

SINGAPORE **E** CLASSICS

# MAN OF MALAYSIA TAN KOK SENG



TAN KOK SENG is the well-known author of a trilogy of books based on his life: *Son of Singapore*, *Man of Malaysia* and *Eye on the World*. His fourth book is a novel, originally published as *Three Sisters of Sz*, by Heinemann Asia in 1979.

Tan's books were all written first in Chinese and afterwards 'rendered into English' in a collaborative effort with his former employer, Austin Coates, for whom Tan worked in Malaysia and Hong Kong. Although his four books had been reprinted several times since their first publication, they were out of print for many years. *Son of Singapore*, *Man of Malaysia* and *Three Sisters of Sze* are now available from Epigram Books.

Tan resides in Singapore with his family.

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# MAN OF MALAYSIA

TAN KOK SENG



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To my wife

## Introduction

“We cannot be other than who we are.” (166)

IN HIS OWN words, Tan Kok Seng signposts for us who he really is. With Kok Seng, what you see is what you get. He has no angles, no hidden meanings, indeed little subtlety. He is what he is: a naïf.

Here is a person who can float serenely through the lives of the wealthy and privileged, quite unlike his own as a farmer turned coolie turned chauffeur turned soap salesman turned vegetable seller and poultry dealer; a person who can handle close encounters with larger-than-life personalities, from ambassadors and film stars such as William Holden to celebrity writers like Han Suyin, and yet remain virtually untouched by it all.

Although his life has played itself out for 75 years now against the backdrop of tectonic shifts in the geo-politics of his birthplace Malaya (today's Singapore and Malaysia), in truth Tan Kok Seng himself has remained largely unaware of the historical context in which he has operated, even when it has had huge impact on him. He has been too busy living.

In that, he is probably not much dissimilar from many poor

and striving workers who understandably cleave to the small picture of their own lives as a matter of survival. How many eggs you can sell at market is far more important than why there is a curfew declared today.

His leading memory of Lee Kuan Yew, independent Singapore's first prime minister, is a distant view of the leader playing golf with his Malay counterparts in the Cameron Highlands in the early 1960s. Kok Seng duly declares the game of golf "boring". (165)

When he needed to travel for a work offer in the UK in 1964, Kok Seng blithely rolled up to the British High Commission with his colonial British passport, totally unaware that in 1963 British Malaya had become the Federation of Malaysia. To his amazement, he was told that he was now a Malaysian and as such would have quite some trouble entering the UK to work.

All of which is not to say that Kok Seng does not observe life acutely and draw from it some deep inferences. He is very much a homespun philosopher, as evidenced in passages like this, on Maxwell's Hill in the Cameron Highlands:

"It seemed as if the mountains, wave after wave of them, were like the sea, going outward forever into distance, till, far away, they became engulfed in clouds, and joined—mountain and sky in one. Standing there on top, facing the enormity of the world, I thought of myself as a man. How boundlessly small we are..." (70)

When he is invited by a generous colonial British friend to stay at the then classy Cameron Highlands Hotel, Kok Seng tosses and turns in his bed, sleepless as he struggles to sort out the eternal conundrum:

"...why is it in this world that people divide themselves into high and low?...How many days would it take me to earn enough money to pay for one night here? In any part of the world, at any time, one reads newspapers and magazines proclaiming human equality. In actual life, does any human being treat another human being as an equal?" (162)

As he himself says in this book, Kok Seng has attended the "world university" (141) or to put it another way, 'the university of life', and you might also say, graduated from it *summa cum laude*. When he catches out a British colonial accountant looking nonplussed at this notion, he muses, in a deliciously child-like, non-racist sort of way,

"Europeans newly arrived in Asia for the first time, coming from their homeland—it seems to me their minds are so simple...An Asian—certainly a Chinese—is born with a mind which is by nature more acute than that of a European. What use he makes of it is another matter, of course; but the acuteness is there." (141)

Here Kok Seng is again somewhat naïf, because, being inexperienced in foreign cultures, what he is unable to fathom is that England is straitjacketed in a class system, so by no means all of the Europeans arriving to work in colonial Malaya hailed from the top rungs of that system, nor were they particularly well educated; they simply were automatically elevated above their station merely by taking up a position in Malaya and assuming the mantle of colonial 'master'. Many were indeed no better than their local subordinates. But equally, Kok Seng was no ordinary Malayan either. He often fails to perceive his own superiority, as a consequence of the colonial ecosystem that was his early habitat.

