

SINGAPORE **E** CLASSICS

# EYE ON THE WORLD

## 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*, *Eye on the World* and *Three Sisters of Sze* are now available from Epigram Books.

Tan now resides in Singapore with his family.

# EYE ON THE WORLD

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TAN KOK SENG

Rendered into English in collaboration  
with Austin Coates



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To my family

## Introduction

Travel on a scale such as this is a godlike experience. Like a winged spirit one traverses the continents and oceans, sometimes at high altitude, at other times swooping down to observe the affairs of men. Every second the view changes, no view ever tires on the eye; there is something to be learnt from every single view, and what is learnt always arrives fresh. Travel of this kind has one special feature: nature appears immeasurably great, man boundlessly small. (204)

*Author Tan Kok Seng ponders the cosmic significance of his round-the-world trip.*

• • •

The countless Singaporeans who today pop in and out of New York, Paris and Sydney at the drop of a hat have no inkling of just how extraordinary it was for any ordinary Singaporean to board a plane back in the 1960s and '70s, let alone a recently reinvented young farmer-cum-chauffeur like author Tan Kok Seng. Those were the days when Singapore's posher restaurants proudly spruiked their keynote dish as 'air-flown steak', and visiting celebrities were dubbed 'jet-setters' by

awestruck local magazines.

This unique travelogue of that era reflects the naïveté of the greenhorn that Kok Seng was back then, as were so many of his compatriots.

Yet, he remained endearingly clear-eyed and grounded about everything he experienced and witnessed during his travels with the eminently sophisticated and urbane former colonial civil servant, diplomat and raconteur, British author Austin Coates, 'Kao Tze', for whom Kok Seng served as driver and personal assistant for some two decades. In this account, *Eye on the World*, Kok Seng retains throughout admirable self-awareness and humility, seeing himself as just a simple country boy who has had incredible luck.

On boarding his very first plane, he notes "the feeling of being suddenly transformed into a high and grand person...I asked myself if this was real?" (4)

Kok Seng is also remarkable for constantly referencing his own traditional Chinese cultural framework and values in order to interpret and assess the new ways of living that he encounters as he trots the globe. As he travels, he also learns, consciously and actively. This is his, and this book's, strength: the ability to be open to the new, and yet hold firm, remain true to a basic, central self.

In this his third autobiographical work, Kok Seng continues with his penchant for homespun philosophy, often adopting a stance of cultural relativism, in the firm belief that what may

work elsewhere, however attractive, will not necessarily work in the Asian cultural context:

What, in fact, is to be learnt from going round the world? It is a paradox, but what I learnt most clearly was what not to learn...East and West have been kept apart by thousands of years of history. As a result, the thinkings of the two are not the same, though sometimes they may superficially look as if they are. Thus, we need to be cautious in borrowing anything from the West. Let us by all means learn Western languages, giving us access to the practical knowledge and learning of the West. But in anything to do with thought, above all moral thought, we must be wary, or we will find we have built for ourselves a superstructure that has not been designed for our ship...East and West do not march to the same measure. (204 – 206)

With such remarkable observations in his thoughtful closing chapter, Kok Seng, of course, does no more than retell the personal odyssey and parable so often recounted by so many travellers in the past: that any journey, no matter long or short, eventually brings you back home to discover that what you sought elsewhere was there all the time, indeed already internalised within yourself. But there is a special novelty in sharing this discovery with a Singaporean Chinese who began life as a farmer and a coolie.

While Kok Seng almost mirrors a westerner's ability to stand apart from the Chinese, his own people, and observe

their foibles accurately, he is also astute when sizing up other cultures:

Wherever they sit down together, they talk of nothing but food...such-and-such a restaurant is so good; another restaurant is even better; at another, fresh crabs have just arrived from China; at another, eels are still in season. Whoever heard of a nation that talked more about food than the Chinese? (20)

He sees the tension and competitiveness in overcrowded Hong Kong—"We're Singapore people," says his wife, "not British subject Hongkong people!" (95)—puzzles over a population boom combined with a skewed economy and overweening bureaucracy in Indonesia, detests a distinct lack of courtesy and 'civilisation' in New York, worries about the excessive freedoms enjoyed in the West, and their impact on the behaviour of the young in particular, and notes the virtues of English party etiquette, which unlike its Chinese counterpart, expects invited guests to turn up on time to a dinner that also starts on time.

