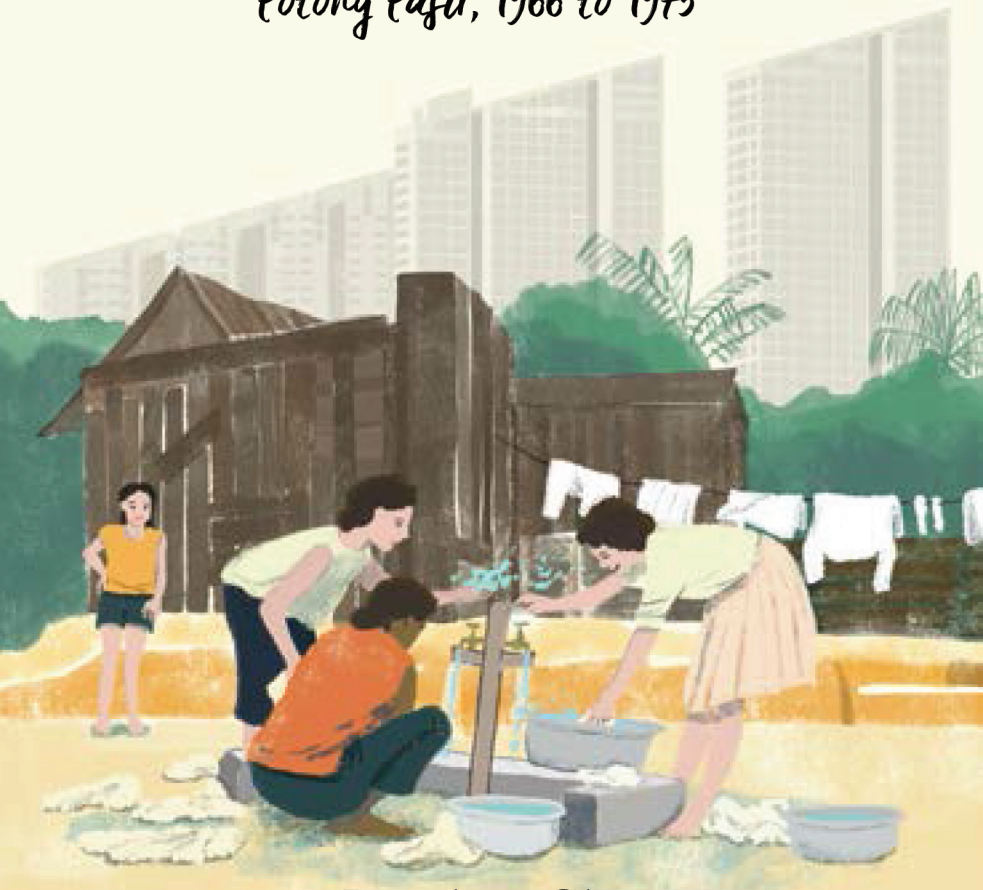


Goodbye My kampong!