Two misconceptions about Tan Kok Seng need to be dispelled: the first that he represents the essence of Chinese traditional culture, the second that one-time diplomat and celebrated author Austin Coates was his puppeteer when it comes to the literary style of his books.

That Kok Seng is quintessentially Chinese cannot be denied. However, he is also very much a man of his time and place: modernising post-World War II Malaya. He had, and still has, strongly iconoclastic instincts. Not for him the manners and mores of his farmer parents, whom he himself classifies as relics from China's 19th-century Qing dynasty in this book:

"There and then, those ideas were valid; here and now, they were not. Even to this day, there are still a number of people

with the same outlook and mentality. I still wonder at this changeless element in Chinese thinking, from which there can be no progress...These are people whose minds are stuck in the past. They are immovable." (55–56)

His Teochew parents clung to tradition. They would not allow him to marry the love of his life, Heung, until his elder brother was married off first; eventually, the couple disobeyed this austere injunction and followed their hearts regardless.

"In our family, tradition was so old and deep that neither my brothers and sisters nor I had ever called our parents Papa and Mama," says Kok Seng. This would have been far too familiar, and could even attract bad luck. "These were the ideas my parents had brought with them from their ancestral villages in China...we were now a big family of 11 brothers and sisters, with two sisters given away, all of us lacking in education, and none of us having derived the slightest benefit from having addressed our parents as Elder Uncle and Elder Aunt." (56)

Clearly, Kok Seng was no conformist. He was a reformer and a rebel. "I never follow the old system," he told me recently, "Nowadays I learn from my grand-daughter, about modern communications technology!"

The role played by Austin Coates in Kok Seng's life and work is well known, and by general consensus, instrumental,

yet Kok Seng was no ventriloquist's dummy. The books carry Kok Seng's own authentic voice, in the case of *Man of Malaysia*, "rendered into English by the author in collaboration with Austin Coates."

Coates, a former British diplomat fluent in several Chinese dialects, particularly Cantonese, was Kok Seng's lifetime 'Red Hair' (European) friend *Kao Tze* (meaning 'High Endeavour'), as well as his employer, and had a delicate empathy with what Kok Seng wanted to say. Austin was neither the translator nor the re-write man. He gently drew the English version out of Chinese-educated Kok Seng, and then adjusted it, applying the minimum of personal ego in the process. With great skill, he crafted a style unique to Tan Kok Seng.

Anyone who doubts that Kok Seng speaks directly to the reader in these books or that he is a storyteller in his own right need only turn to Austin Coates' many books, from *City of Broken Promises* (1967) set in Macau, through *Myself a Mandarin* (1968), his famous account of life as a roving colonial magistrate in rural Hong Kong, to *The Commerce in Rubber* (1987) set largely in Malaya, to discover a very different, denser writing style.

Sadly in some ways, but typical of his natural pragmatism, Kok Seng declared in 1985 that he would write no more, since his primary concern was to make his own living (largely as a businessman trading in traditional Chinese roof tiles) and see his son and daughter through a proper education (which

he successfully did).

Kok Seng had, and has, a feisty independence of spirit that insulated him from any danger of being overwhelmed by Coates' equally strong personality. But the two men were warm, close and loving friends for all that. In private letters exchanged between Coates and another close friend, Spanish musician, author and businessman Ramón Rodamiláns (published as *Austin Coates, Souvenirs and Letters* by Athena Press of London, 2007), Coates made it clear that he considered Kok Seng to be his adoptive 'son' and Kok Seng's family to be equivalent to his own. Rodamiláns expands on Kok Seng's engaging personality and the joy his presence afforded Coates, particularly in his declining years. Austin himself said of Kok Seng, writing to Rodamiláns: "It's that lovely air he has. I've always said that if he had a motto it would be 'Bring Happiness'" (27 June 1996). In another letter (13 February 1991), Coates praises Kok Seng's first book *Son of Singapore*, pointing out that "Apart from anything else, it gives a closer and more accurate picture of me than will ever be conveyed by anyone."