There are some charming, whimsical and good-humoured vignettes in the book: Coates scolding his protégé Kok Seng when the Chinese rustic is shown the magnificent dome at the ancient Pantheon in Rome and, while mildly impressed, asks Coates in a typically practical Chinese way, "What are we looking for here?" Whereupon Coates, himself an erudite Orientalist, sighs and remarks, "This is the greatest dome in

the world...I know you people with Chinese eyes. I'm not going to take you anywhere else." (131)

There is even a classic bidet joke, where a clueless Kok Seng bends down to inspect the novel 'children's basin' that he has encountered in Sicily, and gets a full jet of water in his eyes. In Italy too, Kok Seng's British colonial heritage renders him so certain that all white Europeans speak English that it takes him quite some time to understand that the language of Italy is not English.

But beyond the backwoods philosophising, the wide-eyed wondering, and the jokes, Kok Seng genuinely is a poetic dreamer who, under the gentle guidance of his mentor Coates, can draw as elegant a word-picture as any more celebrated writer, often skilfully applying imagery culled from his farming childhood:

Of the human rat-race in Hong Kong:

"It reminded me of the farm in my boyhood when thousands of ducklings, hungry and about to be fed, rushed forward in a horde, not a single one caring for another, one tumbling over the next, the stronger ones getting there first." (8)

On Cambodia's Festival of Sending Away the Waters:

"All that could be seen was an ocean of black-haired heads and the little movements of their well-oiled hair caught by the

street lights, causing the black surface to glint and glitter like the ripples on the river as the waters were sent away. When the first of the fireworks went off with a sound like a gun, thousands of heads suddenly looked up, like catfish when there are too many in the pond, and all are struggling for air.” (82)

Here we see the unique authenticity of Kok Seng’s own voice. Small wonder that Singapore’s *New Nation* newspaper voted Kok Seng one of Singapore’s ‘Top Ten Men of the Year’, in 1972.

Ilsa Sharp, July 2016

Ilsa Sharp, a Chinese Studies graduate of Leeds University, England, is a free-lance 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.



EYE ON THE WORLD

## Meeting Millionaires

CHAMPANGE...! The most famous of French wines, world-famous...

In any part of the world, when invited by 'great people', whether to a silver wedding party, a birthday, a wedding or a national day celebration, nothing can be celebrated without champagne. Apart from a Chinese dinner's *mao tai* and Japanese *sake*, what drink is more famous?

This was the first time I had travelled by jet. Why did the air hostess smile every time she passed me? Did she know it was the first time I was travelling by jet? Or was I in some way different from others?

Maybe she saw me as a handsome man?

I gave myself a once-over. There was nothing wrong with my body. I was of humble birth. By comparison with other Chinese, I did not feel handsome. My height was five-foot-ten and my weight 140 pounds... Was this perfect? My face was the same as any other Teochew's from southern China.

Yet somehow the air hostess seemed to be treating me with

special politeness. Though I was only travelling economy class, every time she passed, she smiled at me and inquired, "Another glass of champagne?"

I didn't know how many glasses I'd had. I felt my body floating and wobbling, as if I were no longer sitting still in my seat. Then a sudden blur...and I could not see anything. But I felt as if I had flown out of the porthole, and was winging my way independently through the clouds, leaving all the other passengers behind...

Suddenly, a very soft female voice murmured in my ear, and a soft hand gently touched my shoulder.

"Excuse me, sir. Fasten your seatbelt. We're about to land at Kai Tak."

I woke up with a jump and opened my eyes. I saw the beautiful air hostess smile at me and walk away. Having just woken up from a sweet dream, I was not sure what was happening around me now.

Then the loudspeaker said, "Will passengers please fasten their seatbelts and bring their seats to the upright position? In a few seconds, we shall be landing at Kai Tak Airport, Hongkong."

