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# THE STRAITS TIMES

December 22, 2010 Wednesday

## Life!

HOME > LIFE! > LIFE NEWS > STORY

Dec 22, 2010

### Dr Ivan Polunin dies

Well-known naturalist Polunin, 90, preserved the sights and sounds of Singapore  
By boon chan, media correspondent

'He was an explorer as well as doctor. He was also a naturalist and extremely familiar with the flora and fauna of South-east Asia. He was really a renaissance man in every sense of the word'

**Film-maker Tan Pin Pin on Dr Ivan Polunin (in 1996)**



-- PHOTO: ST FILE

Dr Ivan Polunin, a man of many talents who built up a unique archive of old Singapore died peacefully at home yesterday after a short heart-related illness.

He was 90 years old and is survived by his wife Madam Fam Siew Yin and daughters Nadya, a radiologist, and Olga, an artist.

The part-time documentary cinematographer for British Broadcasting Corporation filmed how people lived here between 1950 and 1973. His archive of old Singapore is considered valuable because he is believed to be the only person using the then high-tech process of colour videotaping.

When contacted yestersday, Ms Nadya Polunin says via e-mail of her father: 'He taught us a lot about nature, gardening, trees and flowers, and tribal people. He showed us the world and brought us travelling. He gave us an alternative education.

'He was a multi-talented and multi-faceted polymath who had an encyclopaedic knowledge about everything.'

Her sister Ms Olga Polunin adds about her father: 'Ivan was very full of humour and love, and a lot of fun.'

Dr Polunin was born in 1920 to an English mother and Russian father. He took up studies in classics, natural sciences and medicine. These were the same interests that defined his career.

His tenure as a medical lecturer in epidemiological diseases began in 1952 at the University of Malaya, the precursor to the National University of Singapore (NUS). He retired as associate professor in 1980.

Dr Polunin was featured in film-maker Tan Pin Pin's documentary Invisible City (2007), about the people who chronicle different aspects of Singapore's history and the NUS Museum put together an exhibition entitled I Polunin from August last year to January this year.

« Previous

Next »

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buzzing

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The museum show presented rare photographs and film footage from his archive, including images of Pulau Sudong from the 1950s and kampung houses taken in the 1960s and 1970s.

Tan says: 'He has led such an amazing life in so many ways. He was an explorer as well as doctor. He was also a naturalist and extremely familiar with the flora and fauna of South-east Asia. He was really a renaissance man in every sense of the word.'

Dr Polunin had, for example, contributed written material to The William Farquhar Collection Of Natural History Drawings (1999), which brought together drawings of plants and animals collected in and around Malacca commissioned by Farquhar when he was Resident Commandant of Melaka from 1803 to 1818. He also wrote the authoritative guide, Plants And Flowers Of Singapore (1987).

Production company The Moving Visuals Co also made a 76-minute documentary Lost Images (2009) which incorporated Dr Polunin's 16mm film footage, including the sights and sounds of Chinatown and life along the Singapore River in the 1950s and 1960s.

Executive producer and family friend Galen Yeo calls him a unique individual who 'had a lot of depth and substance'. In addition to the films, he notes that Dr Polunin recorded music which now sits in the Smithsonian archives in the United States. He was also an expert on fireflies and his photos of them were published by National Geographic magazine.

Mr Yeo adds that Dr Polunin was also actively involved in humanitarian work: 'He would play Father Christmas for the Singapore Convalescent Home each year because he looked the part.'

His film archive will be retained by his family, with plans to expose and develop it further in the future.

Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy's associate professor Kenneth Paul Tan, author of Cinema And Television In Singapore, says: 'I appreciate that this is a personal collection which he may have been interested in bequeathing to his family but I also recognise its national value.'

'I hope that some arrangement can be worked out where it can be accessible to the public and also used by interested parties such as academics and film-lovers in general.'