True to their close friendship, Kok Seng, together with his whole family, flew into Portugal to be at the 74-year-old Coates' bedside just a day before his death from cancer in March 1997. Rodamiláns' book records the bitter-sweet smile, "sad and happy", that flickered across Coates' face as he saw Kok Seng enter his room. Indeed, Kok Seng firmly believes that his dear friend had waited for him to arrive before he felt



free at last to depart this world in peace, a belief also confirmed by Rodamiláns.

Perhaps it is in this unlikely friendship and professional partnership, bridging the colonial and Chinese worlds of Southeast Asia, that Kok Seng's oeuvre finds its deepest meaning, making it a product of its own unique times.

In *Man of Malaysia*, we have the authentic voice of a Malayan Chinese Everyman charting his own evolution as a changing world impacts him, yet leaves him strangely untouched, true to his own self. Tan Kok Seng emerges as an unusually sophisticated 'plain man'.

Ilsa Sharp, August 2013

Ilsa Sharp, a Chinese Studies graduate of Leeds University, England, is a freelance editor and writer who often met with Tan Kok Seng and Austin Coates during her own residence in Singapore from 1968–1998; she now commutes to Singapore and the region regularly on assignments, from her base in Perth, Western Australia, and has kept in personal touch with author Tan.

## MAN OF MALAYSIA

IN THE MIDST of the sweetest of dreams, suddenly a voice intrudes, coming from I don't know where. It is like someone calling my name. "Kok Seng!...Kok Seng!"

But in the hazy mist of half-dream, half-awakenedness, am I really hearing the voice or not?

Am I still in Singapore? Or am I in Kuala Lumpur? Already...? I sit up in bed, and try hard to think. The voice is now near and loud. "Kok Seng ah!...Kok Seng ah!"

By this time I am fully awake. I jump up from my bed with a start and look anxiously out of the window. Below, in the courtyard outside the garage, I see my European boss, fully dressed and ready to go to work.

Frightened, I say to myself, "I'm late! I'm late!"

No time to brush my teeth or have coffee, but I manage to wash my face with a wet towel. Luckily, I am still wearing the clothes I put on yesterday in Singapore. When I plunged straight into work here last night, I was too exhausted to take them off.

I slip into my shoes and dash downstairs to the garage.

I say to my boss, "Good morning, sir."

I unlock the car door on the driver's side, step in, unlock the other door and start the engine.

The day before yesterday, I was a Singapore market coolie. Today, I begin my career as driver to a diplomat.

## Part I: Happiness

## Diplomatic Service Without Food

MY BOSS, SEATED beside me in the car, gave me directions as he did last night, when I arrived in Kuala Lumpur. “Turn right!...Turn left!...Go straight. *Go on!*”

Last night! It seemed like long, long ago. Changing my job from coolie to driver, I seemed to have lived a whole lifetime in 24 hours. The boss gave only directions. Apart from these, not a word. I was really frightened. Was he going to keep me on, or dismiss me?

After many commands to “turn left!”, “turn right!” and “*go on!*”, we at last reached his office. He opened the car door for himself, stepped down, and closed it. Then, looking in through the window, he said to me, “You go back and get Ah Foo,”—this was his cook—“and take him to the market. After that, take him home, and you come back here at twelve thirty to take me home to lunch.” With this, he turned his back on me and walked straight into the building. The last I saw of him was his silhouette as he entered the elevator.

Only when he had disappeared, and it was too late to ask,

did I wonder whether I would be able to find the building again. Thinking myself very clever, I parked the car in the car park, walked back to the front of the building, and studied the topographical layout. Straight in front of me was Shell House. To the right of this, leading into the town centre, was a small street named Sultan. On both sides of this street were old-style, two-storey Chinese shophouses. Slightly to the right was a low grey stone building of Chinese temple architecture. Written above the door in golden Chinese characters were the words 'CHAN FAMILY TEMPLE'.

