Reflections and Interpretations

Oral History Centre
25th Anniversary Publication
Pang Yang Huei

Introduction

Accounts of Japanese Occupation in Singapore tend to veer towards the deprivations suffered by the general population and atrocities meted out by the invaders. Rightly so too, as such a slant reflects the deep psychological and physical scars suffered by the community. For the POWs such as Thomas Kitching in Changi, survivors from the killing fields of Sook Ching and victims of the Kempeitai, the Japanese Occupation was a primal hell. Its brutality swamped subsequent accounts. Chen Su Lan’s *Remember Pompong And Oxley Rise* concentrates only on the author’s pell-mell escape to Pompong Island in the bid to escape the Japanese invaders and an interrogation by the Kempeitai. The remaining chapters summarise Chen’s knowledge of various Sook Ching sites. The biographical treatment of Elizabeth Choy by Zhou Mei is similarly vivid and graphical *vis-à-vis* Choy and her husband’s incarceration at Stamford Road. A compilation of interviews written by Foong Choon Hon, *The Price of Peace*, underscores the heroism of Force 136, Chinese Volunteers, the Malay Regiment and to a lesser degree the communist MPAJA.

Seen in this light, Lee Kuan Yew’s autobiography, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* is a curious read, especially Chapter 3: The Japanese Invaders. Lee’s single chapter highlights how a smart enterprising young man with instinctive entrepreneurship could survive in times of war. Although Lee acknowledged the fears generated by the Japanese Occupation and its wanton excesses, those passages seemed almost perfunctory.
Peppered throughout the chapter were subtle hints of Lee's awe of the invaders. For example, Lee noted the Japanese iron fist rule: "As a result I have never believed those who advocate a soft approach to crime and punishment, claiming that punishment does not reduce crime. That was not my experience in Singapore before the war, during the Japanese Occupation or subsequently." Another alternative reading of the Japanese Occupation, Yap Pheng Geck's "Scholar, Banker, Gentleman Soldier" disabuses its readers from suspecting his wartime conduct. His collaboration with the Japanese was coerced. "We had to live and fend for our families," this prominent banker eloquently rationalised. "Most of us had to be in hiding all the time because of fear of the Japanese. Those of us who were bolder took the consequences [sic] and managed to survive."

There seem to be valid reasons to believe that Lee's and Yap's accounts of their experiences during the war, while not heroic, represent a collection of a much neglected but alternative reading of the Japanese Occupation. As this grey area carried for its perpetuators the odious tinge of wartime "collaboration with the enemy", many were for obvious reasons reluctant to share their experiences. This is brought to light in this author in an oral interview with Mr Tang S. Y. (pseudonym), an 81-year-old Chinese, who was a farmer during the Occupation. Tang might not share the analogous social status as Lee and Yap, yet his experiences underscored the alternative experiences shared by the "silent majority" of the survivors in Singapore during the Japanese Occupation. Tang not only survived, but also did well for himself during the Occupation. This aspect is ignored in most accounts. For if subsequent accounts of the Japanese Occupation are to be objective, then one has to consider such divergent experiences.

A Brief Background

Tang, a native of Guangdong Province [Fongshun district] was brought to Singapore in 1930 by his maternal grandfather when he was nine. Tang's grandfather assumed the responsibility of a father and taught Tang to be a competent farmer. They belonged to the Hakka dialect group, which originated from the Western reaches of the Huang Ho and the eastern branch of the Yangtze, and migrated to south China through the centuries. Tang's grandfather came to Singapore to strike it out for himself as a coolie. Through prudent savings, Tang's grandfather was able to buy a piece of agricultural land at Potong Pasir. Life was simple but adequate. He married a local woman during the war and had two daughters and a son.

Tang's granddaughter was kind enough to draw my attention to her grandfather's unique experiences during the Japanese Occupation. Linguistically, Tang is conversant in Hakka, Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew and Mandarin. This is an added advantage as this author can only master a smattering of the various dialects. The entire interview was done in Mandarin at Tang's living room on 5th March 2002.

