

Singapore -- The Tides of Change

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The travel books have said it so many times that it's become trite and prosaic—but I couldn't put it into better words—"Singapore is swept by the tides of change." Having been an almost annual visitor to Singapore since 1970, I've seen it evolve from a thriving commercial metropolis (sort of an Atlanta, Georgia) to a skyscraper strewn, cosmopolitan world capital, more akin to New York City.

At the crossroads of world travel routes linking Europe, Japan, Australia, all of the Pacific and Asia, Singapore is the confluence of all that is oriental—with distinct occidental twist. A mere speck of land (37.6 square miles, to be exact), 85 miles north of the equator, the "Island Republic" is both ancient and new. Ancient in that it was first a "kingdom" of Sang Nila Utama (allegedly a descendant of Alexander the Great), and a capital in the Malaysian empire of Vijaya in the 13th and 14th centuries, eventually destroyed in the dynastic warfare of 1377. New, in that it has been an independent and sovereign Republic for less than 10 years!

Modern Singapore began with the landing of Britain's Sir Stamford Raffles on February 6, 1819. Sultan Hussein Mohammed Shah and Temenggong Abdul Rahman signed a treaty with Raffles giving the East India Company the area around the mouth of the Singapore River as a trading post; Britain eventually took over the entire island in 1824. Funny, didn't the Dutch do something like that with some beads and things?

Anyway, with the collapse of the British empire, Singapore became a member state of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. It soon became obvious, however, that the cosmopolitan island (with a population better than three-fourths Chinese) could not fit into the primarily agrarian Malaysian Federation. In what is a typically oriental maneuver, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur decided that the only solution was inde-

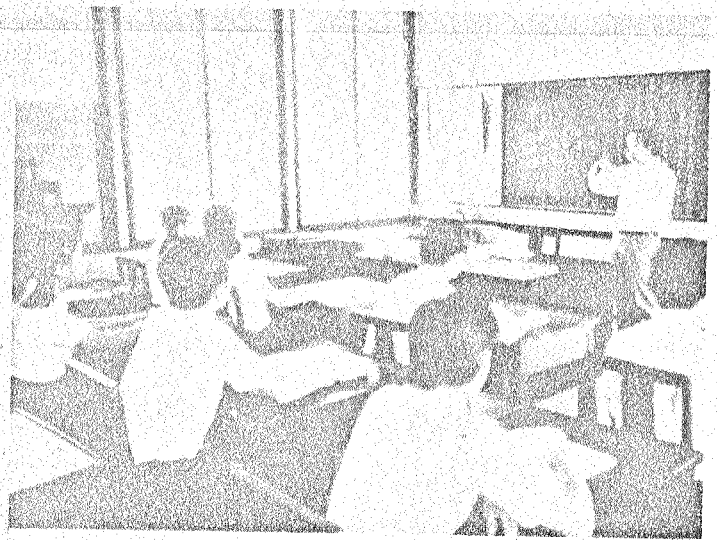
pendence for Singapore—no civil war, no bad feelings (in fact, the two countries are very close today, politically, socially and culturally—as well as geographically!). So, on December 22, 1965, Singapore became an independent and sovereign Republic. Most Singaporeans (and 60% of the population is under 25 years of age) have therefore lived under three rules; British Colonial rule, the Malaysian Federation and the present Republic.

Yup, "tides of change," but even a novice traveler can't help but to notice Singapore's dynamism, the almost "electric" atmosphere which surrounds the visitor from the moment he touches ground. Part of this dynamism, I guess, is linguistic—Any one of a dozen languages, blend to form sort of an oriental Tower of Babel. Though the national language is Malay, English is still the language of administration and most of the people speak one of the Chinese dialects (Teochew, Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Hainanese, Foochow or Mandarin, the official Chinese dialect). Though Tamil is the official Indian dialect, the 7% Indian population speak Telegu, Malayalam, Punjabi, Hindi or Bengali! All Singaporeans speak at least two languages, many even four or five languages!

Well, history, geography and politics aside, let's talk about the deaf! Those readers who read "An Interview With: Peng Tsu Ying—Singapore's 'Man For All Seasons'" in last month's DEAF AMERICAN are acquainted with this pioneering deaf man (who, amongst other distinctions is one of the world's first deaf auto race drivers, and founder of the Singapore Sign School for the Deaf). In Mr. Peng's own words, when he came to Singapore in 1950 "... I couldn't find a single deaf person! Finally, I advertized in a local Chinese newspaper; several parents of deaf children approached me about teaching their children privately." Mr. Peng's "classes" in the living room of his parents' home was the



Left: This is two-story remnant of British colonial days may not look like much (and in fact it rents for only one Singapore dollar a year from the Humane Society), but it is the headquarters of the Singapore Association for the Deaf, a quasi-governmental non-profit agency which, among other duties, administers the Singapore School for the Deaf. Right: Singapore's Canossa Convent Oral School for the Deaf is the only "private" school for the deaf in Singapore. It is operated by three Canossian nuns, all trained in Milan, Italy.



