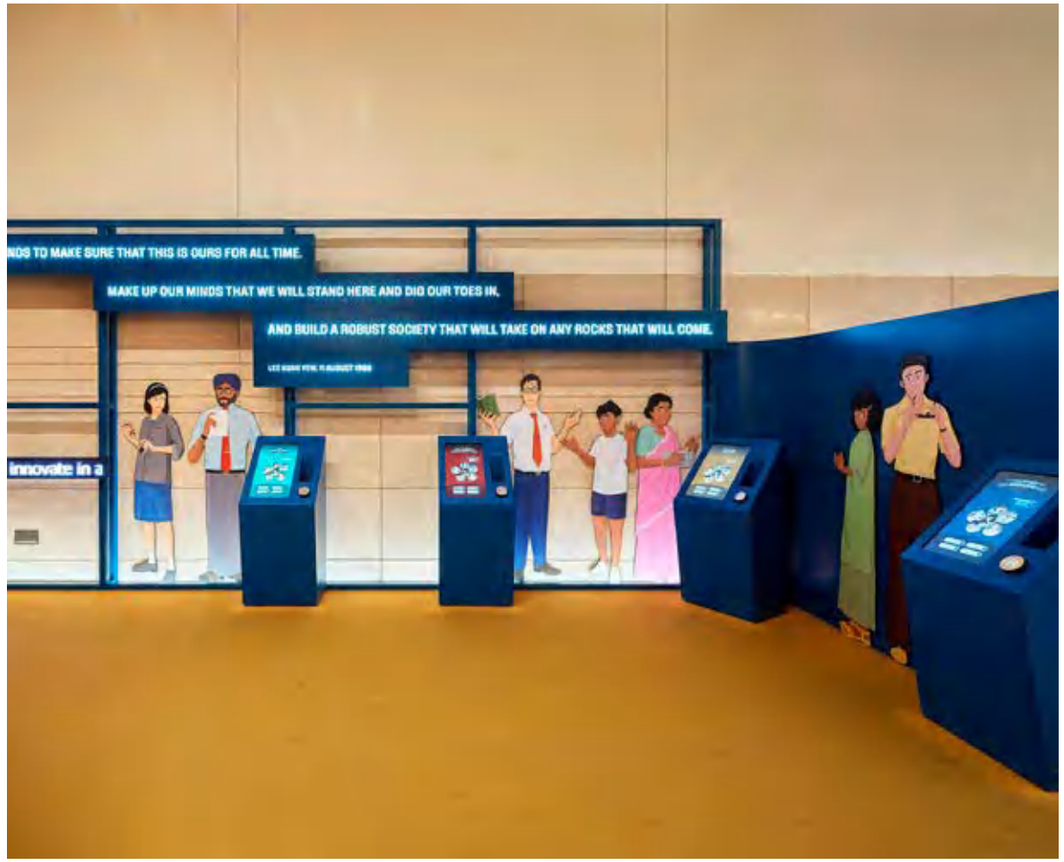
Amid the plethora of stories relating to our early leaders, it would be remiss not to mention the everyday men and women who were caught up in the dramatic transformations of the time. For the Memorial, their experiences help flesh out how ordinary citizens also boldly navigated the peaks and troughs of nation-building. To this end, several artefacts that showcase the sacrifices borne by ordinary citizens in our nation-building journey are also prominently displayed. These include a pig weighing scale formerly owned by the Tan family of Kampung San Teng, and a Speak Mandarin Campaign T-shirt which belonged to a housewife, Cleo Thang. Both of these artefacts were acquired as part of the Memorial's Travelling Exhibition and Public Call held in 2022, and bring to life how policies enacted often had real and palpable effects on the lives of individuals.

