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RECLAMATION & REINCARNATION

Chaplin *in* Singapore

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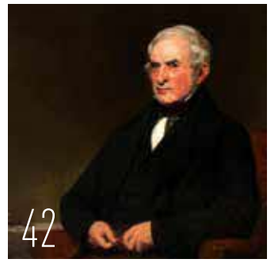

NL NOTES

Director's Note

"Like everyone else I am what I am: an individual, unique and different... a history of dreams, desires, and of special experiences, all of which I am the sum total."

So wrote Charles Spencer Chaplin (1889–1977), or Charlie Chaplin, the affable Tramp as the world knows him, in his autobiography. The inimitable actor, producer and director of the silent film era was so enamoured of the Orient that he visited Singapore three times between 1932 and 1961. Chaplin's visits in 1932 and 1936 are little-known trivia that might have disappeared with the tide of time if not for Raphaël Millet's meticulously researched essay – a work of historical reclamation, as it were.

"Reclamation and Reincarnation" is the theme of this issue of *BiblioAsia* – reclamation in both the literal and figurative sense – as we look at historical and cultural legacies as well as human interventions that have shaped the landscape of Singapore over the last two centuries.

Discover how the British, and subsequently our own government, dictated the extent of land reclamation in Singapore through ingenious feats of civil engineering in Lim Tin Seng's essay. He documents reclamation projects that have increased the island-state's land mass by nearly 25 percent, and how its boundaries will be pushed even further in time to come.

Long-forgotten coastal communities at the fringes of our existence are the subject of articles by Marcus Ng and Ang Seow Leng. The former charts the disappearance of islands and reefs, which indirectly sparked the marine conservation movement that took root in the 1990s, while the latter looks at mangrove forests that have dwindled over the years but still remain an integral part of the ecosystem.

Disappearing art forms, specifically the puppet theatre that diverse Chinese communities brought with them to Singapore generations ago are being preserved through efforts to document a part of our precious heritage. Caroline Chia speaks to puppet masters who are determined to continue with their craft in the hope of finding new audiences.

Casting her eye on another aspect of the Chinese diaspora in Singapore, Goh Yu Mei explains how Chinese authors in the 1920s were instrumental in defining a new "Nanyang-flavoured" genre of literature with their experimental works.

Delving earlier back into history, Wilbert Wong looks back at the life, career and writings of John Crawfurd, the second and last British Resident of Singapore. Apart from his achievements as an administrator, Crawfurd was also known for his ground-breaking books and journals on the languages and ethnology of the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia.

The indelible impression left by the Japanese Occupation, says Mark Wong, is painfully apparent in the first-hand oral-history transcripts of survivors from the era. The interviews – collected by the National Archives of Singapore – that recount everyday realities as remembered by people from different walks of life are a visceral reminder of the time when Singapore was called Syonan-to ("Light of the South").

On a much lighter note, Joy Loh charts the career of the music maestro Alex Abisheganaden, hailed as Singapore's "Father of the Guitar". His multifaceted music career was recognised with a Cultural Medallion in 1988.

Finally, we feature two intimate and vivid accounts of what it was like to grow up as a Eurasian and a Malay person in Singapore, written by Melissa De Silva and Hidayah Amin respectively. The former retraces her Portuguese roots in Malacca, where her great-grandfather had been a fisherman, while the latter recalls her formative years living in the historic Gedung Kuning, or "Yellow Mansion", in Kampong Glam, which her great-grandfather first bought in 1912.

These unique histories and experiences contribute to the sum total of what Singapore is today. We hope you enjoy reading this issue of *BiblioAsia*.

Mrs Wai Yin Pryke
Director
National Library

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On the cover:
An illustration of Charlie Chaplin as the Tramp, with his signature bowler hat and "toothbrush" moustache. In the background is Capitol Theatre where his silent film, *Modern Times*, premiered on 12 May 1936. In all, Chaplin visited Singapore three times, in 1932, 1936 and 1961. *Cover design by Oxygen Studio Designs Pte Ltd. Charlie Chaplin™ © Bubbles Incorporated SA.*

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Chaplin *in* Singapore

One of history's greatest comic actors, Charlie Chaplin, stops over in Singapore in 1932 and makes a return visit in 1936. **Raphaël Millet** traces these journeys.

Charles Spencer Chaplin (1889–1977), or more famously Charlie Chaplin, was one of the most celebrated stars of the 20th-century silent film era. Born in London on 16 April 1889 to struggling showbiz parents, Chaplin made his foray on stage as a teenager in England, before moving to the US in the early 1910s where he signed on with the Keystone Film Company.

Chaplin is perhaps best known for his iconic screen persona as the Tramp, with his signature bowler hat, cane and "toothbrush" moustache. The penniless pint-sized Tramp, with his bumbling ways and heart-of-gold, would become a hit with film audiences all over the world, always playing the underdog who would triumph in the end.

In all, Chaplin acted in, produced or directed 82 films throughout a glittering screen career spanning nearly 65 years. The multi-talented Chaplin took creative control of most of his films, even writing his own scripts and music scores.

Raphaël Millet is a film director, producer and critic with a passion for early cinema the world over. He has published several books, including *Le Cinéma de Singapour* (2004) and *Singapore Cinema* (2006), and is a regular contributor to *BiblioAsia*. He recently completed filming the documentary *Chaplin Bali* (2017).

Chaplin Visits Singapore in 1932

Chaplin was 43 years old when he made his first visit to Singapore in 1932 with his half-brother Sydney Chaplin. He was already a rich and famous Hollywood personality, having churned out a string of successful films and founded the film distribution company United Artists. He was feted by fans and the media everywhere he went, and was single again – his second marriage to the American actress Lita Grey had ended in divorce in 1927.

In all Chaplin visited Singapore on three occasions. His second visit was in 1936 (with his then fiancée Paulette Goddard) and his final visit in 1961 (with his last wife, Oona, and a few of their eight children). Chaplin's inaugural visit in 1932 was particularly significant: firstly, it took place at a key turning point in his personal life and professional career; secondly, it was his first extended holiday after almost 20 years of non-stop work; and finally, it was his first trip to the Orient – a visit that would leave a lasting impression on him in the years to come.

To be more precise, Chaplin stayed in Singapore twice in 1932. The first time was in late March, on his way to Java and Bali in Indonesia, and the second was on his way back from the archipelago in late April into early May. Even though these may appear to be casual visits by a privileged white tourist taking an extended mid-career break, they left an indelible mark in Chaplin's memory, so much so that he recounted them in his writings on two separate occasions.

Shortly after Chaplin's journey to the Orient, he penned a travel memoir titled *A Comedian Sees the World,* published in five instalments in a women's lifestyle magazine, *Women's Home Companion,* from September 1933 to January 1934.[1] The fifth instalment of his work deals extensively with the Asian leg of his trip; it touches upon Singapore before moving to Bali and then Japan.

The second time Chaplin mentions Asia again is some 30 years later when he wrote *My Autobiography,* published in 1964 by the English publishing house Bodley Head, and then by Penguin Books in 1966.[2]

What Brought Charlie to Asia?

Towards the end of the 1920s, Chaplin was confronted with both a personal and a professional crisis. On the personal front, he had to cope with a few reversals of fortune due in part to the acrimonious divorce from his second wife, Lita Grey, in 1927. The news of the divorce, with charges of abuse and infidelity levelled against Chaplin, received front-page coverage in the scandal-mongering American press.

Adding to his woes, Chaplin had been under severe pressure from the Internal Revenue Service because of unpaid back taxes.[3] On the professional front, he had difficulties transitioning from the era of the silent movies to that of the talkies. He was sceptical of the new technology, and, as a compromise, agreed that his latest film, *City Lights,* released in early 1931, would feature a music score but no dialogue.

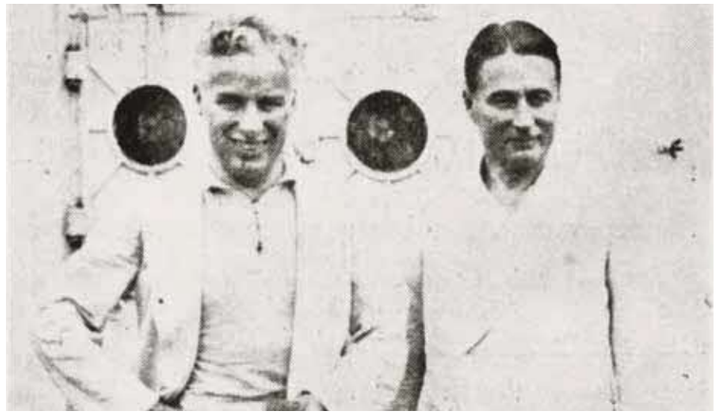
On 13 February 1931, Chaplin sailed to Europe for a publicity tour of *City Lights,* which took him to England, Germany, Austria, Italy and France. Once the tour was done, Chaplin stayed behind in Europe (mostly in Switzerland and on the French Riviera) as he simply did not feel like going back to Hollywood.[4] Finally, in February 1932, as he had already been away from home for exactly a year, Chaplin decided to return to California. However, instead of taking the shorter and faster route across the Atlantic and then to the American continent, he would travel a longer, circuitous route via the Orient, a part of the world that he had always wanted to visit.

Not wanting to travel alone, Chaplin asked his half-brother Sydney, then living in Nice, in the south of France, to accompany him. The two of them had grown up together as impoverished youths in London and had moved to Hollywood, where Sydney (or Syd) intermittently managed his brother's career in between taking on various acting gigs, before quitting Hollywood for good in the late 1920s.

Accompanying them on the trip was Charles' personal secretary, Toraichi Kono, a Japanese who had worked for him since 1916. Together, the trio boarded the Japanese NYK (Nippon Yusen Kaisha[5]) ocean liner called *Suwa Maru* in the port of Naples, Italy, on 2 March 1932. Sailing via the Suez Canal and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), they arrived in Singapore on 27 March, according to the local press[6] – although the date Friday, 25 March is mentioned in the tour itinerary found in the annex to the reprint of Charles Chaplin's travel memoir.[7]

The First Leg of the 1932 Visit

Singapore, then part of the Straits Settlements under the British Governor Sir Cecil Clementi, clearly featured in Chaplin's imagination as one of those exotic places



Charles And Syd Chaplin Arrive.

BUT SINGAPORE REMAINS CALM.

Cannot Say If Next Picture Will Be A Talkie.

(Facing page) Portrait of Charles Chaplin as the Tramp, with his signature bowler hat, large shoes, flexible cane and "toothbrush" moustache, 1915. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*
(Above and left) Charles Chaplin (left) and his brother Sydney Chaplin arrived in Singapore on the *Suwa Maru* on 27 March 1932, and were greeted by a 200-strong crowd at Johnston's Pier. This was Charles Chaplin's first visit to Singapore. *The Straits Times, 28 March 1932, pp. 11, 12.*

located "East of Suez",[8] or what was then commonly called "the Orient", as Chaplin refers to in his writings.[9]

Leaving Ceylon, Chaplin wrote: "Our next port was Singapore, where we entered the atmosphere of a Chinese willow-pattern plate – banyan trees growing out of the ocean."[10] Indeed, it would have looked like a very green and lush coastline as the *Suwa Maru* sailed into the harbour via the Strait of Malacca, cruising along the picturesque and undeveloped western coast of Singapore.

Even though this is not clearly documented in either Chaplin's writings or in newspaper articles of the time, the *Suwa Maru* most likely sailed past the Telok Ayer Basin along the southern shoreline and docked near Johnston's Pier, located right opposite Battery Road. The pier, which was built in 1856, would be torn down when Clifford Pier, a short distance away along Collyer Quay, was completed in June 1933. Chaplin later recollected: "Myriads of sailboats listed in the bay, and white ocean liners lay dormant, waiting to be fed with cargo, and the harbor sang with color and tropical life."[11] Writing was obviously another one of Chaplin's many talents.

At Johnston's Pier, about 200 people waited to greet the Chaplin brothers. This was certainly a change from the heaving crowds that had welcomed Charles Chaplin elsewhere. Relieved at the relatively subdued reception in Singapore – what he was looking for in this trip to the Orient was to escape the usual mob frenzy – he later wrote: "The crowds were not as demonstrative here as they were in Ceylon, but then Singapore is two degrees off the equator and I don't blame them. Nevertheless, there was a medium crowd and I was cheered, photographed, and interviewed."[12]

Interestingly, a journalist sent by *The Straits Times* to cover the event took it upon himself to explain in his article the reason for the modest size of the welcoming party in Singapore:

> "Asiatics are not as demonstrative. They are not in the habit of mobbing cinema stars, even when the star is none other than Charles Chaplin, whose name is better known than that of any other man in the world, whose pictures are as familiar in China, Japan and India as they are in England. Singapore's cinema-goers did not turn out in force to greet Chaplin, they know of him, they crowd the cinemas to see his pictures, but they did not seem particularly interested in seeing him in the flesh."[13]

While still onboard the *Suwa Maru,* Chaplin agreed to give a group interview to all the journalists present, among whom were British, Japanese, Chinese and Malay reporters, many eager to know if he was still going to make pictures, and if his next picture would be a talkie. To which Chaplin nonchalantly replied: "Of course, I am going to make more pictures. Will my next be silent or talkie? That I cannot say."

The journalists told him that his latest film, *City Lights,* had already been shown in Singapore and was very well received by local audiences. Chaplin expressed surprise:

> "Is that really so? I should never have believed it. And they liked *City Lights,* you say? I am glad to hear that. You see, a picture with just a musical accompaniment can be shown anywhere. This is the beauty of it. There are no barriers to the silent picture."

Once ashore, the brothers were taken on a guided tour of Singapore. Chaplin's first impression was positive:

> "My first view of the city surprised me. Perhaps my imagination was influenced by the lurid portrayals of Hollywood's conception of it, with its narrow evil streets and sinister droves on every corner. But on coming into the harbor, I found green open spaces and gardens before palatial granite buildings."[14]

His brother Syd seems to have been far less enamoured with Singapore than Charles was. In his travel notes peppered with humorous details and unexpected anecdotes, Syd describes a visit to a Hindu temple where they were shown a "golden horse with… [a] swinging and detachable phallus". He quipped in his usual sarcastic fashion that Singapore "should be called Stinkapore",[15] alluding to the city's poor sanitary conditions. This was likely observed during their visit to the "native quarters", presumably the poorer sections of the city.

In fact, it was Charles who had insisted on seeing the less touristy side of Singapore. As an actor and film director, he was always interested in scratching below the surface. Syd highlighted this anecdote about his brother in a subsequent interview with the local press:

> "Charlie always makes for the native quarter more than anything else. When he arrives at a place, the faster he gets away from the European part of it, the better. He likes to see how the natives live. If the guide wishes to show him Government House or the Botanical Gardens, he asks for the slums."[16]

According to Syd's travel notes, they made the mandatory stop at the Raffles Hotel and then, unexpectedly, drove to the Sea View Hotel in Tanjong Katong "only a short distance from town" and where "every room [came] with a bath, modern sanitation [and] running hot and cold water". The now-demolished hotel faced the sea (as its name suggested) and was surrounded by a coconut grove. Together with the Adelphi and the Raffles, the Sea View was regarded as one of the finest lodgings on the island and, of the three, "the most beautifully situated of all Singapore's hotels".[17]

Unfortunately, the Chaplin brothers were "the only customers", Syd noted. Although not officially documented, it is very likely that the brothers spent the night at the Sea View Hotel while waiting for their boat to Java. Syd wrote of the Sea View Hotel in yet another humorous note that seems to corroborate the fact of their stay: "They switch off all our lights after serving us with drinks, because it is midnight – and so, we drink in the dark."[18]

The next morning, on 28 March, the Chaplins left Singapore, sailing on the steamship *Van Lansberge* to Batavia (now Jakarta), then by car to Surabaya where they took another boat to Bali. The itinerary had been prepared by their travel agent, Thomas Cook and Son Ltd, whose Singapore branch was then located at 39 Robinson Road.[19]

The Second Leg of the 1932 Visit

After 18 days in Bali, the Chaplin brothers returned to Singapore via Java, where they disembarked on 20 April 1932. They were not able to catch their connecting ship to Japan on 24 April as they had initially planned as Charles had been stricken with dengue fever during the trip to Bali. On arrival in Singapore, he was immediately taken by ambulance to the Singapore General Hospital, where he was warded for the next eight days.

Not surprisingly, this instantly made the news not only in Singapore, but worldwide. The Associated Press issued a dispatch on 20 April, which was picked up the same day by various newspapers such as the *Philadelphia Bulletin,* the *New York Post,* the *New York Journal,* the *Baltimore News,* and other leading dailies.[20] The *Los Angeles Evening Herald Express* ran a huge headline on its front page: "Charlie Chaplin Ill in Singapore", followed by a detailed article that read:

> "Charlie Chaplin, American [sic][21] screen actor, was carried ashore to a hospital upon his arrival here from Java today, suffering a mild attack of fever… The screen star's illness was diagnosed as dengue fever, a disease peculiar to warm climates and in particular to the East and West Indies… Sydney Chaplin, brother of the famous star, who is accompanying him on the tour, told International News Service that Charlie is progressing satisfactorily."[22]

In the meantime, Sydney Chaplin stayed at the Adelphi Hotel, where he enjoyed hosting the press, providing journalists with regular updates on Charles' health, as well as giving *The Straits Times* an exclusive interview about their recent Balinese experience.[23]

In the end, Charles Chaplin was warded at the Singapore General Hospital much longer than he had expected. He was discharged on 26 April, thus missing the ship to Japan, and had to stay put in Singapore until 6 May.

Once Charles was out of the hospital, he joined Syd at the Adelphi Hotel, where they wolfed down fresh pineapples,[24] intent on enjoying their remaining days on the island. As Charles describes it in his travel memoir: "There were several days to wait before we could get a boat to Japan, so in the meantime, we merged ourselves into the life of Singapore… Of course anything after Bali is a letdown. But Singapore has its charm."[25]

MR. CHARLES CHAPLIN

Due to Leave Hospital Today.

Mr. Charles Chaplin, the famous film comedian, who has been in the General Hospital suffering from dengue fever since he arrived back in Singapore from Java last Wednesday, is now convalescent and is expected to leave the hospital today.

(Left) Established in 1906, Sea View Hotel was situated in a grove of coconut trees near the sea at Tanjong Katong, c.1930s. Charles Chaplin and his brother Sydney Chaplin stayed for a night at the hotel on 27 March 1932. *Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*
(Below) Ephemera from the Sea View Hotel.
(Bottom) Charles Chaplin and his brother made a second stopover in Singapore, arriving on 20 April 1932 via Java. Unfortunately, Chaplin had contracted dengue fever while in Indonesia and was warded at the Singapore General Hospital for eight days. *The Straits Times, 26 April 1932, p. 12.*

They visited the Singapore zoo as well as the Seiryokan Fishing Pond[26] and travelled around the island with drivers provided by the hotel. They also toured the city on rickshaws[27] as Charles was very interested in seeing more of the natives' quarters – much to Syd's dismay – who, in his travel notes, recalls that a local doctor had told them that "since the forced closing of the red light district, girls now solicit [for business] from rickshaws", contributing to a rise in the number of local men afflicted with venereal diseases.[28]

With so much time on their hands, the Chaplin brothers were thrust into Singapore's social life, which they took to like ducks to water. On one occasion, they were entertained by the Ranee of Sarawak. They also met with Joe and Julius S. Fisher, two South African brothers who had settled in Singapore in the late 1910s and made their fortune in the film industry. Joe Fisher was the managing director of Capitol Theatres Ltd, while Julius was its publicity manager.

The Fishers took Charles and Syd on a tour of Capitol Theatre, which had been built a year earlier at the corner of Stamford and North Bridge roads. The Capitol was a grand building that was designed in the neoclassical style. It was one of the finest cinemas of the era, with plush seating for 1,600 patrons, including circle seats, and exceptional acoustics.

The Fishers also took the Chaplin brothers to see the horse races in Serangoon on 30 April, which was duly reported by *The Straits Times* the next day. The headline read "Chaplin Bros. at the Races", with a photograph of them dressed smartly in white linen suits and pith helmets that they had purchased a few weeks earlier in Cairo.

On 2 May, Charles Chaplin received a letter from the local tycoon Ong Peng Hock, who invited him and Syd for dinner on the following Thursday at the New World amusement park (which Ong and his elder brother Boon Tat owned) in Jalan Besar. The Chaplins were treated to "an elaborate Chinese dinner"[29] by Ong, who then introduced them to Chinese and Malay actors and performers working at the New World.

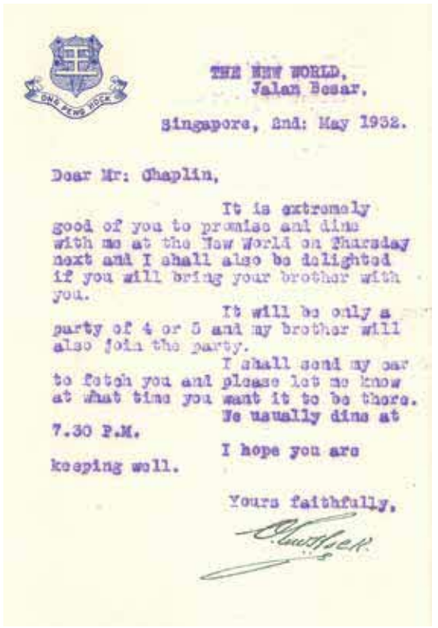
Charles enjoyed New World so much that he returned with Syd on several occasions before their departure: "Occasionally we would go to the New World – the native Coney Island of Singapore – where every known variety of entertainment is given, from Malay opera to prizefighting." One evening, after watching a boxing match at New World, Charles was asked to enter the ring and give the prize to the winner.[30] But what truly fascinated him was the variety of local theatre.

(Below) Adelphi Hotel at the junction of Coleman Street and North Bridge Road, c.1945. Charles Chaplin and his brother Sydney Chaplin stayed at the hotel in April 1932. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*
(Bottom) Charles Chaplin (4th from the left) was entertained by the Ranee of Sarawak, her daughter H. H. Daya Elizabeth and Mr H. C. Strickland on 27 April 1932. *Courtesy of Roy Export Company Establishment.*

> "The Chinese drama listed several nights. My brother and I would sit of an evening trying to guess the different symbols that the actors used during the play. One was a stick with a fringe of wool around the top and center, which the actors would shake majestically. I guessed correctly. It was a horse."[31]

As someone who made his mark in Hollywood, the mecca of the entertainment industry, but who also was, at the same time, an actor and artist very much drawn to talent, Charles Chaplin could appreciate the variety of entertainment that New World offered, recalling it as one of the highlights of his stay on the island:

> "My outstanding memory of Singapore is of Chinese actors who performed at the New World Amusement Park, children who were extraordinarily gifted and well read, for their plays consisted of many Chinese classics by the great Chinese poets... The play I saw lasted three nights... Sometimes it is better not to understand the language, for nothing could have affected me more poignantly than the last act, the ironic tones of music, the whining strings, the thundering clash of gongs and the piercing, husky voice of the banished young prince crying out in the anguish of a lost soul... as he made his final exit."[32]



THE NEW WORLD,
Jalan Besar,

Singapore, 2nd: May 1932.

Dear Mr: Chaplin,

It is extremely good of you to promise and dine with me at the New World on Thursday next and I shall also be delighted if you will bring your brother with you.

It will be only a party of 4 or 5 and my brother will also join the party.

I shall send my car to fetch you and please let me know at what time you want it to be there.

We usually dine at 7.30 P.M.

I hope you are keeping well.

Yours faithfully,

(Above) From the left: Charles Chaplin, Julius S. Fisher, Sydney Chaplin and Joe Fisher. Brothers Joe and Julius Fisher were South Africans who settled in Singapore in the late 1910s and later made their fortune in the movie industry. Joe was the managing director of Capitol Theatres Ltd, while Julius was the publicity manager. *Courtesy of Roy Export Company Establishment.*
(Left) Letter from tycoon Ong Peng Hock inviting Charles Chaplin and his brother Sydney Chaplin for dinner at the New World amusement park. *Courtesy of Charlie Chaplin Archive.*

On 6 May 1932, after an extended 15-day sojourn in Singapore, the Chaplin brothers departed Singapore for Japan on the NYK vessel *Terukuni Maru.* They would both come back to visit Singapore again, but not together: Charles in 1936 and 1961; and Sydney in 1937.

Chaplin Returns to Singapore in 1936

Almost exactly four years later, soon after Charles Chaplin's latest film *Modern Times* was completed and released, he made his second trip to Singapore.

Modern Times would be the last film in which the affable Tramp, Chaplin's universally recognised screen persona, would appear. Produced in the middle of the decade-long Great Depression and capturing the angst of the period, *Modern Times* is a tragicomedy depicting, among other themes, the struggles of work life in the era of rising industrial automation.

Chaplin was accompanied on his second visit to Asia by his new fiancée and favourite leading lady, the glamorous Paulette Goddard (1910–1990), who was cast as his co-star and love interest in *Modern Times*.

Travelling with them was Paulette's mother, Alta Mae Goddard, acting as a chaperone, and Chaplin's new secretary-cum-valet, Frank Yonemori. Sailing via Yokohama, Shanghai, Canton and Hong Kong, the party arrived in Singapore on the *Suwa Maru* – the same ship that had brought Chaplin to Singapore in 1932 – on 18 March 1936.

This time, sailing from the East across the South China Sea, the *Suwa Maru* docked at Clifford Pier, which had been built in 1933. Even before their arrival, there had been much speculation about Chaplin's and Goddard's rumoured wedding (this would have been Chaplin's third marriage), which was said to have taken place either in Shanghai or Canton, or perhaps soon to be solemnised in Singapore. On 16 March 1936, the *Malaya Tribune* reported in an attention-grabbing headline that "Charlie Chaplin May Be Married in Singapore"; a few days later on 19 March, the front-page headline in *The Singapore Free Press* read "Chaplin Mysterious About Marriage".[33]

Before disembarking, the celebrity couple were greeted on board by Julius S. Fisher, the publicity manager of Capitol Theatres Ltd, whom Charles had met on his first visit here in 1932. Once again, Chaplin's arrival did not go unnoticed by the local press, but this time the crowds were much larger compared with his first visit. *The Singapore Free Press* reported on 19 March:

> "Although the *Suwa Maru* arrived earlier than was expected, there was a large crowd at the wharf to see Mr. Chaplin. Miss Goddard, who has a trim figure and vivacious personality to go with her pretty face, and Mr. Chaplin, who was dressed in his usual faultless style, were at the rails when the ship berthed. Mr. Chaplin was given a rousing reception. A Malay police corporal, who had been limiting the numbers of sightseers wanting to go aboard, saluted Mr. Chaplin as he stepped from the gangway. Mr. Chaplin held out his hand to the Malay corporal, who shook it heartily. The corporal was so pleased at Mr. Chaplin's friendly gesture that he gripped Mr. Chaplin's hand in both his own hands. As if in recognition of Mr Chaplin's democratic spirit, a Chinese coolie led a cheer and hand-clap, in which all the wharf labourers, hawkers and money-changers joined. Mr Chaplin removed his white felt hat from his whitening hair to acknowledge the

coolies' cheer. The taxi syces also clapped their hands as Mr. Chaplin, Miss Goddard and Mrs. Goddard drove away."[34]

The party took their rooms on the top floor of the Coleman Street wing of the Adelphi Hotel, and the press made sure to mention that "Miss Goddard and her mother are occupying the same room."[35] That same night, they dined in Katong and spent the evening at the New World amusement park, which Chaplin wanted Goddard to experience, before returning to the Adelphi slightly before midnight.

The following morning, 19 March, Chaplin and Goddard toured the city by rickshaw. "Paulette was fascinated with the rickshas. As her puller carried her a few paces, she cried out excitedly to Charlie, who laughed back a reply", *The Singapore Free Press* gleefully reported on 20 March.[36] Lunch would take place at the Tiffin Room of the Raffles Hotel with Julius S. Fisher and his brother Joe, the managing director of Capitol Theatres Ltd. Both were excited to host the couple as *Modern Times* was scheduled to open at the Capitol Theatre on 12 May 1936.[37]

Interestingly, on 20 March, Chaplin was invited to visit the Singapore Reformatory by its Superintendent F. C. Johnson (whom he had met four years previously at New World). Chaplin readily obliged as he was very interested in social issues. Interacting with the homeless boys was a reminder of his own childhood fraught with poverty and hardship.

(Left) Charles Chaplin flanked by Alta Mae Goddard (left) and Paulette Goddard on their arrival in Singapore on the *Suwa Maru* on 18 March 1936. *The Singapore Free Press,* 19 March 1936, p. 1.
(Below left) Charles Chaplin and Paulette Goddard enjoying a rickshaw ride through the streets of Singapore on 19 March 1936. *Courtesy of Roy Export Company Establishment.*
(Below) Paulette Goddard having a dip at the Singapore Swimming Club on her visit here in March 1936. *Courtesy of Roy Export Company Establishment.*

Over the next few days, Chaplin and Goddard visited various places of interest in Singapore, such as the Singapore Swimming Club, the Botanic Gardens and the Seiryokan Fishing Pond. Needless to say, the local press trailed the celebrity couple wherever they went, with Goddard always impeccably turned out in the latest fashions and looking every inch the glamorous star that she was. These outings provided ample fodder for press photographers.

Although Chaplin's marriage to Goddard would last only six years, she was regarded as a fine match for him as she was "strong willed, independent [and] a lover of life". [38] Goddard acted in another of Chaplin's film – in fact his first talkie – in 1940, entitled *The Great Dictator,* and enjoyed a hugely successful film career right into the 1970s.

On 24 March, Chaplin and his party left from Seletar airport on a Qantas Airways flight[39] bound for Batavia,[40] to begin their tour of the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia). Returning from Bali via Batavia ("by Dutch plane", meaning on a KNILM flight[41]), they landed in Singapore on 7 April 1936.[42] Interviewed by a *Morning Tribune* reporter, Chaplin declared: "I have made no special plans for my stay in Singapore, and I will just take things as they come."[43]

The three-night stopover was mostly uneventful save for another lunch meeting with the Fisher brothers, this time joined by two members from Asian royal families. One was a son of the Siamese King Chulalongkorn, Prince Purachatra Jayakara (who would unfortunately pass away a few months later, in September 1936), and the other was Tunku Ismail, the Crown Prince of Johor (who would be crowned as Sultan Ismail in 1960).