Common Experiences

For all intents and purposes, Tang was unable to recall specific dates. He was only able to relate anecdotal incidents that seemed important to him. But Tang was clear about one specific incident. Sook Ching. "Operation Clean Up" or "Sook Ching" was an extermination programme designed by Lt Col. Masanobu Tsudo, Gen. Yamashita's head of operations staff. It aimed at shattering any attempts at insurrection along the Japanese 25th Army's extended supply lines while it went on to conquer Java and Sumatra. 2nd Field Kempeitai under Col. Oishi Masayuki was ordered to deliver a "severe punishment of hostile Chinese". To this end, the Japanese succeeded. One historian wryly commented, "It may be safely assumed that the marked absence of urban guerilla warfare conducted by secret societies or resistance groups in Singapore during the Occupation bears testimony to this fact."

According to Tang, the villagers were informed, "There, every three days they wanted a number of people to be present. Today they inform you, you pack up the next day and go to Jalan Besar near the Siang Lin Timber mill. There was once a timber mill at that place." Apparently, due to Tang's residence in the rural area of Potong Pasir, he escaped death. "But when the queue reached my batch," he remembered, "it was called off." There were several possible reasons.

Firstly, there were altogether five Sook Ching Centres: Jalan Besar Stadium, River Valley Road, Tanjong Pagar Police Station, Kallang Road and Paya
Lebar Road. The Sook Ching centre at Jalan Besar was of some consequence. According to Mamoru Shinozaki, Singapore wartime Japanese civilian administrator, Lt. Onishi Satoro was the officer in charge of that centre. It was considered a “kind” checkpoint as “he had already caught several big fish, including Wong Kim Geok, alias Lai Teck, leader of the MCP, and a Chungking spy, and so he was inclined to be comparatively kindly disposed toward the smaller fish.” Lee Kuan Yew was also called up for examination at the same checkpoint. In his memoirs, Lee fudged an excuse and he managed to escape extermination on the second day. Secondly, Chen Su Lan offered another explanation.

But on the third day the heat, the anger and the continuous hustle and bustle reduced the vigorously vindictive screeners to a state in which they could not care less... Many lucky ones told me that on the third day without any questioning some were stamped with a square ink mark... The stamping was done hurriedly and at random. The Japanese had enough of this dirty job.

In Tang’s case, the Kempeitai even cancelled the examination of Chinese males too far away. This meant that Tang was not stamped with a “square mark”. This utter randomness of the Sook Ching operation confirmed what appeared to many as a “senseless act of brutality committed by the Japanese.” While many were killed in this operation, numerous Chinese such as Tang made their escape.

The brutality of the Japanese was noted in Tang’s interview. One of the most haunting descriptions was a rape related to Tang by his brother-in-law who was staying in South Johore. The victim, Tang poignantly noted, was supposed to be his wife. Due to objections from the victim’s mother, the marriage was called off. Tang painfully related the incident:

“Three Japanese soldiers entered that girl’s house. Her mother was raped, her mother-in-law was raped and she was not spared. Her husband, father and father-in-law stood aside watching. After the assault, things were not so simple. You think the Japanese would go away? No! My cousin was watching from the next door but his family was in the jungle. The Japanese soldiers used their bayonet, speared into their groins and slashed upwards. [Mr Tang demonstrated] Her mother’s skin [near the groin] was tougher because of age. So it went this way [gestured to the right side of the groin] but the girl’s... it went all the way up [gestured the chest]. She passed away. So horrible, such barbaric acts!”

Although this was not an eyewitness account, there was no reason to doubt Tang’s brother-in-law’s testimony. Numerous factual accounts are available on the beastly conduct of the 25th Army especially in South Johore. One biographer noted that the massacres were usually “preceded by the rape of their women and young girls whose male relatives or friends were then beheaded in the presence of their women by an executioner using a two-handed Samurai sword.” One woman survivor of another ill-fated Johore town of Benut related a grisly report where “[women] who resisted had their clothes slit open by the sword or bayonet and the children were tossed high in the air to fall on waiting bayonet.

