MITA Minister on Society's role

The Minister for Information and the Arts and Second Minister for Foreign Affairs BG (Res) George Yeo was the guest of honour at the Society’s fellowship dinner on November 4 last year. BG Yeo highlighted the role of a society such as the Heritage Society in generating more awareness of the common humanity beneath the cultural diversity.

Speaking to members and friends at the dinner held at the Tudor Ballroom of the Goodwood Park, BG Yeo said: “By sparking interest in the culture of others, you help dissolve prejudices and stereotypes. By delving into particularities, you help uncover the common humanity which binds us all together.”

He said he had been interested in the activities of the Heritage Society well before there was a MITA and before he had any idea that he would be made the minister in charge. “Like all of us here I rejoice in our cultural diversity.”

This respect for cultural diversity was very important, he said. “We must advocate it the way environmentalists advocate biological diversity. In fact, it is one of the great challenges facing the world today.”

He pointed to countries which were being pulled apart because of distrust between ethnic groups. “Cultural diversity is possible only when all the constituent cultures accept one another with tolerance and respect.”

“Our multi-racialism in Singapore is therefore quite a remarkable achievement. Of course we worry about it a lot but it is because we worry about it a lot that we are able to maintain overall harmony. Perfect harmony can never be attained. We just have to be realistic and stay watchful.”

He spoke of how a multi-racial Singapore could only be sustained if cultural diversity as an ideal was internalised in the psyche of every Singaporean.

“For a small place, we are incredibly complicated in terms of our multi-cultural heritage. We reflect on our little island much of the diversity of the world. For this reason, the Singapore experiment in multi-racialism is of some international interest. Just as we are inspired by the Swiss, so we in turn are an inspiration to others.”

His hope was that the Society could “get more organised, recruit more members, reach out to young and old, and help make Singapore a more interesting and a more tolerant society.”

He concluded by congratulating the Society on the good work it had done and urged it “to do even more.”

We have no anti-Japanese motives

The Occupation commemorative events organised by the Society, said the President, William Lim at the opening of the Society’s Singapore Surrender! exhibition were not motivated by any anti-Japanese sentiment. “The Surrender heralded the end of the British colonial era and the time of the Japanese Occupation was a painful period of our history.

“In fact, there are many useful lessons we can learn from the experiences during those war years. They include the need to defend our defence capability and to protect the highly vulnerable resources like water, food and fuel.

“However, from the perspective of the Society, we owe it to our younger and future generations in recording these events and in allowing them the opportunity to recollect their heritage and to remind them of their past. They should become a part of the collective sub-conscious memory of our people.”

The exhibition from February 15 to March 16 was at the never-before-opened Surrender Chamber in the former Ford Factory in Bukit Timah Road.

Lim thanked the heritage department of the Ministry of Information and the Arts for their assistance, the generosity of in particular the Shaw Foundation for being the anchor sponsor of both the Syonan package and the Singapore Surrender! exhibition, and Mobil Oil for sponsoring the Heritage Hunt.

He also thanked committee members for the time they gave to put together everything.

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Edited by Lee Geok Bia - Printed by Ngai Heng Book Binder Pte Ltd
Heritage Hunt 1992 winners

A collage of the winning entries as they appear in Syonan - Singapore under the Japanese.

The subject was the Japanese Occupation and the hunt was divided into two categories - documents and artefacts. The prizes were sponsored by Mobil Oil. The winners were presented with their prizes at the opening of the Singapore Surrenders! exhibition at the Ford Factory.

First prize of $500 went to Tang Kee Seng for three items - permit of remittance to Saitow (China) signed by Odachi Shigeo, the first mayor of Syonan, certificate of registration of a drug store, and a share certificate.

The first of two second prizes of $300 each went to Tan Ah Long for a power of attorney sealed with the seal of the Syonan Kotohoin, a set of documents and artefacts belonging to an Indian port labourer, and documents relating to the Overseas Chinese Association.

The second prize went to Tan Lai Huat for the constitution of the Overseas Chinese Association, Syonan, the Syonan handbook, Syonan notebook containing maps and illustrations, Syonan Shimbun movie supplement dated September 11 2603, Bank of China receipt with the bank's name cancelled and replaced by the legend of Netherlands India Commercial Bank, signed by a Japanese liquidation officer, and two military currency notes.