My hands searched quickly for my seatbelt and I fastened it. Looking out through the porthole, I could see nothing but blue sky, with white clouds flying beneath. The pieces of white cloud seemed to be moving faster than usual, as if trying to escape from the hurtful blows the aircraft gave them. At such moments, the aircraft suddenly dropped, and my heart felt as

if it was jumping out of my mouth. I glued myself firmly to my seat. At the same time, the aircraft's engines sounded as though they were roaring like angry tigers.

I looked out again and down. Below was the sea, reflecting the blue sky and clouds. Then, the sea became entirely blue, and apart from a few very small islands, there was nothing else.

The aircraft was gradually descending lower and lower, coming closer and closer to the water, till it was like a ship meeting the waves, shuddering at the impact. As if tired, the engines were calming down, the aircraft moving more slowly.

An air hostess, standing at the head of the cabin, said into a loudspeaker, "Ladies and gentlemen, we have now landed in Hongkong. Please remain in your seats until the aircraft comes to a total stop. We hope you all enjoyed the flight and we look forward to seeing you fly with us again."

She repeated this in Cantonese.

Once more I looked out of the porthole. Beside us there was nothing but water. How could this jet come to a stop on the water? Being very clever, I told myself this was a flying boat, not a modern aircraft. When I was very young, I sometimes used to see flying boats. I remembered the colossal waves they created as they touched down.

But to my surprise, when the plane stopped completely, I saw two buses approaching.

When it came to my turn to leave the plane, I stood at the head of the ramp and looked to the stern, toward the direction

from which we had flown in. Only then did I realise that we had descended on a runway, immensely long and narrow, projecting out into the sea like a diving board into a swimming pool. This was why the jet had seemed to stop on the water.

At that moment a gust of cold wind blew at me and my whole stomachful of champagne evaporated. Thinking back a few hours, to Singapore and that kind of heat, and to the feeling of being suddenly transformed into a high and grand person upon entering the plane, I asked myself if this was real.

In the air terminal building, I saw that all the immigration officers were Chinese and I could hear that they were talking in Cantonese. But the sound was not the same as the Cantonese spoken in Singapore and Malaysia. The sound conveyed to me a warning: This is Hongkong.

I handed my passport to the white-faced gentleman before me. His face seemed very weak, like a creature with no emotion, completely cold. He addressed me as “Mr Tang.”

I replied, “Excuse me, but I’m Tan, not Tang. In Cantonese I’m Chan.”

“Oh!” he said in Hongkong Cantonese. “So you’re Chan!”

Continuing to speak to me in Hongkong Cantonese, he inquired, “Mr Chan, are you coming here on business?”

Using my Singapore Cantonese, I told him, “I’ve come here to *sik fung*<sup>1</sup>.”

He turned to his colleague at the next desk and burst out

laughing. “He’s come to *sik fung*!” he exclaimed, pointing at me contemptuously.

I wondered what he thought was so funny about it. I quickly switched to English, feeling strange at having to use English to explain something to another Chinese.

“*Sik fung* means to have a holiday,” I told him. He just nodded his head, stamped the passport and handed it back to me.

After passing through the routine customs check, I walked out to the exit. There I found myself confronted by a crowd of hundreds, strange faces, every one of them tense. They had evidently come to meet their friends or relatives. As each passenger stepped out, everyone in the crowd spontaneously stretched their necks out, like modern style battery hens stretching their necks out through the cage, waiting for their master to feed them. After taking one look at each passenger, all the necks contracted.

I stood there arrested for an instant, staring at this peculiar sight. It made me completely forget that my host, Mr Kao Tze, would be meeting me.

Then I quickly walked out through the crowd, keeping my two small eyes wide open, searching around everywhere. I could not even see the shadow of my host. I asked myself why. In his letter, he had said he would meet me at the airport. Perhaps he had forgotten.

As I was staring about, hopeless and becoming desperate, I heard a familiar voice crying out my name. It was not my

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1 lit. to eat the wind, from the Malay makan angin

host's voice.