On Friday 10 April, Chaplin and Goddard finally sailed from Singapore on the French liner *Aramis,* heading for Indochina before taking a slow cruise back to the US. Chaplin's fascination with Singapore was not over yet. He would return again in 1961 with his fourth (and final) wife, the actress Oona O'Neil, whom he married in 1943. But that, as they say, is another story. ♦

(Top right) Charles Chaplin's silent film *Modern Times* premiered at the Capitol Theatre on 12 May 1936, barely a month after Chaplin left Singapore. *The Morning Tribune, 21 April 1936, p. 20.*
(Right) Film still from *Modern Times*. This was the last film in which the affable Tramp, Chaplin's now universally recognised screen persona, would appear. Produced during the Great Depression years, the film depicts the struggles of work life in the era of rising industrial automation. *Courtesy of Modern Times © Roy Export S.A.S.*

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Meeting with the Sea

Melissa De Silva mulls over what it is to be Eurasian in this evocative short story that takes her back to the Portuguese Settlement in Malacca.

(Left) On the shores of the Portuguese Settlement in Malacca, where many of the Portuguese-Eurasian residents used to be fishermen. *Photo by Desmond Lui. Courtesy of Melissa De Silva.* **(Above)** The writer at about five years of age. *Courtesy of Melissa De Silva.*

I am nine.

I am in Primary Three, in social studies class at the all-girls Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus. Not all of us are Catholic (we even have some Muslims in the enrolment) and unlike my mother's day when sweet Irish nuns taught classes, none of our teachers are nuns except one who makes me think of a bespectacled cockroach. That day, the social studies lesson promises pleasant disruption because we have to move out of the classroom to the air-conditioned video lab. We also get to choose our seats, and I choose to sit with my three friends (we're the only ones in class who study Malay as a second language): Faranaz Alam, Michelle Joseph and Geraldine Minjoot.

When the chatter and movement across the room finally settles, Ms Pat Lim, a short, chunky woman with a porky sort of face, casts her eye over us.

"Those four Indian girls sitting together, split up!"

My three friends and I look at one another. Who was she talking to? Faranaz is of Pakistani descent; Geraldine is Eurasian, like me. Only Michelle is Indian.

"I said move!" she snaps.

She clearly means us. We are alarmed. Being nine, and cowed by the authority of a teacher, we break apart and manage to find random seats among the rest of the pupils. I'm not able to articulate the sense of unfairness I feel, like a hot, clenched fist. But during the rest of the lesson, and as I sit brooding on the public bus that afternoon, I can't shake my conviction – what she'd done was wrong. Why shouldn't we have been allowed to sit together? Never mind that she was ignorant only one of us was Indian. Every single one of the rest of our class was Chinese – all thirty of them – and they were sitting all together, weren't they?

I am twenty-five.

I am trying to communicate with the immigration official at the airport in Barcelona. He is speaking in Spanish, and I respond in my newly acquired broken Italian, refusing to lapse into English, because I'm ridiculously determined not to stick out as even more of a tourist. He is stony-faced when he accepts my red Singaporean passport. Then he flips it open and his eyes glide over my surname. His expression lifts.

"De Silva," he enunciates perfectly. "You are Portuguese?"

"*Il mio nonno.*" My grandfather. Now, that's not exactly true. But I don't know how to say "great-grandfather" in Italian so I can't tell him it was my great-grandfather who was from Goa and he was only part Portuguese. But none of this seems to matter.

"*Muy bueno!*" He beams genuine welcome at me and I experience a strange warm feeling I've never felt at Changi Airport returning home.

I am thirty-five.

I am in a cab on the way to the Eurasian Association at Ceylon Road. The taxi driver eyes me openly in the rear view mirror.

"Miss, you are what *ah?*"

I've moved beyond my teenage belligerence, when I would either not acknowledge they were referring to my race or retort, "Human." I don't even roll my eyes anymore, even in my head. I think I've come a long way.

"Eurasian."

"What is *loo*-rayshiun?"

"People who are mixed. Europe people and Asia people mixed together."

"Aww... like Gurmit Singh issit?" he says, referring to the Singaporean comedian.

"Er... no. Uncle, Gurmit Singh is Chinese and Indian. His surname is 'Singh', so – never mind."

I've never understood why it seems so difficult to understand. No doubt we make up less than one percent of the population, but we've been part of this country since the colonial times, as long as some and longer than others.

We spend the rest of the journey in silence, zooming past skeletons of condos rising from stamp-sized plots of land, regurgitated tarmac and clay from road works and the boarded-up Red House Bakery on East Coast Road, its shophouse face shuttered and mute. This is Singapore. Where you'd be a fool to cling to any place held dear, where the treasures of space and memory being blasted into oblivion is the only certainty in the ferocious race for development. The red-brick National Library where my mother used to take me since I was two, demolished to make way for a yawning traffic tunnel. Block 28 Lorong 6 in the Toa Payoh neighbourhood, where I lived with my grandparents till I was five, razed to the ground. Thank god the dragon playground in front of the building was spared, out of a government nod at "preservation" and "Singapore icons".

Some minutes later we approach the gates of our destination.

"Okay uncle, you can stop here please."

As the taxi rolls to a halt, the driver cranes his neck to look at the massive three-storey building in the middle of the leafy residential neighbourhood. "What is this place? Your house *ah?*"

"No, this is the Eurasian Association."

"*Har?*"

"For Eurasian people, mixed people, mix European and Asian."

Still not rolling my eyes.

"Oh, united nations *ah?*"

In December that year, I make a trip to Malacca in Malaysia. The Portuguese Settlement (formed in 1926 to help consolidate the Portuguese-Eurasian community) is a coastal hamlet of modest, mostly single-storey houses spanning three lanes on either side of the impressively named d'Albuquerque Road. As I walk along the main road, an old man with sun-creased skin turns his head as he cycles by. A wavy-tressed teenaged girl and two boys chatting across a gate pause in their conversation, watching me silently as I pass. The stranger in the village. What's even weirder is I'm overcome with a feeling of kinship with these sun-browned, curly-haired people I've never seen before.

In the 1500s, when the Portuguese arrived at the palm and mangrove-fringed coastal town of Malacca, on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula, their imperative was to gain control of the lucrative maritime trade passageway between Asia and Europe. As time went on, the union of the Portuguese with the local women resulted in the burnished-skinned children with Iberian features, and a culture that leaned heavily toward the religion, customs and language of the male colonisers. Five hundred years later, this tiny Catholic community, with a robust Latin tendency towards music, dance and enjoying the sweetness of life, still endures in the midst of the Muslim-majority country.

A month earlier in November, I was in Uncle Maurice Pereira's living room in the Portuguese Settlement. The rain was driving down against the slatted wooden shutters. His fisherman's hands, weather worn, were clasped on his lap. My father's cousin was bare-bodied, wearing only white loose cotton pyjama trousers, and

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his still-muscled torso made him look like a jujitsu master. He regarded me with eyes of blue traced around dark lenses, the onset of cataracts.

My great-grandfather had been a fisherman in Malacca, the traditional livelihood of this community descended from the seafaring Portuguese. My father had told me how, when he was a boy, he would accompany his mother – who moved to Singapore with his father after World War II to seek a better life – to Malacca during the school holidays. There, he'd learned from his grandfather how to make two foods from the fishermen's catch: *chinchalok,* the relish of shrimp fermented in salt and brandy; and *belachan,* heavily salted, fermented shrimp paste, baked into hard cakes in the sun, excellent stir fried with vegetables and a generous handful of chilli.

As I explained how I'd like to document his work by going out fishing with him, to record it for future generations, his craggy white eyebrows rose.

"You want to write something? About me?"

That Saturday morning in December, it's just past 8.30 am when I set off with Uncle Maurice and his 18-year-old grandson, Jeremy, in his open boat named *Lucy.* His cropped-close white bristles are hidden under a black cap and he's wearing a white polo tee that says "Irish Harrier Pub" on the back.

The water glitters. My notebook and camera are waterproofed in plastic and ready to go. At my feet at the bottom of the boat is a one-day-use orange lifejacket, still in its clear wrap, and the fishing nets. The planks we sit on are worn smooth, bleached by the sun. Even if I run my fingers along the edge of the boards, I don't feel any splinters.

Soon we are speeding through the waves and Maurice is pointing out spots on the shoreline where in the 1950s, they would push their boats through the mud of the mangroves at 5 am, carrying their water for the day in glass bottles ("Those days no one had a fridge").

We approach a boat with a flapping orange and yellow flag, carrying two Eurasian fishermen, a father and paunchy son, and a Malay boatman. A white buoy attached to a stick with a red flag bobbing nearby indicates where their net is.

"They are fishing for pomfret," says Maurice.

He asks them how it's going. There's no need to reply. As they draw up the net, it sparkles like fairy candyfloss, then we see they've only caught three tiny fish, each smaller than a child's palm. The son tosses a plastic bag caught in the net back into the sea.

Maurice's voice takes on a hard edge. "All the fish dying, all the construction, the reclamation."

We are soon scudding past a small island, called Pulau Jawa, just off Malacca's coast. "In the '60s, we would go camping there, to fish, eat sardines and gather seaweed to make jelly," Maurice tells me, his sea-otter face crinkled with glee.

Pulau Jawa was where the Portuguese naval general Afonso d'Albuquerque first dropped anchor on 1 July 1511, as he led a fleet of 18 ships, with 900 Portuguese men and 300 Goan-Indians, sailing in on his carrack, the *Flor de la Mar.*

Maurice Pereira (left) and his grandson Jeremy, in his fishing boat on the seas around the Portuguese Settlement in Malacca. *Photo by Desmond Lui. Courtesy of Melissa De Silva.*

EURASIANS: MORE THAN JUST HALF-HALF

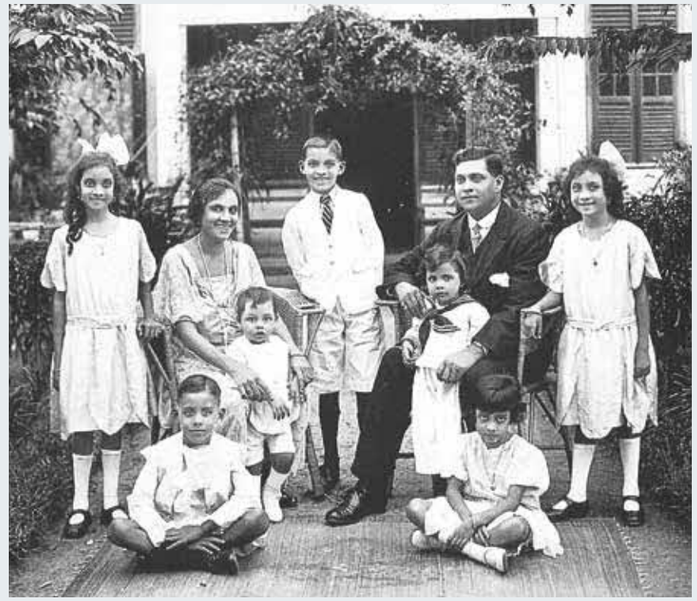
A Eurasian is someone who is of Asian and European lineage. Many people assume Eurasians are people with one Asian parent and one European or Caucasian parent. Children of such partnerships are certainly technically Eurasian, but a Eurasian isn't exclusively defined as a person with this combination of parentage. In the context of Singapore and Southeast Asia, Eurasians are long-established communities of people with mixed Asian and European ancestry and a history that dates back to the 16th century.

Many Eurasians in Singapore, as with the rest of Asia, are a product of European colonialism. The first European colonials in Asia were the Portuguese, who established themselves in Malacca, Macau, Goa and Timor in the 16th century. Other European colonisers followed, including the Dutch in Malacca, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, the Spanish in the Philippines, the French in Indochina, and the British in India, Burma, Malaya and Hong Kong.

These colonies in turn attracted European traders seeking their fortunes. Unions – both illicit as well as legal – between European men and local Asian women eventually resulted. From these unions came Eurasian offspring such as the French Eurasians of Indochina, the Mestizos in the Philippines, the Indo in Indonesia, the Macanese in Macau, the Anglo-Indian and Anglo-Burmese Eurasians in the Indian subcontinent and Burma respectively, and in Sri Lanka, the Dutch Burgher people.

Similarly, many Eurasians in Singapore trace their mixed European and Asian ancestry from many generations past. Portuguese ancestry is a common thread among many Singaporean Eurasians because the Portuguese were the first European colonisers in Asia (having arrived in India in 1498, and then subsequently extending their dominion to Malacca in 1511). Due to the Dutch presence in Asia – who made their first Asian foray into the Maluku islands in Indonesia in 1605 – many Singaporean Eurasians also claim Dutch heritage. Other Eurasians in Singapore trace various European lineages, including German, French and British.

Over time, these diverse Eurasians came together to form their own distinctive community. Their common experience of having both European and Asian ancestry, their unique position of straddling two cultures while ostensibly belonging to neither, was an important factor in prompting them to band together as a cohesive group, one that was neither Asian nor European. In 1883, a group of like-minded Eurasians formed the Singapore Recreation Club exclusively for Eurasians. This was a reaction to the barring of Eurasians and Asians from the European-only Singapore Cricket Club that was formed in 1852.



(Above) Eurasian cuisine is a blend of Indian, Malay, Chinese and European culinary traditions. Devil curry – also spelt as "debal" which means "leftovers" in Kristang – is usually cooked for special occasions and best eaten with a side of crusty bread. *All rights reserved, Gomes, M. (2001). The Eurasian Cookbook (p. 68). Singapore: Horizon Books.*
(Right) William Jansen, a Eurasian, and his family in this photograph taken at the Kampong Java government quarters in 1923. *All rights reserved, Blake, M. L., & Ebert-Oehlers, A. (Eds.). (1992). Singapore Eurasians: Memories and Hopes (p. 64). Singapore: Eurasian Association, Singapore, and Times Editions.*

Historically in Singapore, Eurasians married other Eurasians, contributing to the further mingling of European and Asian lines of heritage within the small, tight-knit community. The typical social circle of a Eurasian during the British colonial times and in the early years after Singapore's independence included other Eurasians. They were neighbours or family acquaintances; they attended the same church (St Joseph's Church on Victoria Street for many Eurasian Catholics) and went to the same Christian mission schools, especially those established by the La Salle Brothers and the Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus. Their active social life included tea dances and New Year's Eve balls, and games such as rugby, hockey and cricket.

The Eurasians were united by their common Christian faith, their fluency in English and their cultural habits, which included both Asian and European influences. Eurasian cuisine for instance draws inspiration from Indian, Malay, Chinese and European culinary traditions and offers unique dishes such as devil curry – also spelt as "debal", meaning "leftovers" in Kristang, a creole language that is traced to the Eurasian community in Portuguese Malacca – beef vindaloo, oxtail stew, salt fish pickle and desserts like sugee cake and brueder cake.

Throughout Singapore's history, the number of Eurasians has remained low. In the 19th century, the Eurasian population never exceeded more than 2.5 percent of the population. In 1871 for instance, at 2.2 percent of the population, Eurasians numbered 2,164 people. In 1891, they numbered 3,589 people at 2 percent of the population. The Eurasian population shrank further between 1965 and 1980, when many of them emigrated to other Commonwealth countries such as Australia, the UK and Canada for various reasons. A *Straits Times* report from 22 February 2006 put the number of émigré Eurasians during this period at around 25,000. According to the 2010 census, Eurasians comprised just 0.4 percent of the population; only 15,581 people classified themselves as Eurasian in an island with over 5 million people.

Another factor which contributes to the obscurity of this ethnic group is that unlike the Indians, Malays and Chinese, who have their own category under Singapore's multicultural policy (known as CMIO, which stands for "Chinese, Malays, Indians and Others"), Eurasians are classified under the category "Others". In past decades, this category used to refer predominantly to the Eurasians. In recent times, however, the "Others" category has expanded to include new citizens who do not fit into the categories of Indian, Malay or Chinese, such as Filipinos, Caucasians, Africans and Japanese.

Eurasians now find themselves in the same group as citizens who are not perceived as Singaporean from birth, a cause of much frustration and discontent as fellow Singaporeans question if they are indeed Singaporean. In addition, many Eurasians have married out of their race, resulting in a new generation of children who may or may not identify with the Eurasian heritage and culture. These factors in recent years have bred further complex issues of identity for the Eurasian community in Singapore, a people who have had a fractured cultural identity since their inception in colonial times.

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Uncle Maurice points to undulations of pale grey mounds in the distance on the water. His forearms are compact and sleek with muscle, lined with protruding veins. "See what happened," his eyes rest on the coastline of developments, "to our sea".

Sand barges lie like alien spacecraft beside them and the air is filled with metallic hissing sounds. These piles of sand are the nascent artificial islands of Melaka Gateway, a project with ambitions to be the largest cluster of synthetic islands in Southeast Asia. The plan for the 246-hectare area is to hold entertainment resorts, theme parks and "man-made eco-islands".

"We fishermen don't cry *ah? Habis, habis lah,*" he says in Malay. When it's gone, it's gone.

As I look, I think of my great-grandfather, the fisherman, and imagine the times he'd shared with my own father, passing on traditions that had survived for over five centuries. And now, just three generations later, the thread of all this knowledge and richness would be snapped. My retired father had been trained as a mechanic. As for myself, former women's magazine journalist and urban princess, I'm hardly the material of a maritime professional.

A half hour later, we are having engine trouble. Maurice fiddles with the outboard motor but it doesn't revive. Smiley Jeremy, with blindingly white, straight teeth and an undercut with attitude, picks up the oar and rows. Without the low roar of the engine, the peace is velvet. The only sounds are the lapping of the sea against the boat and the swish of waves against the sun-bleached wood of the oar.

As we make our way slowly back to shore, Jeremy tells me he works for a local film production house called Marco Polo and has just completed a job working on a film set in Mongolia, filmed in a studio in Johor Bahru. His job was to look after the animals on the set. There were three pigs, two goats, a puppy and a lamb. When two of the pigs got into a scuffle, a piece of one pig's ear flew off. Jeremy saved it.

"It's brown now," he says, sounding like a proud father. "Soon I think it will be black."

"Does it smell?" I ask.

He nods, dazzling me with a smile. "Yes."

Finally, we make it to a ramshackle dock and Maurice trades boats with another fisherman. On the second leg of the trip, as we pass mangroves near Kampung Batang Pasir, the trees closer to the water's edge toppled like fallen soldiers, Maurice tells me the mangroves used to be alive with wild boars, monkeys and birds. This is

where the fishermen would catch *siput,* sea snails, then cook them with slices of unripe papaya, small prawns and *santan,* coconut milk.

Here, the ocean is a translucent mud tint, like watery tea stirred with milk, with a greenish-blue rim along the horizon. Flakes of sun dance on the water and I'm gripped by the urge to swim, to glide through the cool. I lean over the boat's edge and trail my fingers through the waves, letting the water release in a delicious crest.

"We're coming to the place for fishing," announces Maurice some time later, when the mangroves have become specks in the distance. I rummage in my bag and unwrap my camera from its plastic covering.

"Boy, where are the nets?" he asks Jeremy.

Jeremy stares at the floor of the boat as if encountering virgin terrain. He has the look of a boy who has misplaced the nets. There are the lifejacket, rope and a plastic container with money, sunglasses, a penknife and Maurice's mobile phone in it. They'd forgotten to load the nets when we swapped boats.

"If we go back one hour to get the net and come back, it will be too late for fishing already," Maurice explains.

My heart flops. There was only today. Tomorrow he'd be off to the hospital to have his cataracts removed, and he didn't know if or when he'd be fishing again.

I manage to nod. Maurice has been kind, hospitable and his company an absolute delight. I don't want him to feel badly. "Never mind Uncle. It's okay. I got to see the sea. We can go back."

He cuts the engine. "No hurry. We drift for a while. We relax."

It was a clear distinction of values: manic urban efficiency versus sea village chill. I feel slightly chastened, not by him but by my own embryonic Latin spirit. "C'mon," it prods me. "Can't you even relax a little and enjoy being out at sea?"

I don't yet know what my Latin spirit looks like. I picture it maybe doing the flamenco, holding maracas, even though this is a culturally muddy, geographically inaccurate rendition. Is it a woman? Well, it looks olive-skinned, and seems to be wearing a red dress. But this just might be the subconscious influence of the Whatsapp emoticon of a woman in a red dress holding maracas I sometimes use.

Maurice points out a boat with a roof. He tells me how before, when they did night fishing, they would sleep in a boat like that. "No mosquitoes!" He slaps his knee as if in triumph. "If you get hungry, cook Maggie Mee, drink coffee. So nice!" His eyes shine. The man has a lifetime of happiness bottled inside him, I think, enough to last the rest of his time on earth.

As my mind flashes to my previous career of chronically overstressed cubicle rat and the illness that it finally produced, perhaps it's naïve romanticising, but I feel a deep tug of yearning for this hard yet idyllic life, and an ache for everything that's passed and will be lost forever.

Later, as the boat chugs slowly back to shore, I think about how I'd travelled all the way here to document one of the last Portuguese-Eurasian fishermen in Malacca, and our traditional livelihood. It seems almost funny it didn't happen. Almost. Maurice stirs me from my reverie with a gesture. He jerks his chin toward Jeremy, sitting at the bow. The massive construction for a hotel by the settlement's jetty forms a backdrop for his grandson's figure.

Maurice's tone is a wash of sadness over weary anger. "Jeremy cannot be in this line already," he says, meaning fishing. "The sea is dead."

His last words are muffled as the dull drone of a generator fills the air.

The next morning, on Sunday, I walk to the settlement's Chapel of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception for Mass at 7.30 am. The place is not jam-packed like I expected but about 75 percent full. After I'm seated, I see the pew I've chosen has no kneeler. The polished ceramic tile floor looks practically spotless, far cleaner than the church floors in Singapore, where you can often spot stray hairs or dust bunnies. I decide to stay. Five minutes later though, the sun inching across the grid rectangle of window facing the pew is blinding.

I move to the adjacent pew. A dusky man with steel-rimmed spectacles is seated at the end, his head bent. I tap him on the shoulder and he makes way for me. Two minutes before the Mass starts, a short man with honeyed highlights smiles his way into our pew and takes a seat on my right. In Singapore, I can go weeks without seeing any other Eurasian except my own family. Here, I'm sandwiched between two Eurasian men, neither of whom are my relatives. This unprecedented scenario practically qualifies as being on a reality dating show.

During the Mass, the children are not heard, unlike the constant fidgeting, murmuring and some outright conversations between parents and their kids during services in Singapore. At one point, while we are standing, the boy of about six in the pew in front of me wiggles from his grandmother's grasp and scampers to sit and hug her from behind, burying his head in the small of her back. She takes his wrist and guides him gently to stand beside her. At no point during the Mass did I see anyone look at their mobile phones. This I like. This I like very much.

At intervals during the service, my eyes drift to the window. The early morning light bathes the brick wall beyond in a gold glaze and casts the wrought iron lamp outside into silhouette. The lamp looks like those I've seen in photos of Lisbon's streets. I've always wanted to visit Portugal, to see the place of my ancient ancestors, but now, perhaps there's no need. I realise why I feel so strangely comfortable in Malacca. I've found a place I can claim as my own.

After Mass I take a two-minute walk down to the beach. The sun is watery on the blue and open boats with peeling paint bob against the charcoal rocks. In the distance is a *kelong* structure, picturesque, made of long sticks. Three mudskippers the length of my index finger hop among the ropes mooring the boats.

As I move closer to the jetty, the air is filled with the metallic whine of drills and the clang of machinery. Relentless construction, even on a Sunday. Instead of the unfettered expanse of ocean, now the view from the settlement is blighted by the concrete monstrosity of the upcoming hotel a few hundred metres away, grasping for the sky. In the sea beyond are islands of powdery grey sand. In an alternate universe, they could be beautiful, like the humpbacked mounds of Vietnam's Halong Bay, if you ignore the fact that these are the offshoots of reclamation.

I remember how it felt to be out in the boat yesterday, the lapping of the waves, the caress of the breeze, the sear of heat on skin. When I started out for Malacca just two days ago to document a vital piece of my heritage, I didn't imagine I'd be setting off on a journey to the place where I'd finally feel like I belong. Yet this place too, is having its identity eroded by the relentless claw of development. Is it selfish of me that my joy still outweighs my sadness? What I do know is that this is the only patch in the world where I don't have to explain who I am, or why. There is such relief at being able to walk among people like me, unexplained and understood. The feeling is euphoric.

Tok, tok, tok. The sound of hammering infuses the morning. The sun's soft light filters through the green netting shrouding the concrete structure, as the yellow hard hats scurry about their business. I turn my back to it all and start making my way down the beach, the noise of industry growing fainter with each step. ♦

(Top) Religious festivals are part of life in the predominantly Catholic Eurasian community of Malacca's Portuguese Settlement. Pictured here is the celebration of Festa San Pedro or Saint Peter's Festival. Saint Peter is the patron saint of fishermen. Some men of the community carry a statue of the saint to the shore to bless the fishing boats. *Photo by Desmond Lui. Courtesy of Melissa De Silva.*
(Above) The faithful gather for Mass at the Chapel of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in the Portuguese Settlement. *Photo by Desmond Lui. Courtesy of Melissa De Silva.*

"Meeting with the Sea" appears in Melissa De Silva's debut collection of short stories, *Others is not a Race,* to be published by Math Paper Press in 2017.

LAND FROM SAND

SINGAPORE'S RECLAMATION STORY

Thanks to land reclamation, the tiny red dot has broadened its shores substantially. **Lim Tin Seng** discovers just how much Singapore has grown since colonial times.

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(Facing page) Aerial photograph of ongoing reclamation work in Tuas. *Photo by Richard W. J. Koh. All rights reserved, Koh, T. (2015). Over Singapore (pp. 108–109). Singapore: Editions Didier Millet.*
(Below) This lithograph (c. 1850) by Lieutenant Edwin Augustus Porcher from the British Royal Navy shows the view as seen from South Boat Quay, where Singapore's first reclamation took place in 1822. *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*
(Bottom) Named after George Chancellor Collyer, then Chief Engineer of the Straits Settlements, Collyer Quay was built on reclaimed land by convict labour and completed in 1864. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Over the past two centuries, Singapore's land area has expanded by a whopping 25 percent – from 58,150 to 71,910 hectares (or 578 to 719 sq km).[1] This gradual increase in land surface is not because of tectonic movements or divine intervention, but rather the miracle of a man-made engineering feat known as land reclamation.

The quest for land is as old as time immemorial; one of the reasons nations go to war is to gain new territory to support a growing population. Land-scarce Singapore, however, has elected to create new land by reclaiming it from the rivers and the seas.

Boat Quay: The First Reclamation Project

Many people think of land reclamation in Singapore as a fairly recent phenomenon, but in actual fact the earliest reclamation project took place in colonial times. When Stamford Raffles landed at the mouth of the Singapore River in January 1819, the lay of the land was vastly different from what we see today. The river was flanked by mangrove swamps and mosquito-infested jungle, and what is now Telok Ayer Street and Beach Road were coastal areas that hugged the sea.

It did not take long for the British to get down to business. Singapore was officially claimed by Raffles as a colony, and just four years later, the island witnessed the first of its many topographic transformations.

The first land reclamation project in Singapore took place in 1822 at the south bank of the Singapore River. Initially, Raffles had eyed the Esplanade-Rochor River beach front, north of Singapore River, as the commercial district. But as the area was unsuitable for shipping activities due to shallow waters and the surf, Raffles altered his town plan accordingly.[2]

As the south bank occupied a low-lying marsh that was prone to flooding, a hillock near where Battery Road is located today was levelled to provide earth to fill the wetlands. About 300 coolies were hired to carry out the work and an embankment was built along the river's edge to prevent the water from overflowing into the land. The process took about four months and gave rise to a crescent-shaped area known today as Boat Quay. This, together with what was left of the hillock, became Commercial Square – and eventually, Raffles Place – the heart of the commercial district as mapped out in Raffles' 1822 town plan of Singapore.[3]

Collyer Quay: Creating the Waterfront

Boat Quay and Commercial Square grew rapidly. By the late 1860s, the mercantile community had outgrown the site, spilling over to another reclaimed strip of land to the south. Known as Collyer Quay, this stretch – from Johnston's Pier to the old Telok Ayer Market – was reclaimed between 1859 and 1864.[4] This was part of a scheme conceived by the Municipal Engineer, George Chancellor Collyer.

Collyer wanted to build a seawall to serve as a landing site and a road behind it so that merchants could have their establishments facing the waterfront. This would not only improve the "aspect of Singapore's waterfront", but also allow the merchants to keep an eye on the movement of ships carrying their goods. Indeed, some of the first buildings constructed along Collyer Quay were linked at the second storey by a verandah that faced the sea. Peons armed with telescopes would be stationed along the verandah to announce the arrival of their company ships.[5]

As work on the foundation of the seawall could be carried out only when the tide was at its lowest ebb, an occurrence that took place once every fortnight, the

reclamation proceeded at a glacial pace. It took three years for the seawall to be completed and another year to lay the road behind it.[6]

First Reclamation at Telok Ayer: Redrawing the Coastline

In the late 1800s, Collyer Quay was further expanded when the Telok Ayer Reclamation Scheme was commissioned. Carried out between 1879 and 1897, it altered the shoreline of Telok Ayer by extending it seaward with a 42-acre tract.[7] The aim was to create new land so that thoroughfares, including Cecil Street, Robinson Road and Raffles Quay, could be built to link the commercial district and the new port at Tanjong Pagar via Telok Ayer.[8] Previously, these two areas were cut off by the hills of Mount Wallich, Mount Palmer and Mount Erskine, making the movement of goods between the port and town cumbersome.[9]

This reclamation project was a complex one as the Public Works Department (PWD) had to blast out parts of Mount Wallich and Mount Palmer in order to create an opening into Tanjong Pagar. The earth from the excavations was then used as landfill to create Telok Ayer Bay. The work was tedious as the hills were rocky and the sides had to be cut and graded. In addition, the shoreline had to be drained while keeping a section of it accessible so that fishermen could continue their trade. By 1886, the stretch extending into Cecil Street was completed, allowing the colonial government to start leasing the reclaimed land to merchants.[10]

Second Reclamation at Telok Ayer: An Unexpected Tidal Basin

As merchants moved into the reclaimed lands of Telok Ayer, commercial activities began to expand westward. This led to the development of Tanjong Pagar and the growing importance of New Harbour (renamed Keppel Harbour in 1900) as the main port-of-call in Singapore.[11] However, many traders, especially those using smaller vessels such as prows and junks, still preferred to anchor near the Singapore River as it was closer to Commercial Square.

