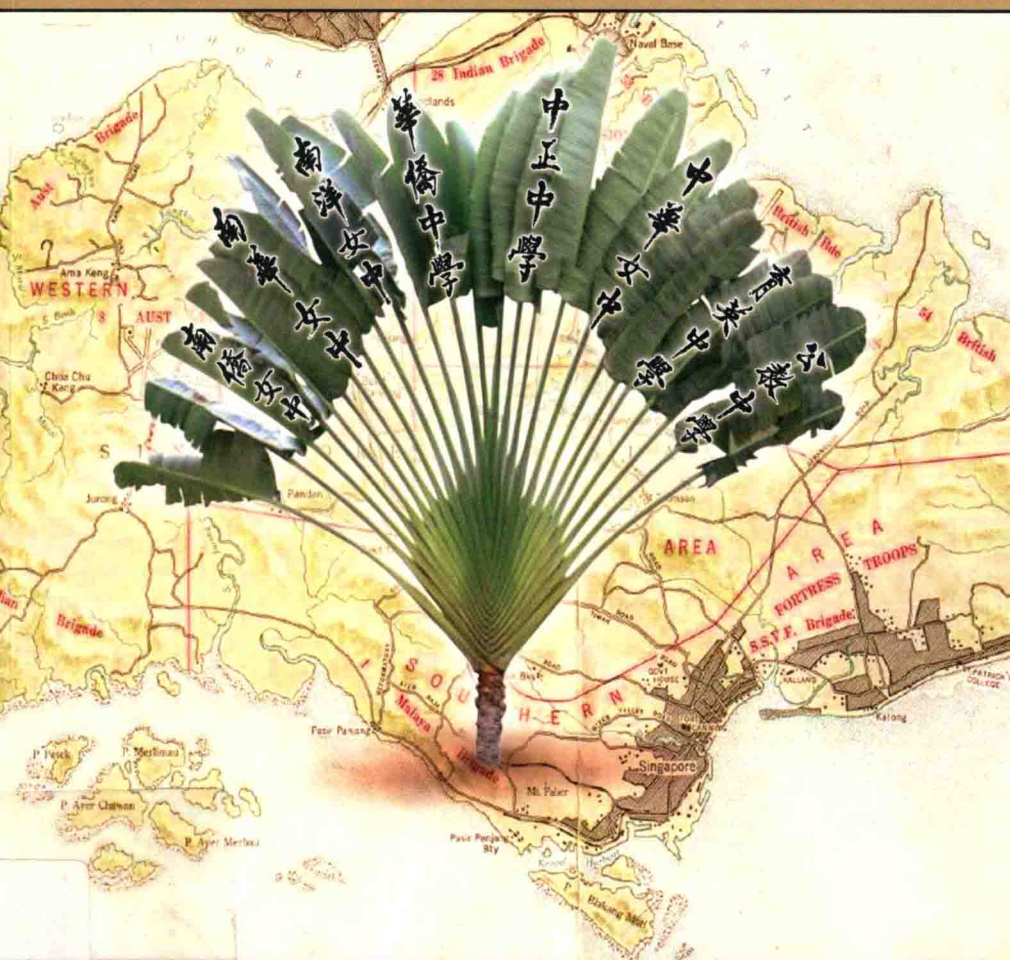


THE MAY 13 GENERATION

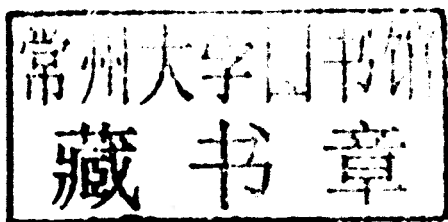
THE CHINESE MIDDLE SCHOOLS STUDENT MOVEMENT
AND SINGAPORE POLITICS IN THE 1950S



ED BY TAN JING QUEE, TAN KOK CHIANG & HONG LYSA

The May 13 Generation:

The Chinese Middle Schools Student Movement and Singapore Politics in the 1950s



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Tan Kok Chiang
Hong Lysa



SIRD

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The May 13 Generation

The **Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD)** is an independent publishing house founded in January 2000 in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. The SIRD list focuses on Malaysian and Southeast Asian Studies, Economics, Gender Studies, the Social Sciences, Politics and International Relations. Our books address the scholarly community, students, the NGO and development communities, policymakers, activists and the wider public.

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Foreword

A young Singaporean today would find it hard to imagine what it was like to live through the Japanese Occupation (1942-45) as a teenager, to study in a Chinese middle school after the war, and to be involved in anti-colonial politics as a young adult.

