

International Memory of the World Register

Japanese Occupation of Singapore Oral History Collection

(Singapore)

2012-70

Colonial Singapore was the jewel of the British empire. It was a centre of trade and commerce, and a cosmopolitan port city which attracted a flow of migrants and businessmen from around the world, especially Asia, Europe and the Middle East. When the Japanese began their Malayan Campaign, British, Australian and New Zealander soldiers, along with scores of Chinese, Malay, Indian, Arab and other local volunteers stepped up to defend Singapore against the invaders. When Singapore fell on 15 February 1942, the lives of all involved, locals or foreigners and combatants or civilians, were changed dramatically under the Japanese administration of the island.

For historians, the circumstances of the following 42 months of occupation have previously been extremely difficult to piece together due to the destruction of records by the Japanese administration in the days leading up to their surrender on 15 August 1945. Other sources such as the local papers had been vessels of propaganda, taken over by the Japanese administration.

The **Japanese Occupation of Singapore Oral History Collection** has become an indispensable source of information; powerfully filling the huge gap caused by the deliberate destruction of written records. It is a comprehensive collection of experiences from a broad spectrum of individuals of different nationalities, ethnicities and social-economic backgrounds. There are accounts by prisoners of war, civilian internees, government servants, businessmen, British, Australians, Chinese, Malays, Indians, Japanese and more. Speaking in different voices and languages, they related their lived experiences and communicated the complexities of deep emotions and memories, giving a multi-faceted view of an important period of world history.

The documentary heritage is **important in world history** for a number of reasons:

1. The collection is unique. It is acknowledged by experts as the most comprehensive collection of testimonies of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore and has aided in the historical reconstruction of this particular period.
2. The collection gives insight into Japanese military strategy. Singapore was an important strategic target in the Pacific Theatre of World War Two. Control of Singapore meant control of sea lanes and trade routes, and ultimately, the resources of the region. The fall of Singapore was an important military victory for the Japanese and marked one of the high points of the Japanese military campaign in World War Two.
3. The collection gives insight into Japan's swift capture of British-ruled Singapore and its global resonance as a victory by an Asian power over a western power. Singapore was Great Britain's "Gibraltar of the East" and symbolised the strength of the British Empire. This was a defeat which would henceforth hang like an albatross on colonialism's neck and have resonance not just in Singapore but throughout the empire. After the war, local populations, including in Singapore, gradually sought self-determination, eventually leading to the end of empire.
4. The collection is also a complex study on race and class relations. 1940s Singapore was a unique potpourri of migrant cultures. Due to multiple historical factors, the Japanese overlords treated the local population differently (though not always consistently), depending on race, class, status and occupation. For example, the long standing rivalry between Japan and China led to particularly harsh treatment meted out by the Japanese overlords to the Chinese population in Singapore, which culminated in a policy where male Chinese suspected of anti-Japanese sentiments were massacred. There are contrasting stories of more respectful treatment accorded to medical professionals, local

Malays, or enlistees of the Indian National Army.

5. Also of wider interest are the first hand accounts of Japanese treatment of British, Australian and New Zealander prisoners of war and the unique and harrowing stories told of life in the camps, the privations and the depth of cruelty faced. These are accounts that still hold great emotive, social and historical value to the military and war veteran groups in Britain, Australia and New Zealand as well as to their families and countries that continue to remember the survivors as well as those who died during the battle for Singapore and during the occupation (such as during remembrances ceremonies still commemorated in Singapore as well as for annual ANZAC days in Australia and New Zealand).
6. The interviews do not just focus on Singapore, but also other parts of the region including Malaya, Indonesia, Thailand and China and Japan. There are accounts such as resettlements to Bahau and Endau in peninsular Malaya and movements of prisoners of war to different parts of occupied Southeast Asia and even Japan. There are stories of the Nanqiao Jigong, a group of volunteer mechanics and drivers from Southeast Asia who travelled to Yunnan, China to serve on the Burma Road as well as movements of British covert forces and anti-Japanese guerrilla groups within the Malay peninsula. Former British and Australian POWs also talk of their post-war years in their home land or travelling around the world.
7. What becomes apparent is that the situation in Singapore was a microcosm of wider inter-racial and inter-national issues between countries, issues that continue to resonate. Over the years, the collection has been consulted by students, researchers and scholars from around the world to help them understand the larger context of World War II. The sheer volume and scope of interviews means that a range of studies is possible, such as military strategy and administration to the psychology of war. It will continue to be a significant documentary heritage and will be able to serve a larger audience with the greater international awareness that comes from its inclusion in the MOW register.

