

# OUTLOOK

coordinated by Linda Neo

# Hysteria

THE Woodville Secondary School in Aljunied Road is just like any secondary school in Singapore. Except for the week in April last year when 48 of its students went hysterical.

For three days, a frightening "epidemic" sent one student after another into frenzied trance-like states.

While some cried, screamed, shivered and started eating the grass and empty glasses, others stared into empty space with open eyes while performing a Tai Chi type of dance movement called the *Kuda Kepong*, an ancient Malay wedding dance.

Some were restrained from their violent fits by the teachers. No one could communicate with them during their violent fits and trances.

Twenty-eight students gave 28 different descriptions of legless apparitions which appeared before them.

Although the police and spokesman of the school confirmed the outbreak of mass hysteria, nobody wanted to talk about it while the atmosphere of fear prevailed in the school.

What happened in Woodville school is, in fact, an age-old human affliction that has appeared in various forms over the centuries — from the dancing maniacs of the Middle Ages to the biting and mewing nuns in Euro-

pean convents. In all known cases, the "emotional contagion" was transmitted from person to person extremely fast, and within minutes groups of people suffered bizarre symptoms of mental or bodily illness for which there's no physical cause.

So far, doctors are still in the dark as to what causes a group of students or factory workers to become hysterical. There are no guidelines on how to prevent an occurrence of mass hysteria and the findings which are documented are skimpy.

The incident in the Woodville school is just another outbreak of mass hysteria in Singapore which went unnoticed and unrecorded.

## Outbreaks

Since the first recorded case of mass hysteria in the Republic in 1973, the Ministry of Labour's industrial health division has investigated only 12 other cases which involved a few hundred factory workers. The rest of the cases were not recorded or reported.

Some outbreaks investigated by the division involved less than 20 people and lasted for a few days while others stretched on for more than 30 days and involved nearly a hundred factory workers.

Victims in mass hysteria outbreaks can be broadly divided into the

**Why did the students of a local secondary school break out in mass hysteria? Nobody knows, or has a scientific explanation. These outbreaks are not peculiar to any particular country, culture or creed, nor are they a symptom of the evils of a fast, modern pace — there have been such outbreaks since the Middle Ages; and yet, there is very little research being done on the whys and wherefores of mass hysteria. BENG TAN investigates.**

"seizures" and "frightened" cases.

During an outbreak, those who have seizures would go into a violent struggle, swinging their limbs and kicking about, and as many as four people are needed to restrain each of them.

They would scream, cry, sweat profusely and breathe heavily. Their eyes would either be opened and staring, or closed.

Some would go into a trance and later forget what had happened to them. Each seizure may last from 30 minutes to more than two hours.

The pupils from Woodville Secondary School who went hysterical belonged to this category.

The frightened cases include those who did not scream, struggle or become violent.

They only complained of dizziness, faintness and numbness. In their states of heightened anxiety some would feel very cold and tremble even when blankets are piled on them.

From the documented evidence of the 13 cases studied in Singapore, no sure explanation of what caused the events was put forth. But the prevalence of belief in spirits is obviously a key factor.

Another factor which cropped up each time is that the people affected were mostly Malay females, although they may not constitute more than 60 per cent of the factory population.

In an interview, the director of the industrial health division of the Ministry of Labour, Dr Phoon Wai Hoong, said mass hysteria is a psychological phenomenon which has no definite physical causes.

## Symptoms

He said: "It can be defined as the collective occurrence of a set of physical symptoms and related beliefs among two or more individuals in the absence of an identifiable causative agent."

Dr Phoon said mass hysteria can affect any normal rational person.

"It is generally agreed that mass hysteria is a reaction to stress, involving a very complex interaction among a multitude of factors.

"It is thus a coping mechanism. Different people react to stress in different ways, and this could be considered as one variation of coping with stress."

This is the only possible answer which researchers have come out with. The outbreaks occur most commonly on assembly lines, where each worker performs the same repetitive task over and over again.

Their jobs are usually considered to be without much opportunity for advancement. In all the factory cases, nearly all the victims are women.

The reason for the outbreaks, researchers said, could probably be due to a kind of rebellion by the affected workers to unpleasant working conditions, or having to work in the first place.

## Stress

If stress is the factor which triggers off mass hysteria, perhaps the Woodville incident could be explained as a susceptible population of students undergoing a stressful state before their mid-year exams.

A belief in spirits by those affected could also be a factor. According to teachers who witnessed the mass hysteria in the school, they said it all started when seven boys went into a trance after they had, out of fun, smeared their palms with oil before rubbing a talisman to call up spirits on the school ground.

"Spirits" were also seen when on October 20, 1977, 16 telephone operators of Telecoms went berserk for three hours in the late afternoon.

It started with one telephonist screaming and one after another of her 15 colleagues in the operations room followed suit.

Some went into a trance with stiffened bodies, while others vomited and frothed in the mouth, according to a Telecoms official.

of mass hysteria occurring in factories here, the division has made some observations and findings, and guidelines to contain an outbreak of mass hysteria are being drawn.