↑
Speak Mandarin Campaign T-shirt, 1983. Gift of Cleo Thang. This artefact was a contribution to the Founders' Memorial 2022 Travelling Exhibition and Public Call for Stories and Artefacts. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Making the New Spirit Come Alive

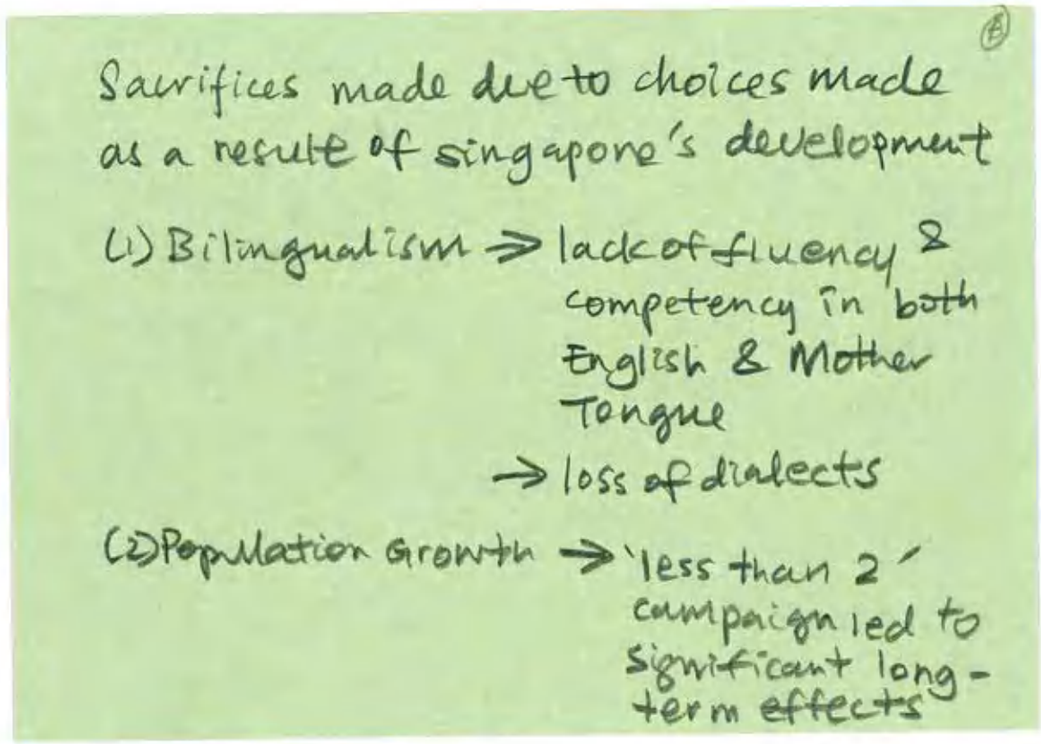
In this age of digital literacy, curators are consistently challenged to think about how technology can augment or enhance visitor experience and the telling of exhibition narratives. The Founders' Memorial's response to this was to experiment with RFID technology to enable visitors to participate meaningfully, respond to prompts, and share insights on which exhibits best resonated with them. In part, this was an extension of the team's learning from an earlier pilot titled *Home, Truly: Growing up with Singapore from the 1950s to the Present*, which was presented at the National Museum of Singapore as an exhibition on national identity. From this earlier trial, the team found that RFID tokens were a fun and accessible way for visitors of all generations to interact more deeply with exhibition content.

For *Semangat yang Baru*, we enhanced the use of RFID technology by linking each tag to unique digital character companions. Visitors thus begin their exhibition experience by choosing one of six digital character companions at the entrance. This character companion then appears at various multimedia stations in the exhibition, prompting visitors to take a values quiz that eventually culminates in a customised profile relating to one of Singapore's founding values. Composited from real life historical figures and events, the characters represent ordinary citizens who may have felt excited, apprehensive, or uncertain during different stages of our nation-building history. As visitors journey through the exhibition, these companions come to life through short character stories. They also prompt visitors to have a closer look at multimedia galleries which contain eye-opening historical and archival footages.