2.1 Name of nominator (person or organization)

Eric Chin Sze Choong, Director, National Archives of Singapore

2.2 Relationship to the nominated documentary heritage

Director of the institution which is the custodian of the nominated documentary heritage

2.3 Contact person(s) (to provide information on nomination)

Julia Ghee, Deputy Director, Oral History Centre/National Archives of Singapore

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3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated

If inscribed, the exact title and institution(s) to appear on the certificate should be given

In this part of the form you must describe the document or collection in sufficient detail to make clear precisely what you are nominating. Any collection must be finite (with beginning and end dates) and closed.

The nominated Japanese Occupation of Singapore oral history collection refers to 361 interviews (1,120 hours) recorded under the Japanese Occupation of Singapore and the Prisoners of War oral history projects conducted by the Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, from 1981 to 2011. The collection is stored in both 7-inch (7.5 ips) tapes and archival CDs.

3.2 Catalogue or registration details

The Japanese Occupation of Singapore oral history collection is available on NAS's onlinesearch portal *Access to Archives Online* (<http://a2o.nas.sg>) and its sub-database *Collection of Oral History Recordings Database* (<http://a2o.nas.sg/cord>).

3.4 History/provenance

The Japanese Occupation project was one of the first three oral history projects carried out by the Oral History Unit (now Oral History Centre, OHC) when it was established as a department of the National Archives at the end of 1979. Compared to the military campaign and fall of Singapore to the Japanese, there had been little primary records pertaining to the actual period of Japanese occupation, including documentation and insights into the daily lives of those who had lived through the period. It was with this in mind that the OHC sought to fill in this gap.

As the project aimed at collecting data that would enable the reconstruction of the lives of those affected by the Japanese occupation of Singapore, a broad approach was taken to include such key themes as the pre-war anti-Japanese movement, the British defence of Singapore, the various Japanese policies that were implemented, social and living conditions under occupation, Japanese defence of Singapore and the resistance forces, the Japanese surrender and its aftermath. In addition, the project also covered interviews with captured and interned military personnel (mostly British and Australian) and members of Force 136 (a branch of the British Special Operations Executive), adding to the comprehensive collection of war-time experiences. Interviewees were selected on the basis of their first-hand familiarity with the topics. Most of the interviews were highly structured to ensure consistency and uniformity in interviewing.

The first phase of the project lasted 4½ years (June 1981 to December 1985). Potential interviewees were identified through media publicity, organisations like the National Museum, Sentosa Museum, Senior Citizens' clubs, community centres, individual recommendations and handbills distributed at pictorial exhibitions organised by the National Archives of Singapore. As a result, 175 persons were interviewed, totalling 655 recorded hours of interviews. A catalogue of these interviews was published by the Oral History Department in 1986, containing the metadata of the interviews, including duration and synopses. In order to fill in gaps of information, the project continued on an ad-hoc basis when suitable interviewees were found, up to 2011, to make up a total of 361 interviews (1,120 hours).

