

The Ya Yin Kwan Collection: Treasures of Early Southeast Asian History

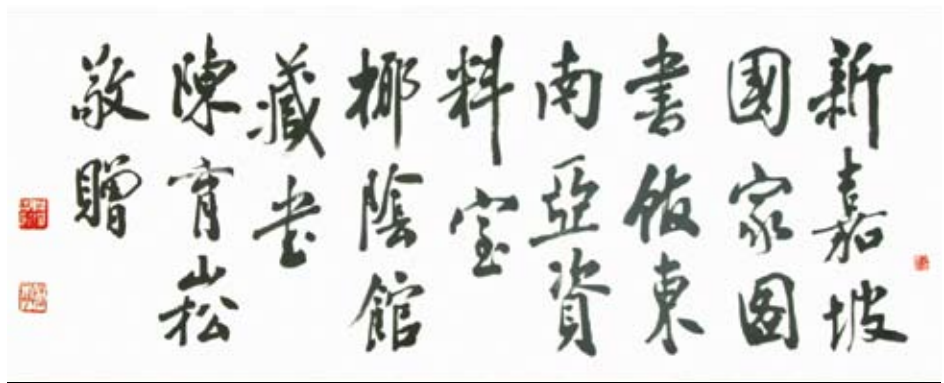


by ANG SEOW LENG

Senior Librarian
Lee Kong Chian Reference Library
National Library



Tan Yeok Seong (1903-84)
Photo courtesy of Alex Tan T.H.



Calligraphy by Tan Yeok Seong on the donation of his Ya Yin Kwan Collection to the National Library, South East Asia Room

"Knowledge is public property and must be shared by all. South East Asia is situated at the crossroads of the world. In the founding of a new state one needs to ponder deeply, and all existing knowledge must be assimilated and collated, before an authentic history can be prepared for posterity to extend the glory of past days."

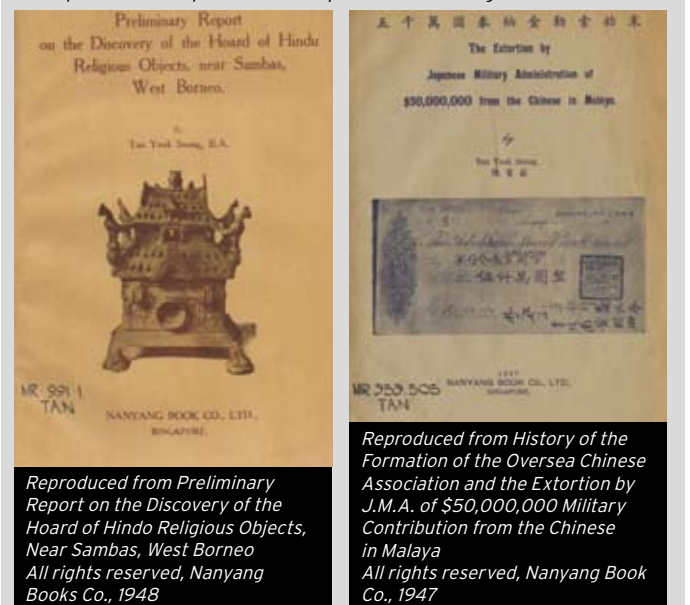
Tan Yeok Seong
Ya Yin Kwan
22 July 1964

In a published note on the presentation of the Ya Yin Kwan Collection to the National Library in 1964, Tan Yeok Seong generously donated his collection of books, accumulated over a lifetime, with the hope that this collection would benefit generations of scholars in their research.

This was to be the first public donation of a collection of high research value. At a time when 19th and early 20th century Southeast Asia histories and cultures were written mostly by the Europeans, Tan Yeok Seong wanted more Southeast Asian scholars to write their own history. He regarded the National Library as a centre for Southeast Asian studies and believed that a rich collection of information resources could encourage more people to become interested in Southeast Asian history. In his presentation speech, he expressed concerns that with the growing prominence of Southeast Asia as a geographical region in the world, Russia, Japan, America and China had started setting up Southeast Asia research centres. Therefore, Singapore should step up in this area.¹

Tan Yeok Seong (1903-84) devoted his life and time to the research of Southeast Asian history.² He received both English and Chinese education and graduated from Amoy University in 1926. His grounding in history and effective bi-lingualism allowed him to