On the right of the temple, a small road led uphill to the famous public park named after the prime minister, Tengku Abdul Rahman. It was popularly known as Tengku Park, or by the Cantonese as Mushroom Park because the Cantonese word for 'mushroom' sounds like 'Tengku'. Looking up at it, I observed a shelter looking like a huge mushroom, and realised this must be Tengku Park.

In the middle distance I saw a large disc surmounting a post high above an imposing building emerging from trees. Inside the disc, in big Chinese characters, were written the words 'GREEN SPOT', so I assumed this must be the Green Spot soft drinks factory. Then, looking more carefully down to the level of the tops of the trees, I saw five more characters saying 'Jing Wu Ti Yu Guan'. It was the premier Chinese sports stadium of Malaya.

On the right, at the foot of the hill, was the road I had

come by. So, turning round and facing the direction as I had approached it, I found Shell House just on my right. Slightly to the left of it, a short distance away, I realised I was facing the place at which I had arrived yesterday—the Kuala Lumpur railway station, which looks like a mosque. Beyond Shell House, the road to the left led to Klang, to the right to the railway station.

I then turned back to look at the building where I had sent my boss. It was the highest building in Kuala Lumpur—11 floors—standing all on its own, surrounded by jungle. At the mezzanine level were five flagstaffs, on which I recognised the flags of West Germany, Britain and New Zealand. A fourth flag I could not recognise, and the fifth flagstaff was empty. Below the flagstaffs, in English, were written the words 'POLICE COOP' plus other words I could not understand.

A small box-like building lay in front of this, with walls made entirely of glass. Inside the glass box were bookcases, hanging newspapers and a number of young students reading at tables. I wondered: Was this part of a school? Then, looking more carefully, I noticed, written downwards in Chinese characters on the glass entrance doors, the words 'Ying Guo Xin Wen Chu' and I realised this was part of my boss's office, the British Information Service.

After looking at all this, satisfying myself that I could remember it, and could therefore find the place again, I drove the car back the same way the boss had guided me. I got back

to Parry Road, to the boss's residence.

This was a block of apartments seven storeys high, entirely surrounded by coconuts and other wild vegetation. Each floor had only two apartments. My boss was on the fourth floor on the right as one went up. On the fifth floor, immediately above him, was the United Arab Republic Embassy. On the second floor on the left was the Royal Thai Embassy. These two had flags hanging out from their balconies, otherwise I would have been unable to recognise the building. Stopping the car, I took the elevator to the fourth floor, and pressed the bell.

The door opened to reveal an unknown woman, middle-aged, fat and Chinese. She smiled at me, and introduced herself. "I am Ah Kim," she said. "I'm the cook's wife." In return I introduced myself. "I'm the one who came yesterday, your boss's chauffeur, Kok Seng." We spoke to each other in Kuala Lumpur Cantonese. Having introduced ourselves, Ah Foo, the cook, appeared on the scene with his shopping basket. In a mixture of Hainanese and Hokkien he asked, "Are you taking me to the market?" I nodded.

Ah Foo was middle-aged, around five foot four, round-faced and bald save for a little rim of black hair round the edge. When he opened his mouth wide to introduce his wife to me, I noticed only his mass of gold teeth. He said, "This is my wife. She is Hokkien. I myself am from Hainan." I then understood why he spoke in a mixture of languages. Luckily, I knew both.

With this, Ah Foo and I descended to the car and set off

for the market. From Parry Road we headed to the city centre. After crossing Treacher Road, we joined Weld Road. From there we headed downhill towards the city. At the bottom of the hill, the engine stopped. I thought to myself, "This is a new car. There's no reason for it to break down." I tried and tried to start the engine again without result. Then I turned on the ignition key, and examined the various meters. All of them seemed all right except that of the petrol tank, on which the needle pointed to 'E'. It meant empty. This was my first day at work. Why had the boss not let me know?