Between 1893 and 1903, the arrival of such vessels mushroomed from 7,062 to 10,974, causing the Singapore River to become congested and polluted. In October 1898, a Commission was appointed to address this problem. The report, issued in June 1899, recommended that a new harbour be built along Raffles Quay, precipitating the second reclamation project at Telok Ayer.[12]

An aerial view of the Central Business District in the 1950s with the octagonal-shaped Telok Ayer Market (Lau Pa Sat) on the left and Clifford Pier jutting out into the sea on the right. In the foreground is Telok Ayer Basin where small vessels once anchored. The tidal basin was eventually reclaimed in the 1970s.

The plan for the new harbour, unveiled in 1902 and revised in 1904, was drafted by the engineering firm Coode, Son & Matthews, and entailed reclaiming an 88-acre tract with a 5,000-ft long seawall that stretched from Johnston's Pier to Tanjong Malang where Palmer Road stands today. The initial plans were more ambitious but, in the end, the authorities decided to scale back their plans due to budgetary constraints.[13]

Work began smoothly at first but in 1910, problems began to surface when dredging operations commenced. When engineers discovered that the seawall was sinking, work was suspended. At the time, 65 out of the 88 acres of land had been reclaimed and 4,120 feet of the seawall erected. However, as the construction of the seawall had been carried out simultaneously on both ends, the engineers were left with an incomplete seawall and a gaping 880-ft space in between.[14]

To salvage the project, engineers reinforced the foundations of the seawall and allowed it to settle for the next 10 years. Thereafter, the unclaimed area would be converted into a tidal basin for anchoring small vessels with the gap in the seawall serving as an entrance.[15] Construction resumed in 1930 and was completed in 1932.[16] By then, the cost of the project had ballooned from 2.5 to 15 million Straits dollars.[17]

Kallang Basin and Beach Road

The hefty cost of the Telok Ayer Tidal Basin project did not stop the colonial government from commissioning more reclamations. In August 1931, it unveiled a massive reclamation project at Kallang Basin for the construction of Kallang Airport. Costing 9 million Straits dollars, it involved the reclamation of 339 acres of mangrove swamp dubbed "the worst mosquito-infested land on the island". Due to the complexity and cost, the PWD was asked to lead the project. And perhaps to prevent the repetition of the Telok Ayer Basin fiasco, the PWD first carried out extensive soil surveys. It also allowed large areas of the basin to dry out completely first before filling it.[18]

The filling operation started in May 1932 using a workforce of over 400 coolies. When completed in October 1936, the construction of the airport had already started.[19] Comprising a terminal building, two hangars, a circular landing field and a slipway for seaplanes, it occupied almost three quarters of the 339 acres of reclaimed land. The remaining land was set aside for the airport's future expansion. Kallang Airport was declared opened in June 1937 by Governor Shenton Thomas, who declared it the "finest airport in the world". PWD Director Major R. L. Nunn said that it was an "audacious engineering achievement".[20]

Even as Kallang Basin was being reclaimed, the authorities had embarked on another project in June 1932. This would add 47 acres to the Beach Road Reclamation site to create a foreshore that would stretch from Stamford Road to Rochor River. The site, also known as Raffles Reclamation Ground, was created by two earlier reclamations that took place in the 1840s and 1890s. The reclaimed land was used to build Alhambra and Marlborough cinemas, Beach Road police station, and the Singapore Volunteer Corps Headquarters and Drill Hall (the former Beach Road Camp). The open land also regularly hosted football matches and circus shows.[21]

This latest reclamation plan would turn the Beach Road shoreline into a "new waterfront", with a bridge built over Stamford Canal to provide a "waterfront drive" from Anderson Bridge to Kallang. To complement this vision, a 6-acre reclamation project was commissioned in 1939 to enlarge the Esplanade along Connaught Drive to create a 600-yard tract linking Anderson Bridge to Stamford Canal.

The Beach Road and Esplanade reclamations were completed at a cost of about 1.2 million Straits dollars. However, the waterfront vision did not materialise until after World War II when Merdeka Bridge (now Nicoll Highway) was built and the Esplanade reclamation site was turned into a park known as Queen Elizabeth Walk (now Esplanade Park).[22]

The Kallang Basin and Beach Road reclamations would be the last major land reclamation projects in colonial Singapore. It would take another 30 years before any more new land would be reclaimed from the sea. In total, about 300 hectares (3 sq km) were added during the colonial period. While this is not a figure to be sniffed at given the technology available at the time, it would be dwarfed by the island's post-Independence reclamation activities. Between 1965 and 2015, Singapore would reclaim an astounding 13,800 hectares (138 sq km) of land.[23]

East Coast: The Great Reclamation

The first major post-Independence reclamation project was the East Coast Reclamation. Dubbed the "Great Reclamation", it added a 1,525-hectare tract along the southeastern coast of the island.[24] The project was undertaken by the Housing and Development Board (HDB), one of three government agencies appointed to carry out land reclamation in Singapore. But first, before any work began, a pilot project was carried out by the HDB in 1963 to reclaim 48 acres in the Bedok area.

Work on the East Coast Reclamation site began officially in 1966 and would continue for a remarkable 30 years over seven phases.[25] Phases I and II from Bedok to the tip of Tanjong Rhu took place between 1966 and 1971, resulting in 458 hectares of land as well as a 9-km stretch of sandy beach.

Phases III and IV began simultaneously in 1971 at both ends of the newly reclaimed East Coast strip. When work was completed in 1975, Phase III had added 67 hectares of land to the foreshore fronting Tanjong Rhu and Queen Elizabeth Walk, while Phase IV added 486 hectares from Bedok to Tanah Merah Besar.

Phase V involved the reclamation of Telok Ayer Basin. Starting in 1974, it extended the already reclaimed foreshore by 34 hectares and expanded the basin.

LAND RECLAMATION: HOW DOES IT WORK?

The proposed site for reclamation is first investigated to determine seabed conditions, availability of fill materials as well as the shape and alignment of the reclaimed area. Environmental studies are then carried out to assess the impact on water quality, water level, tidal flow, sedimentation and marine life.

Work proper begins with the erection of containment dykes made of sand and rock around the perimeter of the area to be reclaimed. Materials such as cut-hill soil, sand and clay are then transported from other sites to fill the enclosed area. The newly reclaimed land must be allowed to settle naturally over time before any structures can be built. In most cases, however, the process is speeded up with soil improvement methods.[26]

Since the first reclamation project carried out in 1822, fill materials have traditionally comprised soil excavated from inland hills and sand dredged from surrounding seabeds. By the mid-1980s, however, these resources began to run out and Singapore had to import sand from neighbouring countries. This soon became a problem when the cost of foreign sand skyrocketed from less than $20 per sq m in the 1970s to $200 per sq m in the 90s. The situation hit crisis levels when Malaysia and Indonesia banned the export of sand to Singapore in 1997 and 2007 respectively.

Although Singapore had to turn to other countries for sand, it recently developed a more sustainable method that has reduced the amount of sand needed for reclamation works. Called empoldering, it has since been successfully deployed by the HDB for the on-going reclamation of Pulau Tekong.[27]

Reclamation work taking place at Pasir Panjang. With rising costs and restrictions on sand exports placed by neighbouring countries, Singapore has turned to technology to try reduce the amount of sand needed for reclamation work. *Photo by Ria Tan. Courtesy of WildSingapore.*

(Right) The East Coast district of Singapore with Katong in the foreground. Marine Parade stretches from the flyover to the lagoon near Bedok Jetty. The strip parallel to Marine Parade Road with the highrises is land that has been reclaimed from the sea. *Photo by Richard W. J. Koh. All rights reserved, Koh, T. (2015). Over Singapore (pp. 140–141). Singapore: Editions Didier Millet.*

(Below) The East Coast Reclamation, which began in 1966, was carried out over seven phases spanning-some 30 years. The project culminated in the creation of Marina Bay in the mid-2000s. In the background of this photograph taken in 1976 are the beginnings of the Marina Bay reclamation site taking shape, with the east coast in the far distance. *© Urban Redevelopment Authority. All rights reserved.*

On completion of this phase in 1977, the reclamation formed a new site known as Marina Centre and a massive lagoon. This was followed by another two phases in 1979 – Phases VI and VII – which extended the newly reclaimed foreshores of Tanjong Rhu and Telok Ayer Basin to create Marina East and Marina South respectively. Together with Marina Centre, these plots formed a 660-hectare reclaimed site called Marina City and later Marina Bay.[28]

The total cost of the East Coast project was $613 million. Fill materials were obtained from multiple sources, including Siglap Plain and the hills in Bedok and Tampines,[29] where the earth was cut by bucket wheel excavators before being transported by a conveyor belt to a jetty off Bedok. There, the earth was loaded onto barges and transported to fill the area to be reclaimed. The entire operation was carried out around the clock, with headlands constructed at regular intervals off the reclaimed coast to protect the newly formed shoreline.[30]

The reclaimed lands were used largely for commercial and residential purposes. In the east coast, housing estates such as Marine Parade and Katong sprang up, providing accommodation for an estimated 100,000 residents.[31] To link the housing estates as well as the commercial centres in Siglap, Joo Chiat and Bedok to the city, a major arterial road, the East Coast Parkway, was constructed along the newly reclaimed coast. Parallel to the expressway, a linear park was built to provide recreational space for residents. Today, East Coast Park comprises 185 hectares of parkland and a scenic 15-km beach.[32]

The other end of the reclaimed land around Marina Bay was to provide space in time to come for the expansion of the city centre. Amazingly, the idea of this new downtown core was conceived several decades before the first soaring skyscrapers arose here in the 21st century. Today, the Marina Bay area has become the new downtown with a stunning waterfront setting and a mix of office and commercial developments, a mega hotel and casino resort, high-rise luxury apartments, and gardens and parkland.[33]

To make this a reality, further reclamation was carried out around the bay between 1990 and 1992 to create an urban waterfront promenade. This 38-hectare project involved filling up Telok Ayer Basin as well as extending Collyer Quay and the shoreline of Marina South facing Marina Bay.[34]

Other Reclamation Projects by HDB

While the east coast was being reclaimed, the HDB simultaneously carried out reclamation projects elsewhere on the island. In 1963, the reclamation of Kallang Basin began, with some 400 hectares of its swampland filled using earth taken from Toa Payoh. Completed in 1971, the site was used for public housing and industrial development.[35]

Next, the HDB reclaimed a stretch along Singapore's west coast between 1976 and 1978 to create 89 hectares of land for the development of Clementi New Town. Along with it, the West Coast Highway was constructed to link Jurong with the eastern part of the island. The fill materials for this project were excavated from Clementi.[36]

This was followed by several other reclamation projects: the addition of 44 hectares of land along the coast of Pasir Ris between 1979 and 1980, 277 hectares of swampland off Punggol between 1983 and 1986 as well as the reclamation of 685 hectares of foreshore and swampland along the northeast coast from Pasir Ris to Seletar between 1985 and 2001.[37]

The latter included the reclamation of 155 hectares from the foreshore of Coney Island and Punggol. Fill materials for these projects were either imported or obtained from sites in Woodlands, Tampines, Pasir Ris, Yishun, Seletar and Zhenghua.[38] Much of the new land was reserved for public housing and recreational purposes.

Additionally, the HDB embarked on reclamation projects for other government agencies. For instance, between 1990 and 1995, it reclaimed about 30 hectares of land in the north and northwest for the Ministry of Home Affairs to expand the Woodlands Checkpoint and construct the new Tuas Checkpoint respectively. The HDB also carried out reclamation works for the Singapore Tourism Board and Ministry of National Development on Pulau Ubin and the Southern Islands.[39]

Between 1965 and 2015, the HDB reclaimed 3,869 hectares of land – roughly one third of the total reclaimed land on the island. The rest were overseen by two other government agencies, the Jurong Town Corporation (JTC) and the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore.[40]

New Lands for Industries: JTC

The reclamation projects undertaken by JTC in the west of the island were mainly for industries. The earliest project took place in 1963 to reclaim 46 hectares of land for the Jurong Industrial Site. This was followed by a string of reclamations in the 1970s that added over 2,000 hectares in Jurong and Tuas. These lands were used for the expansion of the industrial estate as well as for the construction of shipyards to support the marine sector. In the late 80s, the Tuas site was further extended by 650 hectares, and a golf course and a park subsequently added to inject some greenery to an otherwise industrial area.[41]

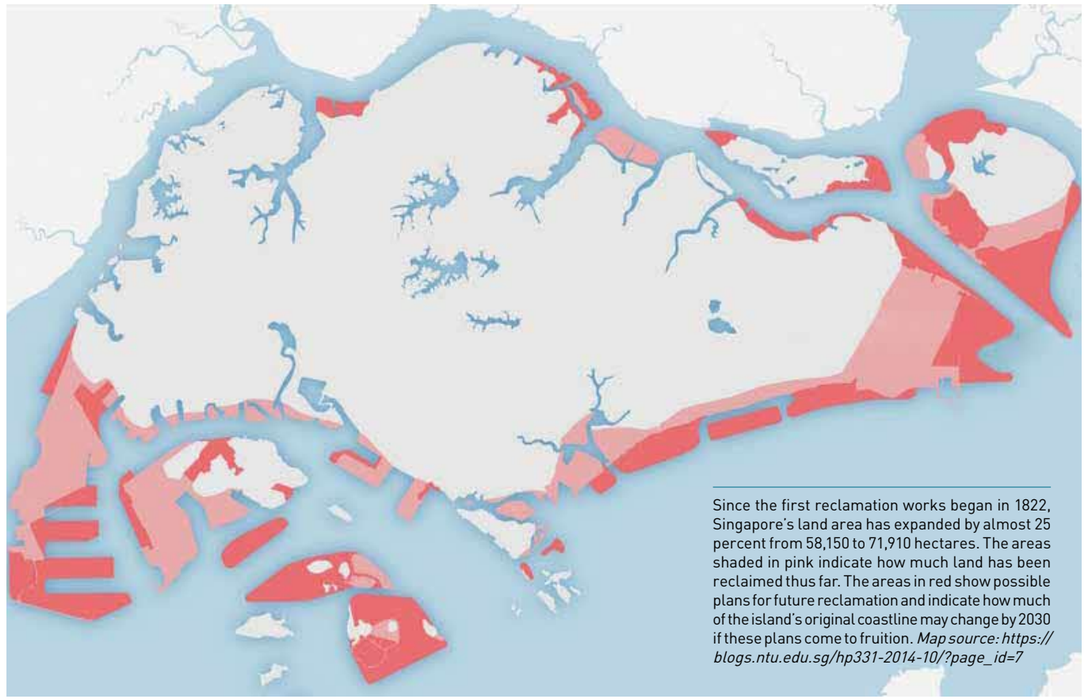
JTC's reclamation works also extended to the islands off the southwestern coast. From the late 1980s, Pulau Bukom and Pulau Busing were enlarged, while Pulau Ayer Merbau, Pulau Seraya and Pulau Sakra were merged with the surrounding islets to provide new land. Most of these reclaimed islands were used for the petrochemical industry.[42]

As the industry grew, JTC embarked on a reclamation scheme of mega proportions in 1993, merging seven southwestern islands – Pulau Merlimau, Pulau Ayer Chawan, Pulau Ayer Merbau, Pulau Seraya, Pulau Sakra, Pulau Pesek and Pulau Pesek Kecil – into a single entity called Jurong Island. The massive project was carried out in four stages at a cost of $6 billion. When completed in 2003, Jurong Island gave Singapore a substantial 3,000 hectares of new industrial space. Today, Jurong Island is home to more than 100 petroleum, petrochemical and speciality chemical companies.[43]

New Lands for Infrastructure and Recreation: MPA

The Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA) – formerly Port of Singapore Authority or PSA – reclaimed land primarily to develop the Port of Singapore and Changi Airport. Its earliest project took place in 1967 when 23 hectares of land were reclaimed to build Singapore's first container terminal at Keppel Harbour. The Tanjong Pagar Container Terminal opened in 1971 with three container berths.[44]

Between 1972 and 1979, some 61 acres of foreshore along Pasir Panjang were reclaimed by the PSA. This was part of a larger effort to move lighter



Since the first reclamation works began in 1822, Singapore's land area has expanded by almost 25 percent from 58,150 to 71,910 hectares. The areas shaded in pink indicate how much land has been reclaimed thus far. The areas in red show possible plans for future reclamation and indicate how much of the island's original coastline may change by 2030 if these plans come to fruition. *Map source: https://blogs.ntu.edu.sg/hp331-2014-10/?page_id=7*

cargo operations from Telok Ayer Basin, Rochor River and Kallang River to a new wharf with warehousing and berthing facilities for lighters and coastal vessels.[45] A decade later, PSA announced additional reclamation works at Pasir Panjang to construct a new container terminal. The first two phases were carried out from 1993 to 1999.[46] In June 2015, reclamation works under the final two phases were launched and are slated for completion by the end of 2017.[47]

PSA's reclamation works for Changi Airport began in 1975 when it supervised the reclamation of 745 hectares of land along Changi coast for the construction of the airport.[48] The adjoining seabed provided the fill material. In 1990, another massive reclamation was carried out for the expansion of Changi Airport as well as for mixed-use developments in the area.

The plans were updated in 1998 – by which time PSA had been renamed MPA – to reclaim over 2,000 hectares of land at Changi East. About 820 hectares were allocated for the development of a fourth terminal and a third runway, while 125 hectares and 639 hectares were reserved for the Changi Naval Base and industries respectively.[49] The reclamation was carried over five phases from 1992 to 2004.

Like HDB, the MPA has been helping other government agencies to reclaim islands around Singapore. Using dredged materials from ongoing reclamation projects, which would otherwise be dumped into the sea, public beaches and recreational waterfronts were created at the foreshore of the Southern Islands. On St John's Island, Lazarus Island, Sisters' Island and Kusu Island, facilities such as landing jetties, chalets, beach shelters and sanitary facilities were built on the reclaimed land.[50] Over in Sentosa, reclaimed land has been used to build hotels and a golf course, and to create new beaches.

MPA also undertook the first reclamation of Pulau Tekong (formerly known as Pulau Tekong Besar). Carried out between 1981 and 1985, it reclaimed 540 hectares of foreshore using fill materials from Changi and imported from neighbouring countries.[51] The enlarged island was subsequently used by the Ministry of Defence as a training site for the military.[52] In 2000, another reclamation effort to enlarge Pulau Tekong by a further 3,310 hectares was approved. Overseen by the HDB, it involved merging the smaller Pulau Tekong Kechil island with Pulau Tekong.[53]

The Future

It is certain that land-scarce Singapore will press ahead with reclamation to meet the demands of its growing population in the foreseeable future. In the 2013 Land Use Plan, the Ministry of National Development has noted that there is a need to provide an additional 5,600 hectares of land by 2030. This is to accommodate the expected increase in population, rising from the present 5.7 million to between 6.5 and 6.9 million.

But there are limits to land reclamation – the rising cost of imported sand, the deleterious impact on the ecosystem and the encroachment of shipping lanes and territorial limits, among others. As an aggressive land reclamation programme is not tenable in the long term, Singapore is looking at other ways of maximising its land space; this includes the development of reserve land, intensifying land usage in new developments, and reusing and rezoning old industrial areas and golf courses for more productive purposes.[54] ♦

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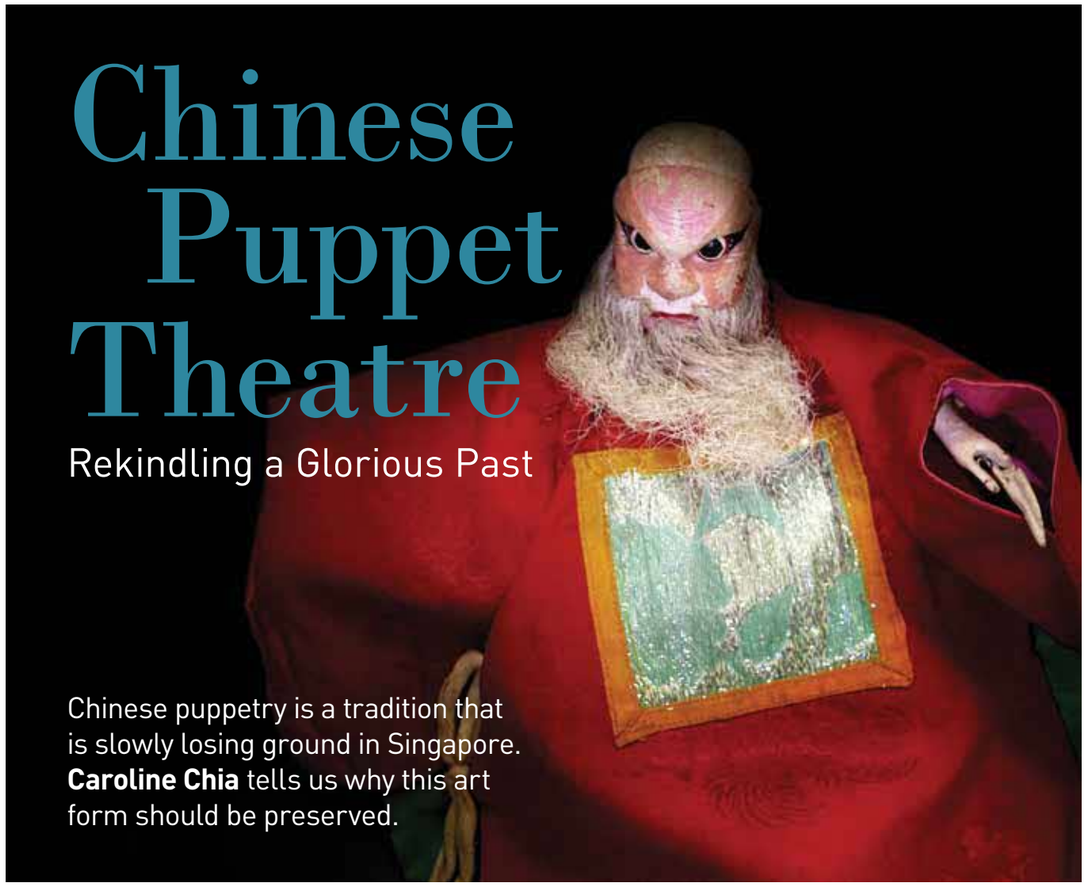
Chinese Puppet Theatre

Rekindling a Glorious Past



Chinese puppetry is a tradition that is slowly losing ground in Singapore. **Caroline Chia** tells us why this art form should be preserved.

Tossing a puppet into the air to perform a somersault, the puppeteer sings at the top of his melodious voice, accompanied by the high-pitched clapping of cymbals and the resounding striking of drums backstage. Unfortunately, the response to this unusual street-side performance at a temple in the heartlands of Singapore is met with either furrowed eyebrows or blank looks, or young people hurrying past an unwelcome obstruction, their eyes averted or glued to their mobile phones. Such a scene would have been unthinkable half a century ago when Chinese puppet theatre in Singapore was a popular form of street entertainment for children and the working class.

The Search Begins

I have always been interested in the forgotten and unknown, and thus my exploration of Chinese puppetry in Singapore began in 2007 – the same year I first encountered these puppets. While travelling on a bus in Tampines one day, I spied through the window a small makeshift stage with what looked like moving bundles of colourful cloth. When the bus stopped at the traffic junction, I realised that the bundles were actually miniature puppets garbed in traditional Chinese opera costumes.

Since young, I have been exposed to Chaozhou, or Teochew opera (Chaoju, 潮剧), as performances were often staged in the Jalan Besar neighbourhood where I grew up. My maternal grandmother, who hailed from Swatow (now Shantou), a city in the Chinese province of Guangdong, was an avid fan of Teochew opera and often regaled her grandchildren with stories from the operas she used to watch as a young girl.

The cloth puppets left an indelible impression on me and I began to search for information on Chinese puppetry. There was very little material to go by but thankfully, I was able to embark on my initial study by using oral history interviews from the National Archives of Singapore. Its Oral History Centre had interviewed a number of puppet masters from the different regional (or dialect) groups in the 1980s. The rest of my research material was collected through painstaking fieldwork and personal interviews with puppeteers since then.

Finding the puppeteers, establishing contact, meeting up with them and getting them to disclose closely guarded secrets of the trade was a mammoth task. To my surprise, I discovered a wide variety of puppetry art forms in Singapore, all originating from different parts of southern China.

Types of Chinese Puppetry

Traditional puppet art forms include Hainanese rod puppetry (*zhangtou mu'ou,* 杖头木偶) from Hainan island, Hokkien glove puppetry (*budaixi,* 布袋戏) and string puppetry (*tixian mu'ou,* 提线木偶) from southern Fujian, Henghua string puppetry from Putian and Xianyou in eastern Fujian, Teochew iron-stick puppetry from Chaozhou, and Waijiang string puppetry performed by the Hakka community.[1]

The opera performances are staged in regional languages (or dialects), which unfortunately make it difficult for the average Singaporean youth to understand and appreciate. Due to the success of the Speak Mandarin Campaign launched by the government in 1979, the majority of young Chinese people schooled in modern Singapore have become unfamiliar with dialects, which critics say has brought along with it an erosion of indigenous Chinese cultures and traditions.[2]

Appreciating Chinese puppet theatre was also a challenge for me but I was fortunate enough to have learnt Teochew and Hokkien from my parents and grandparents. I also picked up some basic Henghua during my 10-week stay in Putian, China, in 2013.

Manipulating a Marionette

The art of manipulating a puppet takes years to master but I will briefly explain how the different types of puppets are controlled. A Hainanese rod puppet measures between 60 and 70 cm and weighs approximately 2 to 3 kg. Each puppet comprises a centralised rod connected to the head and two thinner rods at the base for the puppeteer to manipulate.

The height of the Henghua string puppet varies between 80 cm and 1 m. The puppeteer, whilst in a standing position, manipulates the puppet using the 12 strings attached to it. Additional strings can be added to create more intricate and complex movements. Its southern counterpart, the Hokkien string puppet, ranges from 60 to 90 cm in height, and has an average of 12 strings. According to veteran puppeteers in Singapore, the Hokkien string puppet can have up to 19 strings, depending on the needs and type of performance.

The Hokkien community also has another puppet type known as glove puppet (*potehi* in Hokkien). The glove puppet, as the term suggests, is controlled by inserting the hand into the interior of the puppet, with the index finger embedded in the head compartment and the rest of the fingers below the head to control the puppet's movements. The puppeteer is hidden behind the stage set and manipulates the puppet on the stage with only his or her arms exposed. Older glove puppets tend to be smaller, ranging from 25 to 35 cm in length. Newer puppets can go up to 40 cm.

(Facing page) A white-faced villain (白奸) glove puppet, c.1950s. The colour white usually represents a villainous or crafty personality. *Photo by Caroline Chia.*
(Below) Hainanese rod puppet troupe San Chun Long's performance at the Yan Kit Village Chinese Temple in November 2015. The rods are partially obscured from view by the puppet's costume. *Photo by Jace Tan, National Heritage Board Puppetry Documentation Project 2015/2016.*
(Bottom) A Hokkien string puppet performance by Xin Cai Yun (now disbanded) at Serangoon North on 10 April 2010. *Photo by Caroline Chia.*

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Originating from Chaozhou, the average height of the Teochew iron-stick puppet is approximately 35 cm whereas older ones were shorter at about 25 cm. The puppet head is made of clay or papier-mâché. There are three iron sticks attached to the puppet: one to support it and the other two with wooden handles for manipulation. The puppeteer sits on a low stool and controls the puppet from above.

Although puppet theatre has its roots in different parts of China and there are variations of the form distinct to each region, it is surprising how these various types have been able to coexist and complement one another in a small geographical space like Singapore. Each puppet type is unique to a specific community who share a common language and cultural kinship. This means that one would not usually expect audiences from one dialect group, for example the Teochews, to watch a Hainanese puppet show because of the language barrier. As migrant races, differences in language and cultural practices as well as feudal ties to ancestral villages in China were barriers to social interaction in the Chinese community in the early days of Singapore's founding.

A string puppet show in Chinatown, 1963. The script is placed in such a way that the puppeteer can read it while manipulating the puppet. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

The Transmission of Puppet Theatre

The various puppet types discussed in this article belong to what is known as "traditional temple theatre", or more simply, "a play offering thanksgiving to the deities" (*choushenxi,* 酬神戏). This suggests that puppet performances are usually staged in temples to celebrate the feast days of deities. Puppet theatre is closely associated with temples, and invariably, the few troupes that exist today rely on these religious institutions for survival. Apart from temple venues, puppet shows in the past were occasionally held in the homes of wealthy businessmen, specially commissioned to perform for an elder's birthday or during occasions such as weddings and anniversaries.

In colonial Singapore, temples served as social institutions that provided both longtime Chinese settlers and new migrants with a sense of spiritual consolation when they were far removed from their hometowns in China. Regardless of whether they were settlers or migrants, many Chinese immigrants regarded China as the motherland to which they would return as soon as they had earned enough.

In the 19th century, travelling by sea was a risky venture, with many dying of pestilence or illness during the perilous sea journey before they could arrive at their destination. Those who survived the ordeal would express their thanksgiving to the deities, including Mazu, popularly known as Goddess of the Sea. The veneration of Mazu led to the construction of some early temples by different dialect groups. For example, the Hokkiens established Thian Hock Keng temple at Telok Ayer Street in 1840, while the Teochew community erected the Wak Hai Cheng temple in 1826. On the feast day of Mazu, puppet performances would be staged in these temples, a tradition that continues to this day.