Examples of some publications by Tan Yeok Seong



Reproduced from *Preliminary Report on the Discovery of the Hoard of Hindu Religious Objects, Near Sambas, West Borneo*, Nanyang Books Co., 1948

Reproduced from *History of the Formation of the Oversea Chinese Association and the Extortion by J.M.A. of \$50,000,000 Military Contribution from the Chinese in Malaya*, Nanyang Books Co., 1947

indulge in his pursuit of interesting topics, for example, the names Singapore used to be known by during pre-colonial times, authenticity of Gong Zhen's *Records of Foreign Countries in the Western Ocean*, and Singapore's earliest Chinese school, just to name a few. He wrote numerous articles and published several books on the history of Singapore and Malaysia, and the Chinese overseas.

In the foreword to the publication *Collected Writings from the Ya-yin Studio*³, Dr Gwee Yee Hean praised Tan Yeok Seong as an amateur historian who enjoyed extensive contacts with academics and had attained more achievements than many professional historians. When the commissioner-general for the United Kingdom in Southeast Asia, Malcolm MacDonald, came to Singapore in the early 1950s, he visited Tan Yeok Seong to learn more about Southeast Asia from him.⁴



Malcolm MacDonald at a cocktail party hosted by Tan Yeok Seong
Reproduced from 南洋书局十五周年纪念特刊 = Nanyang Book Co., Ltd.
1935-50
All rights reserved, 南洋书局,[1950]

Besides actively collecting books, Tan Yeok Seong was also a collector of historical artefacts. In 1969, he organised an exhibition at the National Museum through the South Seas Society. The exhibition featured more than 200 pieces of Chinese porcelain dating back to the Ming and Qing dynasties. These pieces, some of which belonged to Tan Yeok Seong, were on display as evidences of Chinese influence in Singapore and the region five centuries before 1819.⁵ A catalogue titled *Chinese Islamic Wares in the Collection of Muzium Negara* was published in Malaysia, according to The Straits Times dated 30 June 1981. Among the 28 pieces of Islamic wares listed, some of them used to belong to Tan Yeok Seong but had been bought over by the museum.⁶ The British Museum also listed 11 Hindu religious artefacts that were collected by Tan Yeok Seong.

Tan Yeok Seong participated in various social and cultural establishments. Victor Sim's *Biographies of Prominent Chinese in Singapore* gave a brief outline of his involvement.⁷ In 1935, he co-founded the Anthropological Museum of Amoy with Professor Lim Hui Siang. This museum is still in existence today and boasts of being the first anthropological museum in China. In 1938, Tan Yeok Seong represented Malaya at the Third Congress of Far Eastern Prehistorians. Although Tan Yeok Seong was not a founder of the South Seas Society, he was an active member. He became president of the society in 1940. In 1950, he became president of the Chinese Study Group, which studied Chinese affairs and culture in English.

Tan Yeok Seong and his friends set up the Nanyang Book Company in 1935. It was a major supplier of textbooks with Malayan content for Chinese children. Business soon flourished and branches were set up in major cities in Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, the onset of World War II severely crippled the business. While running a business, Tan Yeok Seong never neglected his reading and research. According to Teo Han Wue, Tan Yeok Seong was so passionate about history and sharing his knowledge of history, that his "business associates had to bear with him when he went on about his historical research".⁸



星洲總發行所新址
大坡大馬路橋頭十二號
20, North Bridge Road, Singapore.

Nanyang Book Co. Ltd. at 20, North Bridge Road, Singapore
Reproduced from 南洋书局十五周年纪念特刊 = Nanyang Book Co., Ltd.
1935-50
All rights reserved, 南洋书局,[1950]