It seemed to me he disliked me, but did not wish to say so directly. He had deliberately fixed it so that the tank would be empty. Clearly he was going to use this as an excuse to dismiss me. Suddenly, looking back over the last months, on the various occasions when the boss had visited Singapore, I remembered he had already asked another Chinese friend to work for him as a driver. I did not know why that friend, also known to me, turned down the offer, but perhaps he had changed his mind and now wanted the job. Without arranging it this way, leaving the car with no petrol, the boss would have no excuse for dismissing me, sending me back to Singapore, and employing the other man. My immediate thought, however, was of time. I had to collect the boss by twelve thirty.

Leaving Ah Foo to look after the car, I ran off in search of a petrol station. Luckily, I found one not far off, and soon returned with a can of petrol. But I could not find the car's

petrol tank. I searched everywhere. Under the boot I found the tank, but could not see where its funnel was. I then decided to open the boot. Ah Foo was beside me, bowed forwards slightly, trying to help. Worried, and not noticing him, I unlocked the boot and heaved it open. In addition, it had a spring.

As a result, the cover came up with a tremendous rush, hit Ah Foo full blast on the forehead, and he fell over backwards in the road. When he got up, he was very angry. In a loud voice, he said, "You know nothing about cars! How dare you come to work as a chauffeur?"

I dared not open my mouth, and when I looked into the boot, I still could not find the petrol funnel. I was now getting desperate, searching everywhere in the boot. I saw what was clearly a pipe, but could not find its mouth. It seemed somehow to be facing outside the body of the car; but where it came out, there was nothing but the number plate. Try as I might, I could not find the mouth. Finally, I decided to wrench the number plate out. I gave it an almighty pull, it opened without the least trouble, and there behind it was the mouth of the petrol tank. After filling it, Ah Foo and I drove to the Central Market.

On arrival there, Ah Foo, suddenly master of the situation, with a gesture indicated where to park the car. When I had done this, he ordered me to carry the shopping basket and follow him. It was like a great Chinese lady going out, followed by her maidservant.

On entering the market, we went first to the meat stalls.

Having bought some meat, in a lordly manner he handed it to me, saying, "Put it in the basket." Next we went to the vegetable stalls, where the same thing happened. By the time we reached the fish stalls I was getting fed up with his way of purchasing, wasting endless time making his selection, and chatting with the market sellers. But I dared not ask him to hurry up. Somehow I managed to keep calm and patient until, after visiting several more stalls, he at last completed his shopping. With this, walking fast and with long strides, I marched back ahead of him to the car, carrying the basket.

Arriving back in Parry Road, I dumped the basket outside the elevator, not helping him to carry it up, and drove to the office, trying to follow the same route as earlier in the morning. This time I was alone in the car, yet it was as if there were two of us, mind and heart, and the two did not agree. One moment the mind would say, "Turn right," while the heart would say, "No, go straight on." With the two of them fighting all the way, in the distance I at last saw the British High Commission building.

I was still early, so I parked the car and looked around. Not far off, squatting in the shade of a banyan tree, were a group of uniformed Malay drivers with badges marked 'German Embassy', 'New Zealand High Commission', 'British High Commission', and so on, and wearing their *songkoks*. Curious, I drew near. They were playing poker. I said to myself, "This is not the game for me." I walked away. Facing the hill dominated by Tengku Park, I found myself thinking, "This is the capital of

Malaya. Yet everywhere one sees trees—coconut trees, in fact, everywhere. Not like the city of Singapore. It looks more like my parents' farm." I was lost in thought, when the boss came out and called me. "We're going home," he said.

Back in Parry Road, he got out of the car by himself, and was about to walk inside to the elevator. Quickly I leaned out of the window, and said in English, "Sir! I going to eat!"

He replied, "Yes, go and have your lunch," and walked into the building.