I quickly turned my head, following the direction of the voice. In the distance, I saw a tall, slim, young Chinese man waving at me. He looked very familiar. I tried to think where I had seen him before, then remembered.

It was Andy, from Malaysia. I had met him seven years ago in Kuala Lumpur. I yelled out his name.

He quickly came up and shook hands, explaining that he had been sent to meet me by my host.

"How was your journey?" he asked.

Andy had formerly been Kao Tze's private secretary in Kuala Lumpur. At present, he was staying temporarily with him, preparing to go to the United States. I was so happy to see him that I shook hands without answering his question. Instead, I told him, "Andy, you know, today in the aircraft, the hostess gave me special hospitality. They gave me so much champagne and didn't charge me a cent."

Andy laughed. "Which air hostess fell in love with you?" he asked.

"Don't be ridiculous," I said. "Just now, as I stepped out of the plane, I felt the cold air. It was even colder than Singapore air-conditioning."

He smiled. "It's not so cold now," he told me. "You've come at the right time. The last few days the weather's been much better. During Christmas, it was really cold. I don't know how many woollen pullovers I put on—I still couldn't feel warm."

"We're both of us from the hot belt," I said. "I suppose we feel the cold more than others do."

Mechanically walking as we talked, we reached the street exit almost without noticing it. Seeing a taxi waiting there, Andy did not bother to ask the driver if he would take us. He simply opened the boot and put my suitcase in it. When the two of us were in the rear seat, he just said, "Tsim Sha Tsui."

Saying nothing in reply, the driver drove off. We entered the busy streets of Kowloon. All I could see on either side were tall buildings of disorderly shapes and styles. On the pavements in front of the shops were nothing but piles of rubbish, fruit skins, cigarette boxes, paper and other waste. Pieces of torn cloth and string fluttering in the wind made me notice that there was even rubbish stuck on the shop signs.

Yet in contrast with the dirty streets, the people walking in the streets and on the pavements were wearing beautiful clothes—the men in Western-style suits and shining shoes, the women and young girls in mini-skirts, *qipao* or European coats and skirts, with handbags to match their high-heeled shoes. Compared with Singapore, these people paid much more attention to their clothes. Yet they did not seem to care at all about the rubbish in the street.

Very quickly, the taxi reached Tsim Sha Tsui, the ferry pier on the Kowloon side. Andy paid the driver and took my suitcase out of the boot. The driver's services, it seemed, were confined strictly to driving.

We walked to the ferry, to the lower deck, paying 10 cents each and another 10 cents for my luggage. It was certainly a very cheap fare for crossing the harbour—

1.6 US cents.

From Kowloon to Hongkong, it took between 10 and 12 minutes. From the harbour, I had my first wonderful view of Hongkong Island. The Peak looked quite unreal, like a child's toy, with tall buildings and houses placed here and there like little models on a dummy hill.

We disembarked at the Heavenly Star Pier on the Hongkong side just as people were finishing their workday. I stood there astonished, watching people pour into the ferry pier in an irresistible flood. It reminded me of the farm in my boyhood, when thousands of ducklings, hungry and about to be fed, rushed forward in a horde, not a single one caring for another, one tumbling over the next, the stronger ones getting there first. As I looked at these people's faces, I saw they looked tense, fighting to be ahead of others, frightened of falling behind. To see them entering the ferry, it looked as if a major war had just been declared, and everyone was running away to hide.

Was this really Hongkong people's ordinary lives? The sight filled my heart with an unnatural fear. I felt myself saying to Hongkong, "Can you not enlarge a bit? Are you really able to contain the pain of all these thousands of people stamping on your chest and heart? Don't you find it difficult to breathe?

Truly I give you my respect and praise."

Andy tugged at my shoulder. "Quick!" he said. "We must join the queue for a taxi."

The queue, like a lazy snake, moved very slowly. When at last we got a taxi and reached my host's house, the sky was slowly turning grey in the oncoming evening.

Kao Tze's home was in a terrace of old buildings looking to me as if they had been built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the Ch'ing Dynasty. It seemed as if only Chinese lived there, and at a guess I would say that each of them was a property owner, their surnames being written in Chinese characters at the gate of each section of the terrace.