Compatriot ties were essential for the Chinese sojourner, many of whom were penniless men who arrived in Singapore in the second half of the 19th century to work as indentured labour, among whom were adventurous spirits looking to make their fortune overseas. As it was unimaginable for a person to venture overseas without first establishing a social network, these young men often obtained assistance from their fellow villagers, whether it was to borrow money or to seek an introduction to relatives living overseas.

The transmission of puppet theatre likewise depended on such compatriot ties between China and Singapore as well as other parts of Southeast Asia. Established puppet masters who had settled in Singapore for instance, could take on a son, younger brother, nephew, or a neighbour from the same hometown in China, or at least those who spoke the same regional language, as apprentices, or introduce them to others in the same trade. Temples and clan associations, or *huiguan* (会馆), established in various parts of Southeast Asia also invited puppeteers from the same hometown or region in China, and assisted them in the process of emigration.

Children enjoying a Chinese street puppet show, c. late 1960s. *John C Young Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

According to oral history records, the earliest Hokkien glove puppet troupe in Singapore was Xin Quan Sheng (新泉胜), which was established in 1895. However, little is known about the troupe except that its name was associated with a box used to store puppets, which was purchased by a carver named Huang Renshui (黄壬水). A native of Jinmen with his ancestral village in Nan'an, southern Fujian, Huang travelled with a glove puppet troupe to Siam (Thailand) in 1890. Not long after, he married a local woman there. When Huang's eldest brother Bingchen passed away in 1907, Huang relocated to Singapore to take over his shop, Say Tian Kok (西天国), which specialised in making deity effigies. Occasionally, Huang also performed as a puppeteer.[3]

Another example of how the puppet trade took root in Southeast Asia was the Hainanese rod puppet troupe, San Chun Long (三春隆). In 1921, a Hainanese puppeteer by the name of Xie Yinlin (谢殷林) was believed to be the first to bring rod puppets from Wenchang, Hainan, to Southeast Asia. The rod puppets, possibly carved by Xie himself, were first brought from Wenchang to Siam, and eventually ended up in Singapore in 1939. It was only in 1947 that Foo Tiang Soon (符祥春, 1904–1994?), a renowned musician and co-proprietor of San Chun Long, bought the puppets and established the troupe. From these examples, we can see that traditional Chinese puppetry relied heavily on compatriot and kinship ties, and that Singapore was an important nexus in the transmission of these regional traditions.

Travelling Theatre

The spread of traditional Chinese puppetry from China to Southeast Asia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was partly due to the high demand for puppet performances in the region. Puppet troupes, whether already established back in China or just set up in Singapore, proved very popular with overseas Chinese communities in Malaya, Indonesia, Siam (Thailand) and Burma (Myanmar). When no local puppet performers were available, a troupe from China or Singapore would travel to these countries to perform, where they would stay for weeks or even months at a time. These performances were mostly sponsored by wealthy Chinese businessmen who yearned for the familiar entertainment of their hometowns. Puppet troupes would also hold performances at temples during the feast days of deities.

Foo Tiang Soon, the co-founder of Hainanese puppet troupe San Chun Long, recalled that his troupe was frequently invited to perform in Malaya, including at an amusement park established by the Shaw Brothers in Kuala Lumpur. According to puppeteer Long Hian Keng (龙兴京), a ticketed performance took place in Kuala Lumpur during the 1950s that was very popular with children. As there was no Hainanese puppet troupe in Malaysia in the 1970s, San Chun Long was often invited to stage shows in Hainanese temples and clan associations in Ipoh, Penang and Sabah.

The Teochew puppet troupe, Lao Sai Bao Feng (老赛宝丰), too, was popular, especially among Teochew communities in parts of Southeast Asia. In 1976, its leader Tay Lee Huat (郑利发) travelled with his troupe to Tawau, in Sabah, for a performance that was well-received by the local Teochew community. Tay claimed that Lao Sai Bao Feng was the first Teochew puppet troupe to have performed in Tawau and Sandakan.

PUPPET TALES

Regardless of regional differences, the storylines of most Chinese puppet shows in Singapore are based on Chinese classics set in imperial China, such as *A Family of Three Scholars* (一门三进士) for the Hokkien and Teochew communities, *Scholar Zhang Wenxiu* (张文秀) for the Hainanese, and *Scholar Wang Zhaorong* (王兆荣) for the Henghua. The show is always preceded by a ritual during which the puppets, which represent celestial beings such as the Eight Immortals, express thanksgivings to the deity whose feast day is being celebrated.

This ritual is important because it allows the sponsors to convey thanksgiving to the deity and in return, seek the deity's blessings. After the prelude, the performance takes place. Many stories revolve around the theme of a scholar – a highly respected figure in imperial China – and the various challenges he encounters before excelling in the imperial examinations.

There are also stories that depict fictional characters from *Journey to the West* (西游记) and *Records of the Strange* (聊斋志异), or martial arts characters from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三国演义) but most have a happy ending, often marked by a reunion of family members and/or lovers, that befits the feast day celebrations.

A Hokkien glove puppet performance by Shuang Neng Feng troupe at Jiu Xuan Temple on 30 March 2010. *Photo by Caroline Chia.*

In Singapore, local puppet troupes have also received praise from their respective communities. Lee Chye Ee (李载饴, 1919–1991), the troupe leader of the Hokkien troupe Jit Guat Sin (日月星), recalled the occasional *douxi* (斗戏), or "competitive show", between his troupe and Lao Chuan Ann (老泉安), another well-known Hokkien troupe back then. On one memorable occasion, the two troupes were invited to pit their skills to prove who were the more accomplished puppeteers. Both troupes gave their best, which included singing, complex manipulation techniques and story presentation. Lao Chuan Ann performed *Li Shiming Roaming the Underworld* (李世民游地府), and to make the performance more realistic, the troupe used various props to portray the 18 levels of hell. Jit Guat Sin performed *Huang Feihu Retaliating Against the Five Hurdles* (黄飞虎反五关) with a splendid display of acrobatic skills that showcased the puppeteers' consummate control of the marionettes. Such competitive shows were common in the 1950s.

Although the Henghua community was a minority group, its dominance of the Chinese puppetry art scene in Singapore in the mid-20th century was evidenced by the large numbers of puppet troupes that emerged during its peak. Some of the troupes included De Yue Lou (得月楼), Shuang Sai Le (双赛乐), Feng Huang Ting (凤凰亭), Xin De Yue (新得月), and He Ping (和平). The He Ping troupe was the predecessor of Sin Hoe Ping (新和平), currently the last existing Henghua puppet troupe in Singapore.

Cross-cultural Influences

Although Chinese puppetry originated from China, the different regional forms have adapted in various ways so that we can now proudly claim a puppetry tradition that is uniquely multicultural and Singaporean, tempered with mutual respect for each dialect group's culture and traditions. Although the various puppet theatre forms still cater mainly to their own communities and temples, some significant changes have taken place.

In November 2015, for instance, San Chun Long was invited to perform at the Yan Kit Village Chinese Temple in celebration of Shui Wei Sheng Niang's (水尾圣娘, literally translated as "Goddess of the Lower Stream") feast day. Founded by the Hainanese community in 1939, the temple was originally located in a Hainanese enclave known as Yan Kit village across the road from its current location. Today, the temple is visited by devotees from other dialect groups. The chairman of the temple, Koh Chee Gong, is not a Hainanese, but a Cantonese. To ensure their continued survival, temples have welcomed devotees from other dialect communities.

Another aspect that is distinct to Singapore is the proliferation of *sintua* (or *shentan,* 神坛, translated as "household shrine") and spirit mediums known as *tangki* (or *jitong,* 乩童), with the latter sometimes involving devotees from different dialect groups as well as some non-Chinese. When a spirit medium goes into a trance, the deity is believed to have possessed the medium, endowing the latter with powers to heal the sick. The devotees usually consult the spirit mediums on matters relating to health, finance or spirituality, and occasionally the future. These spirit mediums sometimes hand out sweets, red-dyed eggs and other "auspicious" food items that are believed to bestow blessings on whomever receives them. Despite the advances made by modern medicine, this form of alternative healing is still sought after by some Singaporeans.

In a way, the existence of spirit mediums and *sintua* have partly contributed to the survival of puppet theatre. Puppet troupes are often invited to perform during the feast days of deities worshipped at these *sintua,* and during such celebrations, tents with a makeshift puppet stage are usually erected. These instances demonstrate how religious institutions have made adjustments to ensure the survival of puppet theatre.

Rediscovering Our Heritage

There have also been efforts by local puppet masters to conserve and preserve the puppetry art form in Singapore. I pored through a number of Henghua opera scripts and discovered that they are generally longer and more complete, compared with the more condensed scripts found in China. For example, Beidouxi (北斗戏), the *Northern Dipper Play,* a form which expresses thanksgiving to the gods for protecting the children of the sponsors, is performed for two hours in Singapore but the one I watched in Putian lasted for only 20 minutes using a more simplified script. The Sin Hoe Ping troupe still performs the *Northern Dipper Play* upon request.

Singapore's warm and humid climate is not conducive for the conservation of puppet artefacts and paraphernalia, especially since there is a lack of know-how in protecting these items. Although many precious artefacts have been damaged due to poor conservation practices, some have remained in good shape as a result of careful safeguarding by the puppet troupes. When I visited San Chun Long troupe in late 2015, I noticed that the brightly painted faces of the rod puppets appeared more vibrant compared with the ones I saw in some photos in 2012. On further probing, I discovered that the puppets had been repainted in China in 2014.

When these puppets were sent to Hainan for a new coat of paint, Lin Hongwu (林鸿吾), 92, a native of Hainan, was reported to be very surprised when he saw them. To the elderly man, it was a joyous "reunion" of sorts. Lin remembered seeing similar puppets in Hainan when he was younger. Unfortunately, those puppets were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution years between 1966 and 1976.[4] With possibly the only known collection of old rod puppets in Hainan destroyed, this last surviving collection of traditional rod puppets in Singapore has become all the more valuable. These nearly century-old puppets could very well be the oldest examples around.

The conservation efforts by members of San Chun Long, particularly the current troupe leader, 49-year-old Zhou Jingwen (周经文), who is passionate about preserving the puppets and the traditions his elders left him, is highly commendable. Despite the sharp decline in the number of performances and ageing puppeteers, Zhou is adamant about safeguarding this heritage for as long as he can.

Today, traditional Chinese puppet theatre is in danger of being obliterated from the cultural landscape. The inability of young Singaporeans to speak dialects and the lack of interest in an archaic form of theatre are some of the biggest challenges that face existing puppet troupes. Many puppet masters despair over the decline of this once-glorious trade and the rapidly shrinking audiences who appreciate such entertainment. There is little motivation for troupes to innovate and keep up with the times.

Through my continued contact with the puppeteers, many have expressed their interest in performing outside the confines of the temple and to educate the public on this traditional art form. There have been opportunities for puppet troupes to perform at new platforms but the scope is limited.[5] More support, monetary or otherwise, is needed to keep puppet theatre going in modern-day Singapore, but unless young Singaporeans can be convinced that traditional Chinese puppet theatre is not "uncool" and old-fashioned, there is imminent danger of losing yet another part of our rich heritage. ♦

Notes

1 The term "Henghua" is a transliteration of "Xinghua" as Putian city and Xianyou county were previously administered under the Xinghua area.

2 The Speak Mandarin Campaign was launched by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on 7 September 1979 with the objective of improving communication and understanding among Chinese Singaporeans, and to create a Mandarin-speaking environment conducive to the successful implementation of the bilingual education programme.

3 It is not possible to ascertain if Huang Renshui performed as a puppeteer with the Xin Quan Sheng troupe or with another troupe.

4 The Cultural Revolution in China – also known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution – launched by Mao Zedong, then chairman of the Communist Party, began in May 1966 and lasted until his death in 1976. This revolution mainly targeted the arts and popular beliefs. See Kraus, R. C. (2012). *The cultural revolution: A very short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press. (Call no.: 951.056 KRA)

5 In 2014, for instance, I recommended Pang Tong Teng from the Tien Heng Kang troupe (新兴港琼南剧社) to Artsolute, a social group that works with youths to participate in community development and cultural exchange programmes through the arts. At the time, Artsolute was looking for a puppeteer in traditional Chinese puppetry for a cultural exchange trip to Brunei. In 2016, I introduced the Teochew puppet and opera troupe Sin Ee Lye Heng to Lepark, organiser of "Getai Soul 2016", Singapore's first soul music festival. The two-day event was held at Pearl's Hill.

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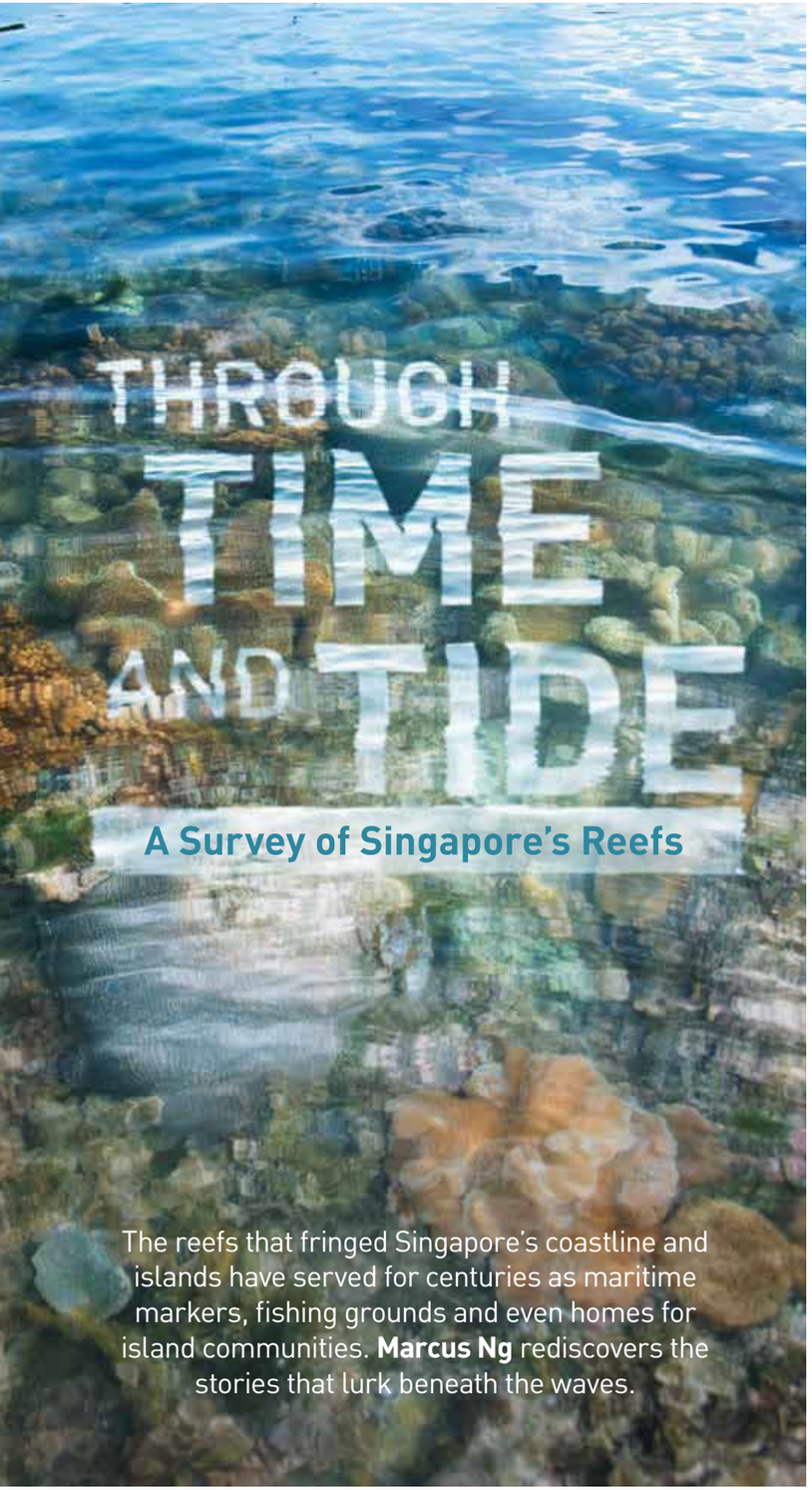


A Survey of Singapore's Reefs

The reefs that fringed Singapore's coastline and islands have served for centuries as maritime markers, fishing grounds and even homes for island communities. **Marcus Ng** rediscovers the stories that lurk beneath the waves.

If the tides are high
It never will appear,
That little winking island
Not very far from here;

But if the tides are low
And mud-flats stretch a mile,
The little island rises
To take the sun awhile.
– Margaret Leong[1]

In 1847, Dr Robert Little, a British surgeon, set off on a series of tours to Singapore's southern islands, beginning with the isle known as Pulau Blakang Mati (present-day Sentosa[2]). His journeys were no joyrides; the good doctor was investigating the source of "remittent fever" – a form of malaria – that had killed some three-fourths of the men posted to a signal station at Blakang Mati. The station was indispensable to navigation in the straits, but as no men were willing to serve at the ill-fated site, it was abandoned in 1845.

In the mid-19th century, malarial fever was often blamed on miasma or bad air that emanated from decaying vegetation in swamps or, in the case of Pulau Blakang Mati, its dense pineapple plantations. Being an annual crop, the remains of every harvest were often left to rot; this led to the belief that the decaying leaves emitted miasmatic vapours that infected nearby residents.

Dr Little, however, held a different theory, believing that the miasma originated from coral reefs. During the 19th century, extensive fringing reefs lined Singapore's southern shores and islands while isolated or patch reefs, known to locals as *terumbu* or *beting,* abounded in the straits. Although the doctor must have been familiar with these habitats, he found cause to regard them as less a treat than a threat. He explained:

> "Wherever we have coral reefs exposed at ebb tide we have a great destruction of coralline polyps, and a decomposition of animal matter carried on in a gigantic scale… If malaria is produced from animal decomposition on land, and we have a similar decomposition at sea, I think I am entitled to make my first deduction, that wherever a coral reef is exposed at low tide, decomposition will go on to an extent proportioned to the size of the reef and that malaria will be the result."[3]

Marcus Ng is a freelance writer, editor and curator interested in biodiversity, ethnobiology and the intersection between natural and human histories. His work includes the book *Habitats in Harmony: The Story of Semakau Landfill* (National Environment Agency, 2009 and 2012), and two exhibitions at the National Museum of Singapore: "Balik Pulau: Stories from Singapore's Islands" and "Danger and Desire".

For all his misplaced suspicions, Dr Little's initial encounters with Blakang Mati's pristine reefs betrayed more than a tinge of admiration for their alien beauty. He was moved to write:

> "At low water spring tides, the whole of these reefs are uncovered, so that by lying on the reef, one can look down into a depth of from 4 to 9 fathoms, like as a school boy does on a wall and looks at the objects below, which here are living corals of many and wondrous shapes, with tints so beautiful that nothing on earth can equal them. While the lovely coral fish, vying with their abodes in the liveliness of their colours, are to be seen peeping out of every crevice, which at full tide has but a few feet of water to cover it."[4]

Dr Little hit an epidemiological dead-end,[5] but his expeditions to Blakang Mati, St John's and Lazarus Islands as well as now-forgotten isles such as Brani, Seking, Sakra and Pesek, offered a rare if fleeting window to Singapore's reefs and the communities who lived off them.

Danger at High Water

Singapore's reefscape posed no medical threat, but these maritime structures were for centuries cause for other mortal concerns. Jan Huyghen van Linschoten, a 16th-century Dutch merchant, warned captains to steer clear of areas "full of Riffes and shallowes" (reefs and shallows) as they sailed past Pasir Panjang en route to China. The 19th-century English hydrographer James Horsburgh would repeat this caution, describing the Singapore Straits as "united by reefs and dangers, mostly covered at high water."[6]

The Europeans who first ventured into the straits had few or no names for the reefs that barred their passage. (One exception was Sultan Shoal, now the site of an exquisite lighthouse, which Horsburgh explained was named after a ship of this name that ran aground on the reef in 1789.) These platforms of living rock were usually hidden under the waves, too deep to be visible but high enough to scrape or worse, sunder a stray hull.

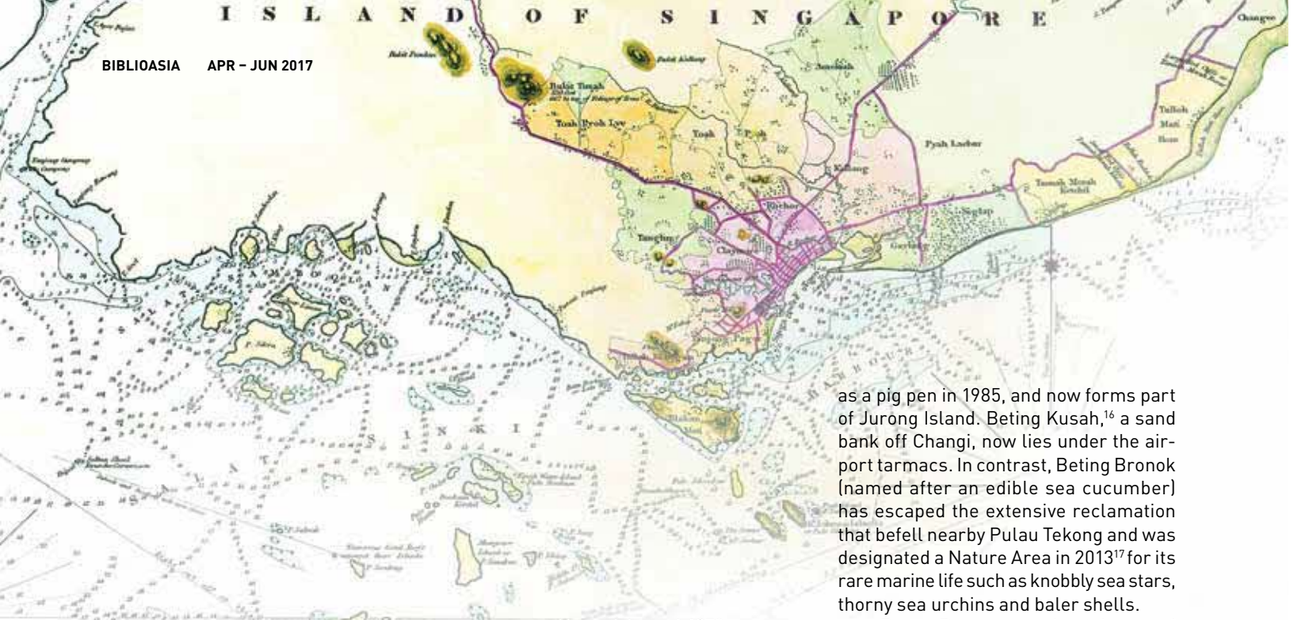
But from the mid-19th century, a few toponyms began to emerge, as the words and worlds of native pilots, boatmen and islanders who knew these waters for generations by heart filtered into the mental, and eventually printed, charts of foreign cartographers to give shape and significance to these submarine forms.

An 1849 map is perhaps the first to mark "Ter Pempang", west of Pulau Bukom, which lies off the southern coast of Singapore. "Ter" is short for *terumbu,* Malay for a reef that is visible only during low tide. It is less clear what "Pempang" refers to. One possibility is that *pampang* means "to stretch out before one".[7] Another Malay word, *bemban,* denotes a fish trap as well as *Donax canniformis,* a fibrous shrub used to weave these traps.[8]

Both etymologies are apt; fishermen visited (and still frequent) these reefs to set traps weighed down by coral chunks and checked at regular intervals for stingrays and groupers. And these reefs indeed rise with the falling tide "to stretch out before one", forming an expanse of land, a shimmer of sand and shoal where minutes ago there was bare sea. But in an hour or two, this ephemeral landscape will vanish once more as the waters return to shield the reef and its builders from sun and sight.

Intriguingly, the 1849 map indicated the presence of a hut on Terumbu Pempang as well as another on Pulo Pandan. These huts must have been set above the highest tide point, perhaps as shelters for fishermen from nearby islands. No trace of any such structures survive today; instead,

(Facing page) Living reefs off Serapong on the northeast coast of Sentosa. Photo taken by Ria Tan on 23 May 2011. *Courtesy of WildSingapore.*
(Below) This painting from the 1830s depicts a cluster of wooden houses perched on stilts on Pulau Brani. In the 1960s, residents were asked to resettle on mainland Singapore to make way for the construction of a naval base. *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*
(Bottom) Two boys playing with their pet roosters in a Malay kampong on Pulau Seking, an offshore island that is now part of Pulau Semakau, 1983. *Quek Tiong Swee Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Terumbu Pempang Laut (one of six adjacent reefs bearing the appellation "Pempang") hosts a warning beacon, while a large sign on Terumbu Pempang Darat announces the presence of buried high voltage cables.

As for Pulo Pandan, there is sign of neither hut nor island today. The only clue that a landmass existed in this patch of sea between Pasir Panjang and Bukom is a trio of warning beacons and a ring of buoys that are not always heeded by ships, which run aground on the reef every now and then.[9] There is also no trace of Pulo Pandan on modern charts, just a cluster of contours marked collectively as the Cyrene Reefs, the largest of which is named Terumbu Pandan.

Low Tide Treasures

Pulo Pandan may be long gone (see box story), but life persists, at least under the waves. Early descriptions of Cyrene Shoal's natural wealth still ring true today, for the reef harbours marine biodiversity that makes it, in the words of Ria Tan, a veteran nature conservationist, the "Chek Jawa of the South". One visitor in the 1960s recalled "emerald waters" and "deep chasms which in good visibility could rival the view of the Grand Canyon".[10] Marine biologists have recorded 37 genera of corals and seven seagrass species at Cyrene Shoal, as well as large numbers of knobbly sea stars *(Protoreaster nodosus)* and signs of endangered dugongs on the reef's seagrass bed.[11]

Such natural bounty would have been familiar to the people who once dwelled in the straits. Up until the mid-1970s, women-folk in Pulau Sudong, an island southwest of the Pempang reefs, "regularly collected sea foodstuffs from the island's fringing reef",[12] some 12 times the size of the island, before the reef was reclaimed in 1977. The women also ventured to a nearby patch reef to harvest *agar agar* (gelatinous seaweed), *gulong* (bêche-de-mer) and *undok* (sea-horses). Chew Soo Beng, who documented the islanders before their eviction to the mainland, described a scene that has long vanished from the straits:

> "During ebb tide, the outer reaches of the reef to the west of Pulau Sudong are completely exposed... Groups of women row their *kolek* [a small sea craft] to different parts of the exposed portion of the reef to gather sea produce... When both the tide and the sun were low, the gay chatter of the women at work would drift into the village where the men, excluded from the offshore merriment, conversed beneath their favourite *pondok* [hut]. The reef was called Terembu Raya (Big Reef)[13] by the fishermen who set their small fish traps at the edge of it."[14]

Lost Reefs

Pulo Pandan's slow erosion into the Terumbu Pandan reef was probably the natural consequence of storms and currents that swamped the erstwhile island. Conversely, other local reefs have been shaped by man to become new islands, coves and port terminals. South of Jurong, Terumbu Pesek was reclaimed[15] as a pig pen in 1985, and now forms part of Jurong Island. Beting Kusah,[16] a sand bank off Changi, now lies under the airport tarmacs. In contrast, Beting Bronok (named after an edible sea cucumber) has escaped the extensive reclamation that befell nearby Pulau Tekong and was designated a Nature Area in 2013[17] for its rare marine life such as knobbly sea stars, thorny sea urchins and baler shells.

Buran Darat, a coral patch named after "a kind of sea-anemone of a light green colour and eaten by the Chinese", was reclaimed in the late 1990s to create the Sentosa Cove luxury resort.[18] Terumbu Retan Laut, a reef off Pasir Panjang, was reclaimed in the 1970s to provide anchorage[19] for lighters evicted[20] from the Singapore River and eventually buried under steel, concrete and cranes, as reported in the *Straits Times* in 1995: "Terumbu Retan Laut on the west coast will be partially dredged away... What remains of it will be used for port terminal development on the west coast."[21]

(Above) A portion of J. T. Thomson's 1846 survey map of the Strait of Singapore showing the western entrance into the strait. *Urban Redevelopment Authority, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*
(Below) Cyrene Reef is home to a large population of knobbly sea stars. Photo taken on 22 July 2012. *Courtesy of Marcus Ng.*

The same newspaper report laid bare the fate of some of the reefs and islets off Blakang Mati which so beguiled Dr Little in the 1840s: "A bigger Sentosa Island include[s] three other islands: Buran Darat, Sarong Island and Pulau Selegu. Terembu [sic] Palawan, formerly a reef off the southern coast of Sentosa, has been reclaimed and is now an island called Pulau Palawan."

Today, Sentosa's surviving coral reefs cling to the island's peripheries: off Serapong at its northeast and along Tanjong Rimau on the northwest, a sliver of natural rocky coastline which guards the colonial-era Fort Siloso. Along the mainland, there are also fringing reefs along less accessible parts of East Coast Park and Tanah Merah, whose ultimate fate probably hinges on future discourses on land-use and habitat conservation in Singapore.

