

The Malaysian magician



ONCE upon a time, there was a magician whose name nobody agreed on. Some people called him John Tan and some called him Tan Chang Ming because only the British called him John. Not only was John Tan the first magician in Malaya; he also prevented the Japanese from invading the country. First, he summoned the ocean spirits to push their boats away from the shore, and then he commanded the waves to crush the boats and sink them. You could see the shadows of the Japanese soldiers diving into the turbulent ocean, hear their frantic shouts as the high waves pushed them farther from the shore and the spirits pulled them down. At daybreak, the Japanese ships were all that remained – charred, smoking, adrift, abandoned. A few dozen bloated Japanese soldiers and a stray limb or two lined the coast. All the dead had the same horrified expression. The soldiers and villagers say it was divine intervention, but many people insist that John Tan had something to do with it. Never mind that John Tan never visited Kelantan until the following year; they will argue John Tan IS a magician after all – he could have teleported there, or cast his spells all the way from Taiping. That was how John Tan saved Malaya from the Japanese, says the *Pakcik*.

In Perak, they say John Tan fought the Japanese at Kampar. The Japanese hovered above the town in an airship. That's right, a really large airship. Kampar was in darkness for hours because the Japanese airship blotted out the sun. The Japanese wanted to challenge the Malayan magician in order to conquer Malaya, and he accepted their challenge. So John Tan's magic staff grew wings, and he flew to the airship and single-handedly brought it down. Nobody knows how exactly, but the Kampar folk recall seeing the airship crumple inwards, as if something was sucking it from within. It crumpled and folded and then burst into flames. That day, John Tan gave Kampar two suns and saved Malaya from the Japanese, says the *Apek*.

I look at the three older men in front of me. I ask, do they know what happened to John



BY CHOONG JAY VEE

Tan's hand? They stare back.

"What about John Tan's hand?" the *Pakcik* asks.

I tell them John Tan had only one hand at the end of the Japanese invasion but nobody is sure how he lost it; so do any of them know anything about it?

The *Aneh* on my right finally speaks up and asks me where I had heard that.

Before I can cite the website I visited, the *Pakcik* cuts me off, "You cannot believe everything you read on the Internet laa. People love spreading false information on the Internet, you know. Now, you can't mess with books, though, because people check the facts before printing. The history books say John Tan never lost any hands or whatever, so you stick with that, okay?"

I would ... except John Tan does not exist in my history books.

The *Pakcik* frowns. "Not at all?" I shake my head. After a sip of his *teh tarik*, he waves his hand. "Must be a misprint. Go and check the facts online."

The *Aneh* agrees with the *Pakcik*, but only to a point: "Of course John Tan had both hands intact, he was a magician! He grew his hand back!"

I am not the only one looking at him oddly.

"He grew his hand back?" the *Pakcik* repeats.

"He grew his hand back," the *Aneh* says and takes a gulp of *kopi-O*.

"How?" the *Apek* asks.

"Aiyoi! How would I know?" the *Aneh* retorts. "Maybe he summoned some spirits to grow it back or something. Do I look like a magician to you?"

The *Apek* beckons me closer, his thick, horn-rimmed spectacles exaggerating his squint, making him look like a cartoonish mad scientist.

He whispers: "The British did it. They took John Tan away, and then they cut off his hand. You know why? His right hand was his magic hand mah. They didn't want him casting magic against the British, so they chopped it off. I know what you're thinking: he saved everyone from the Japanese, right? That's the British for you – who wanted to risk John Tan fighting for Malaya's independence? He was so popular he'd have kicked them out in no time. That's how he lost his hand."

"Don't teach young people nonsense!" the *Pakcik* interrupts.

"I KNOW you're writing about some magician because I rejected the last three articles you wrote about him. Can't you write something normal? Food? Politics? Public transport?"



"How do you know it is nonsense? Your grandfather told you, is it?" the *Apek* shoots back.

They argue about who has the actual story, ignoring the commotion they're causing. Meanwhile, the *Aneh* tells me this would have been settled if John Tan had had children; they would have kept his legacy alive instead of letting it slip off the history books, just like magic in Malaysia now. All Malaysian kids know about some English wizard named Harry who saved England, but they have no idea who John Tan is.

I take a sip of my Milo before starting: You see, Uncle, John Tan did have an heir. Sort of. After the Japanese invasion, he –

"WHAT IS THIS?"

The deep voice barking at me jolts me upright in my chair. I am no longer at the *mamak's* with three elderly men; I am sitting in front of a large bearded man – my editor – in an air-conditioned office. He glares at me, holding a sheaf of papers – my article.

Well, I'm writing about John Tan, the first magician of Malaya –

"I KNOW you're writing about some magician because I rejected the last three articles you wrote about him. Can't you write something normal? Food? Politics? Public transport?"

Today, I read five articles on those in one newspaper. I can only write so much about *assam laksa* and city charms before people realise that despite our country being unique, everyone always writes about the

same thing. John Tan, now that is different –

"Jo, nobody writes about magic in Malaysia because there is no magic in Malaysia. There is magic in Europe, in America, but not Malaysia. This is someone else's culture, not ours. People want to read articles about Malaysia for National Day, not ... this. Can you please write a proper article?"

I nod. My editor returns my article, and I leave. I dump the papers on my table and head out for a cigarette break. The shrubs outside the office are swaying from the wind, but I never have trouble with lighters or matches because a snap of my fingers produces a flame at my fingertips. Shaking my hand puts out the fire.

I refuse to believe magic never existed in Malaysia; John Tan existed, and John Tan is the embodiment of magic in our country, therefore magic exists.

You cannot look at storms and strong winds and cups and cars vanishing and say it's just thieves or being absent-minded. Magic is in the air you breathe, the objects you touch, and the ground you walk on. It is part of you and me. John Tan and his magic affects you deeper than you think, and you can only deny it for so long before discovering you could always start fires from your fingers like me.

John Tan will return to Malaysia, I'll make sure of it.

Legacies should be kept alive, after all.

INSIDE



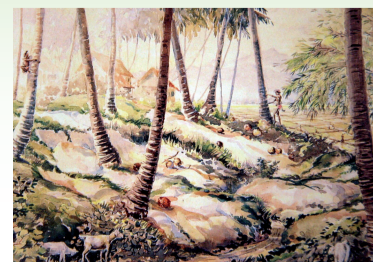
Seeing beyond 1957

• pg16



Icons of Merdeka

• pg19



Freedom and art

• pg20