Left: Mr. Peng Tsu Ying (right), founder of the Singapore Sign School for the Deaf and Lim Chin Heng, Mr. Peng's former student and a recent Gallaudet College graduate, pose outside the Singapore School for the Deaf building. When the building was completed in 1963 both the "sign school" and the "oral school" moved in. Right: Mr. Peng lectures to his class using the Chinese sign language as brought by him and his wife from Shanghai and Hong Kong.

start of education, the start of a new life, for generations of deaf children. It was not until 1954 that Mr. Peng and his new bride, Peng Mei Soo, also deaf, opened the doors of the Singapore Sign School for the Deaf utilizing the techniques and the Chinese sign language they had learned in Hong Kong and Shanghai. Chinese was the "medium of instruction."

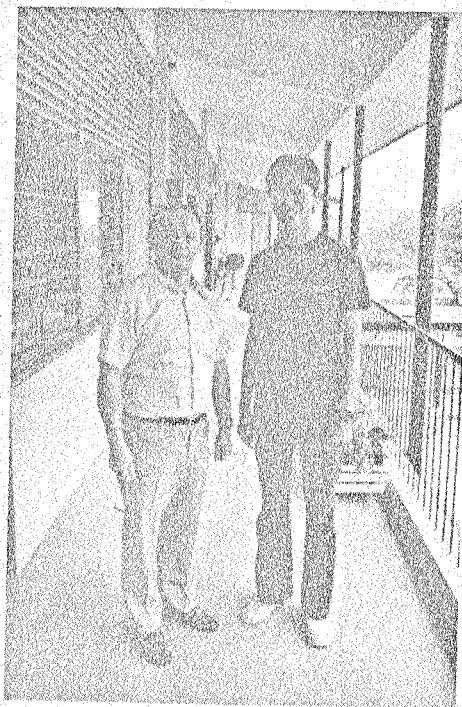
By this time a British woman, Mrs. E. M. Goulden, with the help of the Red Cross Society, began an oral class of nine deaf children. Mrs. Goulden was trained at the Manchester Institute and had a deaf son. English, of course, was the "medium of instruction" in what eventually became the Singapore Oral School for the Deaf.

The next major development for the Singaporean deaf came in 1955 with the establishment of the Singapore Association for the Deaf. A quasi-governmental body, the "Association" has the support of the Social Welfare Department, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health in achieving its aims and objectives, which are:

- To find, and to register, every deaf person in Singapore.
- To provide education for the largest possible number of children suffering from loss of hearing that require special educational treatment.
- To coordinate the efforts which already have been made on behalf of the deaf people of Singapore.
- To deal with all aspects of welfare for the deaf in Singapore.
- To undertake any activities as are incidental or conducive to the attainment of the above objectives.

Consistent with the second and third of its objectives, the Association, in the year of its inception, took over support and administration of both schools for the deaf. Eventually, in 1963, when their new school building was ready for occupancy, both schools moved into the building, becoming the "oral section" and "sign section" of the Singapore School for the Deaf.

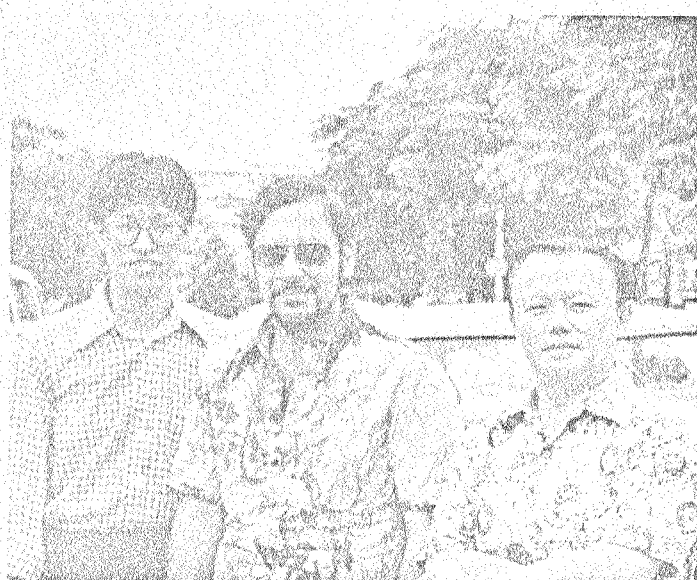
Today, the Association is responsible for referring all deaf children into schools for the deaf, as well as trying to find employment for the deaf in the mainstream of the Singaporean work force (rather than trying to isolate the deaf in a "sheltered" environment). What impressed me most about the Association was its headquarters building! A two-story remnant of British colonial days, the Association rents the building from the Humane Society for one Singapore dollar a year (about 40c). It impressed me because I've



Mr. Peng (left) is working on a unified Singapore Sign Language (he calls it SSL) which he hopes will improve the academic performance of his students, one of whom, Lim Chin Heng (right), recently graduated from Gallaudet College with a major in mathematics. Lim plans to work for improving education for all deaf Singaporeans.

seen other associations for the deaf in our area which have new buildings, costing in the hundreds of thousands, but yet can't come close to doing what the Singapore Association for the Deaf does!