The third prize of $100 went to Geraldene Lowe-Ismail for a set of documents belonging to an amah who escaped to Australia on the MV Gorgon.

Consolation prizes of $50 each went to:
* Ho Chow Pheng for Tadashi Nippon-go, a Japanese language textbook published by the Military Propaganda Department;
* Leslie Lye Weng Kee for Bitter Memories, a cartoon booklet documenting Japanese atrocities;
* H.C. Gay for mimeographed Japanese language exercises, Syonan students' identification card, two Japanese language proficiency certificates, and leaflets dropped by Allied Forces after the Japanese surrender;
* Michael Chen Si Kok for a set of documents relating to the settlement of Bahau;
* Raymond Ang Chien Chien for a copy of The Straits Times dated September 10 1945;
* Ng Foong Ming for a Japanese permit to purchase opium;
* Cheng Choo Kuang for documents relating to the sale of sundry goods in Syonan; and
* Lew How Chye for a census taking list showing removal to Malaya, and a postcard from Malaya to Syonan referring to living conditions in Malaya.

In the artefacts category, the first prize of $500 went to Wong Hon Sun for a set of matchbox labels with propaganda cartoons issued by the Japanese army, and a set of labels from matchboxes sold to raise funds for the Sino-Japanese War.

The second prize of $300 went to Poon Soon Hong for two whistles used by ARP wardens and sub-machine gun decy rattle. The third prize of $100 went to Geraldene Lowe-Ismail for a watercolour painting by a woman POW Gladys Tompkins of “Changi Garden from East Garden”.

The consolation prize of $50 went to Henry Frey for an Australian POW badge.

The organising committee and the judges of the Hunt

The Heritage Hunt committee was headed by Bobby Wong and Tan Teck Kiam jointly and assisted by Maria Mah.

The hunt was launched in mid-December and the results were known in late January, just in time for the winning entries to be listed in Syonan - Singapore Under the Japanese.

The judges for the hunt were Mrs Lily Tan, Director of National Archives, Dr Lau Wai Har, former director Institute of Education and former project director Confucian Ethics Project Team, Associate Professor Ernest Chew, head History Department, National University of Singapore, and Mr Charles Simon, former president Ex-Services Association and former POW and chairman of Bolter and Simon Pty Ltd.
The Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong was the first VIP to receive a copy of the Society’s new publication when he opened the Japanese Occupation exhibition organised by the heritage departments of the Ministry of Information and the Arts on February 8, the day the Japanese landed troops on mainland Singapore.

The book, the Society’s second monograph, entitled Syonan - Singapore Under the Japanese, is more than a book. It is also quite literally a package to recapture a bit of the past. In an army-green canvas pouch together with the soft-cover book are a banana note, a copy of Loh Teck Cheong’s ration card and six postcards of sketches of POW camp life done by a POW, Bill Haxworth. He had given his collection of sketches to the National Archives.

Also included in the package are reprints of the front pages of three newspapers of the period: the February 15 edition of The Sunday Times, The Syonan Times, and the September 7 1945 issue of The Malayan Times. This was the day the Japanese surrendered and the British returned.

The book itself describes both civilian and prison camp life during the Japanese Occupation. It gives the events leading up to the British surrender of Singapore as well as an idea of the extent of the Occupation on the national development of Singapore.

A large part of the book is based on oral history accounts. Author Lee Geok Boi found a treasure house of information and highly quotable quotes in the Oral History Department’s Japanese Occupation project.

This project started in 1981 to capture the memories of the mostly ordinary men and women who lived through the Japanese Occupation involved 175 interview subjects. It took four and half years to complete. These oral history accounts make history come alive.

The book is amply illustrated with material from the National Archives as well as new material from other sources including junk dealers and collectors of Japanese Occupation memorabilia. Also included in the book were the winning entries for the 1992 Heritage Hunt.

Designed and produced by Goh Eck Kheng of Landmark Books, the package took a mere four months to put together from inception to book launch. Both author and designer worked at full steam to get the publication ready.