3.5 Bibliography

"Due to the efforts of the National Museum and Oral History Department [now Oral History

Centre] of Singapore, the media coverage of the period and, of *course*, the inevitable World War II commemorations, several new publications have appeared. These have been both historical and fictional (sometimes both), but do serve to fill in large gaps in the information available. What is clear, however, is that these new sources are virtually all memoirs or memories-the latter drawn from the extensive oral history collection of the Singapore Oral History Department. In a virtual lacuna of documentation contemporaneous with the event, remembrances either spoken or written are, of course, prime documentation [...]. The Singapore Oral History Department's collection of materials on the Japanese occupation during the Second World War is meticulously collected, scrupulously organized, and immediately accessible to users. They provide one of the more comprehensive collections of one former colony's view (or views) of the war."

– James H Morrison, "Japanese Occupation of Singapore: Oral Sources," *Canadian Oral History Association Journal* 14 (1994): 92, 95.

"The OHC is a central source of reference for materials relating to the wartime experience of the local populace, Without its vigorous efforts to establish itself as an authoritative and recognised repository, would-be users including historians and others would be deprived of first-hand accounts and observations and would have to rely on second tier sources like those from abroad that would be limited and border on hearsay. First person accounts of the war experience are crucial to the collective memory that makes for the history of the war and to this end, a media person or others tasked to authenticate the conditions of the era for whatever the purpose will have to look to the OHC for the relevant material. Due credit should be given for the establishment of the unit and its timely moves to capture and store up data from rapidly vanishing sources which in turn has helped buttress its reputation in the process."

– Vijayan K Cumaraswamy, journalist, *The Straits Times*, 2012

4.0 Legal information

4.1 Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details)

Name

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4.3 Legal status

Provide details of legal and administrative responsibility for the preservation of the documentary heritage

The material is copyrighted to the Oral History Centre, a department of the National Archives of Singapore, which is an institution of the National Library Board of Singapore.

4.4 Accessibility

The collection consists of both open and restricted materials, as stipulated by interviewees. Any restrictions are finite and will expire a maximum of 50 years after the death of the interviewee or 75 years after the interview was conducted, whichever is later.

The meta-data of open-access interviews, including synopses, can be accessed from the National Archives' online finding aid at <http://a2o.nas.sg/>. From there, links can be found to selected transcripts in DjVu and/or PDF formats as well as selected audio clips in MP3 format. It is possible to listen to the open-access interviews by coming down personally to the reading room of the National Archives of Singapore.

Since 2004, Oral History Centre began a digitisation programme to transfer the earlier oral history recordings preserved on 7-inch 7.5 ips tapes to archival COs. The entire collection is targeted to be fully digitised by 2015. The digitisation project addresses the danger of the obsolescence of analogue formats and equipment and aims to increase accessibility to the collection. The Centre has plans to make the recordings available online for easy use by the public including in other countries. .

4.5 Copyright status

The material is copyrighted to the Oral History Centre, a department of the National Archives of Singapore, which is an institution of the National Library Board of Singapore.

5.0 Assessment against the selection criteria

5.1 Authenticity.

The oral interviews were conducted with war survivors by trained staff of the Oral History Centre in adherence to the Centre's systematic oral history methodology, which includes a pre-interview screening to ascertain the suitability of interviewee. Each interview is comprehensively documented, with interviewee profiles, interview notes, correspondences and other research material compiled in a case file and with information stored in a database that manages the content. Interviewees also signed a release form determining the access and copyright of the recording.

5.2 World significance

The documentary heritage consists of 361 oral history interviews by unique narrators who lived through the years of the Japanese Occupation. It fills a major gap with regard to historical accounts of the period, due to the fact that the Japanese military administration in Singapore had destroyed their records prior to Japanese surrender to the Allied Forces. The situation is not unlike collections of social memory in, say, the Pacific Island nations where there is sometimes an absence of written records from the past but the oral traditions can still tell a story of a time and place and events that shape a people with both shared and unique experiences.

The broad array of interviewees gives multiple perspectives of the war from different nationalities and ethnic groups, from British and Australian veterans to local immigrant communities, originally from other parts of the Malay archipelago, China, India, Europe and the Middle East. These oral history accounts have thereby been crucial in helping reconstruct daily life during the years of the occupation and are a key source of primary data in various exhibitions curated by the Asian Civilisations Museum, National Archives of Singapore, National Museum of Singapore and more. In particular, the oral history interviews has been a vital component of the multimedia experience of visitors to Singapore's two World War II interpretive centres, Memories of Old Ford Factory and Reflections at Bukit Chandu.