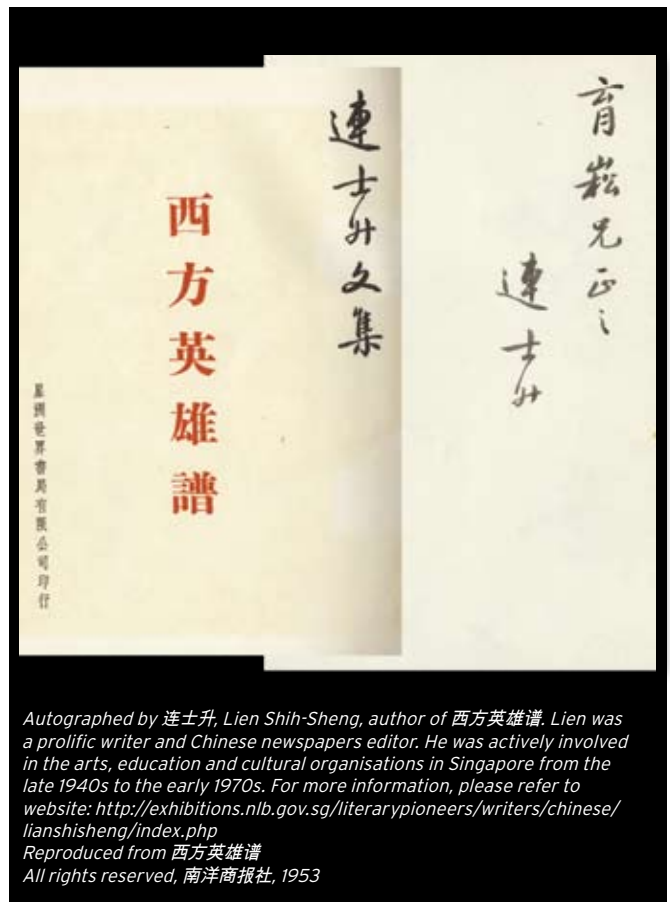
THE YA YIN KWAN COLLECTION

Tan Yeok Seong started his library collection from his university days in Amoy. After the manner of Chinese scholars, he named this collection the Ya Yin Kwan (Palm Shade Pavilion) Collection. It covers a myriad subjects such as philosophy, education, economics, archaeology, ceramics, geography, history and culture. Chinese titles take up more than half of the total collection. The rest of the collection comprises largely English titles, with a small number of titles in Malay, Japanese and European languages.⁹

This collection was an accumulation of years of active collection of titles related to Southeast Asian history, through contacts with rare book dealers, and exchange of titles with scholars. Thus it can be regarded as a collection of important reference titles before Singapore's pre-Independence days.

Leafing through the pages in this collection, one can get a glimpse of various writers' perspectives on Southeast Asia and the Chinese overseas from the 18th century to the mid-1960s. Tan Yeok Seong not only collected the publications but also used them in his research and meticulously added newspaper cuttings on the relevant topics in some books. One can also find autographed publications from authors who gave their publications as gifts to him.

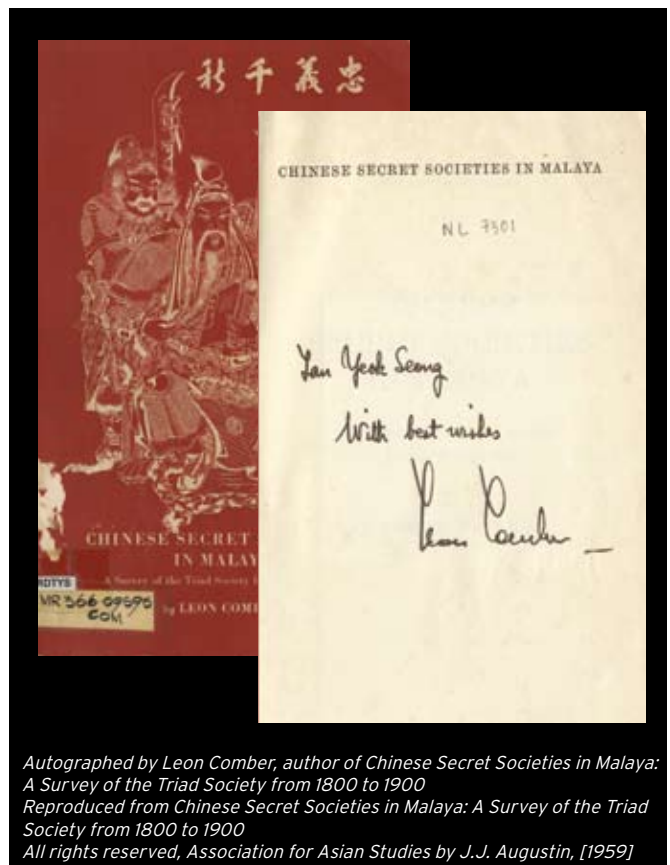
Researchers looking for trends on Southeast Asian studies before the 1970s can refer to some of the titles in the Ya Yin Kwan Collection. These include *Survey of Chinese-language Materials on Southeast Asia in the Hoover Institute and Library, Stanford University, 1952*; *A Survey of Bibliographies in Western Languages Concerning East and Southeast Asian Studies*; *Historians of South East Asia*, and *Research in Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore*.