Education of the deaf in Singapore is new—less than 25 years old. And precisely because it is so new I feel that it provides a good "case study" in education of the deaf for all educators, all over the world, to view. Besides its newness, fate, with all its irony and disregard for human folly, has used Singapore as a laboratory to demonstrate the different educational philosophies. No human educator or experimenter could have set up a better "experimental design" to demonstrate the differences between the "oral"/-



Left: In the "sign section" of the Singapore School for the Deaf, Chinese is the medium of instruction with English taught as a second language. Right: The saddest part of our visit to Singapore is having to leave! Mr. Peng (right) and Lim (left) see off the author at Singapore International Airport on his way to Malaysia—and next month's adventure, "The Deaf Around the World: Malaysia—A Time For Change."

"manual" methods, than fate did in Singapore.

Mr. Peng, a deaf man, and his wife (also deaf) and eventually with other deaf teachers, established school which utilized *only* the "manual" method. Because of their training in Hong Kong and Shanghai, Mr. Peng and his staff utilized the Chinese sign language and hence "signed Chinese" and written Chinese became the medium of instruction in the school. If students were to become fluent in English, they were to do so only by learning English as a "second language" utilizing their base language (signed Chinese). Mr. Peng's classes have never benefited from the support or interest which the "oral" classes attracted. Even today, "sign section" classes have a maximum number of 20 students, while "oral section" classes have a maximum of only 12 students.

Mrs. Goulden, a hearing woman, established a school which utilized *only* the "oral" method. Because of her training in England, Mrs. Goulden and her staff utilized the latest methods, equipment and techniques to give their deaf children a language of spoken English; English was the medium of instruction in the school.

Both schools concentrated only on the first six years of primary education. After more than 20 years of "experimenting" let's see the results. Since there has never been an analysis on the graduates of the two "sections" of the Singapore School for the Deaf, I've established my own criteria for gauging success; to me a deaf student has demonstrated unquestionable academic success if he has successfully completed secondary education (which, in Singapore, would have to had be in a hearing school) and succeeded in entering college.

Even though the number of graduates of the "sign section" is considerably less than the number of graduates of the "oral section" (currently the "sign section" accounts for only about one-fourth of the school enrollment, and "oral" teachers out number "sign" teachers three to one), to date, one "sign section" graduate has completed his B.A. degree at Gallaudet College, two others are currently enrolled at Gallaudet, a fourth is currently enrolled in a hearing college in the United States, studying architecture, and a fifth will enter Gallaudet next fall. I should like to remind the reader that these students had to learn English as a second language since their "first language" was the Chinese sign language. Of the "oral section" graduates, who learned English as a

first language—it was their medium of instruction in class, none, I was told, have ever gone on to college, either at home or abroad, even though they considerably outnumbered the "sign section" graduates.

I fear that I may have embarrassed some of my Singaporean friends. I regret this. But I feel that educators of the deaf everywhere should look at "the case of Singapore—and learn from it a very valuable lesson. A lesson prepared by fate.

I mentioned that one of Mr. Peng's students had recently graduated from Gallaudet. This young man, a friend of mine (we're both math majors!) is Mr. Lim Chin Heng. Lim has just returned to Singapore, will enter teacher training college next year and become one of Mr. Peng's successors. It's an exciting time in Singapore. Mr. Peng and Lim are fighting for total communication, educators are reconsidering their "pat" theories in the face of what this mild mannered little deaf man from China has accomplished—starting with a few deaf kids in his parents living room! Mr. Peng is writing a book on his new "Singapore Sign Language" which he hopes will be used in a total communication program. Yup, "tides of change", that just seems to be the character of life in Singapore.

Before I close this all too brief story about Singapore, I'd like to mention Dr. Jerry Goh, Singapore's top "ENT" doctor and current president of the Association. Dr. Goh has been a champion in working for education for the deaf. He is working for the day when all deaf children can go to school (only about half of Singapore's deaf children are enrolled in school today) and he has been an avid follower of current trends in education of the deaf (particularly total communication) in the hopes of improving the Singapore School for the Deaf.

I'd also like to mention a most delightful, but all too short, visit Lim and I had with the Canossian sisters who operate Singapore's only "private" school for the deaf. Started in 1956 by one nun, it is staffed today by three nuns, all training in Milan, Italy; there are four classes in the Canossa Convent Oral School for the Deaf.

All good things come to an end—Mr. Peng and Lim drove me to Singapore's international airport and off I flew to my next stop, and next month's DEAF AMERICAN story—"Malaysia—A Time For Change".