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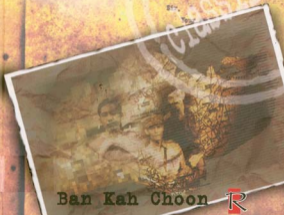
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15/11/16

# ABSENT HISTORY

The Untold Story of  
Special Branch Operations  
in Singapore 1915 - 1942

I have the honour to be  
Sir,



Ban Kah Choon 

# Foreword

When Kah Choon asked me if I would write the foreword for *Absent History*, even as I was happy to oblige, the thought did occur to me that perhaps an academic rather than a retired Special Branch veteran like myself would be a more appropriate choice. But when I started reading the book, (and it makes an enjoyably good read!) it became clear to me that what he expected of me was to be essentially a real-life touchstone, a reality check. This is because, above all, what he endeavoured to capture in his book was not just the mass of facts and figures from which he re-constructed the history of the pre-war Special Branch, but a sense of the mood and political climate of the period which coloured the organisation as it evolved rapidly, shifting from a police intelligence to a security intelligence orientation.

I was struck by the recognition that much of the security threats faced by Singapore even as a colony more than half a century ago, were not radically or fundamentally different from what we face in present day Singapore. The factors of race and religion were always critical variables whether the threat be a simple matter of an imported cause spilling over to the colony from its principal arena of conflict or a grand revolutionary theory of class struggle. How potent these threats would become depended on how it played out in relation to the racial and religious segments, which made up colonial Singapore. Another perennial strand between then and now was reflected in what Rene Onraet, Director Special Branch (1925–35) wrote, “Untoward events in the Straits Settlements nearly always had an external influence”. Based on knowledge and by my own personal experience, this has certainly not changed at all.

The intelligence officer must always be on the lookout for all possibilities and angles. For example, when German prisoners at the Tanglin Barracks subverted their Indian sepoy guards against their British officers and thereby helped bring about the eventual mutiny of

1915. Or when insensitive British army officers failed to take cognisance of an ethnic sensitive rumour that the Indian 5th Light Infantry Regiment in Singapore was being despatched to Turkey to fight fellow Muslims in what was basically a war between Europeans. In these instances, one can recognise why, among the text-book lessons of the craft of security and intelligence, those which must never be forgotten are not to underestimate your adversary, not to take for granted your friends and the fact that most intelligence failures did not stem from blissful ignorance of the threat or even a lack of intelligence but from a self-afflicted blindness which looks but does not see, choosing not to conceive and verify what contradicts one's conventional assumptions. In the world of the Special Branch, a closed mind is more than a moral hazard—it can sometimes be very fatal.

Kah Choon confesses that in writing this book, he has made a fascinating journey but which has saddled him at its conclusion with more questions than answers; he says "so much is still familiar but much is also no longer quite the same". He is not alone in this sentiment. There was more than the occasional moment of *déjà vu* for this reader. The reference to the Banishment Warrants issued against subversives and criminal elements who posed a serious threat to public order and security of the Singapore colony and the Straits Settlements stir personal recall from my early police career under the British, of scenes of people wailing and hurling obscenities at the CID building, then at Robinson Road, in protest against the banishment of their relatives.

Even though the point is not new, it was still interesting to read and trace how the struggles and campaigns of the Communist Party of Malaya after the War had its roots in the revolutions of Russia and China, how the purity of the ideological argument which inspired and gave hope to the oppressed classes in the end also created a structure like Comintern which turned doctrine into dogmatism and discipline into obedient blindness, the latter probably more than anything, made a Lai Teck possible. And in the end, as the CPM leaders themselves must admit, the failure of the revolution laid in the party's failure to genuinely turn itself (and not for the lack of trying) into a multi-racial movement to transcend its Chinese-dominated personality (which however reflected its historical sources of strength).

I believe *Absent History* is the first substantial book written about the Special Branch in Singapore, covering its work and operations both in the then colony and the rest of the Straits Settlements from its beginnings to the eve of the Second World War. While the book no

doubt holds value to the student of history and politics, as well as I contend, security and intelligence professionals, it is a book intended for the lay reader for whom I am confident its narrative will prove an enjoyable and worthwhile experience.

Lim Chye Heng  
Director, Internal Security Department  
(1975–1982)

15 January 2001

*Editor's Note:*

*Lim Chye Heng served 22 years of a 30-year public service career in intelligence and security work. A CID police officer from the '50s to the '60s, he served in the Special Branch under British, Malaysian and Singapore governments from 1960 to 1966. He then spent the next eight years in intelligence work in the Ministry of Defence before assuming the position of Director, Internal Security Department. He is on record as the longest serving Director of ISD, holding the critical appointment from 1975 till his retirement in 1982.*

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