The package comes in two editions. The special edition is in an army-green canvas pouch while the student edition is in a cardboard folder. Both contain the same materials. The special edition which was sold out soon after its launch was priced at $24, the student edition at $15. A reprint of the special edition is in the works. Select Books has been appointed the distributor of the publication.

A Chinese edition is now being prepared. It is hope that the book will be ready in early June in time for an exhibition on the Japanese Occupation to be held in People’s Park Complex. The exhibition is being organised by the Kreta Ayer Zone A Residents’ Committee. The Committee will be giving the Society a stand to sell its books.

If things go according to plan, there may even be a Japanese edition of the book. International House of Japan has been approached to sponsor a Japanese edition of the book.

The English edition was made possible with a generous grant from the Shaw Foundation. The Chinese edition is being sponsored by Orchard Parade Holdings Ltd.

**Briefing for teachers**

As part of the target audience for the Syonan package was schoolchildren and other young people who grew up without knowing anything about the Occupation, both the designer Goh Eck Kheng and and the author Lee Geok Boi addressed more than 100 teachers on the Society’s package.

Goh spoke on the contents and Lee on the subject of food during the Occupation. The aim was to give teachers an idea of how they could use the package as a consciousness-raising exercise. Teachers who came from both junior colleges and secondary schools were also addressed by the Director of the National Museum, Kwa Chong Guan, and Vice-President of the Society.

The briefing was organised by the National Museum and National Archives and held on February 29 at the Museum theatre. Light refreshments were served after the briefing.

After refreshments, interested teachers were given a tour of the Battlebox in nearby Fort Canning. This was the command quarters of Lt-General A.E. Percival in the last days before the British surrender of Singapore.
Surrender Chamber opens for first time

The room where the empire on which the sun never set surrendered to the empire of the sun was opened for the first time to the public in an exhibition organized by the Society in February. The month-long Singapore Surrenders! exhibition in the room at the former Ford Factory in 13 1/2 milestone Bukit Timah Road exhibited historic photographs of the empire-shaking event as well as the winning entries of the 1992 Heritage Hunt which was on the theme of the Japanese Occupation.

Known as the Surrender Chamber, it was here that Lt-Gen A.E. Percival, Commander of the Malaya High Command, surrendered to the Tiger of Malaya, Lt-Gen Tomoyuki Yamashita.

The exhibition was opened by the guest of honour, the former chairman of the Preservation of Monuments Board and group chairman of Overseas Union Bank, Mr Lien Ying Chow, on February 15 at 6 pm. This was about the time that the surrender was being negotiated 50 years ago.

The room is now the conference room of Trune Corporation which kindly consented to the use of their facility for the exhibition.

Copies of the special edition of Syonan - Singapore Under the Japanese were presented to Mr Lien, MITA Minister BG (Res) George Yeo as well as to the representatives of the sponsoring organisations, Mr Shaw, Vee Meng of Shaw Foundation and Mobil's Public Affairs Manager Tan Cheng Guan.

Among the VIP guests present were the Japanese ambassador to Singapore, Mr T. Togo; the wife of the British High Commissioner, Mrs Gordon Duggan, the Australian High Commissioner and his wife, Mr and Mrs Alan Brown, and the Australian High Commission defence advisor, Colonel Mellor, New Zealand High Commissioner Colin Bell, the US ambassador and his wife, Mr and Mrs Robert D. Orr, and the Indonesian ambassador, Mr Tuketyohadi.

The winners of the 1992 Heritage Hunt were also present to receive their prizes from Mr Tan Cheng Guan. The Society's new publication was also put on sale at a book stand set up at the exhibition.

Vice-President Koo Chong Guan (left) presenting a copy of Syonan-Singapore Under the Japanese to Mr Lien (centre) while William Lim looks on.
Committee’s ‘nightmare’ a triumph

A special committee was set up to organise the Singapore Surrenders exhibition at the former Ford factory. It consisted of Dr Kenson Kwok, a National Museum curator, NUS School of Architecture lecturer Tan Teck Kian, freelance writer Mary Lee, and Mr David Boey, Singapore’s correspondent for Jane’s Weekly, who wrote in volunteering his services when he heard of the exhibition.