I wondered where to go to find food. Driving the car, I went to the nearest place I could find, frightened of going too far, lest I be unable to find my way back. It was a street of South Indian coffee shops selling curry and rice. I had my lunch there. It was the first time I had ever eaten Indian food. I ate in such a hurry, being anxious to get back in time, that I scarcely noticed what the meal tasted like.

When I had finished, I drove back to the boss's house, and waited at the door below. A long time passed.

By 2pm he had still not come down. Had he gone to the office by himself? I wondered. I was feeling terribly worried when he came out from the elevator, and got into the car. It seemed he went to his office each day at 2pm. But why had he not told me? After taking my lunch in such a hurry, I had been left down below waiting for more than an hour, not knowing what to do. This was evidently how it was, working for a European.

Returning to the office, the boss again got out without giving me any instructions. Once more I parked the car, this time under the tree where in the morning the Malay drivers had been playing poker. Seated alone in the car, I thought to myself, "This is an easy, light job, compared with being a coolie in the Orchard Road market in Singapore. But time here seems to go so terribly slowly..."

At four thirty the boss reemerged. I quickly drove the car up to the front entrance to collect him, and took him home. That was my first day's duty done. I put the car in the garage, and went up to my room. I had a shower and changed, with the idea of having an early meal and going to bed soon, due to having had so little sleep the night before. I was just going out to find something to eat when Ah Foo, the cook, came to tell me to go up to see the boss.

The cook's words gave me a shock. The boss had finished work for the day, and my duties were over. It could only mean that he was going to send me back to Singapore. Anyway, what could I do? Helplessly I followed the cook across the courtyard and up to the boss's apartment. When I came in, I found him seated relaxedly on a sofa.

I said, "Sir, Ah Foo say you want me."

"Yes," the boss replied. "I want to give you some instructions. Sometimes in the evenings I give cocktail and dinner parties here. You must come and help to serve the guests. And sometimes I go out to cocktail parties and dinners, and you



must drive me. From cocktails I come back early. From dinner parties I shall be late.”

This seemed to be the end of the instructions, and I was making to go, when he called me to stop. “Kok Seng,” he said, “I want you to meet my friend Inche Aris. He’s staying with me, and studying Chinese. He can speak Mandarin. You can talk to him in Mandarin.” Aris was a fine-looking man, aged about 30. It was the first time I had ever met a Malay of such manners and education. I was very impressed.

After exchanging a few words with him, I went down and off to my lunchtime Indian coffee shop. This time I really felt the savour and taste of the Indian spices in the food. The spices were not hot in the same way as when eating Chinese curries, when the quick, sudden heat of chillies is experienced the moment they are in your mouth. In the Indian way one did not notice how hot the food was when one ate it. The hot spices were deep in it, and only when the food was down inside the stomach did I feel the effects, as if the heat was coming from inside me.

On returning to my room, I lay down on my new bed. It was wonderfully soft and comfortable after my sleeping conditions in the Orchard Road market. There, as a coolie one slept on a camp bed, opened out anywhere at night, closed and put away anywhere by day. Here in Kuala Lumpur the sleeping problem was solved. But with this had come a food problem. In Singapore the boss provided us with our meals

each day. Could I carry on here in Kuala Lumpur, burning out the insides of my stomach every day on Indian food? I wondered if other Chinese stomachs were the same as mine. I couldn’t understand why a European should employ someone without giving him anything to eat. But having got an easier job, I dared not ask for food as well. One step at a time.

But life was not by any means going to be as easy as I thought it would be.

PRAISE FOR  
MAN OF MALAYSIA

“*Man of Malaysia* is a rare achievement...

A very inspiring book of how in the face of great adversity, he was able to achieve success.”

—*The Star* (Malaysia)

In this revealing sequel to the bestselling *Son of Singapore*, Tan Kok Seng finds himself in Malaysia as a British diplomat’s chauffeur. While driving luminaries like Han Suyin around, he falls in love with and marries the servant girl Heung despite parental objections. When Tan is suddenly laid off, how far will he go to support his new-found family? As much a timeless account of an enterprising spirit as a travelogue through 1960s Southeast Asia, *Man of Malaysia* entertains and inspires while telling of a life fully lived.

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