The fear of death was also visible in Tang’s account. When a sentry along MacPherson Road stopped Tang, he experienced his first gnawing taste of fear. “Why must the sentry detain only me when there were two of us?” Tang related, “I was terrified, I wet myself. My urine leaked from my leg pants. But there was no problem; I didn’t take off my hat. I just had to take off my hat when I bowed. It was so strict, [laughs sheepishly]” Tang was lucky. Others were not so fortunate to hoodwink death in those dusty afternoons. Yap Pheng Geck had a vivid account: “The sentry brutally hit the man with the butt of his rifle. When he fell backwards, the sentry promptly bayoneted him with one savage jab in the stomach.” Lee was not spared either. “When I reached him [sentry], he thrust the bayonet on his rifle through the brim of my hat, knocking it off,” Lee remembered with disgust, “slapped me roundly, and motioned me to kneel. He then shoved his right boot against my chest and sent me sprawling on the road.” Even Singapore’s former President Wee Kim Wee who worked for Kaigun Kosakubu had his fair share:

“The guard signalled to me to park my bike beside the road. He then gave his gun to a Malay policeman to hold and attacked me ferociously with his bare fists. Never in my life had I been beaten like that. I could not think straight, and after what seemed like an eternity, he stood over
me panting like a punch-drunk boxer. [...] The sentry then grabbed his rifle, turned it upside down and started hitting me on my body and legs with the butt. He continued his assault even when I was down on the ground. Fortunately none of the blows hit my head or I would not have lived to tell the tale.24

To resolve such impasses, the population had to put up with it in the best possible way. For Tang he executed the perfect “bow” and was sent on his way. Wee’s boss Toda advised him to “remain calm and not show more defiance as it could lead to further misunderstanding that [Wee] was showing defiance to the Emperor and to Japan.”25 Others were more servile. Madam Fong Yit Fee’s comment was typical during the Occupation. “As long as you know how to bow and grin, you are quite alright.” She advised, “You laugh, you smile, you are quite alright, you don’t put on a black face, it is quite alright.”26

Grey Areas

The previous three episodes recalled by Tang can be safely regarded as typical. Most people experienced or had witnessed them at some point during the Japanese Occupation. Interesting as they might be, they only served to reinforce the general impression of the sufferings encountered during those years. What is striking and definitely more valuable were Tang’s survival experiences in coping with life and accommodating with the vicissitudes of occupational years through wartime collaboration.

Life for Tang during the Occupation was in fact comfortable. “No, no, no, not that difficult,” Tang insisted. As he was a farmer, Tang creatively “planted food, for example, sweet potatoes, potatoes, tapioca, mixed with rice.” This shrewd farmer “even had a storage of rice. I bought it from the black market. I bought for $28 Nippon dollars for a jin [kati]. I stopped. Later it became hundreds of dollars. I used Nippon dollars, Straits Dollars. I saw that I had enough, I stopped. Towards the end, I couldn’t finish, my rice rotted. [sic]”27 Ee Peng Liang, former Nanyang Technological University Pro-Chancellor, related to his biographer that the hawker’s “managed rather well, better than those with white collar jobs anyway.”28 Obviously, this flew in the face of most Japanese Occupation accounts. Conventional accounts such as C. M. Turnbull’s describes the chaotic scene towards the end of the war, “Even prisoners brought back from slaving to build the Burma-Thailand railway were shocked at the listless hunger and despair of the population. There were long queues for rice... Many people were dying of malnutrition.”29

Tang’s honesty in admitting that he had an excess of rice betrayed his unperturbed existence during the war. Tang was oblivious to the gravity of his comment and went on to reveal the correct method to store rice: “You should use containers made of wood. Never use porcelain containers. They can store the rice for a longer period. Rice in porcelain containers attracts moisture. Not good. I also found out that I should also put charcoal in it.”30 One supervisor of a tofu factory had an even more idyllic life. As someone who had always been active physically, life in the factory was really boring and mundane. [He] passed his time playing mahjong, usually at his mother-in-law’s house at Joo Chiat Road. Gambling became a passion, at least during this period.

“I used to bring stacks of banana notes, about $20,000 or more, to my in-law’s place and together with some friends and relatives, we gambled through the night.”31

Obviously, Tang’s lifestyle was buttressed by a complex matrix of shady dealings between supplier and middleman, all of whom profited greatly. While most traditional accounts deal in depth with the existence of the black market, its players’ attitudes were not revealed. In this aspect, Tang’s testimony proved significant. Tang profitably sold eggs and chickens on the black market. Kenneth Chia remembered, “We often brought the goods to the kampungs, remote, out of town places, where we could get the help of the kampung people, where it would be safer and where we wouldn’t be caught.”32 When cornered by a prying question on his profits, Tang froze up and muttered, “I am a supplier. He [middleman] would earn a bit. I didn’t earn much.”33 What Tang did not reveal is perhaps more interesting than what he did. Towards the end of 1945, if eggs were fetching the price of $35 each, one could imagine how much chickens would fetch.34 Tang and his middleman could not have failed to profit from such a windfall. Moreover,
Tang was shrewd enough to deal only in Straits dollars. "Today's price is different from tomorrow's price," he revealed. "You want the old currency."38