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December 23, 2010 Thursday



# Prime News

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Dec 23, 2010

## Doctor's rare images of S'pore to be preserved

National Library Board to archive the late Ivan Polunin's photos and films in digital format

By Boon Chan, Media Correspondent



This photo, called Street Festival, depicts stiltwalkers entertaining the crowd during Chinese New Year in Chinatown in the 1970s. -- PHOTOS: IVAN POLUNIN COLLECTION

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THE late British-born Dr Ivan Polunin had amassed a unique archive of colour images of Singapore from the 1950s to 1960s. This collection will now be digitised and preserved by the National Library Board (NLB).

Dr Polunin died peacefully at home on Tuesday at age 90 after a heart-related illness.

In March, he and his daughters, radiologist Nadya Polunin and artist Olga Polunin, signed a memorandum of understanding with the NLB.

Under the agreement, the library would digitise the collection of more than 500 film reels and audiotapes recording the social and natural history of Singapore and South-east Asia in the 1950s and 1960s.

An NLB spokesman said: 'As the collection contains important heritage material of Singapore and South-east Asia, the National Library Board is digitising the collection to preserve and make it accessible. Time is needed for this process, and we will inform the public in due time about its availability.'

Dr Polunin shot almost 100 hours of colour film footage showing scenes as diverse as New Year sea sports events held at Collyer Quay to scenes of everyday life in Chinatown to the way of life of the Muruts of North Borneo.

Ms Olga Polunin said: 'When he was making these colour films, there wasn't even colour television in Singapore.'

She said that she had wanted the material to be made available while her father was still alive so that people could appreciate what he did.

The film archive had been kept in what Dr Polunin called his 'toy room' at his bungalow home in the western part of Singapore. There was a dehumidifier to protect the film reels, audiotapes of tribal music and four filing cabinets containing 30,000 photographic slides.

Ms Olga Polunin said: 'My priority was the film, to preserve and digitise it and make it accessible to the public and to professionals. In its current state, it can't be seen.'

The film reels will have to be cleaned before they can be digitised.

But even the toy room could not contain all of his hobbies and interests.

As his granddaughter Farrah Isaac, a 22-year-old student, observed: 'He squeezed several lifetimes' worth of experience into one lifetime.'

He was featured in film-maker Tan Pin Pin's documentary Invisible City (2007), about the people who chronicle different aspects of Singapore's history.

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Dr Polunin's tenure as a medical lecturer at the then University of Malaya started in 1952, and he retired as an associate professor in 1980.

Former student Rexon Ngim, a plastic surgeon in his 50s, recalled: 'During the 1970s, he would take medical students to kampungs in Johor, and to Pulau Tekong and Ubin, so students could study the social aspects of public health.

'We got to see how worm infestation was transmitted. As a lecturer, he wasn't the strict sort.'

Dr Polunin was also a great lover of nature, and he wrote the authoritative guide Plants And Flowers Of Singapore (1987) and a Malaysia edition about the same topic.

Dr Shawn Lum, 47, current president of Nature Society (Singapore), said: 'He had a phenomenal recollection about botany. He was one of those who inspired me.

'It was wonderful to see people who were so driven, and he had a ferocious capacity to learn.'

While Dr Polunin's interests varied, there was one constant in his life, his wife Fam Siew Yin, 87.

She made the nets for him to catch fireflies, made the suit when he dressed up as Santa Claus to bring cheer to the Singapore Convalescent Home and did the packing when he went on his many trips and expeditions.

Madam Fam, cousin of the late war heroine Elizabeth Choy, said of her husband: 'He lived long and was very curious.'

Ms Olga Polunin added: 'She was the facilitator for his dreams. They were very devoted to each other, and daddy used to say, 'The best thing I did in my life was to marry that woman.'

As a father, he encouraged his daughters' creativity.

Ms Nadya Polunin recalled that they used to draw on the bathroom walls as children, but he did not scold them.

'Instead, he would take photos of the tiles and send them out as Christmas cards,' she said.

Ms Olga Polunin recalled fondly: 'He didn't do things by half measure. When he did something, he went all the way. Everything was done with a lot of passion and love.'

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**Additional reporting by Tay Suan Chiang**



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