

Tan Kok Yang, *From the Blue Windows: Recollections of Life in Queenstown, Singapore, in the 1960s and 1970s*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2013. 176 pp. ISBN 978-9971-69-650-4.

It is exciting to currently encounter the publication of an unprecedented number of memoirs and recollections by ordinary Singaporeans recalling local life in Singapore c. 1950-1980. These microhistories “from below” make for a refreshing alternative to the staple diet of hagiographies of Singapore’s elite. Tan Kok Yang’s *From the Blue Windows* is a fascinating and informative account of a childhood spent on a low rise Singapore Improvement Trust estate in Queenstown during the nineteen sixties and seventies. It provides a uniquely detailed firsthand account, a “thick history” of everyday life in one of the first provincial working class housing estates in Singapore. Such accounts are in danger of being completely lost to us in a nation/state so keen to forever change, less enthusiastic about seriously documenting its local and working class as opposed to national past.

As the attractive and evocative front cover by Koh Hong Teng indicates, the colonial Singapore Improvement Trust “Blue Windows” flats of Queenstown were 1960s 3 storey flats, all too soon dwarfed by the 16-25 storey high rise HDB flats that dominate Singapore’s working class housing estates today. The Blue Windows estate seems to fall uniquely between kampong and high rise “heartland.” Tan’s titular epigraphs from *Martin Chuzzlewit* and a Chinese proverb respectively gesture to the importance of home and the equal importance of remembering (as well as the perils of forgetting!) our pasts. The epigraphs seem poignant in a country in which personal pasts and family homes were mandatorily sacrificed for material progress. In his acknowledgements, Tan explains his motivation for writing is for a younger generation who did not experience the pre-full-on development era of the 60s and 70s: “Hopefully, they will have a better understanding of what life was like” – a life “far more enriching and exciting” (10) than Singapore since the 1980s.

Tony Sorenson, in his Foreword, draws parallels between Tan’s Singapore in the sixties and his own childhood experiences of postwar England. One thinks of the handkerchief knotted in four corners Tan’s beloved Grandma makes the infant Tan wear to protect him from the sun, Ford Prefects on Singapore’s then modest highways, Father Christmas at Tan’s father’s works “do,” the ambitious and perhaps impractical use of fountain pens in secondary schools of the period. I am less convinced by Sorensen’s sanguine framing of Tan’s story as “a parable of Singapore’s emergence as a nation.” Indeed, by the end of Tan’s narrative we have experienced a significantly bleaker but far more convincing portrait of a hard but happy period of Singapore’s social history and its ultimate termination. Here for me is an alternative narrative of residents who

after decades made a vibrant community together only to be ultimately exiled by further “redevelopment” questionably in their own interest. Tan’s account gestures to the trauma experienced by the majority of Singaporeans c. 1960-90s when “nation” was unequivocally set before self and locality on the say so of a leadership who largely escaped the personal material impact of such upheavals.

The Blue Windows estate marks the beginning of “development,” yet due to its low rise and diminutive nature the Commonwealth estate retained authentically “kampong-like” traits. Tan’s narrative allows us to joy in the minute particulars of the quotidian surrounding his family’s flat, block 94 Margaret Drive, with its “simple, yet fulfilling lifestyle.” These included Hainanese coffee shops with their chairs of teak, where small children (rather than tissues) were used by grandmothers to chope seats, Alexandra Canal - in Hokkien “Boh Beh Kang” (“no tail river”), early badminton courts, herds of cows, bridges still of wood, which children occasionally fell through, taking bets on chap ji ki from Uncle Botak Head, an abacus in the local shop, children terrorised by grandmothers’ stories of pontianaks, buying materials needed for festivals from Chinatown, taking the No. 9 Hock Lee bus there and back, fighting fish, coating fighting kite strings with powdered glass, bottles of ang sai orange drink for festivals, green spot for funerals, “love letters,” kueh bangkit, monthly pasar malams. Food was simpler, packaging more ecologically friendly, such as opeh leaves, tied with thin cane string. Farmers collected leftovers to feed their animals and in return annually gave householders a live chicken.