Not only did Tang capitalise on the run-on inflation, he sub-let his house to city refugees. Tang remembered with relish, "The second day most city dwellers came to the villages to a place. Some depended on the recommendations of friends. All had to avoid the calamity. My house had over 60 tenants." For his troubles, Tang charged each tenant $30 per month in 1942. According to the cost of living index compiled by Paul Kratoska, by 1945 January, the index for rent had risen up to 565.7 points from February 1942.39 By March 1945, $5,000 was the price for a cubic in the city. Tang's village accommodation could not be far from this price.40 Some of his tenants could only pay in "banana notes". It was possible that Tang immediately converted these notes into some commodities or used up to 600 Nippon notes for a Straits dollar.41 Together with the earnings from chicken and eggs, Tang had a cozy life.

For farmers like Tang, the social hierarchy imposed on him in the pre-war days effectively atrophied. Before the war, Tang faced a dead-end job. "So when we toiled at the farm, some friends commented, 'It is useless wasting all your time here. Every day it is the hoe, digging...looking after pigs. You should go to Malaya, rubber tapping or farm or anything. Better than this.'"42 As a young man, Tang was extremely conscious of this difference. In fact, he even had great difficulties marrying anybody. "It was difficult in Singapore. In Singapore, people were very status/class conscious," he sighed. "If you did not have family fortune and if you were a farmer... They looked down on you especially if you are not educated."43 The war for Tang, albeit its dangers, presented a priceless window of opportunity. He obtained a wife during the war, made a "modest" sum of money and had "ich, big restaurateurs" asking favours from him. Small wonder that Tang remembered this episode so vividly. His experiences were hardly unique. According to Turnbull, "Sharp-witted practice became a virtue, and businessmen who had been ruined and then amassed new fortunes were held in general esteem. Singapore's social world and sense of values turned topsy-turvy. It brought to the top a nouveau riche class of enterprising businessmen, rackevers and gamblers. It offered profitable opportunities as middlemen to the former echelons of the society, the hawkers and the rickshaw pullers."44

Tang was not alone in his opportunism. Said Zahari, the former fiery editor of Utusan Melayu, was explicit on this point:

"Everywhere, people were crazy about learning Japanese as it suddenly had economic value. Nippon-Go became vital for filling bellies. Without it, you faced hunger; or you might be forced to steal or rob to get money for food. To get a job in a private company or a government department, Japanese was a 'must'. Little wonder that Japanese language classes mushroomed in Singapore."45

Lee observed, "There were others, the smart and the opportunistic, who went out of their way to ingratiate themselves and to make themselves useful to the Japanese. They provide them with labour, materials, information, women, liquor, good food, and they made fortunes."46 Mrs Lim San Neo, a widow, was offered "an easier way of life and that was to be kept as mistresses by the Japanese" which she vehemently turned down.47 Those with the right "connections", in Tang's view, won the day handsomely.

Another oral interviewee with the right "connections" had a similar experience; "We were lucky because my father was in the provision supplies line. He had many contacts in the black market. Though the things sold in the black market were expensive, we were able to afford them: things such as rice, salt, sugar."48 One prominent Chinese merchant always had important Japanese business associates to fall back upon.49 He could even engage in "gambling and [was] having a revelling time at the Ee Hoe Hian Club." Incidentally, this club was a restaurant cum brothel reserved for Japanese military officers.50 On another level, Yap Chor Ee's Ban Hin Lee Bank and Lee Choon Seng's Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation both cultivated close Japanese relationships. This played a vital part in ensuring their survival and prosperity in wartime Singapore.51

At this juncture, it is worthwhile reconsidering Tang's position. For an average farmer to advance so quickly in his station during the war brings a host of questions to a critical observer. For example, was Tang plain lucky? More
ominously, did Tang operate as an informer? Lee Kuan Yew observed, "Those who were quick off the mark in assessing the new situation, and swift to take advantage of the new opportunities by making themselves useful to the new masters, made fortunes out of the terrible misfortune that had befallen all in Singapore." After all, it was a well known fact that the Kempeitai made concerted efforts to recruit local informers. Privileges such as extra rice ration were given for services rendered. One Chinese who became an informer recalled the arrangements. "I was to meet up with him [the Kempeitai officer] at Singap Hotel to report to him on all the activities that I had observed in the vicinity of the Siglap-Bedok South area."