Shoals of Contention

Pulau Seringat, which was conjoined with Lazarus Island (Pulau Sekijang Pelepah) off the southern coast at the turn of the 21st century, offers a glimpse into the target, at least a sinking one – an island that long guarded the western entrance to Keppel Harbour but which lost over time its land, trees and name. After the isle vanished, port authorities deemed it a shipping hazard and placed lights and signs on the site to prevent collisions.[27]

Further insights on this reef are provided by another doctor, Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill, the Raffles Museum's last expatriate director. In 1951, Gibson-Hill set sail to retrace Linschoten's sailing route and determine the fate of the Old Straits of Singapore, which ran past Pasir Panjang and through Keppel Harbour but fell into disuse in the early 17th century. Cyrene Shoal would prove pivotal in his quest, as Gibson-Hill would write of Linschoten's "small, flat Iland":

> "It is clear that this small sandy island with a clump of trees (probably coconut palms) on it of Linschoten's account was at the eastern end of Cyrene Shoal, and it undoubtedly afforded a most valuable mark to anyone sailing through the two straits. The sandy strand survived until the last century, but apparently by 1797 it boasted only one tree. Presumably it was slowly breaking up during this period."[28]

Gibson-Hill believed that the island was still extant in the 1820s, when Captain James Franklin marked it as Pulo Busing in an 1828 map. "Busing" may have been derived from *busong,* Malay for "a spit of sand", but Gibson-Hill suggested that it was more likely a corruption of *pusing* ("to turn"), as the sight of the island's shimmering sands in the distance was a cue for mariners to alter their course towards Keppel Harbour. Certainly, Cyrene Shoal's significance as a landmark was felt by its absence, for Gibson-Hill was vexed as he sailed in the path of Linschoten's wake and concluded:

> "There is no doubt that the old route was an easy one to follow, coming from the west, so long as there were a few trees on the white, sandy islet on Cyrene Shoal... The absence of the original mark was very noticeable when I went over Linschoten's course from Pulau Merambong eastward... and one felt that the disappearance of the trees might have been one of the factors that led to the final disuse of this route."[29]

PULO PANDAN: AN ISLAND TURNED REEF

Pulo Pandan is now reduced to Terumbu Pandan and forms part of the Cyrene Reefs. But in centuries past, Pulo Pandan loomed much larger, and even stood out as a landmark in the straits. The island was signposted by Jan Huyghen van Linschoten in 1596, when the Dutchman described the journey eastward on the Selat Sembilan ("Straits of Nine Islands") between Pasir Panjang and the present Jurong Island:

> "... running as I said before along by the Ilands on the right hand, and coming by the aforesaid round Island [Pulau Mesemut Laut[22]], on the right at the end of the row of Ilands whereby you pass, you shall see a small flat Iland [Cyrene Shoal], with a few trees, having a white sandy strand, which lieth east and west, with the mouth of ye Straight of Sincapura [Keppel Harbour], which you shall make towards..."[23]

The seashore pandan *(Pandanus tectorius)*, a native plant associated with sandy beaches, may have been the tree that lent its name to Pulo Pandan. By 1848, however, Pulo Pandan had been denuded of vegetation but gained a new toponym,[24] as the *Singapore Free Press* noted: "Called by the Malays Pulo Pandan, and by the English Cyrene shoal; the trees have all disappeared, but aged natives say that there were many trees on the reef in former times, hence the Malays call it a Pulo or Island."[25]

By the 1890s, whatever remained of the Pulo had vanished, and the *Descriptive Dictionary of British Malaya* had this to say of it: "[Cyrene] Shoal... presents a brilliant appearance at low water, being covered with live corals and shells, many of the most brilliant colours. It is a favourite hunting ground for conchologists."[26]

Pulo Pandan presents for historians and cartographers, if not a shifting

The living reefs of Cyrene Shoal, off the southwestern coast of Singapore. Photo taken by Ria Tan on 22 March 2007. *Courtesy of WildSingapore.*

possibilities that face Singapore's reefs. Where the island now stands was once a tidal islet known as Pulau Rengit, which refers to either a sandfly or a freshwater shell.[30] Another account from 1923, however, cites the alternate moniker of Pulau Ringgit to explain that the islet was "named by reason of the fact that the ninety or more Malay fishermen and the one Chinese store-keeper who supplies their needs, pay a nominal annual rent of a dollar for the privilege of living a congested existence there".[31]

Within a decade, however, most of the islanders would leave their home, which a 1935 article described as "an almost barren, low-lying stretch of coral". The same report added of the residents: "They have now been moved – there are only a few dozen of them left – to a neighbouring islet which suffers less from the inundations of high tides."[32] It would appear that the few families that remained on Pulau Rengit eventually all moved to the mainland. Tijah bte Awang, a villager born on Pulau Rengit, recalled:

> "When I was growing up on Pulau Seringat, which some called Pulau Rengit, I remember it as one with no trees – just land, with one small mosque surrounded by 15 houses... our homes were built on stilts and placed side by side facing the sea... I remember in 1930, our island was not safe. The authorities feared that the sea would swallow up the island during extreme high tide or during a storm... I can't remember exactly when we left Pulau Seringat. I may have been in my teens when our family made the permanent shift to Lazarus Island."[33]

In the 1970s, Pulau Rengit was earmarked as a "holiday island".[34] Some 12.2 hectares of reef were reclaimed, but little else took place until the late 1990s when the government approved a more ambitious programme to reclaim 34 hectares of foreshore, seabed and reefs, and link up Rengit with St John's and Lazarus islands to form a "canal-laced marine village with recreational and mooring facilities, and waterfront housing".[35]

The impending loss[36] of Pulau Rengit was mourned by Singapore's nascent marine conservation movement, which had been calling for the protection of local reefs since the early 1990s. But little could be done other than a salvage operation by the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research (RMBR; now Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum) to collect and document the reef's marine life. The experience, however, would prove to be a catalyst that shaped subsequent conservation campaigns. N Sivasothi, then a RMBR research officer who took part in the salvage, recalled:

(Above) Smooth ribbon seagrass *(Cymodocea rotundata)* growing in abundance at the seagrass lagoon at Chek Jawa. Photo taken by Ria Tan on 27 November 2004. *Courtesy of WildSingapore.*
(Right) High tide at the Chek Jawa boardwalk. Photo taken by Ria Tan on 19 October 2008. *Courtesy of WildSingapore.*

> "The small team that landed on the reef was there... [to] collect, record and preserve as many specimens as physically possible before it was finally lost to land reclamation. The reef revealed rather surprising finds – numerous Neptune cups [a rare sponge], cushion stars, giant clams, crabs, octopus, fish, sea stars and colourful corals including spectacularly red sea fans...[37] When I saw the Pulau Seringat reefs before their reclamation in August 1997, I felt great regret that very few Singaporeans had experienced the beauty of this reef. It remains to this day the precious but private memory of very few."[38]

In 2001, when word got out that Chek Jawa at Pulau Ubin was slated for reclamation by year-end, the marine conservation community felt, as Sivasothi put it, that "this time, we could do better". They mobilised, with the help of the then burgeoning internet, to invite Singaporeans to a "last chance to see" Chek Jawa and its diverse marine life. The memory and lessons of Pulau Seringat were still fresh and the experience prompted the museum to initiate large-scale walks at Chek Jawa to share the beauty and biodiversity of this shore with the public.

Teams of volunteers led walks that exposed Chek Jawa to thousands of visitors, while press coverage of the campaign gave rise to broad-based appeals for the preservation of the coastal wetland. At the eleventh hour, on 20 December 2001, the government announced a 10-year deferment of reclamation for Chek Jawa.

To Sea, to See

The zeitgeist of marine conservation that accompanied Chek Jawa persisted in the decade that followed. Instead of bulldozers, Chek Jawa received a coastal boardwalk and continues to host popular intertidal walks.[39] Riding on this wave of interest in the marine environment, avid divers began offering guided dive tours of the reefs off Pulau Hantu (south of Pulau Bukom) from 2003.[40] Two years later, even Singapore's only landfill, built in 1999 at Pulau Semakau, got into the game by launching guided walks to the island's reef flat.[41]

Rather fittingly, Singapore's first marine park was carved out on the doorstep of Pulau Seringat, the former reef that had fermented the movement to save Chek Jawa. Unveiled on 12 July 2014, Sisters' Islands Marine Park includes the twin Sisters' Islands as well as reefs at St John's Island and Pulau Tekukor. The marine park, which hosts regular intertidal walks and offers a dive trail for more intrepid explorers, has played no small part in rekindling a sense of the sea, and by extension a sense of islandness, which many Singaporeans have probably lost (or never learned) as the straits retreated[42] and bulldozers and dredgers moved in to create land for a growing population.

To board a ferry or bumboat bound for the southern islands and reefs[43] from the pier at Marina South is to tread back in time and catch sight of the mainland as sailors and sojourners once beheld it – a strip of promised land sandwiched between the sky and seething sea.

It is also a trip, not to the southern margins of an island nation, but to where Singapore first took shape and entered the imagination as an entity, an island at the junction of empires that first enthralled a Palembang prince and later an employee of a British trading company – a point of departure from landlocked vistas to an archipelago of reefs, shoals and islands, a landscape that remains to this day in flux and in thrall to the tides. ♦

Notes

1 The island Margaret Leong described is really a reef, as it vanishes at high tide. See Leong, M. (2011). Winking island (p. 16). In S. Lim & A. Poon. (Eds.), *The ice ball man and other poems.* Singapore: Ethos Books. (Call no.: JRSING 811 LEO)
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4 Little, 1848, p. 585.
5 The mystery was solved only in 1886 when a French surgeon, Charles Louis Alphonse Laveran, discovered microscopic parasites in the blood of malaria victims. It took another decade before British doctor Ronald Ross confirmed that mosquitoes were the vectors that transmitted the microbes.
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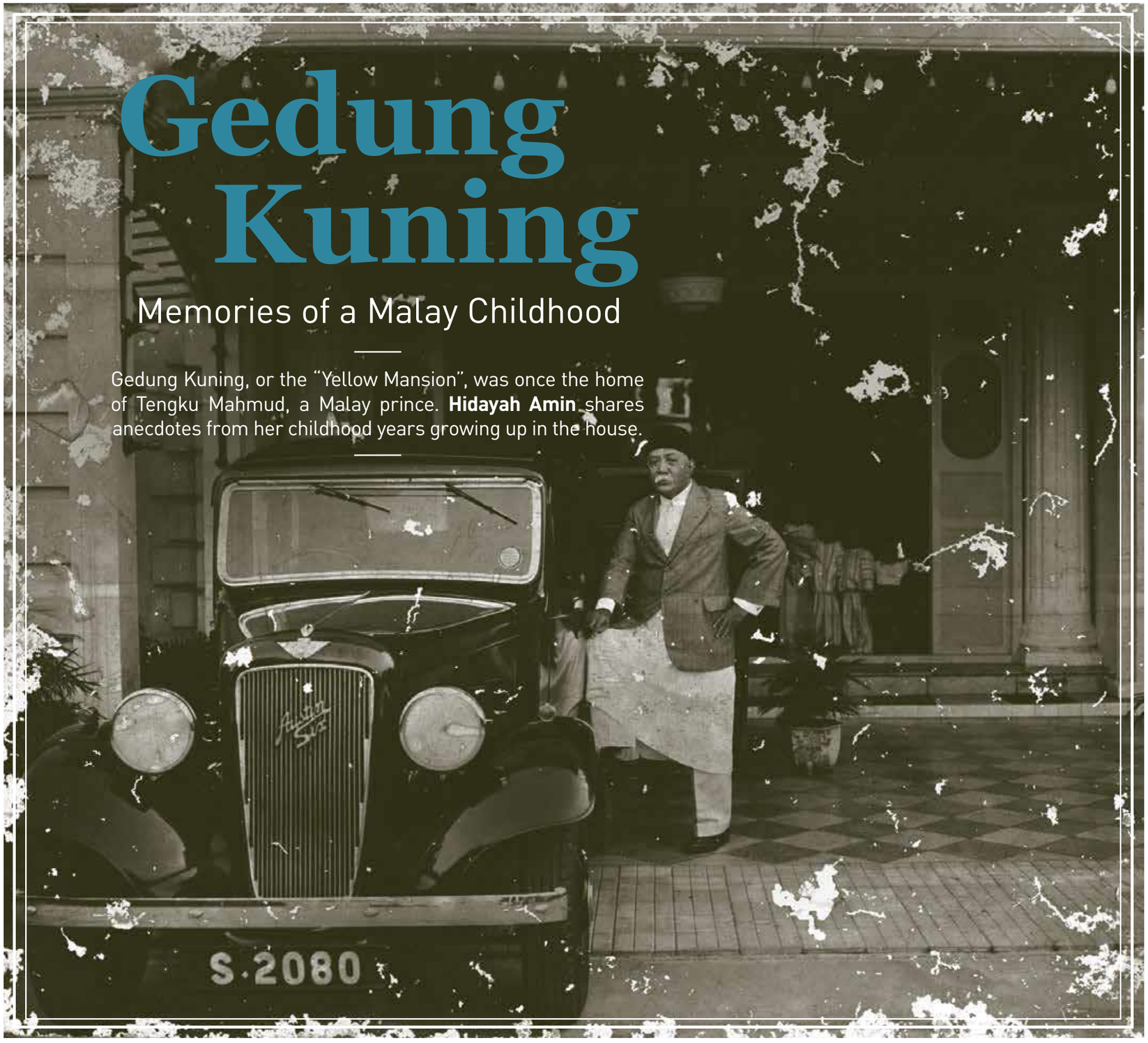
Gedung Kuning

Memories of a Malay Childhood

Gedung Kuning, or the "Yellow Mansion", was once the home of Tengku Mahmud, a Malay prince. **Hidayah Amin** shares anecdotes from her childhood years growing up in the house.



Hidayah Amin is an award-winning author who has written several books and academic articles, and presented at international conferences. She has also produced more than 70 documentaries, audio resources and short films. Hidayah blogs at https://hida-amin.blogspot.sg/

Gedung Kuning[1], at No. 73 Sultan Gate, with its regal yellow walls and stone eagles perched on the main gate, was the mansion that was originally built for a *bendahara* or prime minister. When I was growing up in the house, I never once thought of my family as being privileged or different in any way. When the government acquired my childhood home in 1999, it began to dawn on me that having been born in Gedung Kuning and raised in Haji Yusoff's family, I was part of an important heritage.

Haji Yusoff bin Haji Mohamed Noor was my *moyang,* or maternal great-grandfather, and the patriarch of Gedung Kuning, having bought the mansion in 1912. As he had passed on before I was born, I never had the opportunity to meet the man with his sharp nose, white moustache and gentle eyes that seemed to gaze directly into mine every time I passed by his portrait in the living room.

Haji Yusoff was a man who loved his family only second to God. He was a respected merchant who later became a pillar of the Malay community in early Singapore. Gedung Kuning is as regal as its name and owner – a testament to Haji Yusoff's legacy – and I am proud to share his legacy with you. Here are two extracts from my book, *Gedung Kuning: Memories of a Malay Childhood.*

No. 73 Sultan Gate

Rumahku, syurgaku, my house, my paradise. To many of us, the home is definitely where the heart is and Gedung Kuning, at No. 73 Sultan Gate, Kampong Glam, was such a home to four generations of the Haji Yusoff family. Built in the mid-19th century, Gedung Kuning was once the home of a prince – Tengku Mahmud – grandson of Sultan Hussein of Johor with whom Sir Stamford Raffles of the East India Company negotiated a treaty to establish a trading post on Singapore island back in 1819, thus setting in motion events that would lead to the creation of modern-day Singapore.

Gedung Kuning was, and remains, a grand and stately affair, symmetrical in plan with classical detailing in the Anglo-Regency style of architecture that the British brought with them from India. Apart from the Istana next door, there is no other building like it in Kampong Glam. Rumour has it that the Istana and Gedung Kuning were designed by George Coleman, Singapore's first and, for many years, its finest architect, famous for the palatial mansions he designed for rich merchants and government officials in the early days of the settlement. Although this has never been substantiated, the two buildings certainly show evidence of his influence.

It was Tengku Mahmud who painted the house yellow – the colour of royalty in traditional Malay society – which is how it came by its name, Gedung Kuning (literally "Yellow Mansion"). But family fortunes change and Tengku Mahmud's father, Sultan Ali, mortgaged the house to an Indian moneylender to pay his debts. This was around the end of the 19th century and it is here that my story properly begins.

As a boy growing up in his father's house in the vicinity of today's Kandahar Street, Haji Yusoff would have passed by Gedung Kuning everyday, no doubt looking up in awe at the majestic mansion. Later, in adult life, when he learned that Gedung Kuning was mortgaged to an Indian moneylender, he must have been disappointed at how easily the Malay royal family "gave" away a significant piece of their history to people regarded locally as "foreigners".

An industrious young man on the way up in life with dreams, Haji Yusoff strongly

(Facing page) Haji Yusoff posing proudly with his classic Austin Six at the entrance of Gedung Kuning in 1939. *Courtesy of Hidayah Amin.*
(Above) A 1930s painted portrait of the author's maternal great-grandfather, Haji Yusoff bin Haji Mohamed Noor, wearing a *songkok,* a traditional cap made of velvet worn by Malay men, and a Western-style jacket. *Courtesy of Hidayah Amin.*

(Left) A photo taken on 2 June 1955 showing the facade of Gedung Kuning at No. 73 Sultan Gate. The rear of the house faces Kandahar Street. *Courtesy of Hidayah Amin.*
(Right) Gedung Kuning was acquired under the Land Acquisition Act in 1999, and underwent restoration until 2003. Currently housed within the building is the Mamanda restaurant that serves Malay cuisine. *Photo by Erwin Soo, 27 October 2012. Courtesy of Flickr.*

felt that Gedung Kuning should return to the Malay community. At the same time, he needed to provide a home for his second wife and her children, and so he decided he would spend his entire savings to purchase Gedung Kuning. My grandmother, Nenek, who was Haji Yusoff's eldest daughter, said he paid about $37,000 in cash, a huge amount in those days, to R.M.P.C Mootiah Chitty in 1912.

Unfortunately, some years later, needing to raise capital for his business, Haji Yusoff was obliged to sell the house to a Chinese family. This was in 1919. Subsequently, Gedung Kuning was sold to another Chinese family. According to rumours, neither Chinese family took to living at Gedung Kuning. In fact, one occupant is said to have turned insane while another committed suicide. When the father of one of the Chinese owners passed away while staying in Gedung Kuning, a medium was hired to "cleanse" the house of its misfortune, but this was not enough to dispel the idea that the house was "unlucky" and it was put back on the market again.

Thus it was that Haji Yusoff, who had always regretted his decision of selling Gedung Kuning, suddenly found himself in a position to buy it back six years later. The Chinese owner, however, refused to sell the house to Haji Yusoff whom he chided as a poor Malay man. Being the astute businessman that he was, Haji Yusoff engaged a middleman named Haji Umar "Broker" to negotiate the purchase of the house on his behalf. Haji Umar convinced the Chinese owner that a wealthy "Sultan of Trengganu" was interested in acquiring Gedung Kuning and a deal was struck.

However, when the time came for the supposed "Sultan of Trengganu" to sign the legal papers for the sale of the property, it was Haji Yusoff who turned up instead. Though horrified, the Chinese owner could not back out of the deal, especially when Haji Yusoff offered to seal the transaction immediately in hard cash. It is not known how much Haji Yusoff paid this time around, but it was definitely worth the price since the jubilant Haji Yusoff had retrieved his lost paradise.

His paradise regained, Haji Yusoff was to live happily at Gedung Kuning for almost 30 years before a stroke in 1948 left him bedridden; he passed away two years later at the age of 95. Though no one could remember what his funeral was like, I presume that many people must have attended the funeral rites to pay respect to one of the pillars of the Malay community – I can imagine how the residents of Kampong Glam mourned the loss of their finest kampong son.

Though, I never knew Haji Yusoff personally, through hearing so much about him as a child – he was still very much a part of Gedung Kuning when I was growing up there, in spirit, if not in body – he has always been there as a kind of inspiration and "guiding" presence in my life. The story of Gedung Kuning is as much the story of Haji Yusoff as it is the building itself. Gedung Kuning bore witness to Haji Yusoff's increasing prosperity, his growing family, and the birth of my aunts and uncles. As home to all of his second wife's children and their children in turn, at one point in time six household units could be found all living together beneath the one roof.

Gedung Kuning was to remain in the family for almost a hundred years and life there was akin to a century of history in the making. Sadly, nearly 50 years after the death of Haji Yusoff, the Gedung Kuning family once again found itself grieving the loss of their paradise when the house was acquired under the Land Acquisition Act and Haji Yusoff's long legacy came to an end.

Today, although the outer walls of Gedung Kuning are still painted yellow (albeit a darker shade than in the past), I sense that the vibrancy this place once exuded has been lost, its vitality diminished. No longer home to a family that once filled its immense space with great warmth, joy and laughter, Gedung Kuning, personified, misses its former occupants who so epitomised the heart and soul of old Kampong Glam in days gone by.

Puasa and Hari Raya

One of the major festive celebrations at Gedung Kuning was Hari Raya Puasa (Eid ul-Fitri), which marks the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. I remember how as children, we were taught to fast when we were as young as six or seven years old. We began by fasting for just one hour each day, slowly increasing the duration as we grew older. By the time we reached puberty, we could fast from sunrise to sunset, forgoing food and drink for about 12 hours daily. Fasting was such a big deal for us kids. Fasting made us feel grown-up.

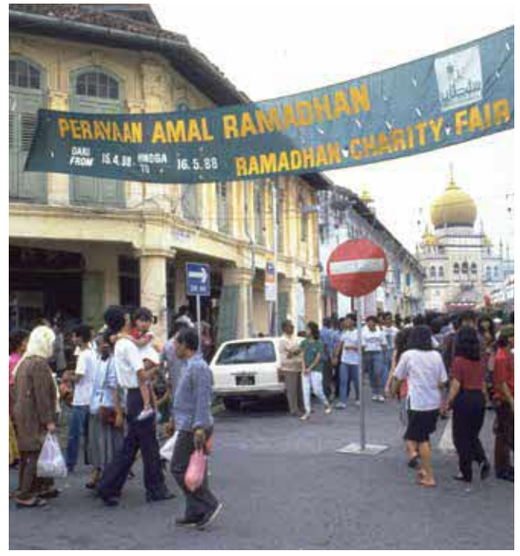
Wak Lah [my uncle, Abdullah] used to tell me how Haji Yusoff emphasised the importance of fasting and prayers to his grandchildren. The strict Haji Yusoff, who attended the Sultan Mosque daily, sometimes splashed water on his grandchildren to wake them up for morning prayers.

Since the girls of Gedung Kuning were more obedient, they were never given the "water treatment". Sometimes, Haji Yusoff used his walking stick to tap the legs of the sleeping boys to wake them up. He had a strict ruling during Ramadan; the grandchildren who did not fast could not sit at the dining table with the rest of the family. Forgoing a seat at the long table full of delicious food and dessert was indeed a tragedy. So every child at Gedung Kuning attempted to fast, even if it was for only 30 minutes a day.

I particularly disliked waking up before dawn for the *sahur*, the early morning meal, eaten just before fasting begins for the day. Emak [my mother] and Nenek [my grandmother] would gently shake my lethargic body but I would always mumble, "five more minutes..." They would finally give up and go downstairs to eat. I would only run down about 20 minutes before sunrise to eat whatever food was left. I remember telling them that I preferred to eat before going to bed and not having to wake up so early in the morning. But of course, as I grew older, I realised the reasons for the *sahur* meal and changed my eating patterns during Ramadan accordingly.

Ramadan was not complete without the daily trips to the Sultan Mosque to collect *bubur masjid* (mosque porridge). Almost all the mosques in Singapore prepared the porridge which they gave out freely to the public. I remember queuing with Wak Lah, bringing two plastic containers for the helper at the mosque to fill up with delicious porridge. The *bubur* was so popular that if you did not queue up early, you might not be able to get it. The simple porridge of rice, little morsels of meat and nuts, was so tasty that sometimes non-Muslims would also stand in queue. In the queue were people from all walks of life. Some of them looked rather poor and the *bubur* was probably their only meal for the day. I remember when I was preparing food at a homeless shelter in Washington D.C., I thought of *bubur masjid*. How good it would be if we could serve *bubur masjid* during other months as well!

Our next destination after collecting *bubur* at the Sultan Mosque was Bussorah Street, the street leading up to the front of the mosque. The street was lined with shophouses facing each other, in front of which were makeshift tents, sheltering



(Left) The Ramadan Charity Fair along Jalan Sultan and Bussorah Street in 1988. Sultan Mosque is in the background. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*
(Below) Haji Yusoff's family posing in front of Gedung Kuning for a family gathering in 1958. Hajah Aisah (Haji Yusoff's second wife and Hidayah Amin's great-grandmother) is seated 6th from the right. On her right is Nenek, Hidayah's grandmother, while her mother Emak is seated 4th from the right. *Courtesy of Hidayah Amin.*

long tables. On these tables was laid out a mouth-watering display of a variety of Malay dishes and desserts to entice passers-by.

Residents of Kampong Glam as well as those from other parts of Singapore made their way each year to the annual Ramadan Bazaar to soak up the festive atmosphere as well as to sample the delicious food. Datuk, my grandfather, would give me some money to spend at the bazaar. It was difficult to choose which food to buy with a small budget so I usually opted for my favourite food, *otak-otak,* a kind of fish paste mixed with spices such as lemongrass and turmeric, soused in coconut milk and then wrapped in a banana leaf that had been softened by steaming. To drink, I would have *air katira.* Ahh... who could forget *air katira?* Made from milk, *biji selasih* (basil seeds), dates and *cincau* (grass jelly), it was light green and, for me, could rival any soft drink!

I also remember how my brother Hadi and I were often asked to take some food to other members of the family living at Gedung Kuning, about an hour before we broke our fast. These food exchanges happened more frequently during Ramadan, a time for reflection and sharing. It could be a vegetable or meat dish, or a plate of *kuih-muih* (cakes), or whatever food that Nenek and Emak cooked. Although we never expected reciprocity, the receiving party would invariably return our plate with food that had been prepared or bought. So you can imagine how much food we ate when we broke fast at around seven in the evening!

About 10 minutes before Maghrib prayers (the evening prayer following sunset), Hadi and I would run up the wooden staircase and look out the window at the end of the landing. From the open windows, we could see the minaret of the Sultan Mosque. We would wait in anticipation as we stared at the little crescent and star at the top of the minaret. During Ramadan, the crescent and star would light up when the muezzin called out the *azan* (prayer call). Hadi and I would be overjoyed and shout "Dah bang!" (It's prayer time!). We would then rush downstairs, much to Emak's unhappiness. "Nanti gelundung!" (You'll fall headlong) she would say.

How we loved Ramadan, especially when it was time for *iftar,* the evening meal which brings to an end the daily fast. Although we were encouraged to break our fast with something sweet like a *kurma* (date), Hadi and I would look at the most enticing dish and eat that first. Most of the family members would try to make it home for *buka puasa* (breaking the fast); no matter how busy one is, one should try to spend dinner time with the family during Ramadan. Ramadan indirectly encourages family togetherness and the spirit of good deeds and kindness. Emak's cousins at Gedung Kuning would sometimes invite their friends to the *iftar* meal. I recall how Abah [my father] once brought home a poor stranger and asked him to have a meal with us.

I also remember Datuk leaving the table after eating his dates and drinking his coffee. He would head to the Sultan Mosque for Maghrib prayers, sometimes together with the other male members of the family living at Gedung Kuning. The rest of us would finish eating before praying, but we would leave some food for others like Datuk who resumed eating after prayers. At times, the women of Gedung Kuning joined the men in the special prayers called *terawih,* which are held in mosques every night of Ramadan.

During Ramadan, the Gedung Kuning household would be abuzz with activities particularly when the festival of Eid, which brings the fasting season to a close, was nearing. Everyone would lend a hand to give the house an especially thorough cleaning (though there were helpers for the daily cleaning). Nenek was tasked to sew curtains for the whole house.

Each household would tidy up their own living areas, and make cakes and dishes for the upcoming celebrations. They would also buy or sew new *baju kurung* (Malay traditional costume) for themselves and their children. Everyone would be busy. I recall how Emak painstakingly "pinched" the pineapple tart dough with a cookie pincher to make the patterns, instead of using the cookie cutter. Such a labour of love! Homemade cookies definitely taste better than the store-bought ones which dominate the dessert scene nowadays.

Emak and Nenek would spend the day before Eid cooking, among other dishes, the family favourite, *sambal goreng pengantin,* a spicy dish of meat and prawns. Nenek mentioned that Haji Yusoff used to keep turkeys on the grounds of Gedung Kuning. He would ask his cook to slaughter the turkeys during festive occasions so that everyone could savour the delicious meat.

(Right) Hidayah Amin celebrating her first birthday at Gedung Kuning in 1973. In the photo are four generations of Haji Yusoff's family. From the left: Hidayah's grandmother, her great-grandmother and her father. The boy is a cousin of Hidayah's mother, while the girl is a guest. *Courtesy of Hidayah Amin.*
(Below) Haji Yusoff's grandchildren celebrating Hari Raya at Gedung Kuning in 1948. Hidayah's mother is the one standing, pouring the drinks. *Courtesy of Hidayah Amin.*

No Hari Raya celebrations would be complete without *ketupat* – boiled rice which has been wrapped in a woven palm leaf pouch – and *lontong* (rice cakes). Wak Lah would buy them at the famous Pasar Geylang market and he would hang a bunch of *ketupat* over a long wooden pole laid horizontally between two chairs. When asked, he said it was to prevent them from becoming *basi* or stale. Everyone was in high spirits and the festive mood was enhanced by traditional Hari Raya songs blaring from the radio which evoked a sense of nostalgia for times past.

I remember waking up on the morning of Eid and hearing the *takbir* – the chanting proclaiming the greatness of God – coming distantly from the Sultan Mosque. Even when I was celebrating Eid overseas, the *takbir* never failed to bring tears to my eyes. I liked watching the throng of Malay males making their way past our house to the Sultan mosque (most females in Singapore preferred to stay at home to prepare the Eid meal). They would be clad in their finest *baju Melayu,* a long-sleeved shirt with a standing collar sewn in a style called *cekak musang,* with matching trousers and over the top, a length of cloth called the *kain samping,* woven from silk and gold thread, which was worn like a short sarong. A sea of blues, reds, greens and other bright colours dominated the streets of Kampong Glam. After Eid prayers, the same myriad of colours would embrace each other, asking forgiveness for past transgressions in a spirit of friendship and brotherhood.

I recollect how neighbours from Kampong Glam would visit Gedung Kuning at Hari Raya. Once, a group of young men from Bussorah Street visited us. They were surprised to see me as I rarely hung outside the house. One teased me and said that if he knew Haji Jofrie had such a *manis* (sweet) granddaughter, he would have proposed to me! Such banter was a reflection of the good neighbourly spirit the people of Gedung Kuning had with the others.