The Blue Windows was largely comprised of a Teochew speaking community, its life revolving around Chinese festivities, many of which are now already largely forgotten, including Double Seventh Festival, celebrating the forbidden love of a cowherd and a fairy, the couple ultimately allowed to meet by the Jade Emperor on one day of the year. Singapore authorities in the sixties still seemed to be closing one eye to unregulated temporary hawkers at these provincially celebrated festivities. As Tan suggests, the police were also perhaps eager to respect the spirits celebrated at such festivals. We get a vivid picture of the author as schoolboy doing his homework amidst the music of wayang and getai outside. We are also treated to a unique account of the long lost attap huts of Boh Beh Kang Kampung coming to life during these festivals. But all swiftly passed away: according to Tan, much of the magic of the moon festival was lost at news of Neil Armstrong (an American!) setting foot on the moon in 1969. The sounds of a Teochew pushcart uncle frying kway teow provided “a soothing aural backdrop” to homework quite different from the white noise of the overcrowded high rise estates of today. So much of this life: domestic bets, ice balls, firecrackers and pushcart hawkers, food perhaps unhygienic, but cheaper, more delicious, was rapidly legislated out of existence by 1980. As Tan opines, “What a pity indeed!” But Mandarin and US TV shows on the Tan family’s Hitachi 19 inch black and white TV must also “have been the

beginning of a shift in the way of life which diluted the kampong spirit of those early years.”

But Tan’s book also delineates many of the hardships of life during the good old days. In the sixties the Tans were a fairly large extended family of eight living together in a small three room flat. The younger boys slept in the hall on canvas beds. The “garden” comprised of grandma’s few plants on the balcony. Tan’s father worked hard for long hours his whole life in a junior position for low pay for British based palm oil firm Sime Darby. With his stressful job, he was not able to afford ang paws even for his relatives, or find time to play badminton on the court outside his block with his neighbours. And to support his large family he still had to supplement his income with work as a part-time interpreter. The young Tan himself was mugged on his way home. Dead bodies were nonchalantly wheeled past Tan’s bed during a spell in hospital. Residents of the Blue Windows also experienced flash floods, blackouts, children dying of infections after swimming in the longkang. Families were in dire need but there was little neighbours, suffering under their own hardships, could do.

The book is full of telling details, throwing light on Singapore during this period. While Tan states that “children of different races seldom mixed with each other,” the Chinese children on Tan’s estate “were able to observe how the Malays lived from the windows of our kitchens.” Were these Tan’s Malay classmates – all from outside Blue Windows, or the itinerant satay man with cabinets on a wooden pole, or more likely the cleaners and attendants and their families at nearby Strathmore primary school? “Very often after school, we would go and watch the Malay boys in the nearby field play football.” Vicariously, the young Tan experiences the richness of Malay culture.

A range of hawkers visited Blue Windows, including the Indian bread seller carrying his wares in a basket atop his turban. Customers lowered baskets from their flats to collect their bread and pay. As Tan observes, “lowering a basket in this manner from a twenty-storey HDB flat is simply unthinkable now!” (25). The muah chee man would dance for children and sing English nursery rhymes such as “one two buckle my shoe.” Food was delivered to houses and the empty bowls collected later. “Such was the practice then, when trust and honesty were the order of the day.” In Primary Six a resounding slap from turbaned Mr Singh, leaves a mark on Tan’s face and a ringing in his ears. And yet,

School in those days was definitely less stressful than it is now. As students we had the luxury of play and interact among ourselves and strong friendships were fostered in that time. Those years must have been one of my happiest times so far.

Tan recalls fondly post exam school visits – even if these were doggedly vocational – such as a field trip to National Cash Registers, with its behemoth state of the art early 70s computers.