→
Entrance area of the exhibition where visitors register for their digital character companions (from left to right: Mei Ling, Jaswant, Tian Teck, Ravi, Devi, Noor, Matthew), 2023. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

Ultimately, both physical and digital exhibition experiences culminate at the *Coda*, where visitors are prompted to reflect on the relevance of Singapore's founding in this vulnerable, complex, and uncertain world. Who could we be as a people? What are each visitor's aspirations for Singapore's future? What does the new Singapore spirit mean to them in the context of the here and now? En route to the *Coda*, visitors also encounter a dedicated wall installation titled *Difficult Moments*, which prompts reflection on the costs, sacrifices, and challenges in our nation-building journey. Our hope is that visitors will take a moment to pause and reflect on the trade-offs that had to be made for Singapore to have come thus far.



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A visitor's response to the *Difficult Moments* installation, 2023. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

How Did Visitors Respond?

How did visitors respond? Has public reception thus far reflected our curatorial intent? Based on responses from post-exhibition engagements and visitor feedback platforms, we were heartened that most visitors have appreciated that *Semangat yang Baru* focuses on the spirit and values which guided our nation-building years. While we were mindful that a focus on values could come across didactic and propagandistic, using a values-based lens has also helped us to present lesser-known stories and angles, so that we can tell our nation-building history in a more compelling way.

Most heartenningly, our inclusive approach to defining Singapore's founding leaders has not gone unnoticed. Visitors appreciated that we brought to the fore the contributions of women leaders such as Mrs Shirin Fozdar and Dr Maggie Lim, and acknowledged the role played by members of other political parties including the Labour Front and the Barisan Sosialis. Some have also asked us to feature more extensively the work done by pioneer public servants. For this reason, you will notice that this issue of *+65* has gone to considerable length to showcase figures such as Alan Choe, former Head of the Urban Renewal Department, George Bogaars, Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Interior and Defence, and Stanley Stewart, Singapore's first Head of Civil Service. Yet, and not unexpectedly, there have also been views expressed that a focus on values and leaders as exemplars may detract from the idea of a "Founders' Memorial"—where founders should ostensibly be front and centre of our narrative and presentation.

One key take-away for us thus pertains to how we need not shy away from providing further glimpses into the human character and personalities of our founding leaders, and to do so in a way that does not generate any semblance of a cult of personality. After all, we cannot speak about our nation's foundational values in a vacuum—they were forged, lived out, and exemplified by our leaders in their public personas, as well as through their interactions with friends and family. Many visitors, for example, have been intrigued by a letter written by Deputy Prime Minister Dr Goh Keng Swee to Dr Bernard Tan about the hiring of Choo Hoey as the Singapore Symphony Orchestra's first resident conductor. In this letter, Dr Goh demonstrated his trademark frugality by plainly reminding Dr Tan "not to give exaggerated ideas" to Choo about his prospective salary. We hope to bring to the

←
Seniors spontaneously standing to attention at the *Interlude* of the exhibition, as the National Anthem plays in the background, 2023. These seniors are visiting the exhibition as part of a bus tour organised by the Memorial. Each bus tour brings families and seniors from different constituencies, including first-timers to the museum. Actors then role-play characters and take participants around while engaging them in lively exchange. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

fore more of such stories in the future, to allow visitors to identify with the tensions and dilemmas felt by our founding generation of leaders and citizens, and to further showcase their human fears and foibles.

In sum, feedback collected on areas for improvement has given us concrete pointers to how we can improve content, design, and visitor experience. Most excitingly though, the exhibition has sparked reflection and dialogue about the Singapore spirit. At present, the team is sense-making visitors' interpretations and imaginations of this spirit, which are arriving via response cards to the *Difficult Moments* installation, the Red Box family activity in *Clean and Green*, and through check-out kiosks in the *Coda*. Looking forward, these responses will further shape the narrative and content of the future Memorial, and help us curate an exhibition that is relevant and resonant with the times.

> ***Semangat baharu lambang masyarakat majmuk Singapura, yang tak lapuk dek hujan tak lekang dek panas. Semangat perjuangan demi negara tercinta.***
> **("The new spirit, as the emblem of Singapore's plural society, is something good and noble which will last forever. The spirit of struggle for our beloved country.")**
>
> • • • • •
>
> A visitor's perspective on the new Singapore spirit in the context of the present and future.