Personal experiences and memories do matter in the understanding and writing of history. In Eric Hobsbawm's view, a young historian who did not experience life during the late 1930s and the early 1940s in Britain would be unlikely to understand the support of the war-generation for Churchill's resistance against Hitler's Germany. Such understanding "requires an effort of the imagination, a willingness to suspend beliefs based on his or her own life experiences, and a lot of hard research work". Indeed, as the senior historian notes, "the beginning of historical understanding is an appreciation of the *otherness* of the past" – with the knowledge of "how much things have changed", especially with the great social transformation of the world since the Second World War.[1]

This volume documents the recollections of surviving members of "the May 13 generation", now in their seventies and eighties. For them, their formative experiences in the immediate postwar era have been an indelible part of their lives, a past that lives on in the present. One senses the urgency of recording their memories, however filtered through the decades, in writing so that readers can appreciate the "otherness" of that past. For their part, the researchers who contributed to this volume attempt to situate the emergence of mass politics and the flowering of cultural expression within the larger historical context of decolonization.

Taken together, both the personal recollections and the contextual analyses address huge gaps in our historical understanding.

Readers are invited to judge for themselves just how – and how far – this volume advances our understanding of the relations between individual biography and social change. But it is worth asking here: Why does such understanding matter? Why should we make a special effort of the imagination and undertake the hard work of appreciating a past that is so radically different from our present?

One wonders if there is a relationship between a lively sense of history and a deeper sense of public purpose – a concern for larger social causes beyond narrow private pursuits. On the one hand, the relative affluence of contemporary society is driven by individual ambition. On the other hand, countries across the world continue to face the complex challenges of inclusive social development and sustainable economic growth.[2] It is arguable if these goals can be truly achieved. Politics is the “art of the possible” – but, as Max Weber suggested, history shows that men and women would not have attained the possible if they had not reached out for the impossible.[3]

From this perspective, the political activism of Chinese-educated youths in the 1950s demonstrated their engagement with the *possibilities of history*, and their aspirations and ideals constituted a significant part of the dynamics of social transformation in the postwar era. In studying the *history of possibilities* represented by that era, we attempt to understand not just the impact of seemingly impersonal forces but also the personal choices made by youths in responding to the major issues of the day.[4]

The past is a fading echo, but as this volume shows, it still reverberates today.

Kwok Kian-Woon*

Notes

1. Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (New York: The New Press, 1997), pp. 232 and 233.
 2. See, for example, Rachel Chang, "Poor Kids Need Aspiration". *The Straits Times*, 23 March , 2011. She concludes her commentary on education and social mobility in Singapore as follows: "[T]he worst thing that an income gap and disproportionate achievement in schools can breed is not resentment, but resignation. A permanent underclass in society is formed not just when those in the bottom third stay there; it ossifies when they believe that it is where they belong. That we must avoid at all cost."
 3. Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation" [1919] in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 128.
 4. On the study of politics as the critical study of "the history of possibilities and the possibilities of history", see David Held, *Political Theory and the Modern State: Essays on State, Power and Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), p. 247.
- * *The writer offers his reflections as a Singaporean sociologist, and they do not represent the views of any institution that he is affiliated with.*

Preface

This is an unlikely book, yet at the same time one whose time has come.

There is hardly any precedence for writings on and in Singapore which feature contributors who have lived through the events about which they are writing, alongside those who research on the period.

In the first place, there is a dearth of narratives and accounts on the subject at hand. The politically active Chinese middle school students, whose voices were about the most insistent and unequivocal in the country's politics in the 1950s have been by and large silent, if not silenced, and have been so for half a century. Up to a decade ago, they were not the only ones.

As a corollary, those who are keen to learn about the experiences of these former students may on the whole find that they do not receive much guidance and encouragement from them. It may well be the case, and understandably so that those who see themselves as being marginalized and demonized in the country's dominant history may not trust that their story would be understood. After all, that narrative has it that the economic and social stability which the country has enjoyed was attained only with their elimination as a political, social and cultural force. The Chinese middle school—that crucial social institution which gave the students their education, friendships and networks, solidarity and their anti-colonial cause is no more, and their putative successors do not regard the turbulent years of the 1950s as a part of the school's history that their students should know about.

Silence then has been the most prevalent form of response to the dominant narrative, whether it be on account of the lack of a coherent reply, or out of fear, frustration and withdrawal, or the decision to put the past behind.

This volume marks the breaking of that silence.

The most precious part of the volume is the Recollections section, which is written in the first person. Even the youngest of the contributors have reached their retirement age. They have decided that it is time for them to say who they are, and what they think. These individuals may have agreed to write for different reasons. Perhaps what they had needed all along was the structure which the book offered; or they may have been stimulated by recent publications which refer to that period, or they regard this as an opportunity for them to be able to let their young grandchildren know one day about themselves about themselves. Even though only a handful have written, they have made a breakthrough.