While Chinese death rites endure in Singapore, they are hardly as colourful as in Tan’s childhood. Of Grandmother’s open air cremation at bright hill monastery, Tan recalls the Cantonese priest spitting fire as he jumped over burning pails of hell money, the children seeing “the skull of the deceased through the burning coffin.” Temple Spirit mediums pierced themselves in the chin with needles, thereby enabling families to communicate with dead loved ones. Poetry then was a part of ordinary Chinese Singaporean’s lives – at least at Qing Ming. Tan recalls Tang Dynasty poet Du Mu’s poem being recited, perhaps as the family drove to the cemetery in his Uncle’s Morris Minor:

In the drizzling rain during Qing Ming Festival,
The people on the streets are in deep sorrow.
May I know if there is a tavern nearby?
The cowherd pointed to the Apricot village afar.

Tan also includes a sad tale of a doomed long distance snail mail childhood romance with his female Peranakan pen pal in Malaysia. Quoting their last letters from over 40 years ago, Tan shares a romance tellingly halted.

The book is evocatively illustrated with numerous contemporary photographs. For me, one of the most poignant pictures is of one of my favourite characters in the book, the diminutive, quiet but fascinating Small Aunt. Small Aunt and her schoolmates would gather at the Tan home on the pretext of doing homework, but to discuss politics. Although Small Aunt “did not get herself into trouble,” Brother Hong, a student at Nanyang University was arrested along with 51 others for suspected communist related activities, and then expelled. We also see Small Aunt at her wedding in 1968. Tan’s photo of traditional Chinese New Year items, including mandarin oranges and an “antique cast iron hexagonal small box” on a new 1970s Formica dining table speaks volumes. Other photos include “lady folk” making “love letters.” Interestingly, while Chinese weddings in the 60s and 70s were held under awnings rather reminiscent of Malay void deck weddings now, small aunt’s wedding dinner was held at Gay World Park at Kallang – signifying a change. How fascinating it would be to read Small Aunt’s own account of these years.

Tan’s book ends on a sober note, a neighbour’s eviction in 1961, and nearby inhabitants’ inability or unwillingness to help: “the officials chased them out and left them crying outside what was previously their own flat.” “Such unpleasant scenes recurred frequently.” Ultimately by 1973 “Development” decrees that Tan and his family are themselves evicted from Blue Windows. They migrate to Tiong Bahru, ironically an SIT block older than Blue Windows

and closer to town, but a far less healthy environment. Such moves did and still do generate psychological trauma especially in the old. Tan's grandmother, among unfamiliar faces and languages, found the experience isolating. Taken away from her friends of decades "she had no one to talk to" and died within a few months of moving.

Tan's Afterword includes a recent nostalgic visit back to Queenstown. Tan finds the area unrecognisable. "The Tah Chung Emporium, the Queenstown Remand prison and most of the low-rise flats have all disappeared. The two cinemas... have been converted into churches." Although Queenstown's first heartlands public library survives, "Still I sometimes wonder if there will be any landscapes familiar to my generation that future generations will be able to come into contact with." He is amazed by the imposing high rise flats that replaced the low rise estates like Blue Windows: "A sense of remorse overcame me: a part of our national heritage had been eliminated in the endless pursuit of a more modern lifestyle." The Afterword ends with a moving plea: "is it possible to be more selective and cautious when deciding what should be torn down and what should be preserved?"

I wonder if later local heartlands memoirs and narratives, accounts of 1980s onwards, impacted so much more fully by development, and corralled by authoritarian legislation, could ever be as entertaining and fascinating as those of life in the Blue Windows in the 1960s and 1970s. The book ends with a very helpful and attractive map, but sadly no glossary. As I said at the beginning of this review it is so gratifying to read middle class narratives of Singapore's past. But most of these, welcome as they are, continue to derive from Chinese males, now we need to see published complementary narratives of the past from other groups: women, Malays, Tamils, Eurasians, pioneer generation members of Singapore's gay community and others.

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