This committee, too, had to work against a tight time constraint to put together an interesting exhibition of the last days of the British Empire. Said Kwok: “It was a nightmare. We had two months to do it and we couldn’t work on it full time. Thank god it’s over.”

Aside from putting together quotations for the boards and organising the site, a major problem was when the exhibition design company they had given the job to backed out at the last minute. The committee then had to rope in Pico Art to take it on.

The exhibition included a short video presentation that captured the sounds and sights of the historic event. Using Japanese and British footage and a little ingenuity, free-lance audio-visual consultant Vernon Cornelius cleverly spliced together an interesting three minutes from SBC’s Diary of a Nation, the World at War series by Thames Television, and Japanese footage put together by Asahi Shimbun among other sources.

Among the discoveries he made was that the Japanese and British were made to pose for pictures in addition to footage taken of the actual happenings. The famous one of Yamashita lifting his arm as though in anger, he said, was a posed shot. Vernon is now re-editing the video with new materials which have since surfaced.

Even before the exhibition was officially opened, it was visited by a group of war veterans, many of whom had gathered for the commemorative ceremony held on the morning of February 15 at Kranji War Memorial. Many of the veterans who were in town also made it to the exhibition subsequently in large groups.

Among the other visitors to the exhibition were the Japanese, judging by the disappearance of the Japanese factsheets. The text of the boards had been translated into Japanese, Malay, Tamil, and Chinese courtesy of the newspapers. (Nihon Keisai Shimbun did the Japanese translations.) These factsheets were distributed to visitors.

Although relatively quiet on weekdays, the Surrender Chamber was to quote Kwok, “heaving with people”, among them schoolchildren who came in busloads.

After the exhibition, the exhibits were given to the head of Trane Corporation, Mr John Kirkham, who coincidentally was a small boy in Singapore before the Occupation. His father had worked in the factory next door to the Ford factory in Bukit Timah. The family had escaped just before the Fall of Singapore.

The Society would like to thank Trane Corporation for the loan of their office. For six weeks, the staff had lost the use of their conference room - the Surrender Chamber itself - as well as its front foyer and office space.

The staff had to be squashed into a smaller space behind the exhibition partitions.
Malay Night goes down well

The food was really something to talk about and the entertainment was a treat. Those members and their friends who participated in the Malay Night dinner at Aziza's Restaurant in Emerald Hill Road found themselves amply rewarded for their effort.

The 65 guests including two children who attended the function on March 29 were greeted in the traditional Malay fashion with a shower of yellow rice and silat dancers.

During the evening, since Hari Raya Puasa was not far off, the skill of ketupat weaving was shown. Ketupat or rice cakes cooked in woven leaf wrappings are a must in all Malay homes. Guests not only saw, but they had to do as well.

They were also invited to join in the singing and dancing. Aziza handed out bamboo sticks and the guests had to keep time with them. The evening also became a karaoke session of sorts for those who love singing before an audience.

Aziza also explained how to do a proper salaam, and guests tried their hand at it by salaaming each other. She also talked about various aspects of Malay culture as well as something about the handmade instruments - the rebana, gambus and violin - which were used in the performances.

To get into the spirit of things, the attire was batik or any Malay attire. Songkoks were offered to members willing to stump out $8 to own this distinctive Malay headgear. One member did take up the offer - Bill Hui.

The menu consisted of such traditional Malay culinary classics as sot ayam (chicken soup), satay which needs no introduction, rendang, a dried curry of either beef or chicken, and nasi minyak (oil rice) among the nine-item menu. Although not sumptuous, the lack of quantity was more than made up for by the quality of the food was the verdict.
Comments in the press on heritage issues

'Leave it alone'

Strait Times reader Chan Wai Kit protested against the gentrification of Bussorah Street. He was responding to a report on plans to bring out the Islamic flavour of the area with dome-shaped lamps and the planting of palm trees to evoke a Middle Eastern ambience. He lamented the increasing inability of Singaporeans to appreciate things for what they are.

'The point here is that Bussorah Street does not need any form of beautification. Turning the street into a pedestrian mall is a positive step but beyond that, little else is called for.'