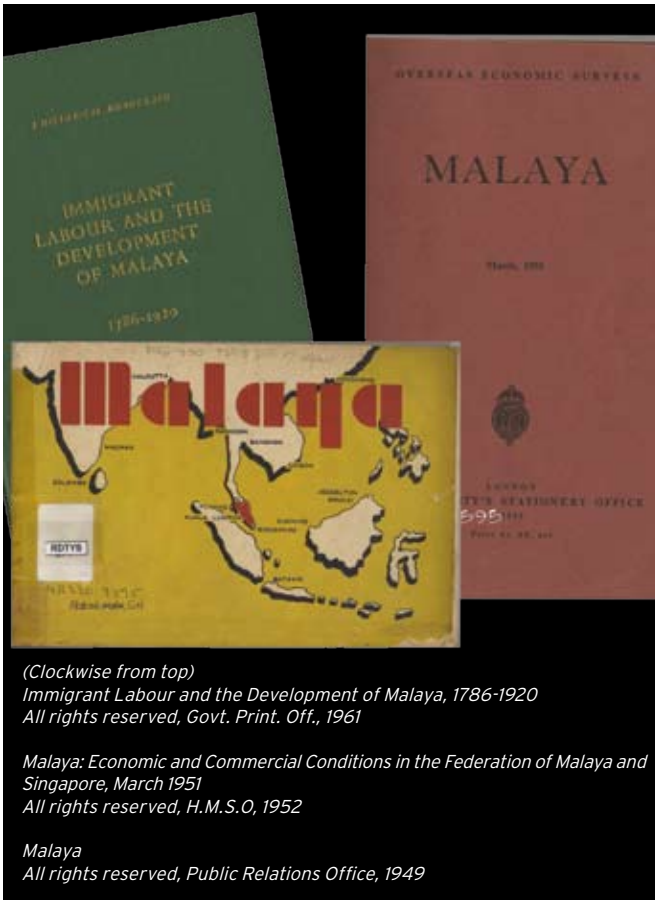
Autographed by 連士升, Lien Shih-Sheng, author of 西方英雄譜. Lien was a prolific writer and Chinese newspapers editor. He was actively involved in the arts, education and cultural organisations in Singapore from the late 1940s to the early 1970s. For more information, please refer to website: <http://exhibitions.nlb.gov.sg/literarypioneers/writers/chinese/lianshisheng/index.php>
Reproduced from 西方英雄譜
All rights reserved, 南洋商報社, 1953



Autographed by 黃開祿, Huang Kai-loo, author of 普通經濟學. Huang taught economics at the Amoy University
Reproduced from 普通經濟學
All rights reserved, 木屋學社, 1963



Autographed by Leon Comber, author of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Survey of the Triad Society from 1800 to 1900
Reproduced from Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Survey of the Triad Society from 1800 to 1900
All rights reserved, Association for Asian Studies by J.J. Augustin, [1959]



(Clockwise from top)
Immigrant Labour and the Development of Malaya, 1786-1920
 All rights reserved, Govt. Print. Off., 1961

Malaya: Economic and Commercial Conditions in the Federation of Malaya and Singapore, March 1951
 All rights reserved, H.M.S.O, 1952

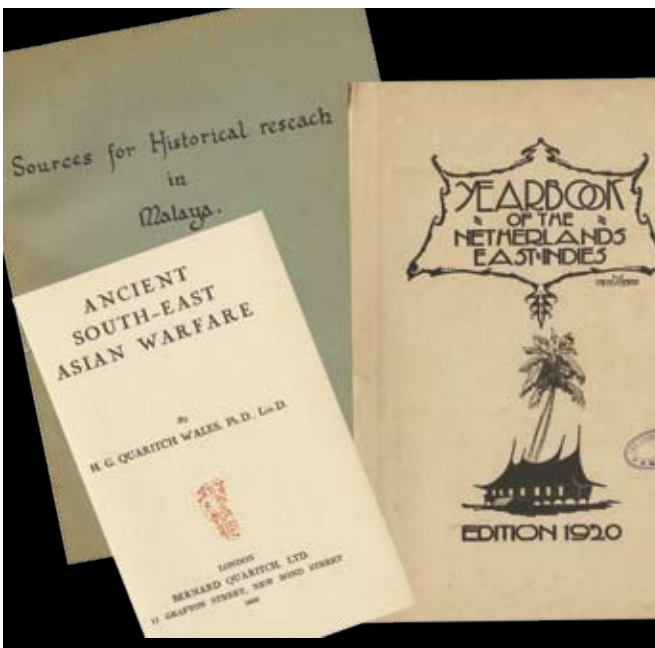
Malaya
 All rights reserved, Public Relations Office, 1949