Haji Yusoff's *tali pinggang* trademark design comprised a belt buckle flanked by two flags with a shining star above the buckle. The trademark was sewn onto the *tali pinggang* – a belt with a small money pouch worn by men over their sarong or pants – that he sold in Kampong Glam. The belts were also exported to other countries in the region. *Photo by Yeo Wee Han. Courtesy of Hidayah Amin.*

Everyone would feast on the Hari Raya cookies and Nenek's famous agar-agar *kering* (crystallised jelly), and help themselves to plates of the *kepala meja* – the main dish at the table – while quenching their thirst with Fraser & Neave orange crush. Warm smiles and laughter would break out amidst the lively conversations as one caught up with the happenings of another.

Children were the happiest during Hari Raya Puasa, especially those who had successfully completed a month of fasting. Proud parents would inform relatives of their feat, while the children beamed with pride at having accomplished one of the five pillars of Islam. I remember when I was spending Ramadan in Morocco, I met children dressed in their most lavish traditional clothes – the girls wore make-up and had their hair nicely coiffured – paraded around the village with drums beating to announce their accomplishment of one month of fasting.

But back in Gedung Kuning, children were celebrated in another way. True to the spirit of giving, Haji Yusoff would give five dollars (a big sum in those days) to each grandchild. In the 1930s, 10 cents could buy four sticks of *satay* from the *satay* man who carried his portable stove and cooked *sur place.* Wak Lah said that one cent could buy up to four different items of food, and that for two cents, he could have a cup of tea, *pisang goreng* (banana fritters) and a bowl of *bubur kacang* (green bean soup). Although five dollars could not buy that many things now, I agreed with Wak Lah when he said that it was not the *duit raya* (Hari Raya money) that mattered most, but the spirit of family togetherness experienced during Ramadan and Hari Raya. And how I missed that family togetherness when I was studying far away from home. ♦

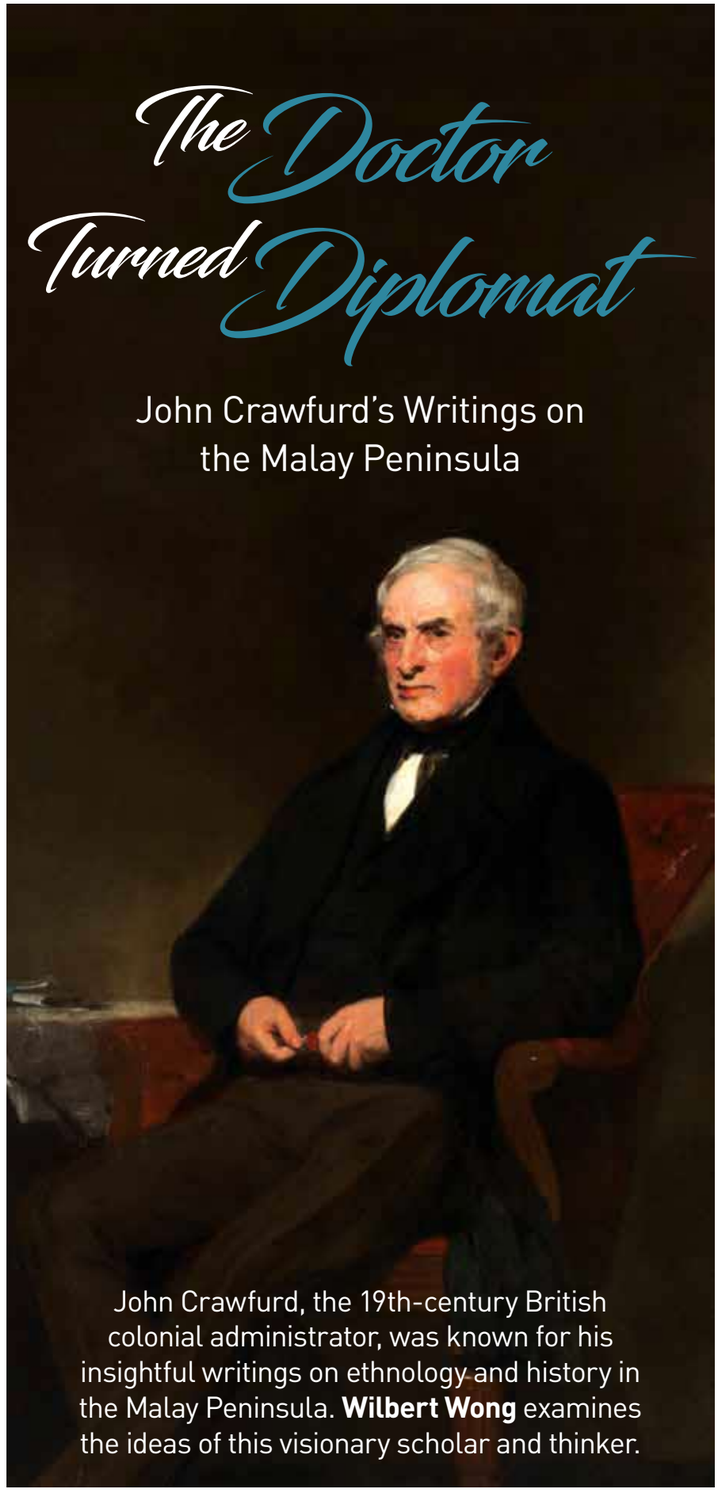
Gedung Kuning: Memories of a Malay Childhood is published by Singapore Heritage Society and Helang Books. The book retails for $24.90 (before GST) and is available at major bookshops. The book is also available for reference and loan at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and selected public libraries (Call nos.: RSING 305.8992805957 HID and 305.8992805957 HID).

Notes

1 Gedung Kuning, along with the adjacent Istana Kampung Gelam in the Kampong Glam area, was restored and opened as the Malay Heritage Centre in 2004. The Istana, or Palace building, houses a museum devoted to the history, heritage and culture of Malays in Singapore, while Gedung Kuning has been turned into a restaurant called Mamanda, which serves Malay cuisine.

The Doctor Turned Diplomat

John Crawfurd's Writings on the Malay Peninsula



John Crawfurd, the 19th-century British colonial administrator, was known for his insightful writings on ethnology and history in the Malay Peninsula. **Wilbert Wong** examines the ideas of this visionary scholar and thinker.

Wilbert Wong is currently a second-year doctoral candidate at the Australian National University's School of History, where he is researching British colonial writings on the Malay Peninsula. He hopes to specialise in the field of world history, with emphasis on cross-cultural encounters.

The National Library, Singapore, has in its collection a number of items relating to John Crawfurd's writings on Asia. In 2016, the collection was further enriched by an acquisition from Dr John Bastin – a noted authority on Stamford Raffles and author of numerous books and articles on the history of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Among the 19th-century British scholar-administrators of the Malay Peninsula, Crawfurd (1783–1868) was one of the most accomplished. He was highly regarded by the scholarly community for his formidable intellect and contributions to the field of ethnology, linguistics and Asian subjects – especially on Southeast Asia.

The Spectator newspaper noted in 1834 that "Crawfurd [was] well known by his writings on Eastern manners and statistics, and his exertions to open the British trade with China and India".[1]

Crawfurd's writings on Southeast Asia provided a wealth of information for those with a keen interest in the region, especially merchants, intellectuals, and aspiring imperial civil servants and officials. His body of scholarly work, however flawed and imperfect it may seem from a contemporary perspective, is a major contribution to our understanding of the socio-political and cultural milieu of colonial Malaya.

Colonial sources invariably provide the only means of historical information on Malaya in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Like many of his contemporaries, such as the British orientalist and linguist, William Marsden (1754–1836), and Stamford Raffles (1781–1826), Crawfurd sought to understand the interplay between mankind and its history, and the inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula often featured in his writings on ethnology and world history. The knowledge gained from his experiences and observations on the region would eventually be used to fuel his scientific debates on ethnology – in other words, the study of societies, cultures and the nature of mankind.

(Facing page) Portrait of John Crawfurd, 1857. *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*
(Below) *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China* is a record of John Crawfurd's commercial and diplomatic mission to the courts of Siam and Cochin China from 1821–22. The frontispiece shows a black-and-white version of the painting titled "A View of the Town and Roads of Singapore from the Government Hill" by Captain Robert James Elliot. *All rights reserved, Crawfurd, J. (1828). Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China: Exhibiting a View of the Actual State of Those Kingdoms. London: Henry Colburn.*

Crawfurd's Early Life and Career

Crawfurd was born on 13 August 1783 on the island of Islay in Scotland.[2] He was the son of Samuel Crawfurd, a physician and a "man of sense and prudence", and Margaret Campbell.[3] Crawfurd was educated in a village school in Bowmore, Islay. In 1799, he enrolled in medical school in Edinburgh; medicine was a field for which, according to his 1868 obituary in *The Sydney Morning Herald,* he "never had much taste, having been chosen for him" – presumably by his father.[4] It later became evident that young Crawfurd's interest lay in languages, history, ethnology, natural sciences and political administration.

After completing his medical studies in 1803, Crawfurd left for Calcutta, India, as an assistant surgeon in the East India Company's Bengal medical service, where he was assigned to the army.[5] In 1808, on completion of five years of active service in the northwestern provinces of British India, Crawfurd was appointed to the medical service at Prince of Wales Island, present-day Penang. Never one to sit on his laurels, Crawfurd used his time there to study the Malay language and its people.[6]

In 1811, Crawfurd, together with Raffles and another Scottish intellectual John Leyden (1775–1811), was invited by Lord Minto (1751–1814), then Governor-General of India, to accompany him on a military expedition against the Dutch in Java.[7] This marked a major turning point in Crawfurd's career; he would become, as the anthropologist Ter Ellingson wrote in his book, *The Myth of the Noble Savage,* "a doctor-turned-colonial-diplomat".[8]

Crawfurd held various senior administrative posts during the brief British occupation of Java between 1811 and 1816 due to his command of the Malay language, including an appointment as Resident at the royal court of the Sultan of Yogyakarta. He befriended the Javanese aristocratic literati and studied both Kawi, an ancient form of Javanese as well as contemporary Javanese.

On his return to Britain in 1817, Crawfurd became a fellow of the Royal Society. His position and local connections in the Malay Peninsula and Java enabled him to acquire a decent collection of local manuscripts. Putting together the information he had gathered during his sojourn in Southeast Asia, Crawfurd published his widely acclaimed three-volume *History of the Indian Archipelago* in 1820.[9] This seminal work, according to a review in *The Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* in 1856, placed him among "the first rank of ethnographers".[10]

In 1821, Crawfurd left England again for India; this time he was assigned to head a mission to Siam (now Thailand) and Cochin China (Vietnam), with the chief objective of opening up these countries to trade. However, he failed because of regional tensions and suspicions raised among the local authorities there.[11]

Crawfurd's Achievements in Singapore

On 9 June 1823, Crawfurd succeeded William Farquhar as the second Resident of Singapore – Crawfurd had first visited the island in 1822 enroute from India to Siam – and remained in office until 1826. It was during this period that Crawfurd made his biggest political achievement: he was instrumental in the proposal and negotiation of the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance on 2 August 1824, which saw Singapore being effectively ceded by its rulers, Sultan Hussein Shah and Temenggong Abdul Rahman, to the British East India Company.

Singapore flourished under Crawfurd's administration, which was marked by rapid growth in trade, population and revenue. Remarkably, by 1826, Singapore's revenue had outstripped that of Penang. Given his administrative accomplishments, historian C. M. Turnbull may be justified in praising Crawfurd as one of the three outstanding pioneer administrators of Singapore, after Raffles and William Farquhar (see text box on page 45).[12]

Crawfurd continued to play an active role in the British East India Company on completion of his tenure as Resident of Singapore in 1826, undertaking diplomatic assignments in Burma (now Myanmar), before retiring permanently to England in 1827.[13] Although Crawfurd left the region for

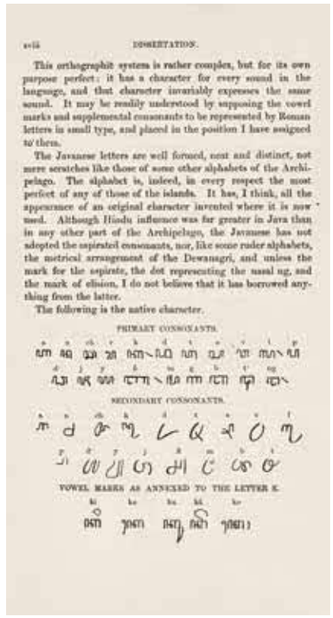
good, he continued to take a keen interest in matters concerning the Far East until the end of his life, becoming the first president of the London-based Straits Settlements Association on 31 January 1868.[14] Crawfurd passed away on 11 May 1868 at his residence in South Kensington, London, at the age of 85, leaving behind a son and two daughters.[15]

The Malay Peninsula in Crawfurd's Writings

An examination of Crawfurd's obituaries would give the impression that his literary fame continued to rise after he ended his career in Asia, to the extent that it seemed to have outshone his civil service accomplishments in the Far East.[16] In spite of several unsuccessful attempts to enter British politics, he continued making headlines in the intellectual world by producing notable publications such as *A Grammar and Dictionary of the Malay Language with A Preliminary Dissertation* (1852)[17] and *A Descriptive Dictionary of the Indian Islands & Adjacent Countries* (1856),[18] and through his journal contributions to the scholarly periodical of the Ethnological Society of London – which he led in 1861 as president.[19] As a leading ethnographer and expert on Southeast Asia, Crawfurd was well known among prominent intellectuals of the time, and was counted among Charles Darwin's circle of friends.[20]

Crawfurd's publications on the Far East were the result of his extensive journeys and voyages made during his time in the region, where he amassed a diversity of materials on ethnology, natural history, local history, geography and geology.[21] As an active participant in the lively 19th-century scientific and philosophical debates on the nature of mankind, he took advantage of his observations in Asia to roundly debunk the idea that offspring produced from the union or "commixture" of two different races would become sterile and incapable of producing healthy children of their own.

In his article in the journal of the Ethnological Society of London, *On the Supposed Infecundity of Human Hybrids or Crosses,* which was read in 1864 and published in 1865, Crawfurd highlighted the theory that "mongrels resulting from the union of two different races of the human family" were sterile (like a mule – a hybrid between two opposite species of the same genus of lower animals). The idea had "lately sprung up" and was beginning to obtain currency in France and America.[22] Crawfurd saw this theory as one that was "without a shadow of foundation", citing evidence in the mixed-race communities in


xviii DISSERTATION.

This orthographic system is rather complex, but for its own purpose perfect: it has a character for every sound in the language, and that character invariably expresses the same sound. It may be readily understood by supposing the vowel marks and supplemental consonants to be represented by Roman letters in small type, and placed in the position I have assigned to them.

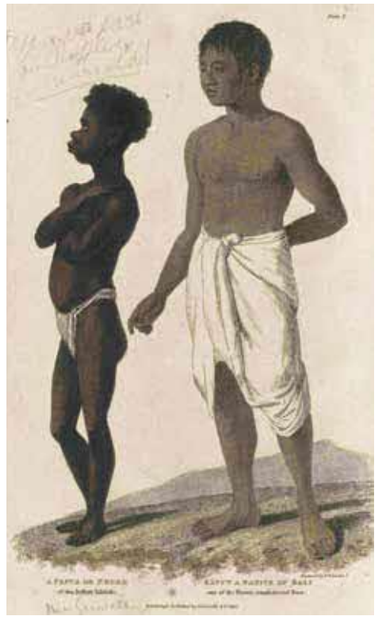
The Javanese letters are well formed, neat and distinct, not mere scratches like those of some other alphabets of the Archipelago. The alphabet is, indeed, in every respect the most perfect of any of those of the islands. It has, I think, all the appearance of an original character invented where it is now used. Although Hindu influence was far greater in Java than in any other part of the Archipelago, the Javanese has not adopted the aspirated consonants, nor, like some ruder alphabets, the metrical arrangement of the Dewanagri, and unless the mark for the sepirate, the dot representing the nasal ng, and the mark of elision, I do not believe that it has borrowed anything from the latter.

The following is the native character.

PRIMARY CONSONANTS.

SECONDARY CONSONANTS.

VOWEL MARKS AS ANNEXED TO THE LETTER K.



(Above left) Page xviii of *A Grammar and Dictionary of the Malay Language with a Preliminary Dissertation* shows the primary consonants, secondary consonants and vowel marks of the letter "K" in Javanese script. *All rights reserved, Crawfurd, J. (1852). A Grammar and Dictionary of the Malay Language with a Preliminary Dissertation. London: Smith, Elder, and Co.*
(Above right) A Papua or Negro of the Indian Islands (left) and Katut, a native of Bali (right). *All rights reserved, Crawfurd, J. (1820). History of the Indian Archipelago: Containing an Account of the Manners, Arts, Languages, Religions, Institutions, and Commerce of its Inhabitants (Vol. I). Edinburgh: Printed for Archibald Constable and Co.*

Asia, "which multiply just as fast as do the parent stocks from which they derived".[23] He would have also drawn this conclusion from his observation of the mixed-race communities in the Malay Peninsula – as suggested in his other ethnological article, *On the Commixture of the Races of Man as Affecting the Progress of Civilisation*.[24] Here, pointing to the Peranakan communities of the Malay Peninsula, Crawfurd wrote:

> "The intercourse and settlement are still in progress, and out of it has sprung a cross-breed known, as in the colonising Arabs and Chinese, by the term Páranakan [sic], with the national designation of the father annexed, and literally signifying 'offspring of the womb,'..."[25]

In Malacca, which had been colonised by the Portuguese since 1511, he observed that a cross-race of Eurasians had sprung up, and they had "so much of Malay blood as to be hardly distinguishable from the Malays themselves".[26]

Crawfurd's view that the children of mixed racial unions would become an "intermediate" offspring, superior to the race of the "inferior" parent, but inferior to the race of the "superior" one, would seem somewhat more controversial.[27] When discussing the Peranakan communities of the Malay Peninsula, he pointed out that "these half-castes speak the language of the father as well as that of the mother, and are distinguished from the pure Malay by superior intelligence".[28] In *History of the Indian Archipelago,* Crawfurd found that the Chinese who intermarry "with the natives of the country, generate a race inferior in energy and spirit" to the Chinese.[29] He also wrote supportively of mixed-racial unions between Europeans and native inhabitants in European colonies because he saw it as a laudable, if patronising, way of improving the existing indigenous societies.[30]

In his scientific views, Crawfurd was a believer in polygenesis, a theory that supposes the multiple origins of mankind.[31] Mankind, according to the tenets of polygenesis, consists of different races or species that are spread across different geographical locations around the world.[32] He opposed Darwinism because of its stand on the common origins of man, considering it to be without firm foundation and not backed by historical or archaeological evidence.[33] A recent 2016 study by Gareth Knapman has furthermore revealed that Crawfurd opposed Darwinism because it promoted a hierarchy of races, which Crawfurd, as an advocate of racial equality, was completely against.[34]

Crawfurd assumed that each race was equally as old as any other, and the reason behind their distribution across the globe was a cosmic mystery "beyond the power of our comprehension".[35] He distinguished each race according to their outer physical appearances, such as the colour of the skin, hair and eyes, average height, hair texture and facial features.[36] But in spite of their differences, he argued, they all belonged to the same genus, *Homo* (modern humans are classified as *Homo sapiens*), just like the different breeds of dogs, although having different physical features, are all from the same family, *Canidae*.[37]

Crawfurd was against using anatomy to distinguish the "species" of mankind, more specifically the classification of races according to the shape of the skull that was being promoted by the anatomist and naturalist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840), with the launch of his publication *De Generis humani varietate nativa (On the Natural Variety of Mankind)*, in 1795. Crawfurd, perhaps also drawing his conclusion from his knowledge of medicine, stressed that regardless of race, one would not be able to tell the difference between the skull of a "Hindu-Chinese" and that of a Malay.[38] This was why Crawfurd thought it best to catalogue the different races according to their external physical features, and this was how he would distinguish between the inhabitants of the Indian Archipelago[39] and the Malay Peninsula in his studies.

The inhabitants of the Indian Archipelago, in Crawfurd's observation, consist of many different races, which he divided into three groups based on appearance: the brown-complexioned, straight-haired men, such as the Malays; men of dark complexion with woolly hair, whom Crawfurd termed the "Oriental Negroes" because their features were similar to the "African Negroes" (although Crawfurd believed that the two were not of the same race due to the differences in their physical characteristics and language); and men of brown complexion with frizzled hair, like the inhabitants of Timor.[40]

The people of the Malay Peninsula consisted of the brown-complexioned Malays and the dark, woolly-haired, "Oriental Negroes", also known locally as the "Sámang" (Semang) or "Bila".[41] In *History of the Indian Archipelago,* Crawfurd noted that, besides their appearance, even the language spoken by the Archipelago's "Oriental Negroes" was distinct from the brown-coloured races of the region, which would mark them out as separate races.[42]

Crawfurd's direct examination of the aboriginals of the Malay Peninsula, the Orang Asli, seemed to have been limited to the three Semang people he saw in Penang and Singapore, as well as the few Orang Laut (or "sea gypsies") he came across, which was understandable since he had never ventured into the interior of Malaya.[43] Instead, Crawfurd had to rely on the findings of other Orientalists, such as James Richardson Logan (1819–69) and John Turnbull Thomson (1821–84), when studying the other Aslian tribes.[44] Those who possessed Malay-like features – the Jakun for instance – were deemed to belong to the Malay group, which Crawfurd labelled as "uncultivated Malays".[45] The other two Malay classes were the "civilised Malays" and the Orang Laut.[46]

In his views on the global progress of mankind, Crawfurd regarded the Malays and the Javanese to be the most civilised of the inhabitants of the Indian Archipelago.[47] In a manner that was consistent with the philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment of measuring the progress of mankind – which was not surprising given Crawfurd's background and education in Edinburgh – he divided the cultures of the world into different stages of civilisation. These stages ranged from the refined to the savage, and he used cultural and material indicators to measure their level of progress, such as the development of language and numerals, advancement of social order, the advancement of the arts, tools used, weaponry, and the state of agriculture, technology, architecture and so forth.[48]

Crawfurd argued that (civilised) Malays were more advanced than the "Oriental Negroes" of the Malay Peninsula because they had learnt how to domesticate animals and cultivate plants, possessed the art of writing and the use of numerals, and had knowledge of useful metals and how to work them. The "Oriental Negroes" in contrast, who "wander the forests in quest of a precarious subsistence, without fixed habitation" had not yet developed letters and numbers, and had either achieved little or none of the other cultural markers mentioned above. Crawfurd also drew a

SINGAPORE'S OTHER FOUNDER: JOHN CRAWFURD

Historian C.M. Turnbull is right in pointing out that John Crawfurd, along with Singapore's first British Resident William Farquhar, has faded into obscurity.[1] We often attribute the success and founding of modern Singapore to the man whose iconic bronze statue stands in Empress Place – Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles. As Singapore's second British Resident from 1823 to 1826, Crawfurd was an excellent administrator who, in the words of Turnbull, "provided the efficient administration that Raffles could not supply".[2]

Crawfurd guided Singapore during a time of rapid economic and population expansion.[3] He promoted agriculture, battled against piracy as far as his scanty means permitted and dealt with Singapore's lawlessness.[4] He was instrumental in turning Raffles' town plan of Singapore into a reality, enforcing standards laid down by Raffles for "beauty, regularity and cleanliness".[5]

Commercial Square (present-day Raffles Place) was developed and a "bridge was constructed across the river".[6] The settlement's streets were both widened and levelled and given English street signs, and street lamps began to emerge during his administration.[7]

As an enlightened liberal, Crawfurd continued Raffles' efforts at suppressing slavery and promoted free trade with a level of zeal that was greater than his predecessor. By reducing administrative expense, he was able to abolish anchorage and other levies, making Singapore a unique port that was free from tariffs and port charges. By the end of his administration, Singapore was the wealthiest of all British settlements in Southeast Asia.

Not all of Raffles plans for Singapore were followed, however. Crawfurd reversed Raffles' ban on gambling, regulating the practice through the sale of licences to gambling establishments.[8]

Notes
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8 Turnbull, 2009, pp. 45–46.

A group of Orang Asli, the indigenous people of the Malay Peninsula, late 19th century. *Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

connection between the practice of wearing scant clothing and savagery.[49]

The Crawfurdian World View

Crawfurd used material and cultural measures to assess the state of civilisation that a race had attained. When it came to explaining how people got to where they were in society, he would identify access to domesticated animals and cultivated plants, cross-cultural engagements with a "superior" race, geography and the intellectual capacity of a race as the underlying forces that determined racial progress.[50]

In order for a culture to develop, according to Crawfurd's theory, it would need access to resources that are necessary to engineer growth, such as animals that can be domesticated for work and consumption, and plants that can be cultivated.[51] Contact with a superior civilisation, whether through cross-cultural engagements or conquest, could also improve a race.[52]

Cultures that thrive are invariably located in places that encourage development and have few geographical barriers that would impede growth, such as impregnable forests or mountains. Access to domesticated plants and animals and cross-cultural engagements are also directly tied to geography – isolated cultures cannot be expected to benefit from cross-cultural contacts, and geographical barriers could prevent a culture from obtaining the resources it needed for advancement. Crawfurd often referred to the Eskimos to corroborate his view, stating that the indigenous peoples of the Arctic and subarctic regions could hardly be expected to progress in the isolated and frozen lands they inhabited where scant plants and animals were available to help spur growth.[53]

Crawfurd also offered an interesting theory about the inhabitants of Britain: he believed that they would still be in a savage state, isolated in their lush forests, if the superior Romans – who introduced letters and numerals to the savage and barbaric tribes of Europe – had not conquered Britain.[54] But Crawfurd was curious about the reason why some races had advanced more quickly than others, despite having the same civilisational advantages.[55] Europe, for instance, seemed to be progressing at a faster pace than China. He reasoned that it was because each race had different intellectual capacities, or in Crawfurd's words, "the quality of the race".[56] Europeans, he concluded, had the highest mental aptitude, which explained their rapid advancement and dominance during Crawfurd's lifetime.[57]

Crawfurd's theory, in a nutshell, was that racial advancement was on the whole decided by a combination of geographical, cultural and biological factors. He then applied his ideas about the progress of mankind to explain the history of the Malay Peninsula's inhabitants, framing it within a global context. The "Oriental Negroes" of the Malay Peninsula were on a lower scale of civilisation because of their isolation in the dense forests and mountains of the interior.[58] The Malays, on the other hand, had attained a certain degree of advancement in their superior Sumatran homeland before migrating to the more geographically hostile Malay Peninsula that was shrouded in dense forest, "a serious and almost insuperable obstacle to the early progress of civilisation".[59]

Crawfurd thought that the Malay civilisation was much improved by its contact with Hinduism and, later, Islam, from where it obtained its letters and culture.[60] Raffles, on the contrary, opined that Islam degraded the Malays[61], as did the British orientalist William Marsden.[62]

Crawfurd's Perceptions of the Malay Peninsula

The Malay Peninsula and its inhabitants played an important role in Crawfurd's writings and in shaping his views on ethnology and world history. Crawfurd's ideas and views discussed in this essay are only a fragment of the many ways in which they informed his writings. They featured regularly in his scientific arguments, as seen in his position on the children of mixed-race unions, where he used his observations of the Peranakan communities in the British settlements to support his stand.

It is likely that Crawfurd's perceptions would have been different if he had never stepped foot in the region. But he did, and based on his first-hand knowledge, Crawfurd applied his ethnological and scientific theories on race to his understanding of the Malay Peninsula's history, and connected its inhabitants to the rest of mankind to formulate and advance his ideas on the history of human origins and progress.

It is clear that Crawfurd was no petty intellectual figure of the 19th century. Because his works were highly regarded and were widely read, he would have influenced how others saw the Malay Peninsula and its place in world history. The Malay Peninsula, despite what many in the West thought, was far from being a literary backwater of the British Empire, and there were others like Crawfurd – such as the British naturalist and anthropologist Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) – who would feature the region in their scientific works. Crawfurd's ideas on mankind may have promoted the idea of European racial supremacy, but a closer look at his complex works would reveal that he was probably more of a realist and a practical visionary who was more concerned about finding logical explanations to the different conditions of mankind. ♦

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MANGROVES
A TALE OF SURVIVAL

Mangroves are an integral part of the marine ecosystem. **Ang Seow Leng** explains why these hardy and resilient plants are vital for the survival of humankind.

Mangroves, the forest between land and sea, are fast disappearing as the urban jungle encroaches on its existence and threatens its survival. Mangrove Watch, a global monitoring programme based in Australia that partners mangrove scientists and the community, has noted that the world's mangroves are disappearing at an average of 2 percent a year.[1]

Mangroves are defined as "a tree, shrub, palm or ground fern, generally exceeding one half metre in height, that normally grows above mean sea level in the intertidal zone of marine coastal environments and estuarine margins".[2] The term mangrove is also used to describe the habitat that is made up of such trees and shrubs. Mangrove habitats are also known as "coastal woodlands", "mangals", "tidal forests" and "mangrove forests".[3] They are distributed in tropical and sub-tropical regions, with approximately 70 known species found in the world today.

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Mangrove Impressions

According to the botanist Philip Barry Tomlinson, mangroves have existed since prehistoric times, dating back to the Paleocene period more than 60 million years ago. However, these hardy trees, with their maze of tangled roots, were researched and studied only from the 16th and 17th centuries onwards when European colonisation began.[4]

Mangrove swamps did not always leave a favourable impression on those who encountered them. In 1878, the zoologist William Hornaday (who was later appointed the first director of the New York Zoological Park, known today as the Bronx Zoo), was tasked to collect natural history specimens for a Professor Ward of Rochester, New York. Hornaday described his first glimpse of mangroves in Singapore:

> "Entering Singapore by way of New Harbour is like getting into a house through the scullery window... For the first stage out from New Harbour, the road is built through a muddy and dismal mangrove swamp. Here and there we pass a group of dingy and weather-beaten Malay houses standing on posts over the soft and slimy mud, or perhaps over a thin sheet of murky water. Delightful situation, truly, for the habitations of civilized human beings. Monkey[s] would choose much better."[5]

(Facing page) Mangroves at Pulau Semakau. Photo taken by Ria Tan on 9 August 2011. *Courtesy of WildSingapore.*
(Above) Mangroves at Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve. *All rights reserved, Yong, D. L., & Lim, K. C. (2016). A Naturalist's Guide to the Birds of Singapore (p. 5). Oxford, England: John Beaufoy Publishing.*

It was a more pleasant scene some 30 years later in 1908 when another visitor, Count Fritz von Hochberg, had this to say:

> "... I was astonished to see how much had been done to the place since I was there four years ago. Lots of these swampy, feverish places around the harbor and the Chinese quarter have been filled up and planted, and it made the place ever so much nicer looking".[6]

The Mangrove Ecosystem

Studies have shown that the "dismal" and "swampy, feverish" mangroves offer a myriad of uses and benefits for both humans and the environment. These fragile ecosystems provide shelter and protection for several species of fishes, crustaceans and reptiles as well as serve as feeding, nesting and roosting grounds for migratory birds.