Potong Pagar, 1966 to 1975



Josephine Chia

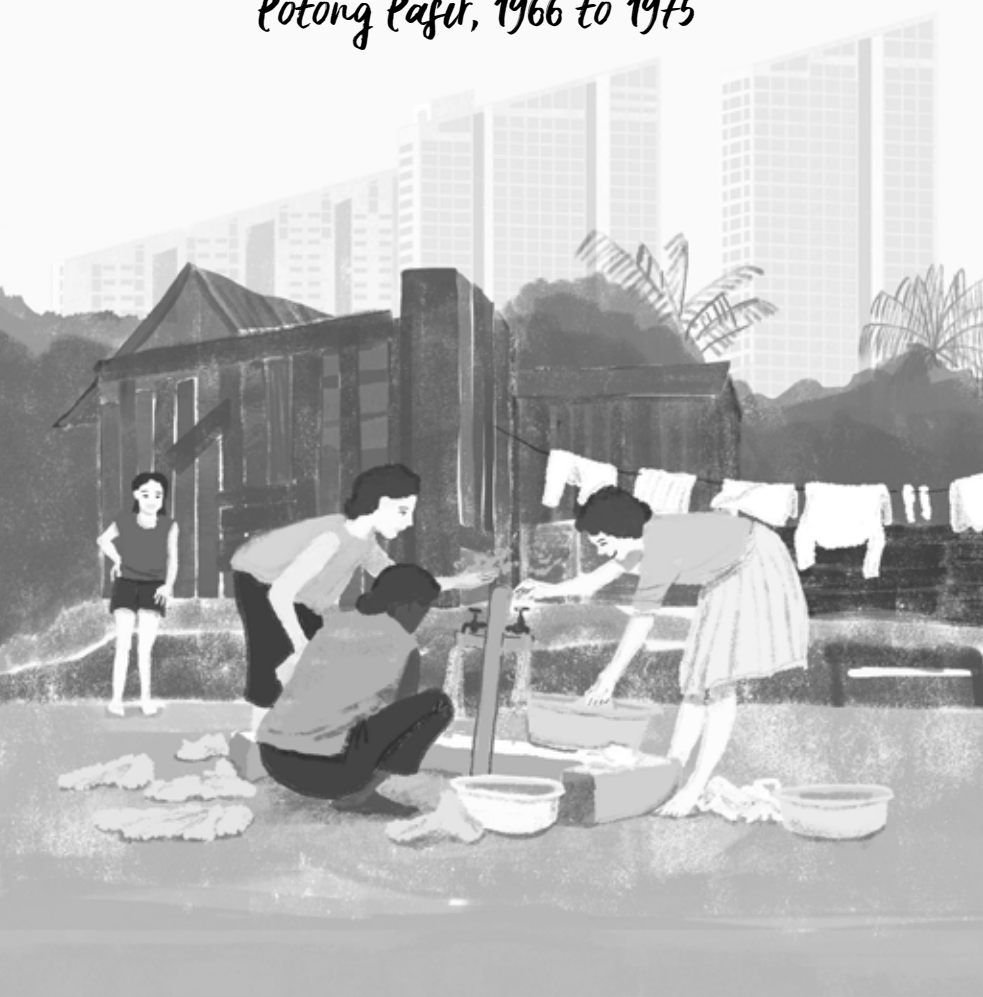
Winner of the Singapore Literature Prize

*This book is dedicated to
the villagers of Kampong Potong Pasir,
&
to everyone who has lived in kampongs
in Singapore.*



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GOODBYE MY KAMPONG! POTONG PASIR, 1966 TO 1975

@ Josephine Chia, 2017

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This work documents a past which is no longer linked to the present, except as a matter of historical record.

This is a book of memory, and memory has its own story to tell. The book reflects the author's memories of experiences as much as recollection permits and/or can be verified by research at press time. Some names and characteristics have been changed, some events have been compressed, some dialogue have been recreated and some names have been changed to respect the privacy of individuals.

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*“We are going to have a multi-racial nation
in Singapore. We will set the example.
This is not a Malay nation; this is not
a Chinese nation; this is not an Indian
nation. Everybody will have his place: equal;
language, culture, religion.”*

Lee Kuan Yew

Founding Prime Minister of Singapore

Excerpt from a transcript of a press conference at

Broadcasting House, Singapore, 1965

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*Happy First Birthday
Singapore!
(1966)*

EVERYONE growing up in the 1960s will tell you it was a magical era.

To borrow the lyrics of the pop group, The Beach Boys, the 1960s indeed had “*good vibrations*”. Not that there were no bad vibrations. Indeed, there were world-wide challenges testing the might of nations: the on-going Vietnam war, the Berlin Wall, Chinese-Communist infiltration and the numerous plane crashes. In our home country, we had faced Konfrontasi, bombings, racial riots, conflagrations and a Caesarean separation from Malaysia. But there was a certain element of “happening” which made the period memorable. There were interesting developments in science, medicine, industry, fashion and music. It was a time of spectacular growth. Internationally, an exciting event was mankind’s

quest for new frontiers. Since John F. Kennedy had voiced his dream in 1961 of putting the first man on the moon, the Americans and Russians were racing to be the first nation in outer space.