There is also a wide range of titles in the collection on the Chinese in Southeast Asia. For a good overview, Jonas Daniel Vaughan's *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese of the Straits Settlements* (1879) gives an account of the social lives of the Chinese in the Straits Settlements. George William Skinner, an American anthropologist, wrote a *Report on the Chinese in Southeast Asia, December 1950* (1951) and more than a decade later, Charles Patrick Fitzgerald, an Australian scholar, published *The Third China: The Chinese Communities in South-East Asia* (1969). The Ya Yin Kwan Collection also has other English and Chinese titles on Chinese communities in other Southeast Asian countries.

In particular, the Ya Yin Kwan Collection has quite a number of Japanese titles that were published in the 1930s and 1940s. These focus mainly on the Chinese in Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian studies. In one of the Chinese articles written by him, Tan Yeok Seong gave a very comprehensive overview of early Japanese studies on the Chinese in Southeast Asia. He also mentioned that some of the Japanese titles in the Ya Yin Kwan collection could no longer be easily found in Japan.¹⁰

These titles are just a drop in the ocean of information waiting to be rediscovered in the Ya Yin Kwan Collection. Members of the public may view the Ya Yin Kwan Collection located on Level 10 of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, National Library, during the library's opening hours. Those wishing to consult the collection may approach the staff at the Information Counter on Level 11. The collection is to be used within the library's premises.

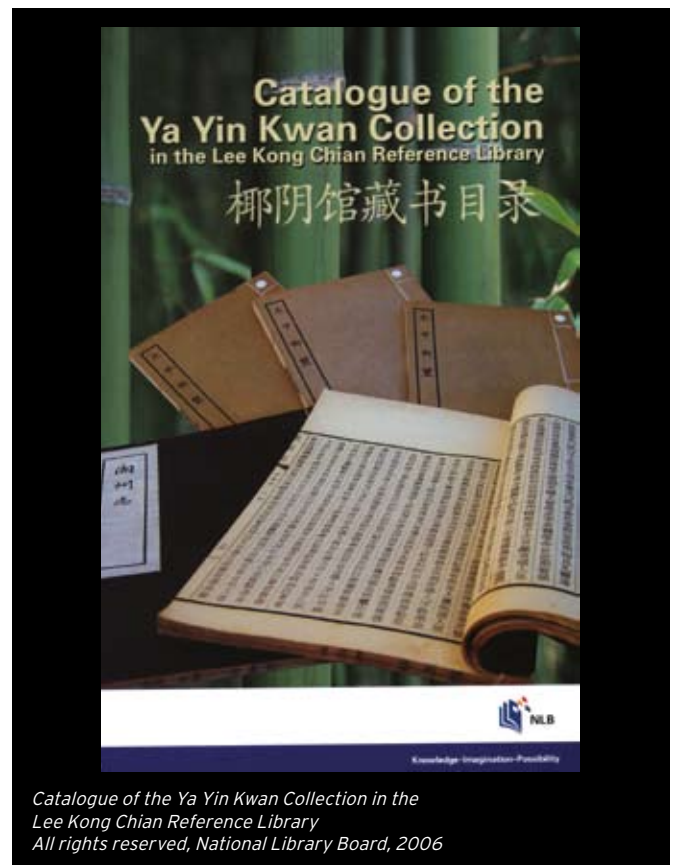
Researchers interested in this collection can also request for a copy of the *Catalogue of the Ya Yin Kwan Collection in the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library* from the Level 11 Information Counter.