Regardless of how solid the work of the academics and other researchers in the volume may be, there will be those to come whose work will surpass what they have written, and indeed it must be the hope of these contributors that that would be the case. But the recollections in print in the volume cannot be thus superseded. They can be supported, supplemented, interrogated, qualified, critiqued, and challenged by other recollections, and cited and analysed by scholars, but they stand as testimonies that were made at a particular point in their individual lives and in the country's history, presented in a particular format, and in a specific configuration.

The editors have made every effort to invite and encourage contributions from as many people as possible. The response was not overwhelming. All the more then are they cognisant of the trust that has been placed on them by the contributors, whatever the reasons they may have for writing. Time is not on our side where this is concerned.

For the researchers and academics who are contributors to this volume, it is a unique opportunity to be published in this shared enterprise. It would be difficult for us to find a more meaningful and significant platform in which to situate our academic work. Though the combination of participants' recollections and academic output is an obvious one, it has taken all this while for it to happen. The original plan was for there to be only one or two chapters setting out the historical context and long term impact of the dynamics of the

period. In the end, however, the inclusion of a substantial number of the more academic pieces not only helped to fill up the pages, an important consideration in itself it must be admitted, but also to throw up more dimensions and insights for consideration.

In order to allow authors who write in either Chinese or English to participate, and to reach a readership that cuts across age groups, this book is published in the two languages. The translators who have worked on the chapters have been most obliging, patient and dedicated.

Of the many people whom we would like to thank, Phoon Yuen Ming and Tan Teng Phee have been of assistance in the most diverse of ways, from helping us take photographs and scan documents, recommending excellent translators (and in one instance even taking on the translation when others would not be able to meet the tight deadline), to encouraging a potential contributor to write, and facilitating the effort by keying in the handwritten text as well as subsequent amendments whenever these were made.

Rose Tan was indispensable as our business manager, as well as designer of the book cover. But she is of course much more than that, being the other half of Tan Jing Quee.

The calligraphy that graces the book cover is the work of Mr. Zhang Guan Sheng.

I have been given the privilege of writing this Preface, and cannot pass up the opportunity to acknowledge the contributions of my fellow editors. Tan Jing Quee came up with the idea for the book initially as a companion volume to He Jin's novel *Ju Lang* (2004), which we translated (with Loh Miaw Ping) into *The Mighty Wave* (2011). Throughout, he held firm to the belief that this effort was too important to give up on. Tan Kok Chiang took a leap of faith from afar, and agreed to come on board as an editor when we sent him an email invitation. His endorsement of the project has been important and heartening, as has been the meticulous work he put in to ensure among other things that where the translations are concerned, both versions are of equal standard.

It is clear from the Chinese middle school magazines of the immediate postwar years and the 1950s that the students of the time

learnt the most and best from self-directed, purposeful activities complementary to, but outside of the school curriculum. As a historian in Singapore, I can really appreciate that state of affairs.

This book is dedicated to those writers who will take off from this initial, limited effort.

Hong Lysa

Introduction

The Chinese school student movement which emerged in the 1950s can be defined by two characteristics. The decade marked a major transition from the armed struggle which was waged in the Malayan jungles to a new phase of constitutional struggle against colonial rule centered in the urban areas, in particular Singapore. As a result of both international and internal pressure for change and self-government the British authorities initiated and encouraged electoral politics in both the Malay Peninsula and the colony of Singapore.

In the early 1950s a member system was introduced in the Malay Peninsula leading to a fairly speedy grant of independence to Malaya on 31 August 1957, after the British had successfully cajoled and persuaded the elite of the three main racial groups to work together to achieve independence. A similar attempt was introduced in Singapore in the first half of the 1950s by the introduction of the Rendel Constitution. However, the political situation in Singapore at the time was more fluid and the anti-colonial struggle more united, so that the British policy of divide and rule did not take off quite so easily. In fact, the political development in Singapore in the early 1950s indicated quite clearly that with each new election, the anti-colonial movement shifted leftwards. As a result, there was a delayed grant of self-government and independence to Singapore until the colonial government was quite convinced that they could remove what they perceived to be the main threat to subsequent developments.

The British colonial government accordingly had to take a more complicated and convoluted path, first by working with Lim Yew Hock, and eventually with a People's Action Party (PAP) which had

been cleaned and purged of its leftist elements before any further constitutional advance could be granted. This situation was achieved in staggered stages by a series of arrests from 1956 and a provisional attempt to grant full internal self-government in 1959. Even so, full independence was only premised upon the tripartite agreement by the three governments, ie Britain, Federation of Malaya and Singapore for a larger federation upon the precondition that the left-wing anti-colonial struggle should be removed. This was the setting for the planning and execution of the infamous Operation Cold Store which took place in 2 February 1963.