The documentary heritage **has significance beyond national history**. It gives insight into an important battle of geostrategic significance in the Pacific Theatre of World War Two. Japanese military strategy prioritised the capture of Singapore which meant control of sea lanes, trade routes and entry into the resource pool of the region which could be funnelled into their battles elsewhere around the world. The fall of Singapore was an important military victory for the Japanese and marked one of the high points of the

Japanese military campaign in World War Two.

The documentary heritage gives further insight to Japan's swift capture of British-ruled Singapore and resonated globally as a victory by an Asian power over a western power. Singapore symbolised the pride of the British Empire and its loss to Japan marked the beginning of the end for the cohesion of the Empire. After the war, local colonised populations in Asia and Africa led campaigns of self-determination, leading to a wave of decolonisation.

The documentary heritage is also a complex study on race and class relations. 1940s Singapore was a unique potpourri of migrant cultures. Due to multiple historical factors, the Japanese overlords treated the local population differently (though not always consistently), depending on race, class, status, occupation, etc. For example, the long standing rivalry between Japan and China, which resulted in war between the two in 1937, led to particularly harsh treatment meted out by the Japanese overlords to the Chinese population in Singapore, which culminated in a policy where male Chinese suspected of anti-Japanese sentiments were massacred. The documentary heritage also has accounts of Japanese treatment of British, Australian and New Zealander prisoners of war. What becomes apparent is that the situation in Singapore was a microcosm of wider inter-racial and inter-national issues between countries, issues that continue to resonate.

5.3 Comparative criteria:

1 Time

The focus of the oral history interviews are the 42 months of the Japanese occupation of Singapore from 15 February 1942 to 15 August 1945, a most traumatic period in a brutal war and occupation. The interviews range from the pre-war anti-Japanese movement through to the Japanese invasion and occupation to the immediate post-war British military administration. It recollects war-time experiences of prisoners of war, civilian internees, government servants, businessmen, British, Australians, Chinese, Malays, Indians, Japanese and more. Speaking in different voices and languages, they related their lived experiences and communicated the complexities of deep emotions and memories, giving a multi-faceted view of an important period of world history.

Due to the scarcity of primary documentation of the period, the oral history interviews are an extremely important account of the lives and times during the Japanese occupation, particularly on shedding insight into the daily lives of all those affected by the war including locals or foreigners and combatants or civilians.

2 Place

There are many accounts on life in Singapore during a short but important period of its modern history. Interviewees describe a Singapore completely different from the Singapore of the present day- a Singapore still with a sizeable rural population living in kampong villages rather than the ubiquitous Housing Board flats of today, where communities drew water from wells or public standpipes rather than enjoying the convenience of piped water.

Moreover, life during those 42 months under the Japanese military administration saw sweeping changes to daily life neither seen before nor experienced again in the modern history of Singapore. Interviewees describe how all schools were transformed into Japanese schools, or of the frightening *Soak Ching* operation which saw the systematic extermination of thousands of mostly Chinese men who were suspected anti-Japanese elements. The experiences of suffering, deprivation and near death are unlike any that the survivors' children and grandchildren have ever known.

The interviews do not just focus on Singapore, but also other parts of the region including Malaya, Indonesia, Thailand and China and Japan. There are accounts such as

resettlements to Bahau and Endau in peninsular Malaya and movements of prisoners of war to different parts of occupied Southeast Asia and even Japan. There are stories of the Nanqiao Jigong, a group of volunteer mechanics and drivers from Southeast Asia who travelled to Yunnan, China to serve on the Burma Road as well as movements of British covert forces and anti-Japanese guerrilla groups within the Malay peninsula. Former British and Australian POWs talk of their post-war years in their home land or travelling around the world.