How could my host be living in a Chinese house?

Andy took me up to the first floor and pressed the bell. Footsteps could be heard approaching as someone came to open the door, and I heard a voice within. I said to myself, "That's him."

I stepped in through the door. In a loud voice Kao Tze cried, "Seng! Welcome!" I took another step forward and shook my European friend's hand. Born Austin Coates, he was affectionately known as Kao Tze to his friends.

"How was your journey?" he asked.

I nodded my head, meaning to say it was fine, then told him, "D'you know, the whole way in the aircraft the air hostess gave me so much champagne, it made me very drunk. Only when I stepped down from the plane was I woken up by the cold wind."

He laughed. "This is the real way to travel," he said, "and the real way to take a holiday."

Kao Tze lived in this old four-storey building. As I entered his rooms I felt strange, as if I had shrunk a bit. Every door in the place was about 17 feet high. Compared with my Singapore Housing Board flat, this was gigantic. It made me think. The world population had increased so much over the space of 60 years that it was no longer feasible to build houses with rooms so tall and spacious.

After a servant had taken away my luggage, Kao Tze showed me round the house. It consisted of three very large interconnecting reception rooms, which gave a wonderful sense of space and calm. In the dining room or hall was a long table capable of seating 12 persons, and further in were bedrooms and bathrooms, with a corridor leading further back to the kitchen, in which I saw a square mahjong table with four chairs—the kitchen being large enough to have a mahjong game in while the cooking was going on. The whole apartment was more Chinese than European.

When I returned to the drawing room, I was offered a drink. Then I went into the tiled interior terrace fronting the building with windows from one side to the other. From there, I could look straight out into the distance. On the right, Kao Tze pointed out Fei Ngo Ling (Kowloon Peak), and further to the left the Lion Rock. Directly in front rose the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank and the Bank of China, and just beyond

these, I recognised the place where I had come over by ferry from Kowloon.

Kowloon Peak and the Lion Rock were joined together as if by a row of camel humps, the camels themselves sitting down to rest, the clouds gently touching their humps. It was like looking at ripples on the sea when the wind blows, the waves coming from far to near. The sky gradually darkened, as though a blanket were being drawn over the sleepy camels. Mountain and sky hid themselves and stepped into the world of dreams.

I lowered my eyes to the harbour and to the ships at anchor. Like fireflies they were pushing out a little energy to make light as darkness came, and these lights reflected on the water like stars on a moonless night. When the water ruffled them, it seemed to shake their hearts, causing them to push out more energy. In a short time Hongkong and Kowloon both caught the infection, very quickly becoming alive with pulsating light, like the sequins of a nightclub dancer as she twists and turns till the reflections almost hurt one's eyes.

The lights I was looking at tired my eyes in the same way. I did not care to look out any more.

At 8pm, my host's guests began arriving one by one for cocktails. All of his friends were Chinese. I felt it was unusual. I had never noticed before, but now I saw it more clearly. He was not like other Europeans. Even more strangely, each of his friends who came in looked like a millionaire. Their clothes and shining shoes looked so expensive. In the South Seas,

people wearing this kind of attire would be either managers, chairmen of companies, members of the diplomatic corps or dressed up to attend some important party. It made me feel they were all in much higher positions than I, and I dared not mix with them. In fact, I felt rather lonely. Supposing I should be too familiar with them, I thought, they might think I was a beggar, or they might not speak to me at all.

But at a party, one cannot escape entirely. After a few drinks, I grew braver, no longer ashamed to hold conversation with them. The few words exchanged were enough to make me jump. I found out the kind of work each of them did. There was not a millionaire among them.

Around 9.30, Kao Tze said it was high time we all had something to eat and that we must go to a Tientsin restaurant. By now, my body was feeling very light, as if I was floating. Walking out of the house, my feet did not seem to touch the ground. This afternoon on the plane I had had champagne. I had been blown away by the cold air, and this evening I had till now been drinking whisky. I was really wobbling. Somehow we all piled into two taxis and drove down to a place on the waterfront opposite the Macao ferry piers. There we got out. Looking up, I saw a signboard of Chinese characters in neon lights saying, 'Hai Ching Lou (Sea View Building), Genuine Tientsin Restaurant'.