(Clockwise from top)
Sources for Historical Research in Malaya

Handbook of the Netherlands East Indies, 1920
 All rights reserved, Netherlands East Indies. Dept. of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce, 1920-1930

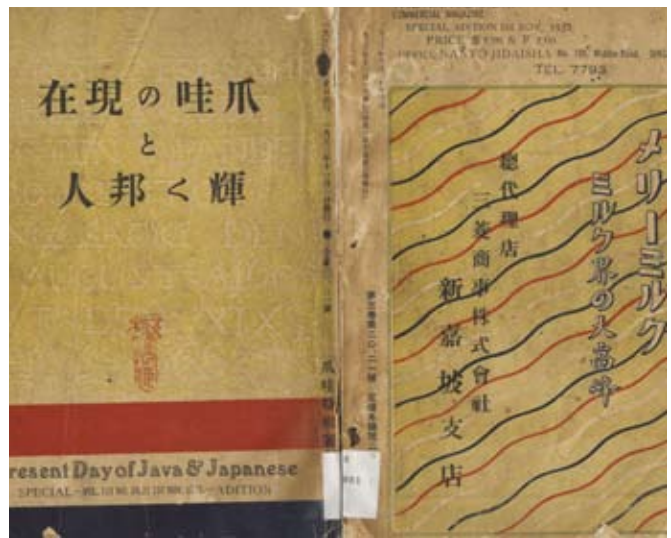
Ancient South-east Asian Warfare
 All rights reserved, Quaritch, 1952



Catalogue of the Ya Yin Kwan Collection in the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library
 All rights reserved, National Library Board, 2006



(From left)
Japanese titles related to Southeast Asian Chinese (From left to right)
Tōa kyōeiken to Nan'yō Kakyō = Greater East Asia Co-Prospersity Sphere and the Southeast Asian Chinese Overseas
All rights reserved, Tōkō Shoin, Shōwa 16 [1941]
Nan'yō to Kakyō = Southeast Asia and the Chinese overseas
All rights reserved, Sanseidō, Shōwa 18 [1943]



Japanese title published in Singapore
Reproduced from *Jawa no genzai to kagayaku hōjin = Present Day of Java & Japanese*
All rights reserved, Nan'yō Jidaisha, 1932



Japanese title published in Singapore
Reproduced from *Nan'yō jūyō bussan = Products of South Sea Islands*
All rights reserved, Nikka Kōshi, Shōwa 14 [1939]



Japanese titles related to Southeast Asian studies (From left)
Nanpō kankei bunken mokuroku = Bibliography of Publications on Southeast Asia
All rights reserved, Nihon Shuppan Haikyū, Shōwa 18 [1943]
Tōnan aja no minzoku to bunka = People and Culture of Southeast Asia
All rights reserved, Seiki Shobō, Shōwa 17 [1942]
Nan'yō no Kaikyō = Islam in Southeast Asia
All rights reserved, Nan'yōkyōkai, Taishō 11 [1922]
Nanpō Kyōeiken no Bukkyō jijō = Buddhism in Southeast Asia
All rights reserved, Kōshisha Shobō, Shōwa 17 [1942]

ENDNOTES

- (8月29日1964年). 国家图书馆扩充中: 东南亚资料馆开幕. 星洲日报, 第8页.
- For more details, please refer to article 'The life of Tan Yeok Seong' by Alex Tan T. H. in Catalogue of the Ya Yin Kwan Collection in the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library.
- This is a collection of more than one hundred articles on history, education, personalities, forewords for books and poetry, written by Tan Yeok Seong. Majority of them are in Chinese, with a small number in English.
- 朱孟香. (4月5日1984年). 为文化教育贡献心力—记陈育崧先生. 联合早报, 第3页.
- (15 August 1969). Old China that tells a story. *The Straits Times*, p. 6.
- (30 June 1981). Islamic porcelain unique to this region. *The Straits Times*, Section Two, p. 1.
- Sim, Victor (Ed.). (1950). *Biographies of prominent Chinese in Singapore*. Singapore: Nan Kok Pub., p. 62.
- Teo, Han Wue. (5 April 1984). History lives for him. *The Straits Times*. Section Three, p. 2.
- For a Chinese write-up of Tan Yeok Seong and his Ya Yin Kwan Collection, please refer to Jane Wee's article, 陈育崧先生与椰阴馆藏, in *BiblioAsia*, 2(1), April 2006, pp. 22-23.
- 陈育崧. 日本的华侨研究斋测, 自陈育崧(1983). 椰阴馆藏文存 = Collected writings from the Ya-yin studio. 新加坡: 南洋学会., 第205-211页.