The studies show that the largest age group affected are those below 25. A significant number of those affected have histories of psychosomatic complaints and those employed for less than three years in the same factory are more susceptible to hysteria.

Psychological tests taken by the unaffected and affected factory population show no definite personality characteristic difference in terms of intelligence, culture, educational background, position in the family and marital status.

According to the guidelines drawn by the division, the most important step to be taken in any mass hysteria situation is to "immunise" the rest of the unaffected factory workforce.

This is done by isolating the affected ones, as mass hysteria can spread like

an epidemic from one department to another within minutes if the unaffected ones see and hear those who are under attack.

Mass hysteria is a world-wide phenomenon although the manifestation of the symptoms can be different.

In the US, for instance, large numbers of the factory workforce suddenly complain of stomach pain, itching limbs, nausea and giddiness.

It is only in the early 70s that Malaysia started observing such outbreaks, especially in their schools; and it is only recently that the United States has started studies on outbreaks in their factory workforce.

So much is still unknown about this subject that social scientists are starting to pool their knowledge to exchange information about their researches and findings.

It was only last June that for the first time a world conference was organised in Chicago to discuss this peculiar problem.

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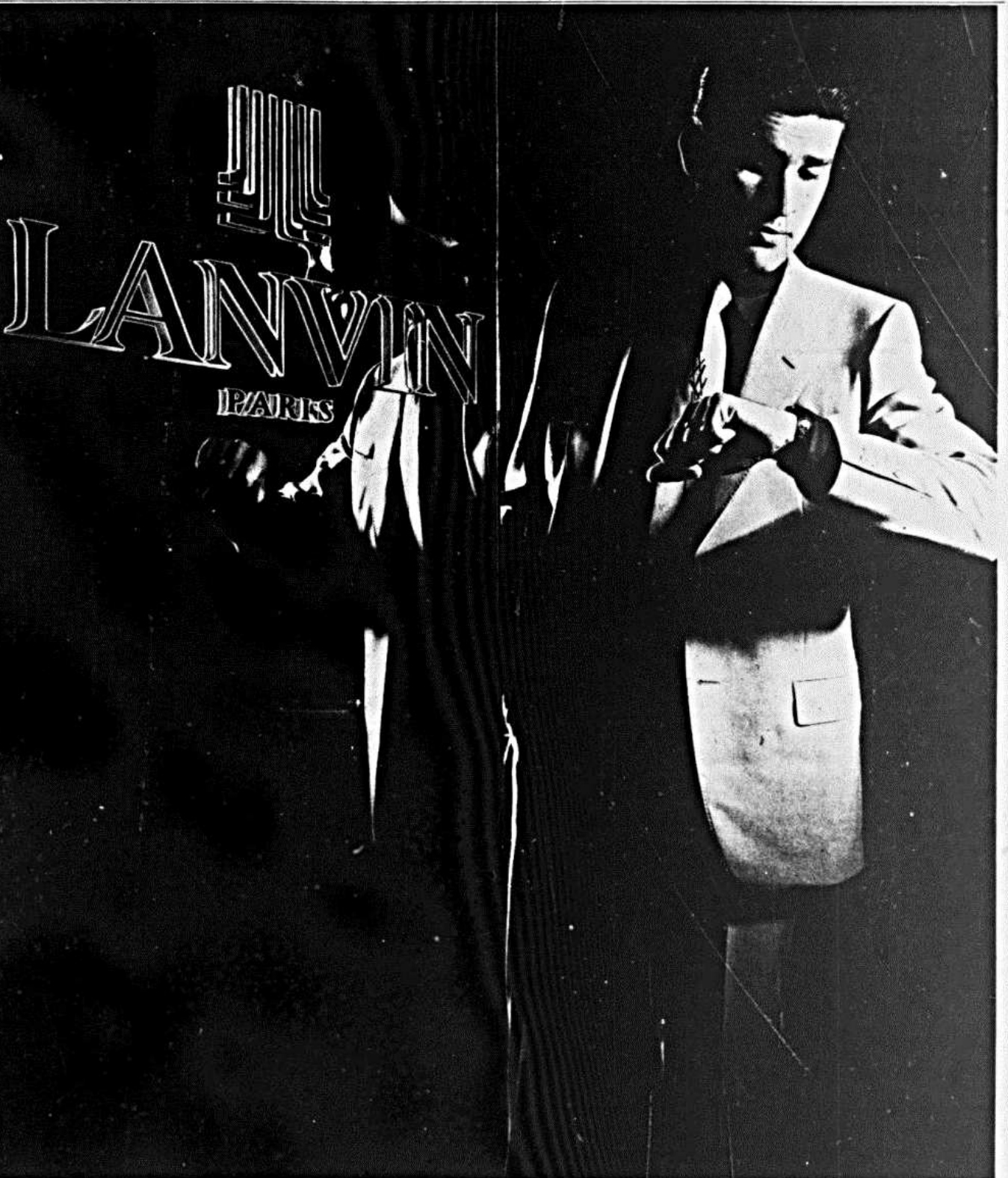
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