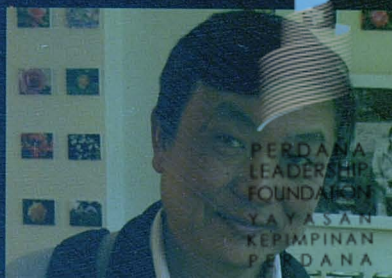


ESCAPE FROM THE LION'S PAW

Reflections of Singapore's Political Exiles

edited by
TEO SOH LUNG
LOWYIT LENG





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Function 8 Limited is a social enterprise initiative by a group of individuals who believe that there is a need to facilitate the sharing of social, political and economic experiences of those who had, or are eager to contribute to society through reflection and civic discussion.

The name "Function 8" represents our hope that, just like the F8 key in computers resets a computer to "safe" and basic mode for troubleshooting, we can also reflect over the basics of what makes societies strong, just and meaningful and the role of democratic processes in achieving those goals.

With seminars, talks, workshops, discussions and reflections, the company hopes to restart the process of critical thinking, rejuvenate the staleness of a society based on economic expediency and reclaim the human dignity and freedom which is the basis of our humanity.

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introduction

“Exile is not a choice
But a lawless oppression
The ferocious, unbridled rage
Of a deranged intelligence”

“Exile” by Tan Jing Quee*

The narratives in this collection might awaken some of us out of our economic-growth-induced complacency, who were unaware of the political climate in Singapore during the 1970s and 80s. For those of us who lived through the two decades, memories of friends and relatives who had their brush with the Internal Security Act (ISA) flood our minds. Did we, as responsible citizens, question the allegations made by the government against those detained? Did we do anything to help those arrested or those who fled? Was the state so powerful and the media so convincing that we succumbed to accepting the wholesale assault against defenceless individuals? Or did we feel so helpless that doing nothing was our best protection?

The relentless use of the ISA by the People’s Action Party (PAP) government since it came into power in 1959 is well known. Wave after wave of arrests and detentions without trial have deprived Singapore of talented and committed visionaries who could have contributed much towards the progress of our country if not for the ISA which cut short their productive lives. The notorious Operation Cold Store on 2 February 1963 saw the arrest and imprisonment of more than 120 leaders of the Barisan Sosialis, trade unionists, and students. Throughout the 1960s, continuous mopping-up operations wiped out all forms of opposition as well as student activism in both the Chinese- and English-medium universities.

* Tan Jing Quee, Teo Soh Lung and Koh Kay Yew eds. *Our Thoughts Are Free: Poems and Prose On Imprisonment And Exile*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2009.

The state-sponsored depoliticisation was as broad as it was deep so that by early 1970s, Singapore was nothing more than an administrative state and political activism was at its ebb. Ho Juan Thai noted: "...the Nanyang University Students' Union was a shadow of its past student activism. Its involvement in championing Chinese education, anti-colonial activism and intense debate on the political future of the new nation ended in the mid-1960s."

Despite the dearth of political activism and the surface calm that Singapore experienced in the 1970s, Francis Khoo observed of DPM Teo Chee Hean:

"The deputy prime minister and home affairs minister revealed in mid-October 2011 that over 800 had been arrested in the 1970s alone with detention orders issued to 235. The total over the decades runs into thousands."

Who were those arrested and why were they arrested?

While Ho was attempting to resuscitate the Nanyang University Students' Union, Tan Wah Piow, the president of the University of Singapore Students' Union, was already in the thick of economic and social issues that plagued Singapore then and now. The grave hardship that befell workers all over the world because of the 1970s recession also hit Singapore with rising unemployment due to the closure or slowdown of factories in our industrial zone, Jurong. The entire leadership of the University of Singapore Students' Union were involved in research and negotiations with companies and trade unions over the retrenchment of workers. A Research Retrenchment Centre was set up by the students' union. The unjust manner in which workers were retrenched with little or no compensation and at very short notice irked the students. Putting their studies aside, they actively helped retrenched workers, encouraging them to seek assistance from their government-approved industrial union. Youthful idealism was, however, no match for the full weight of state machinery. In the end, Tan, the 23-year-old student leader, was arrested together with two workers and imprisoned on trumped-up charges of rioting within the industrial union premises.

The trial of Tan and the two workers showed up the partiality of the judicial system and resulted in the decapitation of the students' union. While Tan was sent to jail, student leaders who were non-Singaporeans were deported without so much as an opportunity to defend their case. It was the police raid on Bukit Timah campus that sent Tsui Hon Kwong, a Public Service Commission scholar from Hong Kong, scurrying into hiding. Though he escaped arrest, the Ministry of Home Affairs initially

told the world that he, together with five other non-Singaporean students, was deported, exposing the shocking disconnect between politicians and the secret police.

The high-handedness of the university administration is told by Tan:

“The Vice-Chancellor at the time was Dr Toh Chin Chye, chairman of the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP). The emergence of radical student politics in the 1973-74 period happened under his watch, and he was instrumental in cracking down on student activism, eventually succeeding in depoliticising the university.”

It was fear of arrest under the ISA that forced Tan to leave Singapore.

The future of Nanyang University and the Chinese language were burning issues during the 60s and 70s. Opposition politicians and journalists, especially those who attempted to defend the use of the Chinese language and Nanyang University, came under severe attack. Ho Juan Thai, a candidate of the Workers’ Party who stood for election in 1976, had to flee the country after unstinting harassment by the Internal Security Department (ISD) for speaking up on “the plight of Chinese-stream students and social issues emanating from the implementation of unfair government policies.” Shocked by the prospect of arrest and “confession” on state television, he fled Singapore for England.

In the early 70s, editors and journalists of the two Chinese dailies, *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, were targets of state intimidation and several were arrested. Journalists of the English-language *Singapore Herald* and *Far Eastern Economic Review* were not spared. In February 1977, the ISD spread their witch hunt to include the English-educated. This small group of professionals started a campaign to save the *Singapore Herald* (the only English daily critical of the government) and called for the release of ISA detainees who had been in prison since the 1960s. At least 40 of them were arrested and made to “confess” over state television. They were labelled “Euro-communists”.

The mass arrests and “confessions” were the reasons why Francis Khoo, who was married just two weeks before, decided to leave his beloved country. The cruelty of the regime did not stop with Khoo leaving the country. Failing to catch Khoo, a team of ISD officers descended on the Singapore General Hospital and arrested his wife, Dr Ang Swee Chai. They had the audacity to demand arrest even while she was in the midst of performing an operation on a patient. Sadly, Khoo