Several flora and fauna species are indigenous to mangrove swamps in Singapore, such as the Singapore Rubble Crab, *Favus granulatus,* that was discovered in 1900 on our intertidal shores.[7] Mangrove wood is used as fuel and for thatching, piling and construction purposes. Mangrove trees also act as an effective natural barrier and help to protect shorelines against soil erosion and tsunamis. Some species of mangroves are also used in traditional folk medicine as cures for various malaise.[8]

Perhaps, most importantly, mangroves act as carbon sinks to absorb huge amounts of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere – between two and four times greater than the rates observed in mature tropical forests. In this sense, mangroves play a key role in mitigating the deleterious effects of climate change and global warming.[9]

A study carried out in late 2014 by a team of researchers from the National University of Singapore's Department of Geography revealed that mangroves occupy just 960 hectares or less than 1 percent of the land area in Singapore, but store disproportionately high levels of carbon – 450,571.7 tonnes to be exact, or 3.7 percent of Singapore's national carbon emissions in 2010.[10] Additionally, mangroves are able to absorb heavy metals, metalloids and certain pollutants from the air, thus hampering the flow of toxins into the food chain.[11]

Unlike other plant species, the ever resilient mangroves can survive in oxygen-poor soils and high salinity environments. One of the ways in which mangroves survive in a hostile environment is to grow anchor roots that penetrate deep into the soft sediments as well as long aerial roots called pneumatophores that radiate from the trunk just beneath the soil to prop itself up above water. These breathing roots also perform the function of absorbing oxygen from the air. As a result, mangrove plants have developed a tangle of prop-root structures that are either pencil-like *(Avicennia sp.)* in appearance, resemble the human bent knee *(Bruguiera sp.)* or look like stilts *(Rhizophora sp.)*.[12]

Furthermore, as mangrove wetlands are coastal plant communities that belong to a larger coastal ecosystem, they act as a connecting link and maintain stability between different coastal ecosystems such as coral reefs, seagrass flats and freshwater swamps.[13]

The four most common mangrove species found in Singapore include *Avicennia* (api-api), *Bruguiera, Rhizophora* (bakau), and *Sonneratia*.[14] It is estimated that the island was home to 75 sq km of mangrove forests two centuries ago compared to the minuscule 7.35 sq km found today.[15] By the end of the 19th century, a sizable portion of mangroves had been destroyed by logging activities.[16] In the subsequent decades, large swathes of mangrove forests were removed for industrial development and conversion to coastal reservoirs, the most well known of which is Marina Reservoir in the heart of the new downtown.[17] Today, there are only a few scattered patches of mangroves left in Singapore,[18] and these are mostly found in the northern part of the island.

One of the most well-known mangrove conservation sites is at Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve. It is a popular site for migratory shorebird watching and photography and has clearly marked nature trails with raised boarded walkways to provide easy access and also prevent wildlife and vegetation from being trampled on.[19] The wetland reserve contains the largest tracts of mangrove forests on the mainland.[20] Other places in Singapore that were named after mangroves, such as Kampong Sungei

TSUNAMI AND MANGROVES: BOON OR BANE?

In 2015, Sri Lanka became the first nation to protect all its mangrove forests under a comprehensive programme.[21] The following year in July, Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena inaugurated the world's first mangrove museum in Sri Lanka, declaring that the "National Coastal and Marine Resources Conservation Week" be observed in September every year.[22]

Why the great emphasis in protecting mangroves in Sri Lanka? The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the world's largest and most diverse environmental network,[23] noted in a 2006 report that the gigantic tidal waves unleashed by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami caused much less damage in areas in Sri Lanka that had relatively intact coastal ecosystems.[24] When the IUCN compared two tsunami-devastated villages in the Hambantota area of Sri Lanka, it discovered that nearly 6,000 deaths were reported in the village that wasn't protected by dense mangrove and scrub forests compared to just two deaths in another village that was bordered by such vegetation.[25]

However, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations has cautioned such oversimplification, adding that several factors impact the efficacy of mangroves as coastal protection against waves, wind and water. These include the height and velocity of the tsunami, the topography and orientation of the coastline, the width of the forest, and the height, density and the species composition of the mangroves. The FAO warned that it is possible for mangroves and other coastal trees to be uprooted during a tsunami and cause even more extensive damage.[26]

Attap and Sungei Bakau Rungkup in Jurong, no longer exist.[27]

In an article published in *The Singapore Free Press* on 20 January 1951, Marian Wells described the carefree lives of village folks who made a living from firewood harvested from mangrove forests in Jurong:

> "The bakau settlers themselves are shabby and poor. Bakau stakes provide walls for huts and lean-tos, and even material for floors. It was amusing to see a kitten clinging desperately to a stake while its body swung in space. It had fallen through a gap in the flooring. Apart from the felling of trees the men are engaged in some fishing and crab catching. Children find sport in racing along raised mudbanks and plank bridges which are their only pathways in a land of mud and sludge."[28]

A 1915 photo by G. R. Lambert & Co. showing some attap houses in a kampong, possibly at Bukit Timah. Mangrove habitats also host nipah palms, whose leaves are used for thatching. *Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved. Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009.*

The Regeneration of Mangroves

The debate on land use in Singapore is not a recent phenomenon. In 1951, R. E. Holttum, then Professor of Botany at the University of Malaya, contributed a lengthy article in *The Straits Times* arguing why mangrove swamps should be preserved in Singapore.[29] In Ulu Pandan for instance, some 4 sq km of the mangroves were sacrificed for prawn cultivation in 1957, leaving only 1 sq km untouched.[30]

Almost three decades later, a 1983 *Straits Times* article by Mark Pestana pondered if mangrove swamps could survive in land-scarce Singapore, with Dr Wee Yeow Chin of the Malayan Nature Society and Dr Leo Tan of the Singapore Science Centre weighing in on the issue.[31]

Today, mangrove conservation efforts in Singapore are carried out by means of legislation, management and education as well as targeted restoration efforts in specially demarcated areas. Together, nature lovers, botanists and staff from the National Parks Board (NParks) have taken concrete steps to preserve our remaining mangroves. For instance, the Restore Ubin Mangroves ground-up initiative supported by NParks was formed to study and rehabilitate the mangrove ecosystem at Pulau Ubin as well as to conduct activities to raise awareness of Singapore's rich and diverse mangrove habitats.[39]

In 2015, a mangrove arboretum was set up by NParks at Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve to conserve the country's dwindling mangrove species, especially the critically endangered Eye of the Crocodile, *Bruguiera hainasii*. Interestingly, Singapore is home to 11 of the remaining 200 trees in the world.[40]

As it is extremely difficult to replant mangroves, Singapore can take pride in two successful mangrove reforestation projects – at Sungei Api Api and Pulau Semakau. Mangroves along Sungei Api Api that were effected by reclamation works at Pasir Ris have been regenerated by NParks. When the Semakau Landfill was created by merging Pulau Sakeng with Pulau Semakau in the mid-1990s, the 13-hectare plot of mangroves that were destroyed during reclamation was successfully replanted with 400,000 mangrove seedlings.[41]

As mangroves are one of the most threatened habitats in the world, concerted and sustained efforts are needed to conduct further research into these hardy intertidal plants as well as to educate and create public awareness of an ecosystem that predates even the human species. ♦

MANGROVE WOOD FOR CHARCOAL

Wood from the *Rhizophora apiculata,* also known as *bakau,* makes for good-quality charcoal, which is essentially carbon-rich burnt down wood that is used as a form of fuel. Charcoal is no longer produced in Singapore today but the trade still thrives in parts of Southeast Asia where there are abundant tracts of *bakau*.[32] Matang Mangrove Forest Reserve in Perak, the largest of its kind in Malaysia, for instance, produces sizable quantities of charcoal for export.

An interesting pictorial description of Singapore's charcoal burning industry from yesteryear can be found in the 22 June 1935 edition of *The Straits Times* (page 20).[33]

At the charcoal production factory, the mangrove stems are stripped of their bark and then arranged according to size. The stripped mangrove stems are then placed in the kiln to be incinerated into charcoal. *Photo by J. Yong.*

Typically, the harvested *bakau* stems are cut to size and transported along the river to the charcoal production factory, where they are stripped of their barks and arranged according to size before being placed in a kiln to be incinerated into charcoal.[34]

Housewives in pre-war Singapore had to make do with charcoal burning stoves. In his book, *The Singapore House and Residential Life, 1819–1939*, Norman Edwards described these kitchens as "extraordinarily primitive", consisting of an open stove made of brick with either a stone slab or a concrete top at bench height, with two round holes to place the cooking vessels over burning wood or charcoal underneath. A bundle of approximately 2.5–5 kg of charcoal could last a large family for about two days.[35]

Mr Lim Tiong Sui, who used to run a charcoal business in Singapore, recalls purchasing mangrove wood from the Malay villagers at Chua Chu Kang, Tinggi and the Naval Base areas and supervising the firing of the raw material at his charcoal kiln in Jurong. As the demand for charcoal in Singapore was more than what could be supplied locally, it was also imported from neighbouring countries like Indonesia and Thailand.[36]

In the 1930s, imported charcoal was unloaded at the beach near Singapore Hainan Hwee Kuan (clan association) along Beach Road but in subsequent years, it moved to the wharf at Clyde Terrace, then to Crawford Street and finally to Tanjong Rhu in the late 1950s.[37] In 1986, temporary warehouse facilities in Lorong Halus, Singapore's only charcoal port, were offered to 17 charcoal merchants from Tanjong Rhu, which was affected by the Kallang River clean-up. By 1992, the Lorong Halus port had closed and the charcoal import and export business moved to Pasir Panjang Terminal.[38]

The use of cooking gas and electricity spelt the end of the charcoal industry in Singapore. In 1948, there were more than 50 charcoal dealers in Singapore, including 12 who owned charcoal kilns in Indonesia. By 1988, only half of the dealers remained. No new licences have been issued to charcoal dealers in recent years and the government has stopped offering rental spaces to charcoal factories.

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寻找“南洋”

从1920年代末文艺理论初探文人对南洋之印象

Chinese authors in 1920s Singapore were faced with the call to produce works with a distinctive “Nanyang flavour”. **Goh Yu Mei** explains how these early writers defined this new genre of literature.

关于新加坡华文新兴文学[1]起源的年份以及其发展分期，不同学者有着不同的看法。然而，大多学者都注意到1920年代至1930年代期间是新加坡华文新兴文学中本地意识萌芽与兴起的时期。[2] 回顾当时在新加坡的文人所发表的文艺理论中，不乏明确提倡富有“南洋色彩”的“南洋文学”的文章。这在1930年代中期也进一步发展至有关于 “马来亚文学”的争论。

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随着越来越多篇文艺理论探讨着何谓“南洋色彩”及“南国文艺”，文人作家也试图在一个比较抽象的概念上，赋予这些词藻具体的特征。他们从自己对所在地的印象，抽取出他们所认为的特点，尝试以此为血肉，塑造一个拥有本地色彩的“南洋文学”。本文将会从1927年到1930年期间在新加坡华文报章上所发表的文艺理论尝试论述这点。

文学中本地意识的兴起

19世纪末至20世纪初，中国经历了巨大的社会动荡与变化。在这一历史背景下，许多中国人迁移到世界各地谋求新生活。新加坡也是他们的目的地之一。[3] 这个移民浪潮清楚地反映在当时新加坡人口结构的变化。1824年，在新加坡的华人人数为10,683人，占总人口的31%。近100年后，华人人数在1921年增加了40倍，升至418,358人，占总人口的75.3%。[4] 这些华人人口当中，有来自中国的文人，也有在本地或回到中国接受教育并活跃于本地文化界的知识分子。他们有些担任本地报章及其文艺副刊的编辑，有些发表文艺作品，成为本地华文文学发展的主要推动力。

虽然移居本地，但是从他们发表的报刊创刊词、社论以及文学作品中，可以看出这些初来乍到的文人仍然心系中国。他们的文章大多讨论中国所面临的问题，而文学作品中也不乏希望回到中国或贡献中国的情怀。[5]

随着在本地居住的时间越久，这些文人对本地的情感也逐渐加深，并且更加关注本地在各方面的发展。[6] 除此之外，1919年在中国发生的五四运动，同样地也冲击着本地华人社会。然而，要在本地推行五四运动以白话文撰写作品的主张，文人们需要考虑本地的特殊环境，才能顺利在南洋推广这些源自于中国的主张。[7] 这些因素促使文人的本地意识开始萌芽，进而开始提倡在文学中加入本地色彩。在1927年至1930年期间，新加坡报章上更是发表了不少关于“南洋色彩”的文艺理论。[8] 其中一些文艺理论在阐述作者对于在文学作品中加入“南洋色彩”的看法，同时也显露了该作者对于南洋景观的印象。

《新国民日报》文艺副刊《荒岛》编者张金燕在1927年发表的《南洋与文艺》一文中写道：

> “我虽然不是完全一个飘荡南洋有名的马六甲海峡的椰果，但是未学成时已在无野狗患的乡土‘S埠’培植到胡子刻满嘴唇；黄河泥色的滔水，又虽未浸染过，但我的皮肤遗传着祖宗旧衣裳，而黄姜、咖哩，把我肠胃腌实了，因此我对于南洋的色彩浓厚过祖宗的五经，饮椰浆多过大禹治下的水了。”[9]

又如，曾圣提也在《醒醒吧，星城的艺人》一文提到：

> “穿过了椰子的长林，走上沥青的马路，驶进黑烟漫天的工厂，缒入暗无天日的矿洞，你将看见，真理在那里徘徊。……
>
> 醒醒吧，星城的艺人！旧世界在烈日下消溶了，百咫高椰可以飘挂我们的旗，万里无云的长空表示我们的坦白；大象象征我们的巩固，长绿的叶子宣告我们的新鲜，海助我们呐喊，我们的新鲜的环境，供给我们无穷的材料！”[10]

另外，陈炼青于1929年发表的《文艺与地方色彩》中阐述：

著名编辑及报人曾圣提1927年来到新加坡，担任《南洋商报》电讯翻译和副刊编辑。他曾在他所主编的《南洋商报》副刊《文艺周刊》上主张要“以血与汗铸造南洋文艺的铁塔”。版权所有，骆明总编。(2003)。《南来作家研究资料》。新加坡：新加坡国家图书馆管理局、新加坡文艺协会。

(前页) 椰子虽然不是南洋特有的植物，但是却常被作为代表南洋的植物。李急麟收藏。版权所有，李急麟和新加坡国家图书馆管理局2009。
(下) 陈炼青与《悲其遇》（右下）作者张金燕在提倡“南洋色彩”的文章中都提及椰子为代表南洋的事物之一。而于1960年出版的《马来亚风情画》（左下）封面亦绘有椰树。图像来源：新加坡国家图书馆管理局。

> “作家溷在椰丛下，写着梅花、雪片、杨柳……等东西，还是不全改掉；而我们地方色彩、风味，不知怎的总蕴在作家们的肚子里，似乎烟士披里纯未到以前，这些都不愿意发泄了吧！
>
> 如其谓南洋的景物太粗俗与太不艺术，所以够不上我们的作家赏鉴的话，就我们的眼光看起来却未必是。这里的本地风光，倒也不见得这样的难堪。你看，苍翠的椰林、浓密的橡胶、茂盛的芭蕉、耸立的老树，实在觉得可爱；兼之那富于雨量的气候，‘一雨便成秋’的热带的生活，似乎不无一点诗意；即如落日斜晖，我们在海边眺望，大自然的壮丽奇伟，似不能说比中国的不好看些。”[11]

三位文人作家在鼓励位于本地的作家撰写拥有南洋色彩的文学作品时，也在文章中描述了一些他们心目中所认为可以代表南洋的事物。这包括了动植物（如：椰子、橡胶、香蕉及大象）、自然景观（大海）、热带气候、经济活动（如：矿洞及工厂）以及食品（如：黄姜及咖喱）。

1930年《星洲日报》上的文艺论争

1930年3月19日《星洲日报·野葩》刊登了由“陵”所撰写的文章——《文艺的方向》，继而引发了一场延续约两个月之久的文艺论争。三名文人（悠悠、陈则矫、滔滔）针对陵的《文艺的方向》发表了他们对于当时“南国文艺”[12] 所应发展的方向。虽然对于文学作品应发展的具体方向和方法有所不同，但是他们都认为文学应该含有社会性，而非单纯是属于个人的。[13]

在这论争中，滔滔于1930年4月30日发表的《对于南国文艺的商榷》中明确指出南国的特征：

> “因此，我们要创设或树植南洋的文艺，我们便首先要认取南国的一般的社会的特质。所以首先我就想简单的写出据我所观察到的南国社会几个特质大概。
>
> 谁都可以看见，南国的经济生活不过某国经济体系中底很多脉络的一

条吧了，并且这一条脉络的命运，十分之七八不但待决于某国，而且操权于他处。这点表示什么？就是很清楚的表示南国经济仅是世界经济的大机构中一个小齿，密切地结合着。当然绝不是‘旧经济组织’。

其次，南国是个商品的推销场，或者说膨胀的资本主义的排泄地；同时，又是天然物产的吸取底场所。所以，南国一方面试商业繁盛，尤其是小商业异常地发达的地方，另一方面却包含着广大的劳苦群众。

而且，这儿是各民族混杂密集的地方，各民族劳苦群众支持着南国社会的生存。就以所知某地大工厂来说，总共有人数三千左右，华人只有七八百，还不够全厂人数三分之一，其他多是印人或土人，其中尤以印人为多。其他当然可以得到类似的情形。

这样，我好像乘着特别快车由星洲到槟城匆匆把这儿的特质的大概说过了，现在进而说到我对于这么一个情形下的南国应该建设什么一种的文艺底一点意见。

……

自然，南国有它底质，而应该有它底地方色彩的文艺（不是地方主义或什么乡土派，请莫误会）。好像植物般的，南国有它底疏朗的椰影或阴郁的橡林，北国的浓艳的牡丹总不会在这儿开放奇葩吧。”[14]

滔滔从经济角度，描绘了他所认为的“南国”（主要只有马来亚）。他指出南国的多元民族社会，也点出种植、生产以及商贸为南国的主要经济活动。在以植物来代表南国时，他也选择椰树和橡胶作为南国植物的代表。

滔滔也于同年5月10日在《星洲日报》的另一副刊《垦荒》上发表的《我们所需要的文艺》一文中表示：

“沉郁的橡林，疏朗的椰影，不会生长在温带的中原；漫天飞舞的白雪，雪花掩映的红梅，也不会在南国有其踪影。这是地质和气候底自然关系上必然现象。

同样，文艺也应有地方色彩的衣裳。

我们看看吧，在这儿无论是社会关系上或自然关系上，我们目光所接触的事物，耳朵所听到的传说，大都和我们本国的互异。这儿有各色各样的民族群总；这儿有整千整万的锡矿的和胶园的苦力，这儿有西方带来的物质文明，同时也有人类黑暗的深渊，五光十色，应有尽有。”[15]

除了之前提到“多元民族社会”、“橡胶”和“椰树”之外，这篇文章也点出南洋一带受到西方国家的影响，以及暗示着南洋社会内的问题。

结语：中国以外的“南洋”

文人们在提倡拥有本地色彩的南洋文学时，主张要描写以南洋为背景的文学作品。他们在论述自己的主张时，也时常描绘了有关南洋的意象。综上所述，从1927年到1930年在新加坡报章上发表的文艺理论中提到的特征有：椰树或椰林、锡矿或矿场、橡胶、本地食品（椰浆或黄姜）、香蕉、热带气候及多元民族社会。橡胶种植以及采锡是战前马来亚主要的经济活动，因此不难想象为何他们会以此作为代表南洋的特征。然而，令人好奇的是“椰树”或“椰林”这个常被作为南洋的代表特征，却非南洋独有的植物。

上文中所提到的滔滔的《我们所需要的文艺》中，他所提出的南洋景象大多是对比中国[16]景观，并且列举出两者之间有所不同的地方。

此外，陈则矫于1930年4月23日于《星洲日报·野葩》上发表的文章《关于文艺》中也不难看出这种对比中国文坛的倾向：

“就是给你写了几篇‘亚答’叶盖的房子的主人翁的小说吧，也不过暗示着张资平的小资产阶级的恋爱派罢了；就是给你写了几篇关于南洋土人的生活的小说吧，也不过暗示着鲁迅的‘阿Q正传’派而已。”[17]

（下）橡胶种植和采锡是战前马来亚主要的经济活动之一，因而可能使得文人们在文章中也以此作为本地色彩的例子。李急麟收藏。版权所有，李急麟和新加坡国家图书馆管理局2009。
（右）这幅1842年印制的石版画描绘了不同种族的人士在天福宫外活动的情景。多元种族社会也是文人们在文论中所提出的南洋社会特点之一。天福宫石版画，1842年，Alfred T. Agate 作画、J. A. Rolph 雕刻。图像由新加坡国家文物局属下的新加坡国家博物馆提供。

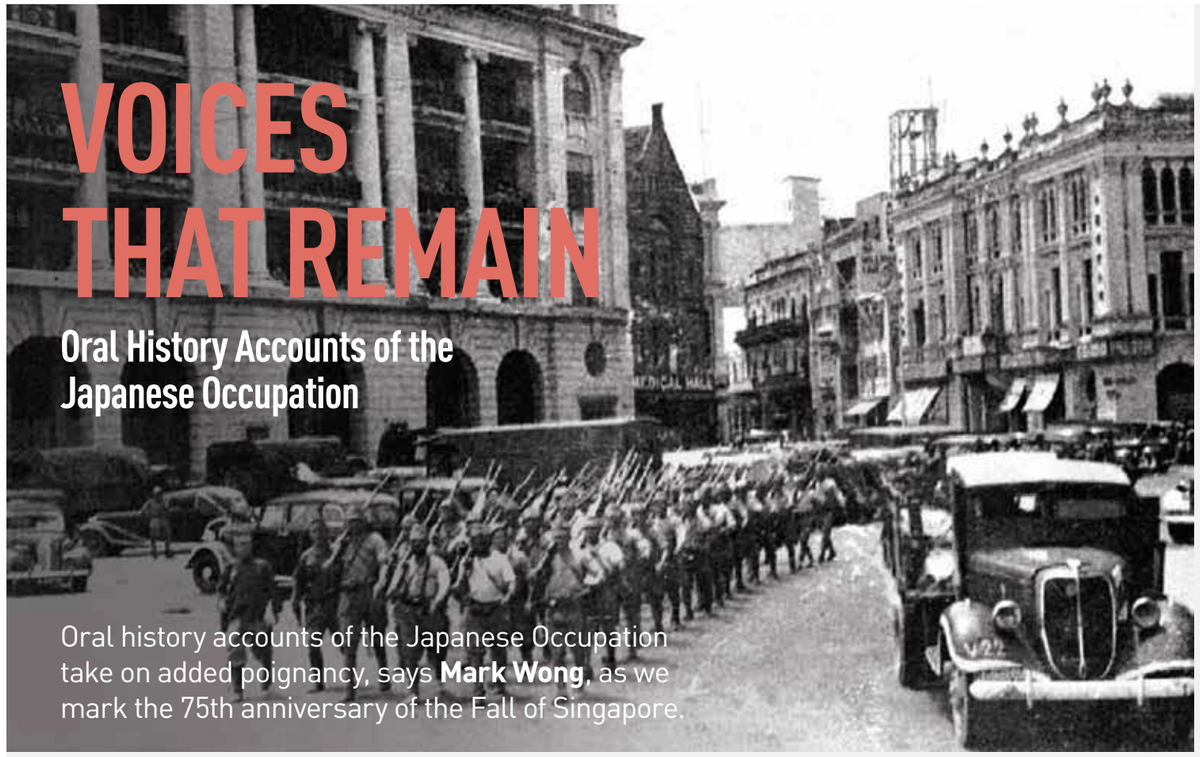
其后，1930年代有关于“马来亚文学”的文艺理论中同样也可看到类似情况。例如：1934年3月1日，《南洋商报·狮声》刊登了丘士珍以笔名“废名”发表的《地方作家谈》，引发了之后有关于“地方作家”的论争。这篇文章中就更为清楚地讲述与中国（上海）文坛对比的情况：

“关于马来亚有无文艺，这是不成问题的，在这里，我们应该肯定地说马来亚有文艺，就是居留或侨生于马来亚的作家们所生产的文艺！因为我想，我们应该抓紧了‘地方作家’这个含义来承认马来亚的文艺，同时要坚决地方对以上海才有文艺的谬误的高调！”[18]

综上所述，从当时的文艺理论中，可以看出在本地的文人们对比本地与中国的一种心态。他们所提出的“南洋色彩”，源自于他们对于“南洋”的印象。而这种印象是建立在与中国（南部除外）的特征。这些特征除了确实是南洋社会明显特点之外，也不乏非南洋特有的物产和景观。然而，在对比中国之后，这些特点，无论是南洋特有与否，也因非中国特点，而随即成为文人们笔下的的南洋特征。♦

注释

1 本文中所探讨的“新加坡华文新兴文学”主要指20世纪初期，在新加坡的文人袭承五四时期所倡导的以白话文创作的作品，有别于古典诗词等古典文学。
2 杨松年（2000）。《新马华文现代文学史初编》（页13 – 18）。新加坡：BPL（新加坡）教育出版社。Call no.: RSING C810.09 YSN
3 骆明总编（2003）。《南来作家研究资料》（页10）。新加坡：新加坡国家图书馆管理局、新加坡文艺协会。Call no.: RSING C810.092 SON
4 Pan, Lynn (Ed.). (2006). *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (2nd ed) (p. 200). Singapore: Editions Didier Millet. Call no.: RSING 304.80951 ENC
5 杨松年（2000）。《新马华文现代文学史初编》（页56 – 66）。新加坡：BPL（新加坡）教育出版社。Call no.: RSING C810.09 YSN
6 杨松年（2000）。《新马华文现代文学史初编》（页71）。新加坡：BPL（新加坡）教育出版社。Call no.: RSING C810.09 YSN
7 杨松年（2000）。《新马华文现代文学史初编》（页38）。新加坡：BPL（新加坡）教育出版社。Call no.: RSING C810.09 YSN
8 方修编著的《马华文学大系（一九一九——一九四二）》将十篇从1927年到1930年分别发表于《新国民日报·荒岛》、《南洋商报·文艺周刊》和《叻报·椰林》的理论批评分类为“南洋色彩的提倡”。
9 张金燕（1927年4月1日）。《南洋与文艺》。《新国民日报·荒岛》。引自方修编（2000）。《马华新文学大系（一九一九——九四二）》（第一册）（页119）。香港：香港世界出版社。Call no.: RSING C810.08 MHX
10 曾圣提（1929年1月18日）。《醒醒吧，星城的艺人》。《南洋商报·文艺周刊》。引自方修编（2000）。《马华新文学大系（一九一九——九四二）》（第一册）（页127 – 128）。香港：香港世界出版社。Call no.: RSING C810.08 MHX
11 陈炼青（1929年9月23日）。《文艺与地方色彩》。《叻报·椰林》。引自方修编（2000）。《马华新文学大系（一九一九——九四二）》（第一册）（页145）。香港：香港世界出版社。Call no.: RSING C810.08 MHX
12 这场论争中这些作家以“南国文艺”代指南洋的文学，而杨松年和周维介（1980）亦指出陈则矫的“南国文学”也包含了广东、广西和福建。
13 杨松年、周维介（1980）。《新加坡早期华文报章文艺副刊研究1927 – 1930》（页140 – 144）。新加坡：教育出版社。Call no.: RSING 016.0795957 YSN-[LIB]
14 滔滔（1930年4月30日）。《对于南国文艺的商榷》。《星洲日报·野葩》。引自方修编（2000）。《马华新文学大系（一九一九——九四二）》（第一册）（页81-82）。香港：香港世界出版社。Call no.: RSING C810.08 MHX
15 滔滔（1930年5月10日）。《我们所需要的文艺》。《星洲日报·垦荒》。引自引自方修编（2000）。《马华新文学大系（一九一九——九四二）》（第一册）（页101）。香港：香港世界出版社。Call no.: RSING C810.08 MHX
16 滔滔的文章中提到“中原”。由此推断，他的文章中的“本国”（中国）并不包括福建、广东等中国南部。
17 陈则矫（1930年4月23日）。《关于文艺》。《星洲日报·野葩》。引自方修编（2000）。《马华新文学大系（一九一九——九四二）》（第一册）（页77）。香港：香港世界出版社。Call no.: RSING C810.08 MHX
18 废名（1934年3月1日）。《地方作家谈》。《南洋商报·狮声》。引自方修编（2000）。《马华新文学大系（一九一九——九四二）》（第一册）（页259）。香港：香港世界出版社。Call no.: RSING C810.08 MHX



VOICES THAT REMAIN

Oral History Accounts of the Japanese Occupation

Oral history accounts of the Japanese Occupation take on added poignancy, says **Mark Wong**, as we mark the 75th anniversary of the Fall of Singapore.

On 15 February 1942, the British surrender to the invading Japanese forces heralded the start of three-and-a-half years of occupation when Singapore was known as Syonan-to ("Light of the South").