'The charm which this area exudes comes from the lifestyle - the way the people carry out their daily activities. Bussorah Street does not owe its charm to facades and motifs.'

'Tanjong Pagar has fallen victim to similar treatment that has left the area all dressed up externally but without any soul. What remains are rows of reconstructed facades with shops behind which one finds easily in places like Marina Square and Chinatown Point.'

'Our culture is fast disappearing as we continue to yearn for everything to look all clean and dressed up. It is time to try and see things differently.'

'The government has already taken steps to protect the architectural heritage of the area. It is time for us to consider other ways to enhance the area.'

'Must money always talk loudest?'

In a letter to The Straits Times reader Choo Thim Heng queried the necessity to be always dictated to by economic considerations.

'These' seem to outweigh others in many government decisions. This is most telling in the conservation issue.

'Chinatown is now littered with restaurants, pubs, offices and tourist-oriented shops. Do they reflect the true elements of Chinatown? The running of the Malay Cultural Village has been awarded through tender to a Hong Kong company. Can genuine Malay culture blossom in such a context?'

'Upon completion of the MRT project, the URA should have refurbished the Cathedral belonging to the Town Council and handed it back to those who worship at the Cathedral. Instead, the URA is turning the Cathedral into a grand commercial "upmarket" complex.'

'Must we always subordinate our cultural heritage to economic dictates?'

'Save our oldest apartment block'

Reader Yvonne Ang, too, protested at the priority given to commercial considerations in the redevelopment of Crescent Flats in Meyer Road. Believed to be the oldest apartment block in Singapore, the flats which originally fronted the sea were built in 1909 by Macassar Meyer. They are to be replaced by a condo to be built by Hong Leong Holdings.

'Next to Crescent Flats is Meyer Apartments which was added in 1928. This block will also be demolished. Architects have praised Crescent Flats as of an unusual design and worthy of conservation.'

Tours of battlefield sites

Heritage guide Geraldene Lowe took interested members and their friends on a tour of the sites on which the battle for Singapore were fought. December 8 1991 coincided with the 50th anniversary of the start of the Malaya Campaign.

Singapore experienced its first bomb raid and the Japanese landed at Kota Bahru and Singora and Fatani in south Thailand. The landings were launched at about the same time as the bombing of Pearl Harbour.

The second battlefield tour was on February 15 1992 which was also the 50th anniversary of the Fall of Singapore. The tour covered the site of the British surrender to the Japanese, the beaches from which the Japanese landed their assault on Singapore, the Kranji War Memorial as well as the nooks and corners where gun emplacements and ammunition stores were once to be found.

Another tour which was part of the activities to commemorate the Fall of Singapore was a tour of Changi Village on January 25. This tour took in Changi Prison which was the internment camp for British prisoners-of-war as well as civilian prisoners. Later into the Occupation, the civilian prisoners were shifted to Sime Road camp.

Visitors went to the chapel which has actually been rebuilt - the original chapel was carted away to Australia block by block after the return of the British.

They also visited the museum which has a display of POW photographs. The group then went to the old Changi airbase to look at the murals painted by POW Stanley Warren.

A few years ago, Warren had been invited back by the Singapore Tourism Promotion Board to touch up his paintings. He passed away recently.

Two for British Council-sponsored visit

The President, William Lim, and the Vice-President, Kwa Chong Guan will be representing the Society on the British Council-sponsored trip to check out British heritage activities.

They will also be looking into the set-up of the British Heritage Trust, something the Society is hoping to be able to do eventually. The stay and visits will be sponsored by the British Council. However, the Society will have to get another sponsor for the air tickets. The trip is scheduled to take place at the end of May.

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The Society’s annual general meeting will be held on Tuesday May 26 at 5.30p.m. at the National Museum. Since this is a non-election year, the meeting will be mainly to go through accounts, pass the minutes of last year’s AGM as well as for members to raise any outstanding matters. The AGM will also be an opportunity for members to socialise and catch up with each other.