Soon after the establishment of Malaysia the internal contradictions between the Malayan and Singapore elite broke out into the open, leading to Singapore's separation in 1965. From that date, two separate independent sovereign states replaced what everyone had previously conceived to be a single nation-state comprising the two territories.

The second characteristic of the anti-colonial movement in the 1950s was the emergence of youth to confront British colonial rule. This took form in the well-organised student movement comprising mostly Chinese middle school students in their late teens as well as the emerging youthful leadership in the trade unions, who were in their early 20s. This volume focuses on the former. Within the larger framework as explicated above, Section One examines colonial policy and practice in the post-war years, where the British colonial authorities re-armed themselves to continue ruling Singapore, this time by talking of moulding a citizenry as well. Education hence became a major arena of contestation, ending the almost century-long policy of *laissez faire* towards the non-English medium schools, in particular the Chinese-medium schools sponsored by the community. The authorities envisaged setting up 'national' schools, with the Chinese middle schools in particular targeted for intervention in order that their students could be disciplined in conformity to the ruler's idea of good citizenship. This was resisted by the leaders of the community, and the students themselves. Despite their assurances to the contrary, it was plain that the British were averse to the Chinese-medium schools, in particular the

political values and orientations they were seen to be inculcating, which it regarded as pro-China, which after 1949 was equated with being pro-Communist, denying its anti-colonial nature.

In the 1950s the middle school students came to play a critical political role as they became the most sizable and effective grouping that could mobilize support for political parties. The constitutional path which the colonial authorities proffered was slow and limited, but it did bring about the age of mass politics, where the cultivation of an electoral base became important. The students came to hold such sway particularly with the May 13 event, when they unexpectedly became the defenceless victims of official unwarranted public brutality, when ostensibly all they did was to try to petition the governor for exemption from national service so that they could concentrate on their studies.

As a public relations exercise, the May 13 event was a self-inflicted blow on the part of the British. However, thereafter their handling of the students became even more rabid, from banning their proposed charity concerts for flood victims and other worthwhile causes, to attributing the outbreak of the Hock Lee riots to their instigation. All this was justified in the name of fighting the communists. When Lim Yew Hock took over the position of Chief Minister, he abandoned the attempts that his predecessor David Marshall had of trying to reconcile with and even to win over the students to support his party, which did not endear him to the British. Instead Lim Yew Hock primed himself for the constitutional talks by arresting students and other leftist circles and banning their organizations, the frictions and hostilities generated culminating in riots in October 1956. Following that, the centre of attention moved from the middle schools to the newly-opened Nanyang University, but even though the university students tried to avoid the confrontational stance of the middle school students, they could not but be drawn in when the People's Action Party moved to control the middle schools system, and subsequently the University as well.

The section on Recollections contains reminiscences and reflections on the part of former middle school students. A common thread running through them is the sense of being wrongfully

accused and vilified, and the righteousness of their cause. The tone of these essays differs with the personalities of the authors and the experiences they went through. They range from defiant and cutting, cathartic in nature, to subtle and careful, significant for what they have to say as much as what is left unsaid. The May 13 event as the transforming force in their lives forms the core of the narratives of the writers who were participants, as well as the claim to being imbued with a sense of larger purpose and social responsibility towards the underclasses in society.

In the general absence of awareness about and of opportunities to mention the leftists of the 1950s and 60s, the obituary has been a significant platform to remember the individuals and demonstrate that the politically defeated were not totally speechless. Prominent notices of condolences were taken out in the Chinese-language newspaper by former Chinese comrades when leading left-wing leaders died, registering the point that they remained much respected. The two obituaries in this volume are much more modest in scale, but they similarly bring a larger dimension to the life of the deceased, offering careful insights about their times, and ours.

But more than words can ever tell about a life are the documents and photographs that one of the authors has kept for all these decades. She calls them her most treasured possession, but their meaning and potency have been locked up by being purely in the possession of its owner, which others would not get to read. In this book, they are released into the public domain, to tell their story by their sheer existence. As a set of documentary materials generated in the course of a person's life they take on a meaning, and evoke an immediacy and poignancy that the same sheets of paper lying in a public repository would not.

So just what was it that the middle school student activists of the 1950s were up to, that has come to make them so much the object of condemnation by the state? An important part of their political activism was expressed in their cultural explorations. This volume features essays on their art (woodcuts), drama (Chinese-language theatre), dance (ballet), literature (short stories) in which they were the most active and experimental at the time, and which