> **The new spirit means being courageous even if you are afraid and unsure what lies ahead, but to meet it with tenacity and humility.**
>
> • • • • •
>
> A visitor's perspective on the new Singapore spirit in the context of the present and future.

← A memo penned by a child as part of the Red Box activity, which encourages youths to reflect on how to make Singapore a better place to live, 2023. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

The New Spirit: A New and Renewed Appreciation

As *Semangat yang Baru* enters its final months, we continue to explore ways in which the exhibition can spark conversation and build bridges among visitors of different social and cultural backgrounds. One way in which we are facilitating such outcomes is through a programme titled *A New Singapore Spirit: Let's Talk About It*. Created as a pilot to give us insights on programmes we can organise at the future Memorial, it brings together new and natural-born citizens, as well as participants of different ethnicities, ages, and genders. Thus far, conversations between programme participants have proven to be thought-provoking and inspiring, and have allowed for deep cross-sharing about the new Singapore spirit from diverse perspectives.

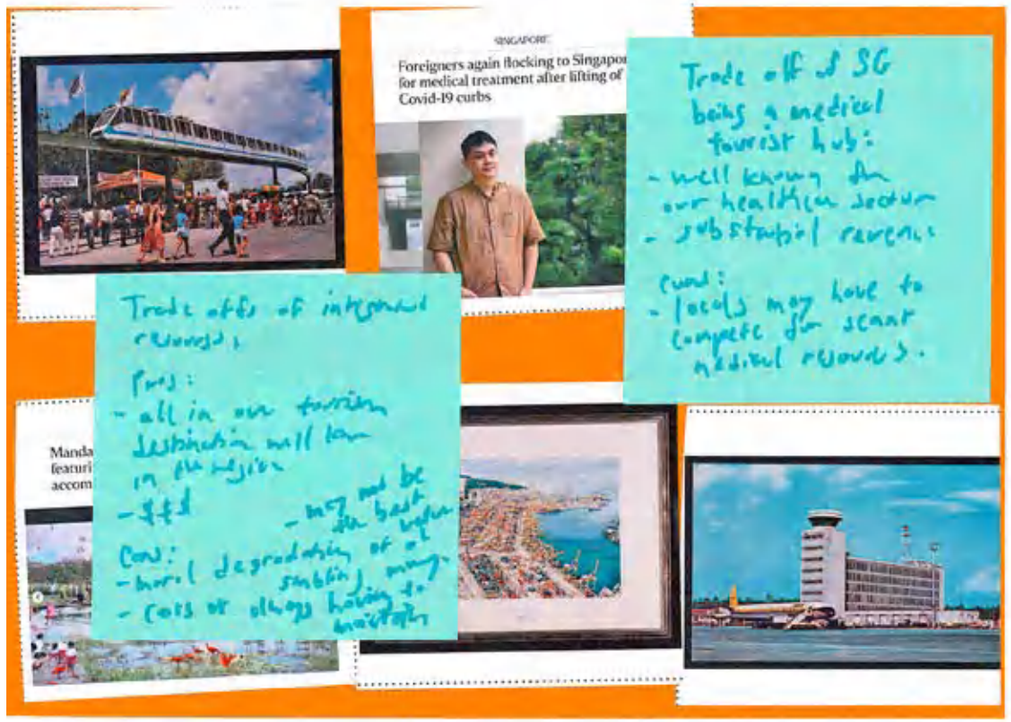
In conclusion, we at the Founders' Memorial would like to express our appreciation for the 200 and more individuals and groups who have advised us, given candid feedback both positive and negative, and provided much-needed words of encouragement in the making of the exhibition. In so far as courage and spirit are critical to nation-building, we have come to appreciate that these are also vital qualities needed to build a Memorial to nation-building. Looking forward, we are encouraged and emboldened to press on to build the Memorial—an institution that honours the legacy of our founding generation while inspiring the future.

> **The one big take-away from this programme is [the idea of] trade-offs. There is an opportunity cost to every decision. Best if we can weave this into [future] programmes at the Memorial so that Singaporeans can better appreciate our lives!**
>
> • • • • •
>
> A participant expressing his thoughts on *A New Singapore Spirit: Let's Talk About It*

↑ An artist's impression of the viewing gallery at the future Founders' Memorial when completed, 2023. Courtesy of Kengo Kuma and Associates.