As it turned out, Tang performed a delicate act, balancing between the contempt of his compatriots and the outright collaboration with the Japanese. Under the Japanese’ Tonari Gumi system, Tang’s grandfather was a one star sidang in charge of their neighbourhood unit consisting of 30 households. The Japanese only selected noted characters for this job. Punishments were collective. "If anyone in a Kumi committed an offence he will be severely punished by law, and the heads of his families and that of the Kumi will be fined." Despite such exacting demands, Tang actively helped his grandfather. "You were supposed to know everything about your charges," he recalled. "So the Japanese knew of all the ‘bad hats’. We were honest, and did not hide anything from the Japanese. We were responsible. We were trained."

Haji Sukaimi bin Ibrahim, a two star sidang in a Pasir Panjang kampong, remembered that "they were also expected to report to the Japanese if there were any trouble."

Tang was gratified by his meticulous discharge of duties. Similar behaviour existed among ex-Koa Kunrenjo Malay cadets. One was to declare reverently, "I realise that no work is too difficult to accomplish and I would not have risen that fast in my career, if not for my Japanese training." Zahari went one step further. "It was at that time in Sihan Gakko (Japanese Teacher’s Training College), that the seeds of the desire for independence (dokuritsu) were sown in my mind."

John H. Boyle, in analysing wartime Sino-Japan relations, suggested that collaboration rationalised with the purpose of nationalism was acceptable amongst the perpetrators. Under the cover of nationalism, political leaders such as Sukarno, Jose P. Laurel & Ba Maw, suffered no political repercussions in the post-war period.

Interestingly, Tang talked about one informer. He emphasised that even Mr Rui Yong Kun, the informer for the Japanese, "wasn’t really a traitor". He stressed, "He did not harm us. He helped the Japanese to administer us. I did not know how he was chosen. He had helpers. There was pay." One of the roles that Rui performed was one of "collect[ing] our produce, for example, vegetables", where the Japanese would "buy from us" and "exchange rice with us. This person [Rui] would settle this. Negotiate the price." In an arduous effort to distance his collaborative role, Tang emphasised Rui’s role instead. Such psychological "displacement", concentrating the discussion on Rui’s roles and enticing sympathy for Rui’s predicament, was at once both fascinating to witness and galling to behold.

It can be deduced that Tang’s role as an assistant sidang and his evident close working relationship with the informer Rui, contributed to the peaceful and decent life he had as a farmer in rural Potong Pasir. Coupled with his shrewd common sense, Tang was able to capitalise on his unique position as a producer and his rural accommodation to make some money.

Tang’s dilemma came after the surrender. There was a very real danger of facing the “kangaroo trials” conducted by MPJA members. One interviewee, Mrs Fong Yit Fee who enjoyed a close relationship with the Japanese, verbalised these fears, "Then surrender time, very frightened. Everybody say surrender, ‘mati’ lah. How, why we are so good to Japanese. Give you a house to stay, aich, went to shift to Lorong, stay atap house lor. A little bit scary from the very beginning, but we kept to ourselves, keep our mouth shut... We cannot say that we starved. Other people also starved what, we also got ration, food to eat what."

Tang admitted that there were killings after the surrender. But he again stressed those killings were largely “personal vendetta”. His village was spared from such spectacles, as they were “closely-knitted”. Low Ngiong Ing, a teacher from Raffles Institution, recounted from another perspective that the camaraderie enjoyed by the English school teachers prevented any “betrayal by a colleague [to the Japanese].” Similarly, village cohesion against outsiders...
such as the MPAJAs may have saved their one star sidang. To Tang, only "bullies" deserved to be killed. One such official "demanded bribes. $5-7 or he would arrest offenders. Some bore a grudge. If one had no money, one would be arrested." This bully was summarily executed in Bugis.