Members who have ideas to share may want to note that there are now four new committees through which they can work. As members may have noticed, the Culture and Lifestyles sub-committee has been very active in the last few months. These four new sub-committees are:

- Heritage of the Physical Environment headed by Bobby Wong c/o School of Architecture, National University of Singapore, Kent Ridge (0511); tel. 772-3520, fax 779-3078
- Written Heritage headed by Goh Eck Kheng, 12-A King Albert Park (2159); tel. 734-4579, fax 235-3487
- Heritage of Performing and Visual Arts headed by Claire Chiang, 67 Faber Drive (0512); tel. 772-3724, fax 462-0186, pager 207-4001
- Heritage of Culture and Lifestyles headed by Y.P. Chee, 15 Queen Street, #03-01 Tan Chong Tower (0718); tel. 339-7633, fax 339-5605

Members who are interested in these areas or who want to help plan activities on any one of these areas can get in touch with the chairperson of the particular committee.

Current Ex-co members

President : William Lim
Vice-president : Kwa Chong Guan
Honorary Secretary : Claire Chiang
Honorary Treasurer : Goh Eck Kheng
Committee members : Y.P. Chee, Geraldene Lowe, Ismail, William Sim, Tan Teck Kiam, and Bobby Wong
Co-opted : Dr Kenson Kwok

Need for more awareness

To reach out to the younger generation and make them more aware of our collective history, the Society needed to free itself from the constraints imposed by the lack of human resources and financing.

“We should increase our membership and enlist more corporate members. We need a permanent office with a full-time manager. Both human and financial resources are necessary to enable us to play a more active and effective role,” said President William Lim at the Society’s fellowship dinner on November 4, 1991 at the Goodwood Park, at which BG George Yeo was the guest of honour.

Knowing who they are was no longer an issue for most young Singaporeans, said Lim. “However, we still need much better awareness of our collective history and heritage. This will foster and strengthen understanding among our different ethnic communities.

“At the same time, this awareness will provide the essential subconscious anchorage and creative energy towards the development of a contemporary culture we can proudly identify as our own.”

Formed in 1987, the Society has been low-key, its activities limited and its achievements and contributions modest. The constraints came from the lack of human and financial resources. The Society’s large projects have been financed in an ad hoc fashion by corporations such as Shell, Shell and Mobil.

This year Far East Organisation has kindly donated $50,000 towards running costs as well as to finance some of the projects coming up.

Lim highlighted some of the Society’s significant actions since its coming into being in 1987:

- Minorities Workshop in 1988;
- Submission to the Committee on Heritage of the Advisory Council of Culture and the Arts;
- Submission to the Ministry of National Development on the Master Plan and the Civic and Cultural District;
- Participation in the dialogue session on the above;
- Heritage Hunt for treasures in the physical environment;
- Publication of the Society’s first monograph - Pages of Yesterday in 1989;
- Heritage Hunt on literary treasures;
- Submission of Society’s views on the preservation of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus;
- A fair of traditional crafts and food from the different communities;
- In early 1991, two representatives were sent to Jakarta to attend a dialogue meeting on conservation of architectural heritage;
- A long letter to the press expressing disquiet over the proposed demolition of Eu Court;
- Participation in a regional conservation seminar in Penang.

He spoke on the need to increase membership. “In particular, the Society must also reach out to the younger generation, particularly those who are still in the tertiary institutions.”

Society of the History of Singapore Membership and Renewal Form

I wish to join the Society of the History of Singapore as (tick appropriate box below): Ordinary member (Singapore citizen/permanent residents aged over 21 only, annual subscription S$50.00)
Associate member (all others over 21 and resident in Singapore, no voting rights, not eligible for office, annual subscription S$50.00)
Corporate member (all organisations, no voting rights, not eligible for office, invited as observers to meetings, annual subscription S$1000.00)

Name: Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms.
Organization: (corporate members)
Address:
Telephone: .................................. (Home) .................................. (Office)

I enclose my cheque for $ .................................. No .................................. made out to the Society of the History of Singapore. (Due to shortage of space, a detailed application form for membership will follow shortly.)

RENEWAL OF SUBSCRIPTION

I enclose a cheque for S$50.00 in renewal of my subscription.

Date: .................................. Signature: ..................................

(Please note that those who joined between April and October 1992 will need to have their subscription renewed by 30th April 1993.)