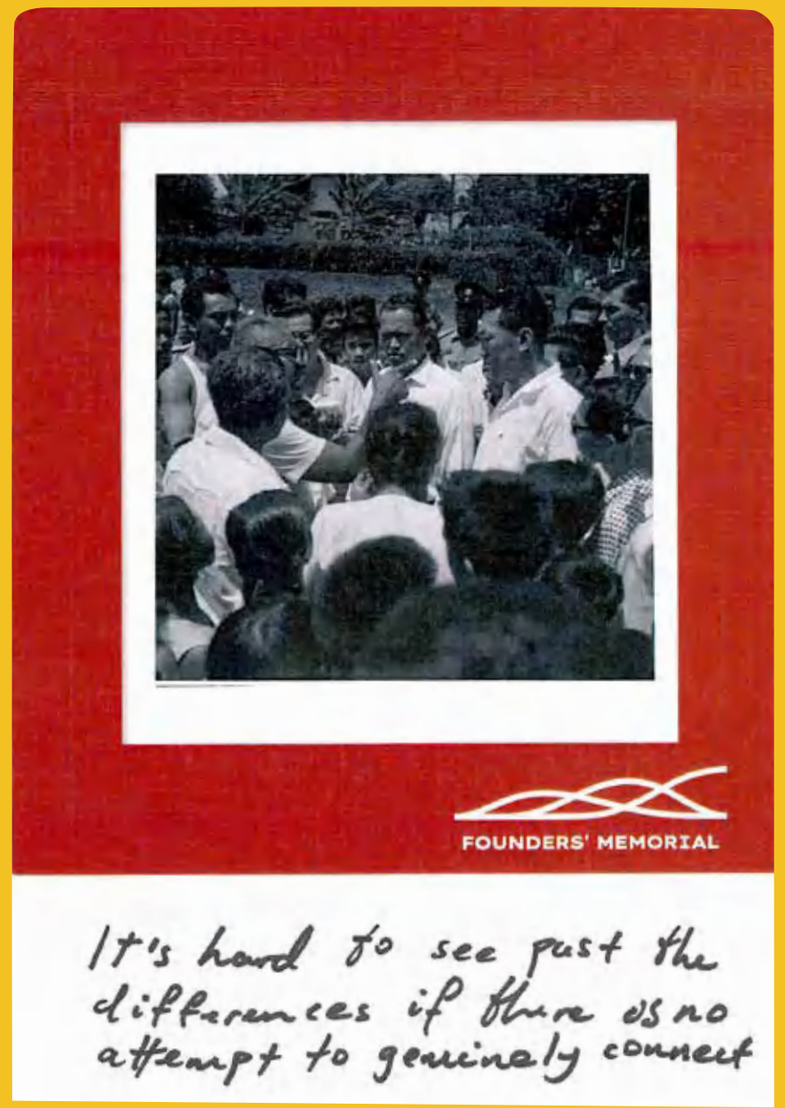
+ Wong Hong Suen is Director of the Founders' Memorial.

Joshua Goh is Assistant Curator at the Founder's Memorial.



A collage activity from *A New Singapore Spirit: Let's Talk About It*, 2023. In this activity, participants reflect on the trade-offs made as Singapore pursues its vision of being a global city. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

A group discussion taking place during *A New Singapore Spirit: Let's Talk About It*, 2023. Here, participants share more about their collages, one of which is shown on the top of this page. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.



A creative re-caption of an archival photo from *A New Singapore Spirit: Let's Talk About It*, 2023. This participant has chosen to re-caption a 1964 photo of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Minister for Social Affairs Othman Wok meeting Goodwill Committees and community leaders in the aftermath of the racial riots. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

NOTES

Access the digital version of the journal via the QR code above or via this link: **https://go.gov.sg/65**

Any comments, feedback, or suggestions for upcoming issues? Drop us an email at **Founders_Memorial@nhb.gov.sg** to get involved.

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