The irony was that as billions of dollars were being spent on rocket fuel, billions of people around the world were starving in so called Third World Countries. Singapore was amongst them. We had just wrested our independence from the British via a circuitous route through merger with Malaya and Sabah but were now forced to stand alone. We were faced with the challenges of self-governance and were encountering problems with shortages of food, water, housing and jobs. Nonetheless, the 1960s were exciting life-changing years for Singapore as we toddled on our new-found feet as a newly-birthered nation.

Our island was still largely rural, with numerous hills, huge tracts of tropical forest and large expanses of smelly, muddy swamps. Kampongs were plentiful, stretching to the coastal edges and into the hills. Those furthest away from town, like the kampongs in Chua Chu Kang, Mandai, Seletar, Sembawang, Punggol, Loyang and Changi were called ulu, the Malay word for remote. For the folks living in those parts, a trip into town was a marathon journey on foot, bicycles, tricycles and bullock carts until they got to the

main roads, where they boarded rickety old Tay Koh Yat or Singapore Traction Company (STC) buses that were not air-conditioned and still had a conductor issuing tickets. Most of the villages had yet to get electricity.

However, in the city we had a different problem. Some 550,000 people were living in over-crowded, ramshackle shophouses in the central area, in Chinatown, making them prone to disease. In pre-war years, immigrant Chinese men came on their own but subsequently they brought their families over, so the families had to crowd into small spaces to get by. The previous year, just after independence, the Minister for Health, Yong Nyuk Lin, had submitted a White Paper to Parliament on family planning, so this year the Family Planning and Population Board (FPPB) was set up, to educate the people on birth control. Maternity and health clinics were quickly built, especially in rural areas, where it was not uncommon to have families with eight or more children. The rural folks were not so easy to persuade. When they were taught the use of condoms to prevent conception, this was what they said, grumpily: "How can you enjoy eating a banana with its skin on?"

Our village, Kampong Potong Pasir, located between Macpherson at Third Mile and Braddell Road, off Upper Serangoon Road, had houses made of wood, with attap,

corrugated zinc or asbestos roofs. We were separated from Toa Payoh by the Kallang River, a huge swampy area which had recently been reclaimed. The word “payoh” comes from “paya”, the Malay word for swamp, whereas “toa” is Hokkien for big. Thus, this dual-language term means “Big Swamp”. Many hills around the island were slowly being eroded, as sand and gravel were needed to fill up the swamps. The name of my own village meant “Cut Sand” in Malay, as the former hills in our area were cut down to be used for land reclamation. The quarries that resulted soon became ponds, fed by the Kallang River and the monsoon rains. The Teochew name for my village, Swa Ti, reflected this. Eventually, the ponds were utilised as fish farms, something that Kampong Potong Pasir was known for, besides its floods.

Except for the main roads leading into town, and those in town, most of the village roads were mud tracks, called lorongs in Malay, unpaved, and filled with gaping potholes. During the heavy rainy seasons, village roads became slippery rivers of mud, treacherous to navigate, comical only when the consequences were not serious. Villagers, particularly those wearing rubber-soled slippers, slid and pirouetted, letting fly whatever they were holding, then crashed to the ground, and the contents of fruits, vegetables and personal effects from boxes, baskets or handbags were flung into the air and then plopped with a resounding sound into the

squelchy mud, which instantly coated them like icing. The air invariably turned blue. Sturdier char kiak or wooden clogs became the safer option. “Char” was the Hokkien word for “wood”. In Malay, clogs were called terompah.

Our village char kiak maker, with his stacks of bright, colourful clogs of varying sizes for children and adults, had good business during the rainy seasons. I loved the smell of Ah Liang’s cottage factory when he was shaving the block of wood into inch-high clogs. His small premises opened on one side into the main lorong, though they were boarded up at night. He would be dressed in loose shorts and white singlet as he bent over the shaving block, a *Good Morning* towel rolled and tied across his brow to catch perspiration. As he moved, his muscles rippled along his arms, sweat dripping down his chest, staining his singlet darkly. I was 15, and doubtless, the hormones were raging in me. I was decidedly simple, having had no instruction on sexual development. It was years before the advent of the Internet, so information was not easy to come by. When I started menstruating at the age of 12, my mother, Mak, simply gave me a long strip of cloth and belt and showed me how to use it, rewash it and use it again. She did not know anything about sanitary towels then! I was an ulu kid. The word also referred to backward people!

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