Tang was obviously sidestepping the issue. In Malaya, crimes such as "profligating, causing harm or death to people, robbery or rape" would warrant tortures such as "beating with sticks, iron rods, or any sharp objects, bayonetting stabbing, and finally mutilation or decapitation... Eyes would be gouged out, genital cut off, the lower body disembowelled." Wee Twee Kim, an advisor to the Syonan Overseas Chinese Association, was executed in Singapore. Soh Guan Bee vividly recalled the carnage:

"[It] happened in Rangoon Roac Area, they kept on going from house to house to those people who tortured... those during the Jap's time they tortured people, they caught them, they killed them. They shot them all... And I saw quite a lot (of people) floating in the river, Rochor River... Rochor Canal. This was Syed Alwi Road corner, the bridge there, I saw a few floating in the river after the Japanese surrender, so everyone took their revenge. Some of them were informers, some of them were police, detectives, they were killed by those people, they hunted them down."

For Tang, confident in his fair conduct among his villagers, was not unduly perturbed. The Japanese conferred upon him his grandfather the rank of a sidang, while the others did not volunteer. Moreover, Tang's sister-in-law's husband, massacred during the Sook Ching, was a volunteer in the Overseas Chinese Volunteer Army. Tang's uncle joined the MPAJA's 5th Independent Regiment (Perak), which was by all accounts the strongest and most well organised.

All in all, Tang had a respectable anti-Japanese pedigree. Soong Mun Wai, a librarian of the University of Malaya, testified to the importance of such connections:

"The guerrillas accused him [Soong's father] of being 'a capitalist who had harmed the people'. Someone had given false information against my father. Fortunately, one of our relatives was a communist. He immediately spoke to an official in the local communist party, and explained

that though my father was a shopkeeper, he had secretly contributed money and food to the resistance movement... The intervention was timely. We thought my father had already been executed. But he was freed, and told to reform his capitalist attitudes."

Finally, the lack of harassment experienced by Tang could be explained by a simple act of self-preservation; passive resistance by doing nothing spectacular. One Sim Kah Yam, odd job labourer during the Occupation, rationalised: "The village headman would not make reports on the anti-Japanese because if he did the anti-Japanese would come after him." The village sidangs were not alone. Through pure expediency, pro-Japanese wealthy collaborators also donated secretly to MPAJA's coffers. This was essentially a backup plan should the Occupation end prematurely. While conventional wisdom would have Singaporeans believe that the Occupation years were a story of "terror, fear and atrocities [existing together with] bravery, patriotism and sacrifice," the reality was often filled with the banality of survival.

Conclusion

Tang's experiences highlighted a much-neglected aspect of Occupation literature: of ways and means shrewd survivors sought to make their lives as comfortable as possible. Cynically speaking, if the death toll of the Sook Ching was 50,000, this constituted 6.67% of the 750 000 Chinese in Singapore. While not discounting the horrors inflicted by Sook Ching, a case could be made for extensive studies on the "grey areas", a tangled web of wartime collaboration and survival, of the remaining 93% of the Chinese population.

Lee Kuan Yew's frank discussion in his memoirs is a good example. Tang's oral interview presents another opportunity to document such "grey areas" where students can be exposed to such rich controversies, neglected by textbooks.

It is common knowledge that the current Japanese history textbooks sought to bury all wartime atrocities. Former Member of the Japanese Parliament, Ishihara Shintaro, even believed Sook Ching was a legal military procedure against guerillas. At the other end of the spectrum, ironically, in Singapore, students are only taught that "the Japanese Occupation brought great
hardship to the people who lived in constant fear of the Japanese... The Syonan years also marked a period of struggle for survival against odds.”

The general impression given is, as rightly pointed out by Kevin Blackburn, that the entire Singapore population suffered together so much so it is re-written as part of a “shared past”.77 In both cases we see what Diana Wong aptly describes as the political power of “collective memory” used in the “founding myth of Singaporean nationhood [or a Japanese one for Shintaro].”78 Wang Gungwu cautioned:

“[...] memories can be selectively perpetuated for many generations. They might be reconstructed at different levels and for different purposes. They can even be used so effectively that later generations can remember more vividly than those who had lived through the events. This tells us something about memory and its uses. The kinds of history-writing that concentrate on the construction of new political identities may find the emotional power of direct memories, especially those of victims, particularly invaluable. The fact that some countries revive memories of the war and others do not itself needs attention. The uneven use of war memories in different parts of Asia shows that these memories can be still a political force for nation building.”79

“Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” is the education vision much enamoured by our local schools.80 Eventually, our “thinking” students will question their grandparents’ roles during the Occupation and revert to their history teachers for clarification. Exactly how much was three-and-a-half years of the Japanese Occupation a “traumatic experience of cruelty, brutality, hunger, and deprivation”?81 Instead of blindly adhering to the official “nationalistic” textbook line, Singapore educators would do better to draw out the discrepancies in experiences and to enact a more fulfilling discussion among students on this unique episode in Singapore’s short history.
Reflections and Interpretations

Lee, 54.
25. Ibid., 34.
27. Tang’s interview, 5.
33. Ibid., 8.
35. Tang’s interview, 6.
36. Kratoska. 203.
37. Turnbull, 200.
38. Tang’s interview, 6.
39. Ibid., 4.
40. Ibid., 2.
41. Turnbull, 200.
43. Lee, 62-76.
44. Lim San Neo, My Life, My Memories, My Story, Singapore: Epic Management Services, 1997, 63.
47. Goh, 35-6, 97. This story is repeated in Low, 107.
49. Lee, 74.
50. T. M. W., 7.
52. Diagram outlining the Re-Organisation of District Organisation and purpose of Tonari Kumi, MB Johor 209/2602, quoted in Kratoska, 83.

A Tangled Web of Wartime Collaboration and Survival in Singapore

53. Tang’s interview, 8.
54. Yeoh & Ramdas. 175.
59. Tang’s interview, 7.
62. Tang’s interview, 8.
64. Shinozaki, 94.
66. According to Low, the Japanese “did away with the rank & file of the Chinese Volunteers, but spared the officers.” (21) One of the officers spared was none other than Yap Pheng Geok.
68. Cheah, Red Star, 182.
69. Yeoh & Ramdas, 179.
71. Goh Chok Tong, Prime Minister, Speech, Opening of the “When Singapore was Syonan-To” Exhibition at the National Museum, 9 Feb 1992.
72. According to Chin Peng, MCP’s register recorded at least 50,000 missing personnel as a result of the Sook Ching, see Chin & Hack, 88; Nicholas Tarling on the other hand quoted 40,000 to 70,000. He obtained his figures from Otabe Yuji’s article, see A Sudden Rampage: The Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia 1941-1943, Singapore: Horizon Books, 2001, 201.
73. As time went on, we were to meet many collaborators, people who were willing to sell themselves to the enemy at the expense of others;’ see Geoffrey Tan, 14.
74. Free, Henry P., “Japan Remembers the Malaya Campaign,” In Malaya and Singapore During the Japanese Occupation, 162; Go to, 289-291.
75. Chua, 335.
REFERENCES

PRIMARY RESOURCES

Oral Interviews
Tang, S. Y. (pseudonym) Interview by author, Tape recording, Singapore, Toa Payoh. 5th March 2002.

Diaries & Memoirs

Governmental Press Releases
Goh Chok Tong, Prime Minister. Speech, Opening of the "When Singapore was Syonan-to" Exhibition at the National Museum, 9 Feb 1992.
Goh Chok Tong, Prime Minister, "Shaping our Future: Thinking Schools, Learning Nation," Speech, Opening of the 7th International Conference on Thinking. 2 June 1997.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Official Publications

Books

Articles
Reflections and Interpretations


Appendix: Transcript: Oral History Interview
5th March 2002 7:30 - 9 p.m.
Mr Tang S.Y. (pseudonym) - 81 years old.

Interviewer: Mr Tang (pseudonym), this interview is for the purpose of enquiring your experiences during the WWII especially with regards to the Japanese Occupation.

TANG: During the war I was only 20 years old.

Interviewer: So at that time what was your occupation?

TANG: I was a farmer on a small, very small farm.

Interviewer: Where is it situated?

TANG: Near St Andrew's School...

Interviewer: [ignoring the previous comment] Potong Pasir was a long stretch, divided in two places. One can either enter through Serangoon Road or Balestier Road. Most of the villagers in the kampong were Cantonese, some Hokkiens, all mixed, various races, even some Malays.

Interviewer: So during the Japanese Occupation, when the surrender took place on the 15 Feb...