Like soldiers returning from the war, all drunk and rather unsteady, we burst into the place and marched up to the upper

level. There we sat down at a table near the windows overlooking the harbour and Kowloon. The ships in the harbour were all quite quiet, sound asleep.

It was the first time I had been in a Tientsin restaurant. The waiter went straight to Kao Tze and handed him the menu. He ordered a cold dish of drunken chicken, hundred-year-old eggs, jellyfish, pigs' intestines and shrimps. Next came dried chilli chicken, then lean beef and vegetables and after this, half-fat, half-lean pork stewed in garlic and spices, with northern Chinese steamed bread—white, soft and delicious. It was a really wonderful dinner.

Afterwards we separated, save for Kao Tze and myself, who took a taxi together.

"Tonight all your friends looked like millionaires," I said on the way back to his home.

He hesitated a moment, then said, "Why?"

"Well," I replied, "their clothes and shoes. You could see it."

He looked at me astonished. "I didn't notice."

"Well," I told him, "at first they all looked like millionaires to me. But after having drinks and dinner together, I made some comparisons. Where jobs and society are concerned, put them above me and they're no higher than me; put them below me and they're no lower."

At this he gave a big roar of laughter, and the taxi drew up at the house.



## 2

## Meeting Mao

AT SEVEN O'CLOCK the next morning, I was still sound asleep in my warm bed when I was awakened by the sound of something scraping on steel. I jumped out of bed and took a look through one of the dining room windows. A cable car was slowly climbing up the hill, like a child just wakened from sleep, unwilling to walk and being forced to climb. Seeing it, I laughed to myself. In fact, machines are curiously like people.

I went to wash and change. Over coffee, I asked my host how the cable car worked.

"Would you like to go up?" he asked. "When you're ready, let's go."

I felt very happy and excited as we walked down to await the cable car. It operated in the same way as the one in Penang. Here, however, the cable car was like a bus. At whichever station you wished to stop, you simply pressed a button... unlike Penang, where at the start of your journey you had to tell the conductor where to stop.

As Hongkong was so small and urban, it surprised me to

see flowers, trees, grass and shrubs all the way up the Peak. As the train reached the top, the sun had just risen to the point where it was shining everywhere. In the South Seas, such as in Singapore, if the sun were to shine at this angle on anyone, it would make him so hot he would quickly be sweating from head to foot. Here on Victoria Peak, the sun was strong, but I did not feel in the least warm. A light wind was blowing and I felt the cold rather than the heat. I was wearing a shirt, pullover and suit, and I still did not feel warm. It was March the fourth.

"Is this Hongkong's winter or spring?" I asked.

"Spring," he replied. "Spring here comes in February."

As we walked out from the Peak's tram station, I was faced with a magnificent view of Hongkong and Kowloon, 1,600 feet below.

"No, that's nothing," my host said. "Come with me."

He led me along a narrow path encircling part of the Peak. Following it for some distance, we reached a point where there was a view of almost frightening beauty. I had never seen anything like it. No pen of mine could have described it—neither the beauty nor the awe it provoked.

This was the point where one looked down in a dead drop, as if from the top of a gigantic skyscraper. Immediately below was the city, and though from this height it looked motionless, there rose from it a sound like bees in a hive.

"That's Sai Wan," he said, pointing directly down. "There's

# PRAISE FOR EYE ON THE WORLD

“[I]n simple yet sensitive language, he relates without any pretension a decade of his life.”

—*The New Nation* (Singapore)

Having settled down in Singapore with his young family, Tan Kok Seng is again uprooted when his former employer and friend, writer and British civil servant Austin Coates, calls him to Hong Kong to act as his assistant. Thrust into a world that is at once familiar and foreign, he navigates between the heady privileged life of the real taipans of Hong Kong, while remaining the Singaporean Everyman.

Part memoir, part travelogue, *Eye on the World* is the third and concluding volume of Tan Kok Seng's autobiography.

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