As we mark the 75th anniversary of the Fall of Singapore, we are fast approaching a turning point in our history. Anyone with a passing memory of the occupation years would be well into their 80s today, and the day will come when we can no longer obtain first-hand accounts from people who survived the atrocities of this period. This situation raises some fundamental questions about our national history: how do we know what we know about the past if no one alive has actually experienced it?

Fortunately, the National Archives of Singapore (NAS), as the official custodian of Singapore's collective memory, has been collecting primary historical records of the war and occupation years. These take the form of government and personal documents, photographs, audio-visual recordings, maps and other formats.

Giving a Voice to the Past

The shift from living memory to official archives gives us occasion to re-evaluate the significance of the NAS's Japanese Occupation of Singapore Oral History Collection.

In 1981, the Oral History Unit (OHU; now renamed as the Oral History Centre) launched a major project to record memories of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. Although it was the impending and inevitable loss of Singapore's wartime generation that prompted this effort, the idea of collecting interviews about the war and occupation had been conceived when the OHU was first established in 1979.[1]

That year, the OHU announced plans to embark on two key projects – "Pioneers of Singapore" and "Political Development of Singapore, 1945–1965";[2] the third project on the Japanese Occupation would be on hold until "more experience has been obtained by the Unit".[3]

The first two projects were narrower in their scope and selection of interviewees. The Pioneers initiative (at one time also referred to as the Millionaires project[4]) recorded the recollections of business and social leaders from the early- to mid-1900s, while the Political Development project focused on political leaders familiar with the rise of politics in the period after World War II up to Independence.[5]

Both projects were attempts to understand history through the movers and shakers of society. The Japanese Occupation project, however, aimed to record history from a variety of perspectives – and would cut across socio-economic lines.

The first phase of the Japanese Occupation project took four-and-a-half years, from June 1981 to December 1985.[6] Potential interviewees were identified through "media publicity,[7] organisations like the National Museum, Sentosa Museum, Senior Citizens' clubs, community centres, individual recommendations and handbills distributed at pictorial exhibitions organised by the National Archives of Singapore".[8] At the close of the project, 175 persons had been interviewed, totalling some 655 recorded hours.

Subject to conditions placed by the interviewees, the recordings were made available to government officials, researchers and members of the public. The first major showcase of the interviews took place in February 1985 on the 43rd anniversary of the Fall of Singapore.[9]

For one month, the Archives and Oral History Department (OHD) – the entity formed by the merger of the National Archives and Records Centre and the OHU in early 1981[10] – organised a month-long exhibition on the Japanese Occupation at its former premises at Hill Street Building (today's Old Hill Street Police Station).[11]

This first-ever exhibition on the occupation years[12] used information that had been gathered from oral history interviews as well as a selection of pictures, maps, charts and documents.[13] Many of the artefacts displayed were either donated or borrowed from the interviewees.[14]

A year later, to mark the end of the first phase of the project, the OHD published a catalogue of interviews containing information such as date, duration and synopses. Recognising that there are more stories to be told, the project continues to this day whenever suitable interviewees are found.

The Value of Oral History

Today, the Oral History Centre (OHC), as it was finally renamed in 1993, is a unit under the NAS. Altogether, it has amassed over 360 interviews and 1,100 hours of recordings pertaining to the Japanese Occupation.[15] These interviews have become a key collection of the OHC for a number of reasons.

Most importantly, the interviews have helped to fill an enormous gap in our knowledge of the war and occupation. The chaos of war and the regime change posed many challenges for recordkeeping, made worse in the final days leading up to the official Japanese surrender on 2 September 1945 when the administration systematically destroyed records of its work in Singapore. Copies of the heavily censored *Syonan Shimbun* and other newspapers that survived, while providing a valuable record of daily life in Singapore, mostly presented positive, if not glowing, views of the Japanese administration.

The Japanese Occupation interviews have helped to shed light on the harsh realities of life in Syonan-to, the large number of interviewees often proving to be effective in corroborating (or disqualifying) competing claims. Interviewees were selected based on their first-hand familiarity with the subject matter. Structured outlines were used to ensure some measure of consistency and uniformity in the topics covered, while interviewers were trained to pick up on unique experiences for follow-up.

Weighing in on the significance of the Japanese Occupation collection, James H. Morrison writes:

> "In a virtual lacuna of documentation contemporaneous with the event, remembrances either spoken or written are, of course, prime documentation.... The Singapore Oral History Department's collection of materials on the Japanese Occupation during the Second World War is meticulously collected, scrupulously organized, and immediately accessible to users. They provide one of the more comprehensive collections of one former colony's view (or views) of the war."[16]

As the project was intent on collecting data that would enable the reconstruction of the lives of those affected by the Japanese Occupation – both civilians as well as military personnel – a broad approach was taken to include several key themes. These include the pre-war anti-Japanese movement; the British defence of Singapore; social and living conditions under occupation; the *Sook Ching* massacres; the Japanese defence of Syonan-to against the Allied Forces; the role of the resistance forces; and the Japanese surrender and its aftermath.

(Facing page) Victorious Japanese troops marching into Fullerton Square on 16 February 1942. The British had surrendered the previous day and Singapore would be renamed Syonan-to ("Light of the South") by its new masters. *© IWM (HU 2787).*
(Below) This portrait of a photographer's assistant, taken after the Japanese Occupation, clearly shows the effects from the years of deprivation. *All rights reserved, Lee, G. B. (1992). Syonan: Singapore Under the Japanese 1942–1945 (p. 44). J. H. Siow (Ed.). Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society.*
(Bottom) A father and daughter having a simple meal of porridge and nuts. During the Japanese Occupation, many people suffered from malnutrition or died of starvation. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

Mark Wong is an Oral History Specialist at the Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, where he conducts oral history interviews in areas such as education, the performing arts, the public service and the Japanese Occupation. He co-curated the exhibition, *Law of the Land: Highlights of Singapore's Constitutional Documents*, now on at the National Gallery Singapore.

DECREE

The military administration of Syonan-to hereby decree that all British people and enemy aliens shall gather at the esplanade (opposite the Supreme Court) before the noon of February 24 in order to be taken prisoner.

Those excluded from the above order shall only be those indicated by responsible Nipponese authority. These persons shall be given this appointment on 23rd and 24th February.

The badges possessed at present shall be useless from the noon of Februuary 24.

NOTICE TO RICE CONSUMERS

1. Syonan people must report the number of persons in each family to their nearest Rice Retailers as soon as possible.

2. Syonan people can buy rice from their nearest Rice Retailers without any permit, at Government controlled price, and should get a receipt for their purchases from the Rice Retailers.

3. Consumers must not buy more than one week of their rice requirements, that is to say, 5 kattles each person per week.

4. Consumers who find any Rice Retailers contravening these Orders should immediately report to the undersigned Association.

THE SYONAN-TO RICE & FADDY DISTRIBUTING ASSN.
No. 75 Boat Quay,
Syonan-to.
15th May. 2602.
73—79

Public notices such as these became commonplace during the Japanese Occupation. The first is an order for all military personnel and European civilians to assemble at the Esplanade following the British surrender on 15 February 1942 *(The Syonan Times, 23 February 1942, p. 4.)*. The second notice is an order to purchase rice supplies in rationed amounts only from licensed retailers *(The Syonan Times, 18 May 1942, p. 5.)*.

The intention was to record a plurality of voices so that they could serve as a counterbalance to the predominantly Western-centric memoirs of British and Australian soldiers and politicians that had begun appearing after the war and the types of histories that were subsequently written. The Fall of Singapore has been framed as Britain's worst military disaster – but what did occupation really mean for people in Singapore?

To this end, the interviews systematically record experiences from a broad spectrum of individuals, spanning gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion and socio-economic background. There are accounts by volunteer forces, prisoners-of-war, civilian internees, resistance fighters, government servants, businessmen, British, Australians, Chinese, Malays, Indians, Japanese and more. Speaking in different voices and languages, they relate their lived experiences and communicate the complexities of deep emotions and scarred memories, providing a multifaceted view of this significant period of Singapore history.

The interviews cover themes beyond the shores of Singapore, including experiences in Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, Thailand, China and Japan – underscoring the regional significance of the occupation of Singapore. There are accounts of resettlements to Endau and Bahau in Malaya and movements of prisoners-of-war to different parts of occupied Southeast Asia and even Japan. There are also stories of the Nanqiao Jigong (南桥机工), a group of volunteer mechanics and drivers of mostly Chinese ethnicity from all over Southeast Asia who aided the war effort against the Japanese in China by bringing supplies through the 1,146-km Yunnan-Burma Road as well as mass movements of British covert forces and anti-Japanese guerrilla groups in Malaya. Former British and Australian internees also speak of their traumatic post-war years adjusting back to life in their homelands.

With access to such a broad range of interviews, one realises that there is no singularly defining experience of the war and occupation, but multiple ones. Listening to so many different individuals provides new insights that can help clear up preconceptions or myths of the occupation. The Japanese Occupation scholar Clay Keller Eaton expresses it succinctly:

> "I use a lot of memoirs in my work, but with a few notable exceptions the people whose memoirs get published in both Japan and Singapore tend to have held positions of power during the occupation. One of the greatest strengths of [the] 'Japanese Occupation of Singapore' oral history project is that it covers a wide cross section of Singaporean society… some of the interviews I've found most valuable were of poorer or marginalized Singaporeans whose experiences don't fit easily into the dominant narratives of the occupation…. I came into the oral history interviews with this idea that the Japanese administration was omnipresent in wartime life because of organizations like the Overseas Chinese Association, Eurasian Welfare Association, and the auxiliary police force. However, through the interviews of the city's poorer residents like Mabel [de Souza],[17] I found that the Japanese Occupation state was actually less present the further down you were on the socioeconomic ladder…. I did start to get a sense that the Japanese were far more interested in co-opting and controlling the elites of Singapore, and that marginalized peoples (whether by race or socioeconomic status or gender) had a peculiar sort of anonymity in the occupied city. Some might not consider these people to be 'significant,' but their experiences provide an important corrective to standard narratives of the war."[18]

An Emotional Connection

Over time, one can become easily disconnected from a past that may seem so far removed from our present. Oral history accounts can help us find an emotional connection to narrators, who engage us through nuances in voice, pitch, tone, pace, mood, expression and more. We may not always comprehend their circumstances, but we can recognise their emotions of joy, anger and fear, and ultimately understand history through a rich tapestry of highly personal and subjective perspectives.

This is why oral history has been a lynchpin of the NAS's efforts to document the war and occupation. In a book review of *The Price of Peace: True Accounts of the Japanese Occupation,*[19] the critic writes: "The most compelling stories here are the first-hand accounts of wartime resistance activities, culled from the Oral History Centre's collection of interviews with survivors."[20] There is something riveting about listening to a spoken first-person account of an event that third-person narratives can never hope to capture.

Oral history has continued to engage the public imagination ever since that first exhibition on the Japanese Occupation in 1985. The interpretive centre, "Memories at Old Ford Factory", opened at the Former Ford Factory – the site of the British surrender – on Upper Bukit Timah Road on 16 February 2006. The exhibition was a stark reminder of the horrors of the war and occupation. Eleven years later, on 15 February 2017, a new exhibition, "Surviving the Japanese Occupation: War and its Legacies", took its place.

Singapore's wartime survivors will not be around forever, but their voices will be preserved in the Japanese Occupation of Singapore's Oral History Collection so that we and the generations who come after us can continue to listen – and learn – from their experiences. ♦

VOICES FROM THE OCCUPATION

"When the Japanese came in, during the first fortnight, they beheaded eight people and their heads were put into iron cages and hung up at eight different places and notices were put out beside the heads that 'These eight people were beheaded because they disobey the law of the Imperial Japanese Army'… The notice spelled out that if anyone caught in the act would be given the same treatment."

– Neoh Teik Hong[21]

"My father and two uncles were required to report to some registration centre – I don't know whether [it was] a police station or what, I'm not so sure. Three of them went and only two came back."

– Foong Fook Kay[22]

"The rice ration we get from our shop was hardly sufficient for our requirement… We chopped the tapioca into small pieces, combined it with the rice and used it as rice… We all were thin, skinny, sickly… Very hard life. I tell you honestly, not worth living during Japanese time. Better to die than to live. Another year… if the Japanese were here, I think a lot of people would have died from malnutrition."

– Ismail bin Zain[23]

"Every term about two or three songs will be sent out to the schools and it was our job to ensure that the schools were learning these songs… They were mostly military war songs, marching songs, Japanese patriotic songs… Of course, many of us did not know the meanings of those words at that time… The policy was partly to propagate Japanese culture and propaganda through the use of songs."

– Paul Abisheganaden[24]

"Unlike the… the Westerners, like the Americans or the British, who would conceal any knowledge that they felt should not be imparted to others, other than their own people… the Japanese did not mind teaching us, so that the people of this land could learn how to maintain a plane, how to maintain a ship, how to do certain things…"

– Mahmud Awang (translation of interview in Malay)[25]

An interview in progress – using the Uher Report Monitor 4200 open-reel tape recorder – at the Oral History Department in Hill Street in 1982. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

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THE GUITAR MAN

ALEX ABISHEGANADEN

Hailed as the "Father of the Guitar", this pioneer musician has spent the last 50 years championing the classical guitar movement in Singapore. **Joy Loh** charts his illustrious career.

Joy Loh is an Associate Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. Her job entails managing and developing the library's performing arts collection as well as overseeing the MusicSG digital archive. Joy also enjoys making magic in the kitchen.

Alexander S. Abisheganaden, more popularly known as Alex Abisheganaden, is an accomplished Singaporean musician who was conferred the Cultural Medallion in 1988. The award honours individuals who have achieved excellence in the fields of literary arts, performing arts, visual arts and film, and have contributed to the city's cultural environment.

Often referred to as the "Father of the Guitar", Abisheganaden is regarded by many in the music circle as Singapore's first home-grown classical guitarist and double bassist – an affable and generous musician who has dedicated much of his life educating and popularising the performance of music on the guitar.

In 2015, Abisheganaden donated his collection of handwritten scores, notes and books on the double bass, guitar ensemble and choral singing to the National Library, Singapore. A total of 158 items have since been placed on the shelves of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library at Victoria Street and the Library@Esplanade.

This article explores the musical genius of this guitar maestro and previews some of the handwritten scores he used to teach during his illustrious career as an educator. With this donation, the National Library is hopeful that future generations of musicians will benefit from studying Abisheganaden's sizable canon of works.

Early Life

Abisheganaden was born into an Indian Lutheran family of nine children in 1926. His earliest memories of music were those in his home at Buffalo Road, singing hymns and Christian songs with his family. His father played the violin and ukulele, and his similarly talented older brothers, Paul, Gerard and Geoffrey, were also musicians. Thanks to these early influences, Abisheganaden cultivated a lifelong passion for music.

His talents were spotted at a tender age of six when he made his debut on stage as a singer in a variety show at Moonlight Hall, on the grounds of New World amusement park in Jalan Besar. Numerous performance opportunities followed and this became an unbroken pattern throughout his entire musical career.

The recognition that Abisheganaden received early on in life affirmed his musical gifts. Besides being a naturally gifted singer, Abishenagaden also picked up the guitar easily, having taught himself to play the instrument at age 15 using the textbook, *Ellis Through School for Guitar*. He also managed to master the piano accordion without taking any formal lessons.

When he was 15, Abisheganaden witnessed the fall of Singapore when Japanese forces invaded the island on 15 February 1942. The Occupation years were a time of deprivation and hardship for many, but fortunately for Abisheganaden, his family and many other Indians were kept relatively out of harm's way as a result of special ties between the Japanese and the Indian National Army.

Abisheganaden's strong musical skills stood him in good stead during the Japanese Occupation years. He found employment by playing the guitar in an Indian orchestra for the Azad-Hind radio station, which broadcasted pro-Japanese, anti-British propaganda in support of the Indian National Army. Because of his adept singing and excellent command of the Japanese language, Abisheganaden was asked by the Japanese authorities to sing Japanese folk and propaganda songs over the radio

After World War II, Abisheganaden completed his Senior Cambridge examination and embarked on a career in teaching. He taught at Rangoon Road Primary School between 1947 and 1957, and later became the principal of several primary schools until 1963. He was subsequently promoted to Inspector of Schools at the Ministry of Education, a role he helmed until 1981.

Family Life

Abisheganaden met his future wife, Eileen Wong, at the Teachers' Training College in the 1950s. Both shared a common interest in music and attended the same church. Brought up by strict Christian Cantonese parents in a traditional household, Eileen was the eldest child and her parents had

On his passion for teaching:

"Imparting knowledge, having rapport with people is a great kind of blessing, I would say. It is a great thing… because I have been able to help a number of people along the way through life. And it seems to me that this has been my great commitment which I was destined to do. I had been able to touch people's lives, help them through and see them progress."[1]

(Facing page) Alex Abisheganaden teaching a young boy how to play the guitar (undated). *All rights reserved, Eric Foo Chee Meng 1979–2001. Courtesy of National Arts Council.*
(Left) Alex Abisheganaden is in the second row holding the double bass in this photo taken in the 1960s. He is with members of the Goh Soon Tioe String Orchestra. Goh Soon Tioe is in the second row, first from the left. *Goh Soon Tioe Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

high expectations of her. Marrying outside of one's race in those days was uncommon and often frowned upon by society.

Despite the challenges the couple faced during their early courtship days, the determined Abisheganaden was clearly not to be deterred from marrying Eileen. Unable to receive neither his father-in-law's permission nor blessing, the couple sought the help of Eileen's uncle, Lee Swee Cheng, a prominent individual in Singapore's business circles, to give the bride away in place of her father. Sixty-one years later, the couple is still happily married with two children, Jacintha, 60, and Peter, 57.

Abisheganaden's children, too, grew up in an environment filled with music during their formative years. His wife was also musically talented, and often sang and played the piano at home. Aisheganaden's brother, Paul, had established the Singapore Junior Symphony Orchestra (later known as the Singapore Chamber Ensemble) in the 1950s, and Jacintha reveals that her home was often used as a rehearsal venue. Jacintha has fond memories of how she often "met fabulous people, listened up close to the most intrepid classical music and every day was a party."[2]

The Abisheganadens often took their children to watch concerts and movies with a strong musical element. While Abisheganaden naturally had a measurable influence on his children, he made sure he did not coerce them into pursuing music as a career. Instead, he believed that it was more important to inculcate in them a deep appreciation of the art form, and provide them with opportunities when they showed interest. Jacintha took lessons in classical piano and singing, while Peter learnt the violin. The former followed in his footsteps, and is now an accomplished actress, entertainer and jazz singer. Peter is a businessman who currently resides in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Turning Professional

In 1950, an opportunity came knocking on Abisheganaden's door. From his brother Paul, Abisheganaden found out that the Singapore Junior Symphony Orchestra was looking for a double bass player. In return for the loan of a free instrument, Abisheganaden agreed to play for the orchestra and to pay for his own formal lessons.

The next few years he spent studying the bass under Hungarian cellist Feri Krempl turned out to be a major turning point in Abisheganaden's musical development. From picking up music through experimentation and trial and error, Abisheganaden rose to become an accomplished virtuoso, taking proficiency exams in various instruments, including the double bass and classical guitar.

In 1960, Abisheganaden became the first person in Southeast Asia to receive a Licentiate of the Royal Schools of Music for performance on the double bass. A year later, as he was keen to pursue a college education, the plucky Abisheganaden went back to school with the aid of a grant, despite having to raise a family with two young children.

He spent a year overseas at the Royal College of Music in London where he studied voice, bass and the guitar. There, Abisheganaden became truly immersed in his element and was fortunate to be mentored by the famous Australian guitarist John Williams. In 1967, Abisheganaden started the Singapore Classical Guitar Society and has championed the classical guitar movement in Singapore ever since.

The Birth of a Guitar Maestro

The widespread use of recreational drugs among Singaporean youths in the early 1970s was a worrying trend for the government. To divert the attention of teenagers to meaningful activities and keep them away from the clutches of drug peddlers, the Ministry of Education (MOE) leveraged the mass media as a means to facilitate the teaching of musical instruments such as the guitar.

Abisheganaden was commissioned by then Minister for Education Goh Keng Swee to produce 26 episodes of the TV programme, *Music Making with the Guitar,* which was broadcast on MOE's Educational Television Service for two years from 1970 to 1971. He also wrote the two textbooks that accompanied the series. The programme not only helped to raise the profile and popularity of the classical guitar, it also established Abisheganaden as the master of the classical guitar in Singapore.

In 1981, Abisheganaden founded the National University of Singapore Guitar Ensemble (GENUS) at the university's Centre for Musical Activities. Beginning as a guitar class with fewer than 10 enthusiasts, GENUS has now grown into a 50-member strong ensemble with a wide repertoire and is recognised as one of Singapore's premier guitar ensembles. Its annual public concerts often feature Abisheganaden's original compositions and music that he has transcribed for the guitar.

These works reflect Abisheganaden's personality and musical style: he enjoys taking a popular ASEAN song, arranging it into a style suitable for the guitar ensemble, and then teaching it to his students. Some notable examples include the Tagalog song "Anak" written by Filipino musician Freddie Aguilar; "The Pursuit" composed by local music legend Dick Lee and popularised by the late Cantopop singer Leslie Cheung; and "Jingli Nona" (or Jinkli Nona, which means "Fair Maiden"), one of the most popular Portuguese Eurasian folk songs. It was often sung and performed at Eurasian weddings, and the dance movements are somewhat similar to the Malay *joget*.

Abisheganaden also composed works for the guitar – including original pieces and transcriptions of popular songs – for didactic purpose as a means to train and improve playing techniques of the guitar orchestra. Iconic works include the 16-bar long "Katong Blues," a short work composed in 1971 for the TV programme *Music Making with the Guitar,* which derived its name from the east coast district in Singapore, and "Huan Yin-Vanakam", a double concerto Abisheganaden composed in 1995 for the sitar, erhu and guitar orchestra.

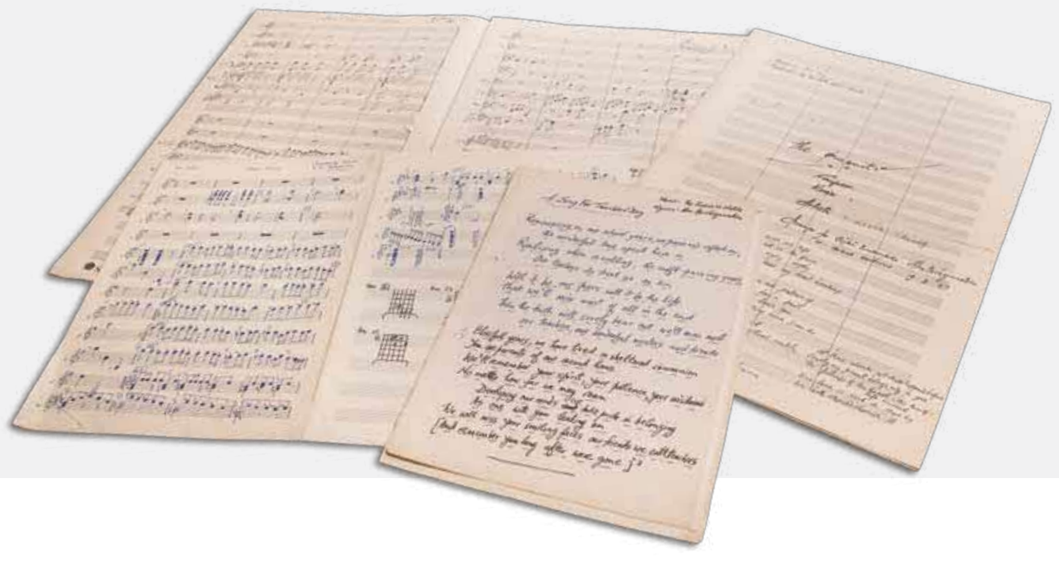
"Huan Yin-Vanakam" combines elements of Indian and Chinese folk music – musical traditions that Abisheganaden has kept close to his heart. The concerto blends sinuous Chinese folk melodies with the rhythmic tempo of songs sung by Indian foreign workers that Abisheganaden remembered from his childhood days. Together with the inclusion of Chinese and Indian musical instruments as well as Western classical influences, the work has distinguished itself as a singularly important example of world music.

"Gela Nexus" is another important work for the guitar orchestra by Abisheganaden. Composed in 1995, the title is an amalgamation of GENUS, the NUS Guitar Ensemble, and Abisheganaden's first name "Alex", symbolising his feelings of pride and achievement with the ensemble he founded. "Huan Yin-Vanakam" and "Gela Nexus" were first performed in January 1996 by GENUS, and again in 2007 in Singapore. Additionally, "Gela Nexus" was performed by GENUS in a guitar orchestra competition in Germany in 2007. It became one of the first local works of this genre to be performed overseas.

Later Years

In 2007, Abisheganaden received the Cultural Medallion grant which he used to present popular ASEAN folk songs as well as his original compositions. During GENUS's 25th anniversary concert – organised as part of the NUS Arts Festival – on 23 March 2007, Abisheganaden's compositions were performed by an ensemble of more than 50 guitarists from GENUS in honour of its founder. In the years that followed, Abisheganaden continued to score church hymns and teach classical guitar at various schools. He even explored teaching the ukulele.

Now in his 90s, Abisheganaden continues to have an unbridled enthusiasm for music and life. His generous spirit and winsome personality endear him to many, and his legacy and generosity remain etched in the hearts of



(Below) Pictured here are the handwritten music scores for: (clockwise from left) "Huan-Yin Vanakam", "The Pursuit", "A Song for Teachers' Day" and "Gela-Nexus". *Image source: National Library Board, Singapore.*
(Facing page) Parts of a classical guitar. *All rights reserved, Abisheganaden, A. (1970). Music Making with the Guitar (Vol. 1) (p.6). Singapore: ETV Service.*

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Tsang, S. (1996, September 29). They strike a chord in each other. *The Straits Times*, p. 11. Retrieved from NewspaperSG

YMCA joins the attack on drug use and abuse. (1971, October 12). *New Nation*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG

the numerous lives he has touched, many of whom still make the effort to keep in contact with the legend. Having taught and nurtured generations of students, his protégés continue to keep the flame of guitar-playing and his love for music alive.

Bernard Tan Tiong Gie, a critically acclaimed Singaporean composer and professor of physics at NUS describes Abisheganaden as the "quintessential musician's musician – always young at heart and ever generous with his immense talents".[3] ♦

Notes

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2 Telephone correspondence with Jacintha Abisheganaden, daughter of Alex Abisheganaden, on 24 January 2017.

3 Email correspondence with Bernard Tan Tiong Gie, a prolific and acclaimed local composer and a friend of Alex Abisheganaden, on 19 January 2017.

THE ABISHEGANADEN COLLECTION HIGHLIGHTS

Among the items Alex Abisheganaden donated to the National Library are his handwritten scores, pedagogical notes on teaching the guitar as well as his private collection of books on the double bass, guitar ensemble and choral singing. In view of copyright restrictions, only the handwritten materials have been digitised and made accessible on MusicSG – Singapore's premier digital music archive (http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/music). His other donated materials are available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and the Library@Esplanade.

Here is a selection of original handwritten scores donated by Abisheganaden.

Afternoon with Alex Abisheganaden (2010) (Call no.: RCLOS 787.870922 AFT-[AA])
This is a bound publication of handwritten pedagogy notes that Alex Abisheganaden used to train guitarists for Christian worship ministry. It contains photocopies of certificates of proficiency that Abisheganaden received in guitar, voice and bass training.

Eleven September Two Thousand and One (2002) (Call no.: RCLOS 781.095957 ELE-[AA])
Conceptualised and arranged by Alex Abisheganaden, this work was inspired by the aftermath of the 2011 terrorist attacks. It includes two sets of draft summary text on Singapore's history and development since 1819. The work comprises arrangements for "Sumatera", "Singapore", "God Save the King", "Negara Ku", "Count on Me Singapore" and "Let There be Peace on Earth". The piece was performed by GENUS in a concert in 2002.

Friends (1983) (Call no.: RCLOS 787.87 ABI-[AA])
Alex Abisheganaden wrote "Friends" in 1983, in memory of a dear friend who had passed away. The music is based on the popular ballad "Danny Boy" (sung to the tune of "Londonderry Air") that he had rearranged. "Friends" was performed at a GENUS concert in the 1990s with a narrative by Abisheganaden.

Loy Krathong: Thai Ethnic Traditional Arrangement for ASEAN Selector II (1999) (Call no.: RCLOS 787.87 LOY-[AA])
The popular Thai Song "Loy Krathong" was rearranged for the guitar orchestra by Alex Abisheganaden, and performed at "ASEAN Serenade: An Evening of Music, Song, Dance and Poetry" concert held at the Esplanade in July 2008. The piece was a collaboration between GENUS and the NUS Thai Music Ensemble.

Teachers Day Song: Our Teachers, Our Mentors, Our Friends (undated) (Call no.: RCLOS 782.0095957 ABI-[AA])
This song was written by Alex Abisheganaden for the Ministry of Education to celebrate Teachers' Day in schools throughout Singapore. Sung to the tune of "Tennessee Waltz" by Pee Wee King, the title encapsulates the deep relationship between students and their teachers.

The Life of Christ: Aframerican Folk Song Cycle (undated) (Call no.: RCLOS 787.87 HAY-[AA])
This is an excerpt from "The Life of Christ", an Aframerican folk song compiled by Roland Hayes and arranged for solo classical guitar by Alex Abisheganaden.

Three Cities Suite: Johor – S'pore – Batam (undated) (Call no.: RCLOS 784.1858 THR-[AA])
Alex Abisheganaden composed this piece of music, which was inspired by the Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942–45). It is a reflective piece on the incursion by the Japanese military as they advanced into Southeast Asia in the early 1940s. It begins with a nostalgic feeling of loss and despair that gradually builds up into a frenzy before ending on a patriotic high inspired by the National Day song, "Count on Me Singapore".

Yaaka Hula Hickey Dula Prime Ensemble Version with Steel Guitar Percussion & Etc (undated) (Call no.: RCLOS 787.87 GOE-[AA])
Composed by Ray Goetz, Joe Young and Pete Wendling, this arrangement by Alex Abisheganaden features the steel-pedal guitar for a Hawaiian-like effect. It was an encore piece for the 1995 GENUS concert.

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