

Former ISA detainees tell their stories



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Our Thoughts Are Free

Edited by Tan Jing Quee, Teo Soh Lung and Koh Kay Yew
Ethos Books (2009)

that we may dream again

Edited by Fong Hoe Fang
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They have waited decades to tell their stories in public – so long that many may no longer remember them or the causes for which they were exiled or detained without trial.

But now, their voices can be heard in two slim volumes of poetry and prose published this year by Ethos Books: *Our Thoughts Are Free* and “that we may dream again”.

The first book, launched two Saturdays ago, is a collection of poems by five former detainees who were imprisoned in different periods in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

Three of the five were arrested in 1963 during Operation Coldstore: left-list politicians James Puthucherry (who was detained twice previously in 1951 and 1956) and Said Zahari, and trade unionist Ho Piao. The other two are

former Barisan Socialist member Tan Jing Quee, who was arrested later that year, and Ms Teo Soh Lung, who was detained in 1987.

The book also includes poems and songs by lawyer Francis Khoo, who fled Singapore for London in 1977 as the Government launched an extensive security operation against alleged Euro-communists.

Its final chapter is a fictional account of a police interrogation, based loosely on the experience of Ms Wong Souk Yee who, together with Ms Teo, was detained in 1987 under the Internal Security Act.

What was life like “inside”? Mr Tan attempts an answer in his poem, *ISA Detainee*.

His cell was a “purgatory of perpetual night”, its squat pan dank and putrid, the guards Neanderthals.

*The guard shoved you on,
Along the corridor of despair;
That first heavy thud of the
iron door*

*Sealing you incommunicado
from the world*

The toll on their loved ones rings out in a Hari Raya card to his wife Salamah, written six years into his 16-year imprisonment, Mr Said Zahari cries:

*So high, so huge
this partition between us.
For so long!*

Ms Teo records her 80-year-old mother’s lament – originally expressed in Hokkien – after her detention order was renewed for another year:

*Is there no end to the punishment you
must receive?*

*To the temple I shall go
to the gods I shall complain.*

The works of the late Mr Ho Piao are more politically charged. Detained

from 1963 to 1982, he has the dubious distinction of being the second longest-held political prisoner, after Mr Chia Thye Poh.

In *Ideas, Masters*, he writes that those he fights serve “governors from a thieving land, sultans, magnates, local whore”. His own masters, by contrast, are “they who make the daily bread”, “workmen peasants ‘neath the flag”.

These are not the polished works of practised wordsmiths but the heartfelt accounts of those who experienced



first-hand painful aspects of Singapore’s recent past.

Their stories provide a counter-point to the official accounts of the security threats that served to justify each successive wave of detentions.

In the book’s introduction, the three editors, Mr Tan, Ms Teo and their fellow former detainee, Mr Koh Kay Yew, observe that political poetry in English is relatively rare in Singapore due to a climate that “inhibits social comment and protest”.

But the tide has been turning in recent years, with the publication of several memoirs by former politicians once branded as communists, including Mr Said Zahari.

The two books reviewed here, however, mark the first time that those detained in 1987 have come out in public to tell their side of the story.

In “that we may dream again”, three of them recount their experiences in Whitley Road Detention Centre, what drove their social activism and the lingering effects of their arrests on them and their families.

Mr Vincent Cheng, then a full-time Catholic church worker, was accused of masterminding a Marxist conspiracy and detained for three years.

He writes with raw feeling of how the treatment meted out to him in detention triggered a sense of “abject subjugation” that has haunted him for a long time.

Both Mr Kevin de Souza and Ms Tang Lay Lee were lawyers who decided to work full-time for church organisations instead of climbing the corporate ladder, so as to put their faith into action.

Their brief accounts in this small, 70-page book will be best read by those with a keen interest in the events of 1987.

In putting their thoughts and feelings to paper, these former detainees expressed their faith in the power of words to heal.

Poet and Cultural Medallion winner Lee Tzu Pheng calls their works a record of survival, with the potential to move and strengthen readers “with the conviction of our essential freedom”.

The stories of these survivors deserve a hearing.

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Our Thoughts Are Free and “that we may dream again” are available for purchase at **Select Books, Kinokuniya** and www.ethosbooks.com.sg