The interviews conducted with prisoners-of-war in Singapore give firsthand accounts of internment with vivid descriptions of daily life in various prisons all over Singapore, such as Selarang and Roberts Barracks in Changi. Their accounts are sad, stirring and also life-affirming, as they talk of torture, sickness and how they took care and organised recreational activities and entertainment for one another.

3 People

The interviews represent a wide range of human behaviour and are a record of both the best and worst of human actions, both of which are important to record and remember. There are accounts of Japanese atrocities to both the civilian population and military personnel, as there are memories of acts of compassion and war time ingenuity and improvisation.

There are interviews of war heroes and heroines, such as Mrs Elizabeth Choy, who together with her husband risked her life to smuggle food and other supplies to prisoners-of-war. She was subsequently arrested and tortured by the Japanese. Her ordeals are all the more remarkable in the context of her post-war achievements as a celebrated war heroine, and nominated member of the Singapore Legislative Council.

The interviews also give insight to Japan's swift capture of British-ruled Singapore and resonated globally as a victory by an Asian power over a western power. Singapore symbolised the pride of the British Empire and its loss to Japan marked the beginning of the end for the cohesion of the Empire. After the war, local colonised populations in Asia and Africa led campaigns of self-determination, leading to a wave of decolonisation.

4 Subject and theme

The one dominant viewpoint that echoes resoundingly across interviews is the turmoil, disruption and displacement of war. While the collection consists of multiple views and perspectives, it also represents a united voice against senseless violence.

As highlighted in detail above in 5.2, the interviews give insight not only to Japanese and British military strategy, but also the change in geopolitical structure, east-west relations, and the beginning of the end of empire worldwide.

5 Form and style

The format of oral history interviews produces primary sources of unparalleled emotional pull. The voices of first person narrators create a connection to listeners that no material document can. Moreover, the oral history recordings capture a range of local vernacular of a particular generation, including a variety of Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese that are presently in danger of 'dying out' as it is no longer widely spoken by the young generation of Chinese.

6 Social/ spiritual/ community significance:

While different listeners would have different responses to the heritage material, depending on their country of origin, their age group, or whether they themselves had gone through the war in Singapore or some other part of the world, it is safe to say that the heritage

material resonates emotionally with a large and diverse audience because of the universality of themes that emerge: war and peace, forgiveness and revenge, survival, and many more. Empathy is evoked by virtue of the common humanity that comes across the different narrators, an empathy that transcends cultural and national boundaries and gives important lessons for all human beings.

These accounts still hold great emotive, social and historical value to the military and war veteran groups in Britain, Australia and New Zealand as well as to their families and countries that continue to remember the survivors as well as those who died during the battle for Singapore and during the occupation (such as during remembrances ceremonies still commemorated in Singapore as well as for annual ANZAC days in Australia and New Zealand).

6.0 Contextual information

6.1 Rarity

While other efforts to collect the oral history of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore has been undertaken by scholars and academic institutions, the collection at National Archives of Singapore is by far the largest, most comprehensive and systematic collection with an integrated documentation and preservation plan. The contents of the collect represent the unique experiences of individuals living under extraordinary circumstances which have never and hopefully will never be repeated again. The broad range of experiences and perspectives of individuals of different nationalities, ethnicities and socio economic background based on a single major world event is invaluable. The interviews also present the individuals interviewed with an opportunity to reflect on the past an attain closure, and thus are evidence in themselves of the process of individual and social healing.

"I'm really happy to have spent this time with you because I think you have made me reflect a lot of stuff that I didn't want to think about. But that's good because I had to do that, because that was the thing that was probably troubling me".

Barbara Scharnhorst, Japanese Occupation Survivor, concluding at the end of an oral history interview, 2007

6.2

Integrity

The collection was built up by way of strict adherence to systematic oral history methodology stressing on first person experiences and reflections. As a collection, the interviews represent the multiple perspectives of class, race, religion, sex and nationality, giving a comprehensive picture of life under occupied Singapore.